DECADENCE IN *LA MUERTE DE TADZIO* BY LUIS G. MARTÍN[1]

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the trope of decadence in Luis G. Martín's novel *La Muerte de Tadzio* (2000), a follow-up of Thomas Mann's acclaimed *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912). This work proposes a cultural encounter between the notion of decadence, as a transgression of social normativity and ideas of progress, and the antisocial strand of queer theory, specifically Lee Edelman's criticism against reproductive futurity (2004). The analysis also draws on Leo Bersani's conception of sexuality's self-shattering impulse to discuss how this novel articulates notions of disease and death (1987). This essay evaluates how the novel depicts homosexual desire as the death drive, recapturing a negative cultural memory that re-emerges in contemporary fiction.

KEYWORDS: decadence, antisocial queer theory, death drive, futurity, cultural transgression.

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RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza el tropo de la decadencia en la novela *La muerte de Tadzio* (2000) de Luis G. Martín, una continuación de la aclamada *Muerte en Venecia* (1912) de Thomas Mann. Este trabajo plantea un encuentro cultural entre la noción de decadencia, entendida como transgresión de la normatividad social y de las ideas de progreso, y la corriente antisocial de la teoría queer, específicamente la crítica de Lee Edelman contra la futuridad reproductiva (2004). El análisis también sigue la concepción de Leo Bersani sobre el impulso autodestructivo de la sexualidad para examinar cómo esta novela articula nociones de enfermedad y muerte (1987). Este ensayo evalúa cómo la novela retrata el deseo homosexual como pulsión de muerte, resucitando así una memoria cultural negativa que resurge en la ficción contemporánea.

PALABRAS CLAVE: decadencia, teoría queer antisocial, pulsión de muerte, futuridad, transgresión cultural.

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INTRODUCTION

Luis G. Martín's novel *La muerte de Tadzio* (2000) is the retrospective first-person account of Tadzio's life, the mysterious ephebe of Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912)[2]. Tadzio is a seventy-five-year-old Polish musician suffering from a mysterious disease. Aware of his approaching death, the elderly narrator returns to Venice and, by doing so, closes a cycle of sexual obsessions that began during his youth, when he was

[2] The author, Luis García Martín (1962), published his early works as Luis G. Martín. Later, he changed his name to "Luisgé Martín", probably to prevent confusions with the Spanish poet and literary critic José Luis García Martín.

observed by Gustav Von Aschenbach, Mann's protagonist. In Venice, Tadzio writes a long confessional letter that documents his life, one that steadily departs from social conventions. Martín's novel is entirely epistolary; it is Tadzio's letter to Stefano Fornari, an Italian opera singer whom the narrator loved in the past. Martín's novel substantiates some critical issues of the antisocial strand of queer theory. Furthermore, Tadzio's confessional letter shapes decadence, as a queer literary strategy to exacerbate forms of cultural transgressions.

The objective of this article is to analyse Martín's novel through the concept of "decadence", as a literary category deriving from an outdated countercultural movement, and a textual force that transgresses society's normative conventions and schemes of progress. This critical analysis validates the literary productivity of decadence, from an antisocial queer perspective. I argue that decadence is key to understand Tadzio's antisocial departure from cultural normativity. It is also related to notions of aestheticism, the irrational pursuit of sexual pleasures, the dissolution of morality, and the embrace of the death drive.

For this analysis, I first discuss the cultural implications of decadence along with critical notions presented by literary scholars. I draw some important parallels between decadence and the antisocial strand of queer theory. In doing so, I engage with Lee Edelman's critical manifesto against reproductive futurity. Second, I draw on Harold Bloom to discuss the cultural influences on this narrative and their effect on its decadent configuration. Third, I examine the narrator's depiction of Venice as a topography for male homoeroticism. Fourth, I draw on Leo Bersani's critical conception of sexuality's self-shattering impulse to examine how this queer novel condenses intersecting notions of disease and death. Consequently, in juxtaposing decadence alongside the antisocial strand of queer criticism, this essay provides cultural and literary encounters between Martín's novel and contemporary critical issues of gender and sexuality.

1. DECADENCE: A CULTURAL CONCEPT

The meaning and implications of decadence are mostly oppositional to perceived standards of cultures and civilizations. Drawing from the Latin "*de cadere*", meaning "to fall away", decadence is commonly used to describe a society as it decays, falling from a state of prosperity and progress to one of physical and moral ruin. Nonetheless, even if decadence is lexically related to decay, they may differ conceptually. While decay implies the natural outcome of time, decadence indicates a regressive alternative against society's schemes of progress. My use of the concept draws on this literal meaning and, also, on a cross-historical influence that has its origins in the late nineteenth-century decadent movement, the cultural period known as the *fin-de-siècle*. This countercultural movement reinforced the idea that art opposed nature and, thus, it should not follow the "natural" norms which regulate notions of aesthetics, morality, and sexuality[3]. At risk of oversimplifying, we could say that nineteenth-century decadentism symbolized a cultural parenthesis of chaotic and irrational disorder within a period of continuous industrial progress.

In parallel with cultural debates around decadentism during the late nineteenth century, the status of decadence had an uneasy reception in twentieth-century literary criticism. Terry Eagleton (1995), for instance, has considered the European *fin-de-siècle* as a period in which the "high-rationalist subject of Mill or *Middlemarch* gradually imploded into Madame Blavatsky and Dorian Gray" (p. 11). Briefly, the notion of decadence has meant a transgression both against modernity's progress and the conservative norms of the past. As Desmarais and Baldick (2012) observe, the concept condenses a catalyst "in which private pleasure and the fate of civilisations are ominously linked" (p. 1). In his seminal study, *Decadence*, Richard Gilman (1979) argues that the concept represents a negative reflection of any cultural, social, or technological development occurring at any historical period. Gilman explores the imprecise qualities of progress and the indefiniteness

[3] Belgian Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *A Rebours* (2003 [1884]) is often regarded as the most emblematic literary text of the decadent movement.

of its opposite term –decadence. If there is no substance to progress, Gilman alleges, "then to be linked to it as its dark complement, its oppositional mode, as 'decadence' is, means that the latter [progress] ought to be immediately suspect" which involves "the stable realities of the external world" (p. 14). Gilman maintains that decadence has a metaphorical function that disrupts those experiences of the progress-decadence binary as "a space in which to exist otherwise" (p. 161). Thus, literary texts associated with decadence tend to unsettle social norms of morality and progress. The concept also discloses how Western cultures have perpetuated notions of birth and growth as positive and decay and death as negative. It is transgressive as it undercuts hegemonic values such as the imperative of the heterosexual family, industrial progress, the moral foundation of beauty, and the meaning of human existence.

The cultural material of decadentism responds primarily to late nineteenth-century scientific discourses on pathology. The *fin-de-siècle* scientific imagination presented an array of figures who were categorized as sexual inverts, hysterics, or narcissists by the language of sexology first and psychoanalysis later (Kaye, 2007, p. 55). The importance of those discourses is that they associated sexuality to both moral and social values. In his study *De Sodoma a Chueca: Una historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España en el siglo XX*, Alberto Mira (2004) claims that cultural practices of Spanish homosexuality throughout the long twentieth century frequently react against late nineteenth-century discourses. He identifies three problematic cultural stereotypes of the homosexual: the criminal, the invert, and the pathological (p. 62). Furthermore, Mira pinpoints the existence of a *maudit-decadent* cultural model which aims to demoralize society's values (p. 25)[4]. When discussing the traits of this specific model, Mira observes: "Se acepta la marginación impuesta desde fuera, pero se valora positivamente como signo de rebeldía: se elige lo que la sociedad define como el mal para mostrar el desacuerdo con los pilares de esa sociedad" (p. 34). Following Mira's cultural classification, Łukasz Smuga (2022) effectively observes that

[4] Mira situates Antonio de Hoyos and Juan Goytisolo as the most important Spanish writers in the *maudit-decadent* model. However, the scholar considers the French author Jean Genet as the most internationally prominent twentieth-century figure within this literary tradition (p. 25).

Martín's novel imitates a *malditista* discourse, "where homosexuals are viewed as criminals and social outcasts who chase their 'sick' desires in places which are squalid and repulsive to decent citizens" (p. 77)[5].

Drawing on Mira and Smuga's cultural reflections of Spanish *malditismo*, we could maintain that what is socially understood as "evil" becomes a sign of "rebellion" for the *maudit-decadent* subject. Nonetheless, instead of "rebellion", I propose that "transgression" is a more suitable concept in this context. The opposition of decadence *vis-à-vis* society does not necessarily involve adherence to a political faction, which "rebellion" often suggests. Whether from the left or the right, decadence becomes transgressive in its opposition to society's values. As Michel Foucault (1978) maintains in his *History of Sexuality*, society is formed as the result of the intricate network of power and resistance in which limits and their transgressions are inseparable: "a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (p. 34). Hence, transgression implies a need to disrupt society's values, shaping practices beyond normative boundaries and articulating non-hegemonic ways of being.

In this critical vein, decadence discloses common themes of transgression and temporality proposed by queer criticism. Lee Edelman's study, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), is the most prominent response to debates on the relationship between temporality and the antisocial strand of queer studies. Edelman's thesis is that queer signifies the antisocial force of the death drive that threatens futurity. His manifesto recommends the "antisocial bent of sexuality as such", an impulse "acknowledged, and then only as pathology, only in those who are bent themselves" (p. 143). Edelman endorses "the figural burden of queerness" that implicates disallowing the social (p. 27). He writes that "queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to [the death drive],

[5] Smuga's insightful analysis also proposes that Martín's novel bears similarities to the literary trend of Spanish *tremendismo*. From the Spanish *tremendo* –terrible, awful– *tremendismo* is distinguished by pessimistic, brutal and grotesque portrayals of social reality. This literary tradition emerged in the 1940s, coinciding with the traumatic experiences of the generation of writers who experienced the Spanish Civil War (p. 79).

accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of that resistance from every social structure" (p. 3). Hence, queer symbolizes an unassimilable figure since any social system depends on norms, with the consequence that some conducts are condemned, disciplined, and sentenced. Following Edelman's view, heteronormativity is a constant framework perpetrated through reproductive futurism.

Edelman distinguishes how notions of futurity connect with social expectations of reproductive maturity. His thesis challenges "the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism" of a culture obsessed with the image of the child as a bringer of future (p. 4). He maintains that Western culture perpetuates the figure of the child because of its promise for the continuity of values. The child has the potentiality to reproduce cultural norms forwards into future generations. Edelman argues that "queerness names the side of those not 'fighting for the children', the side of reproductive futurism" (p. 3). This negativity urges denial of the metonym of "the child" as symbolic of a heterosexual future by negating "the insistence of hope itself as affirmation" (p. 4), as the promise of futurity reproduces the hegemonic conditions of the present. Edelman (2004) writes:

> We might like to believe that … the future will hold a place for us –a place at the political table that won't have to come at the cost of the places we seek in the bed or the bar or the baths. But there can be no *queers* in that future as there can be no future for queers, chosen as they are to bear the bad tidings that there can be no future at all. (pp. 29-30, emphasis in original)

Contrary to many queer studies scholars, Edelman does not consider queerness as a potentially alternative process of becoming or a model of the fluidity of subject position. He appreciates the cultural importance of queerness only in its potential to transgress the social order. This antisocial criticism facilitates cultural encounters between queer studies and themes proposed by decadence. In what follows I discuss how Martín's novel draws on decadent themes which turn dissonant with our post-Stonewall perceptions of sexual identities and politics of equality.

2. DECADENT INFLUENCES

Venice is the novel's setting through which decadence is textually articulated. Tadzio's account of his final days in the Adriatic city of canals conveys a bleak aura of fatality and decay that echoes throughout the text. Venice's eerie atmosphere functions as an external reflection of his decay. On his arrival, the narrator is stunned by "el color de metal que tenía el mar, la densidad hirviente y gris del aire, el rostro descarnado de ciertos gondoleros que nos llevaban de la isla a la ciudad y luego de vuelta … el silencio de la marea alzándose sobre el de la noche, y, sobre todo, esa luz azafranada, llena de aureolas y de chispeos muy brillantes, que yo no había vista nunca en Polonia" (2000, p. 22). The narrator's description of Venice delivers anxieties about decay and mortality. This passage condenses an impression of a haunting past disturbing the present. The narrator creates a decadent and death-driven self that contours his description of this ruined city. As I shall argue below, decadence functions as a force that stresses social transgressions, exploit (homo)sexual desires, and underlines different notions of disease and death.

Martín's novel shows a high degree of referentiality to Mann's novella: the narrator continually gestures at his own situatedness within a setting that forms part of Aschenbach's downfall. Tadzio and Aschenbach belong to Venice, a territory of literary memory. Venice embodies a circuit of desire which Aschenbach sparked in a plot that is also part of *Der Tod in Venedig*. The city is rooted in Tadzio's past: "debía quedarme en Venecia: aquí había muerto Gustav von Aschenbach, el hombre que me había enseñado los grandes laberintos mucho antes de que yo entrara en ellos" (p. 248). Aschenbach influenced Tadzio into the labyrinths of desire before the latter could even indulge in them. Then, Aschenbach was a mentor who performed a dominant influence on the narrator's doom. Tadzio's writing exercise indicates eagerness of reaching out beyond his temporal situatedness, through the letter as a testament. Although this letter is addressed to the opera singer, it reaches readers familiar with a famous character: "Tadzio el hermoso, el delicado niño al que Gustav von Aschenbach amó durante un verano aquí en Venecia" (p. 177). In this vein,

Tadzio combines moments of his life with events depicted in Mann's novella. Readers of *Der Tod in Venedig* or viewers of Visconti's film adaptation, *Morte a Venezia* (1971), are familiar with its intertext. Hence, the novel proposes an attempt to align itself with Mann's novella, as a literary descendant.

The influence of *Der Tod in Venedig* on this novel stimulates consideration of how canonical literature impacts contemporary queer fiction. The interpretation of this novel as a sequel and somehow positioned to imitate the novella might motivate us to consider Mann's work in terms of the poetics of influence. By influence, I mean the flowing of cultural material from the past into ("influ-") contemporary narratives. However, queer criticism's dismissal of metaphors of fatherhood and futurity tends to avoid some of the notions that the idea of influence enforces. Nonetheless, queer fictions often honour, respond to, or depart from the literary canon. Indeed, Martín's novel is deeply influenced by previous cultural material, ideas, and themes which fashion its decadent worldview.

The most prominent study that explores metaphors of authorship as fatherhood and immortality is, possibly, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973)[6]. Bloom maintains that influence should be regarded as an "intra-poetic relationship", meaning the synchronized movements that one author makes away from and towards a prior author through an act of misprision (p. 7). Bloom considers literary "influence" as a titanic battle between "precursor" and "ephebe" confined in a patriarchal tradition, a cultural force that has repercussions for our present (p. 7). For the ephebe, the figure of the precursor generates a condition of authorial anxiety, articulated in terms of a Freudian family romance, with the new author actively misreading the "stronger poets" in search of originality (p. 7). Anxiety commences when the apprentice fails to come to its natural end, which Bloom finds to be the objective of the author's original literary production. Drawing on Bloom, fathering a canonical literary text prompts the author's immortality. Hence,

[6] Bloom's seminal study is probably the most significant exponent in a wide body of theorization on the concept of literary influence. After his contribution, criticism on influence has sought to reformulate ways for thinking around this poetics of anxiety and has provided new ways to theorize the literary status of textual relationships within postmodernism. See, for instance, Gilbert and Gubar, 1979; Clayton and Rothstein, 1991; and Lane, 1993.

literary history symbolizes a timeline of sons growing into the fathers of texts, making their own claims to immortality. Consequently, Martín's novel represents a figurative child of Mann's novella.

Bloom supports the importance of the author figure, but, as he also argues, authors are the cumulative result of their influences, intrapoetic relationships akin to life cycles. The scholar identifies an uncanny factor in the transmission of influence and emphasizes the immortal presence of the author, as the father of the literary text. In his discussion of Oscar Wilde's literary production, for instance, Bloom maintains that Wilde "failed as a poet because he lacked strength to overcome his anxiety of influence". The scholar quotes from Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> [All influence is immoral] because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He [the influenced author] does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else's music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. (Qtd. in Bloom, 1973, p. 6)

This passage condenses the anxiety that perpetuated Wilde's refusal to wrestle with the dead. Moreover, the trope of influence within Wilde's specific novel offers significant insights. Dorian Gray's moral downfall condenses an account of the decadent kinship between influence and aesthetics: influence is immoral, the aesthetic taste is based on influence; thus, aesthetic taste becomes immoral[7]. Similarly, Tadzio is an influenced aesthete. He is a talented composer, but his musical compositions are an appropriation of another musician: "Los críticos consagraron toda su inteligencia a demostrar que mi sinfonía sexta era un trasunto de las últimas obras de Gustav Mahler, de cuya alma,

[7] Wilde's novel explores the fatal impact of literary influence as the protagonist's moral decline is triggered by a book, identified only by its yellow cover and representative of a myriad of decadent fiction available at that time.

decían, me apropiaba yo para cantar mi propia alma" (Martín, 2000, p. 241). The novel draws on several motifs from decadentism, such as the notion of authorial identity and self-fashioning (Denisoff, 2007, p. 32). Like Mahler, Aschenbach exerts an immoral influence on the narrator: "Gracias a Aschenbach, pues, llegué a ser luego cuanto he sido: un hombre que goza contemplando" (p. 178). Aschenbach represents a queer progenitor, a father figure who influences Tadzio: "Aschenbach fue una predestinación, el anuncio de las plagas que vendrían, el espejo en el que se me mostraba mi porvenir … Durante los años que han transcurrido desde entonces no ha pasado ni un solo día sin que le recordara" (p. 141). The narrator articulates an immortal bond with Aschenbach, an omen of his fallen adulthood. His determination to return to Venice and repeat Aschenbach's downfall –implicit in his use of "the plagues"– finally kills him. As such, Tadzio has a Bloomian vision of influence as an inherited wound and of writing as an individual struggle against extinction and as a form of survival.

The influence of *Der Tod in Venedig* in Martín's novel is evident; an elderly aesthete travels to Venice where he develops a maniacal fascination with a younger boy. Martín's novel uses the same themes: the images of a decadent city, of youth, of growing older and of death. However, Martín's narrator differs from Mann's Aschenbach who was often wrapped in aestheticism and a platonic vision of beauty[8]. The platonic issues that modelled Mann's novella transmute into a transgressive drive that kills the narrator. Therefore, same-sex desire works as a metaphor for cultural transgression. The plot expresses the transgression to which Tadzio's desires conducts him, the consequence of which is death. In an antisocial queer gesture, the novel validates the death drive and refuses hegemonic plots empowered by the conception of futurity.

Martín's novel is faithful to *Der Tod in Venedig*'s investment in a death-oriented plot. Even if Mann's novella fails to portray same-sex desire in a positive light, it has

[8] Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio draws on classical Hellenic models for homosocial relations. The old German fantasizes that he is Socrates and Tadzio is Phaedrus (Mann, 1998, p. 238). Indeed, this cultural model of male homosociality emerging as the relationship between an older man and a younger one has influenced many Western interpretations of homosexuality (see Gallop, 1982, p. 118).

remained a classic text for both, gay and queer fiction[9]. As Andrew Webber (2002) argues, the novella "has identified Mann, however ambivalently, as a pioneering modern gay writer" (p. 68). The novella's negativity was also objected to by some of its contemporary readers. The poet Stefan George criticized Mann for transfiguring "the highest form of love" into the "realm of decadence" (qtd. in Mann, 1990, p. 96)[10]. Nevertheless, the novella has influenced a variety of cultural products, Visconti's *Morte a Venezia*, and Britten's *Death in Venice*, perhaps among the most significant. The consolidation of *Der Tod in Venedig* within a gay literary canon was a result of the post-Stonewall search for gay literary gems of the past. The cultural milieu enabled by Stonewall was also the context of a prominent film adaptation of the novella. *Morte a Venezia* is at the vanguard of the gay subculture's recovery project of the 1970s. The film itself also bears influence on Martín's novel. In fact, the narrator's name is Tadzio Andrésen, the combination of Mann's character's first name and the last name of the Swedish actor who incarnated him in Visconti's film. Besides, the book cover includes a photography of Visconti's Tadzio, stressing the visual influence of the film. The portrayal of Tadzio as the actor Björn Andrésen is omnipresent. As the critic Gilbert Adair (2001) observes: "Björn Andresen has become, once and for all time, the Tadzio of the collective imagination" (p. 87). So omnipresent is the film's influence that, after its release, the image of the Swedish actor has been identified with that of Tadzio. By looking at the book's cover, the reader thus visualizes Björn Andrésen whilst reading Tadzio's epistle[11].

3. TOPOGRAPHIES OF DESIRE

[9] In its representation of same-sex desire, Mann's novella draws on several sources, from classical Hellenism, scientific discourses, Freudian psychoanalysis, and decadent aestheticism (see Tobin, 2012; Wilper, 2016).
[10] By "the highest form of love", Stefan George refers to the Hellenic model of homosocial relations; this is, the love of an older man for an adolescent.
[11] Recently, the documentary *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World* (2021), told by the film-makers Kristina Lindström and Kristian Petri, explores the tragic consequences that being part of Visconti's film had for Andrésen's personal life.

Venice is the setting that dramatizes Tadzio's return to the city of the plague. The notion of Venice's tolerant view of sexuality will not surprise readers familiar with the literary motifs of Venetian license which became clichés in the English sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature (Labalme, 1984, p. 218). Besides, the motif of travelling to Southern Europe was also, for a long time, a literary trope for homosexual exploration. In *The Seduction of the Mediterranean*, Robert Aldrich (1993) argues that the phenomenon of "the lure of Italy" influenced British, French, and German intellectuals, who became "the largest contingent of writers on the Mediterranean and homosexual visitors to the South" (p. 101), among whom Aldrich lists Johann Joachim Winckelmann, August von Platen, Lord Byron, John Addington Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Prime-Stevenson, and Thomas Mann (pp. 101-35). Aldrich writes that "the writers and artists who lived in the Mediterranean created and perpetuated the myth of the homoerotic south, conflating ancient and modern images" (p. x). These Northern European intellectuals travelled to the mediterranean south seduced by the queer promise, though culturally anachronistic, of encountering a homoerotic past within their present.

In his seminal study *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference*, Derek Duncan (2006) examines the position of Italy within Europe's topography of male homoerotism. His hypothesis is that Italian homosexuality has been conceived fundamentally different *vis-à-vis* Northern European perceptions of male same-sex desire. The latter generated a cultural tradition characterized by strategies of masking, silences, and productive reticence. In doing so, Duncan explores "the paths of constraints and resistance charted by an emergent queer subject" (p. 12) in Italian literature, extending from the late nineteenth century to the present day. Duncan writes:

> Italy attracts upper-middle class aesthetes, but it also attracts aspiring rent boys from North Africa and the Balkan States convinced that gay men will offer them a reliable source of income. In both instances, sexual identity is imbricated in complex economics of class, national difference, and cultural capital. It is not just the case that foreigners have somehow got hold of the

> wrong end of the stick. Northern Italians project similar fantasies onto the South. All Southern Italian men, it is sometimes asserted, have sex with each other although none of them is gay. (p. 4)

Duncan maintains that Italy is included in Europe's "idea of the South as a pastoral haven of unfettered homoeroticism" which has fossilized an image of the country "in a state of archaic underdevelopment" (p. 4). The economic discrepancy and racial difference between travellers and locals resulted in several liaisons. As Duncan argues, Northern European perceptions of Italy's homoeroticism, "both long for and repress this sense of difference that might be termed racial as much as sexual for the object of desire is determined more by geography than by gender" (p. 4). This imagery is nurtured by perceptions of economic disparity, racial difference and depending on a desire for such difference.

The elderly Tadzio's journey to Venice is influenced by cultural perceptions of the homoerotic south, as indicated by Duncan. When recalling his childhood vacations in Venice, Tadzio remembers his friendship with boys from a different background. He was "un muchacho sensible y afeminado que cultivaba la música y se educaba en los saberes de la poesía, las artes plásticas y la metafísica" (Martín, 2000, p. 15). Nevertheless, he made friends with "chicos de temple muy distinto y de distinta alcurnia" (p. 100). Tadzio was particularly obsessed with Yaxu, an Arab boy whose brutality triggered his sexual desires: "[Yaxu] era el mayor de edad, lo que ya bastaba, pero tenía, además, la crueldad que conviene a quienes reinan" (p. 100). Yaxu's hyper-masculinity juxtaposes Tadzio's effeminacy. The narrator's sexuality is blatantly expressed in a wrestling episode on the Lido beach. In this scene, the Arab boy defeats the effeminate Pole: "Sentí entonces la complacencia de su carne, el gusto de su olor, la molicie … Me excité con brutalidad, tuve escalofríos. Allí, caído sobre el suelo, vencido, conocí por primera vez la turbieza del placer" (p. 101). This passage shows the narrator's reminiscence of his childhood's

erotomania at being overpowered by the Arab boy. In Venice, therefore, cultural differences fuel homoeroticism[12].

Venice is structured into a different cultural territory from Northern Europe and the two stand in mutual exclusion, against each other. The narrator does not give an account of his sexuality without going through the other. Sixty years after the summer of the plague, Tadzio returns to Venice. Now, he becomes fascinated with a distinct kind of southerner garçons fatales: "morenos, muy rectos, de huesos afilados, un poco bestiales" (Martín, 2000, p. 25). These working-class boys are exalted by their "bestiality" as they symbolize unbridled sexuality and cultural differences between north/south. The narrator maintains: "multipliqué mis actuaciones en Italia con el único propósito de conocer a muchachos de esta especie" (p. 26). These boys are portrayed in their primitivism, and such depiction becomes central in Tadzio's sexual desires, directed towards those whose lack of cultural sophistication licenses the narrator to invest them with this eroticized difference. The narrator describes these boys as "others" through a racial motif. Hence, Tadzio's homoerotic fantasy is symptomatic not only of racism but also of a decadent mindset, dissonant with Western notions of progress.

At this point, the novel's perception of social class and racial dynamics may generate a critical distance between narrator and reader. The image of the exotic working-class lad is exalted because of its homoerotic potential, and thus it is an objectified representation instead of a cultural identity. Hence, it conveys a fantasy of homoerotic masculinity in which the working-class boy is not provided with an identity of his own. These bodies, symbolizing primitive masculinity, are at odds with parameters of post-Stonewall epistemology, especially the politics of sexual shame. This portrayal of cultural difference indicates how sexual fantasies may function in a decadent fashion, in conflict with progressive sexual politics. The recurrence of distinct temporal models has been discussed by queer scholars. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), for instance, maintains that

[12] In articulating a boy's erotic desires, the novel evokes notions from late nineteenth-century sexology and early twentieth-century psychoanalysis: the idea that children harbour "indecent" desires (Kaye, 2007, p. 55).

"minoritarian" views of the homosexual as an "abnormal species" did not displace less identity-bound notions of same-sex desire (p. 9). Thus, homosexuality did not replace sodomy. Although these cultural concepts follow different temporalities, they co-exist in tension with one another. Sedgwick argues:

> At the same time that this process of sexual specification or species-formation was going on, … less stable and identity-bound understandings of sexual choice also persisted and developed, often among the same people or interwoven in the same systems of thought … an understanding of their irresolvable instability has been continually available, and has continually lent discursive authority, to antigay as well as to gay cultural forces of this century. (pp. 9-10)

Therefore, a universalizing view of same-sex relations –the idea that all men are capable of same-sex desire– continued after the historical advent of homosexuality as a minority identity. The line between these two notions turns ambiguous and productive. The result of this "irresolvable instability," Sedgwick maintains, makes the homo/hetero quandary a permanent concern for Western culture. In Venice, the ambiguity around sexual identity categories fashions a territory of primitive male-male eros.

The narrator has sexual intercourse with other men, but this does not identify him as gay. From a post-Stonewall liberal viewpoint, this refusal to describe Tadzio as gay would often imply repression or homophobia. Thus, I use "queer" to indicate a non-identitarian subjectivity, dissonant with current sexual politics. Tadzio's sexuality fails to support any identity or political agenda. This is utterly physical: "Al observar a los muchachos en las playas, no imaginaba ya solamente sus cuerpos desvestidos o las caricias, sino la sodomización, el rebuscamiento de los labios, la salivación de dedos, las convulsiones, la violencia de dientes y el orgasmo" (Martín, 2000, pp. 105-106). As such, Tadzio has a non-identitarian sexuality; he is not gay, but a man who practices sodomy. This representation conveys an attempt to dislocate and remove morality from our

contemporary framework of sexual subjectivities. Accordingly, the novel inverts sexual politics without subverting post-Stonewall perceptions.

Venice functions as a distant topography of sexual excess in tension with the parameters of Western civilizations. This territory shapes an unbridled male-male eros; thus, it turns transgressive because it is situated far beyond frameworks of contemporary sexual identity and modernity's progress. Influenced by Mann's novella, Tadzio's Venice also embodies a decadent territory of disease and death.

4. DISEASE AND DEATH

The most controversial aspect of the novel is, perhaps, its investment in a decadent motif that relates male same-sex desire with death, echoing the narrative trajectory of the plague in *Der Tod in Venedig*. Mann's novella connects same-sex desire with the plague, a textual metaphor that summons issues of disease and degeneration, associations which late nineteenth-century scientific discourses had already made to homosexuality (Wilper, 2016, pp. 91-113). In fact, historians of sexuality have often observed how *fin-de-siècle* discourses usually considered same-sex desire as an indicator of moral, mental, and physical degeneration. David Greenberg (1988) argues that during that period "the fundamental opposition between normal sex and abnormal paraesthesia was largely based on traditional oppositions. Sex was perverse if reproduction was not its goal" (p. 414). These beliefs continued to prevail during the next decades, with literary texts and cultural objects reacting against those hegemonic discourses. In this vein, literary texts associated with decadence tend to represent a regression on what is presumed to be a healthy trajectory of progressive growth. Hence, the association of decadence with disease, as if society were infected by a devastating virus. I argue that Martín's novel reshapes this conundrum between male same-sex desire and death, explicit in the novel's title (and the title of Mann's novella).

The Stonewall riots symbolized a turning point, a moment at which being the objects of homophobic oppression transformed into becoming the subjects of political activism. Nevertheless, if Stonewall functions as a political and cultural hallmark, the divergence of queer subcultures suggests the dissonant persistence of regressive narratives of sexual difference. The persistence of tropes of disease and death suggests an abandonment of Stonewall's progressive politics. Martín's novel adapts decadence to illustrate the death-dealing implications of male-male sex during the AIDS epidemic, central to the sexual-political scene during the 1980s and 1990s. When discussing the cultural impact of AIDS, Gayle Rubin (1993) writes: "gay people find themselves metaphorically welded to an image of lethal physical deterioration. The syndrome, its peculiar qualities, and its transmissibility are being used to reinforce old fears that sexual activity, homosexuality, and promiscuity led to disease and death" (p. 26). AIDS came to reinforce a regressive view of homosexuals as situated at the interstices of notions concerning disease and death. The fatal association of AIDS with male-male sex did not only suggest that the syndrome was a sort of gay disease but also resuscitated the belief that homosexuality was anti-natural. Hence, the social effects of AIDS were used to abort the liberal promise of progressive history.

One hundred years after the *fin-de-siècle*, the decadent interest in temporality and death plays a revitalized role in queer fiction that explores the cultural impact of AIDS. However, the textual explicitness of the syndrome is not always evident. Discussing the fiction of the late twentieth century, George Piggford (2000) maintains that "a number of textual practices emerged that took on the subject of AIDS variously as signifier, signified, metaphor, and pathology" (p. 169). This metaphorical tendency presented AIDS as a textual motif which may not necessarily have always been explicit. In this critical vein, I do not claim that Tadzio's disease is AIDS-related, only that the effect of the virus influences the novel's decadent imagery. Thus, my close reading looks beyond literal meanings to scrutinize cultural possibilities.

The novel's death-driven motif combines Tadzio's final days with Aschenbach's death, during the summer of the plague. One of the earliest homophobic phrases for AIDS

was the "gay plague", which not only implied that AIDS was a result of homosexuality but that the latter was in itself a sort of disease (Sharrock, 1997, pp. 356-357). As Tadzio declares to Fabrizio, one of his lovers: "La peste, respondí mientras servía vino en las copas. 'Pero eso da igual', añadí, '*siempre se muere por la peste*"' (Martín, 2000, p. 263, emphasis mine). The narrator articulates the uncanny menace of "the plague" as a permanent threat for homosexuals. Of course, neither Aschenbach nor Tadzio dies from AIDS since the syndrome seems to be dissonant with the novel's temporality and cultural milieu. However, Tadzio invokes a motif also experienced by Mann's protagonist; namely, the perception that death haunts male same-sex desire.

In a novel that puts such an emphasis on death, Edelman's antisocial perspective becomes relevant as it goes from "the death drive" –underlining the absence of future-oriented reproductivity and when, because of the AIDS discourse, the desire for anal sex is culturally associated with death– to the social. Nevertheless, anticipating Edelman's criticism, Leo Bersani's controversial essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987) had already stressed the death-oriented potential of male-male sex. Drawing on a psychoanalytic perspective of sexual pleasure as the outcome of a threshold of bodily excess, Bersani considers sex as "antiegalitarian, antinurturing, anti-loving" (p. 215). He argues that sexuality might be interpreted as an impulse towards either self-hyperbole (self-inflation) or self-shattering (pp. 217-218). The transgressive potential of male-male sex, he argues, dwells in its self-shattering impulse, in "the violation of male identity" (p. 209). Bersani argues that social structures which display traits of domination and subordination are symptomatic of the dynamics in sex. His premise addresses the social repudiation of the rectum as a site of pleasure to anxieties of masculinity.

Bersani pinpoints the male rectum as the site of masculinity's prospective for loss or "self-shattering", claiming that "*To be penetrated is to abdicate power*" (p. 209, emphasis in original). In his argument that receptive anal sex is perceived as a potential loss, Bersani cites a range of authors who claim that even in cultures that were tolerant with male-male

sex, assuming the "receptive" role was deemed degrading[13]. Receptive anal sex "shatters" the normative notion that male sexuality has its basis in the phallus (p. 209). Bersani concludes, in a polemic passage, that if the rectum symbolizes the grave whereby "the masculine ideal" is "buried", then "it should be celebrated for its very *potential for death*" (p. 222, emphasis mine). He goes on to add that,

> AIDS has literalized that potential as the certainty of biological death and has therefore reinforced the heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation originally and primarily identified with the phantasmatic mystery of an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality. It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him. (p. 222)

Following Bersani, male-male sex undermines heteronormative sexuality and shatters hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, the cultural impact of AIDS brought to the fore intermingling notions about male-male sex and death which, as I argue in what follows, are reconfigured in the novel's decadent imagery.

The intersection between male-male sex and death is complicated by a mysterious disease. The origin of this disease is undefined; however, it seems to be a consequence of Tadzio's sexuality: "Fui conociendo todos los males, como si la Providencia hubiera mandado plagas para castigar mis venialidades: contraje una enfermedad mortificante" (Martín, 2000, p. 222). The narrator goes on to mention the symptoms of this disease: "las primeras carnosidades negras, las fiebres, el enflaquecimiento" (p. 14). His body is the site whereby the disease's symptoms develop textual form. Tadzio's description of his symptoms resonates with sexuality's self-shattering impulse: "tenía calores de fiebres,

[13] Bersani draws on Foucault, who affirms that for the ancient Athenians the only honourable sexual behaviour "consists in being active, in dominating, in penetrating and in thereby exercising one's authority" (p. 212).

temblores, escalofríos y luego alivios. La cara se me enrojecía. Y el reposo del sueño, como a los condenados, me faltaba" (p. 45). The textual depiction of the disease does not offer one explicit meaning but presents, instead, a combination of different symptoms[14].

Aschenbach's mad desire for Tadzio epitomizes sexuality's self-shattering impulse: a threshold that results from a fatal loss of the self. The narrator's memories of Aschenbach convey his destructive influence on the old man: "Me miraba con horror, como creo que sólo puede mirarse a la muerte" (Martín, 2000, p. 21). Tadzio's final encounter with Aschenbach is figurative of sexuality's self-shattering impulse: "Aschenbach levantaba a ratos los ojos hacia la oscuridad de la playa. Tenía en la cara –acicalada, empolvada de blanco– la expresión extraña con que algunos hombres atormentados contemplan lo que es hermoso: el goce puro y el suplicio extremo, la destrucción y el éxtasis" (p. 64). As such, Tadzio is destined to shatter Aschenbach's sense of self. When the old Tadzio returns to Venice, he experiences a similar loss of the self: "sufrí una especie de locura. Mi asombro ante la belleza de los chicos se convirtió de repente en un daño siniestro, parecido al de la muerte" (p. 222). This decadent experience with death also conveys anxieties regarding the decomposition of the human body. Tadzio suffers from nightmares in which he sees his decomposition:

> vi cómo mi cuerpo desnudo, blanco, de carne engordada en anillos, se sacudía suavemente entre las sábanas de hilo. Vi también mi rostro, como en un reflejo: una frente de piedra, unos ojos agrandados por cercos violáceos, un cuello ya sin arquitectura, flojo, unos dientes de bordes podridos, unos labios flacos y secos. Casi sin moverme, levanté el borde de la sábana y me cubrí *como si fuera un cadáver*" (p. 116, emphasis mine)

This fixation with physical decomposition is again reiterated when the narrator ruminates on the young Gabriele –Tadzio's new object of desire– and Aschenbach. The narrator

[14] Similarly, from its origins, AIDS has been difficult to represent since, as Susan Sontag (1991) maintains, the syndrome is "a medical condition, whose consequences are a spectrum of illnesses" (p. 102).

became obsessed with Gabriele, a beautiful Venetian boy, whom he chased through the city's ruined alleys. After that, Tadzio would see Gabriel in his nightmares: "Vi el rostro de Gabriele y los ojos de Aschenbach. *Las larvas de un cadáver*" (p. 156, emphasis mine). The disgust inspired by the image of a corpse with larvae implies the emergence of new life in the form of insects in the decomposing body. This image exposes a shame about the human organic origins in the linear continuity found in heterosexual reproduction, to which we are reverted by death. Of course, death is the inescapable outcome of time's effects on the human body. Even so, Tadzio emphasizes the anxieties of the abandonment of his physical body, the dissolving of its boundaries into organic life.

As I have discussed here, Venice becomes the textual setting for the depiction of male same-sex desire in the context of AIDS. As such, Venice represents a literary territory of death, triggered by the legacies of cultural memory. Venice is where Aschenbach died, and where Tadzio eventually dies. However, I do not intend to perpetuate an essential correlation between male-male sex and death. In fact, queer scholars and activists have cautioned against accepting this link as natural, and it is imperative to recognize it as neither essential nor unavoidable. Nevertheless, critiquing this link should be distinguished from rejecting its convoluted existence; expressing our critical views should not prevent us from examining its cultural meanings and possibilities. In the novel, Tadzio embodies a social death drive that undermines normative scripts of health and progress. Expanding on this issue, I discuss the narrator's ultimate act of transgression in what follows.

5. ANTISOCIAL TRANSGRESSIONS

Eventually, Tadzio's unexpected murder of Gabriele displaces the narrator from any sort of social framework or community. Murder is the principal proscription of most religions, and the crime carries severe legal punishment. The narrator's maniacal infatuation with Gabriele produces a literal death drive that ultimately kills the very object of desire. After introducing himself to the Venetian boy, Tadzio spends a night with him alone in his room. The day after, the narrator asks him about his family background: "Luego le

pregunté a Gabriele quién era su padre para escuchar cómo decía su nombre, amigo Fornari. "Stefano Fornari", dijo. No se movió. Volví a mirarle y pensé que la belleza era obra de Lucifer, la pasión de un monstruo. Saqué del bolsillo de mi batan el hilo de cuero que había robado en su habitación y lo puse alrededor de su cuello" (Martín, 2000, p. 273). The reader ultimately realizes that Tadzio's crime is an act of revenge against Stefano Fornari –the addressee of this letter– as the latter had rejected Tadzio's love declaration in the past. Finally, the reader understands the real intention behind Tadzio's letter. Then, Tadzio finally transgresses the limits of the most absolute perversion, necrophilia: "Aquella noche dormí junto al cuerpo muerto de Gabriele" (p. 280). Themes of murder and sexual perversion stand for a hyperbolic transgression of social norms and condense the essence of decadence. Indeed, a significant element of the decadent imagery involves murder, notions of sterility and a refusal of the future (Downing, 2004; Porter, 1997). As critic Lisa Downing (2004) writes: "Decadence is the underside of the *Bildungsroman*, the dark side of progress. It replaces reproduction with the sterile perfections of sexual perversion, and intersubjectivity with murder" (p. 202). Hence, same-sex love, or any other relational bond, does not exist in the novel's antisocial worldview.

Following this decadent imagery, the novel is largely antisocial, and death driven. Tadzio's crime echoes Edelman's view of queer as "a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration" (2004, p. 79). Moreover, Tadzio embodies Edelman's concept of the *sinthomosexual*. Drawing on the Lacanian term "*sinthome*", which names the "fixation of the drive that determines [the subject's] jouissance", Edelman coins the *sinthomosexual* (2004, p. 36). Following Edelman, this concept designates a queer figure that "has the privilege of refusing the responsibilities that come with collective life, the privilege … of sexual license, political disengagement, and thus … the privilege of remaining indifferent to the vulnerabilities of others" (2007, p. 475). Edelman's *sinthomosexual* is a "sign" but resistant to further meaning. Its literality stands for the death drive and undermines beliefs in meaning and futurity. In this vein, Edelman's antisocial stance delineates Tadzio's lethal impulses. Because of this, criticism may inspire allegations of homophobia that makes Martín's novel dissonant and incompatible with post-Stonewall's sexual politics

of equality. Nonetheless, those issues of being "outside society" are the core of the novel's decadence.

Far from representing sexual minorities, Martín's novel removes the notion of morality from sexual taxonomy categories. Recognizing identity categories facilitates the circumscription of the subject within society. By declining to represent sexual identity into delineated cultural categories, the novel disavows social absorption. Furthermore, instead of pleading for a cohesive queer community, the novel overthrows any sort of relationality. At odds with the social and utopic thinking that distinguishes most current queer criticism, Martín's novel is temporally decadent. Accordingly, the classification of this text as "queer" is debatable as it fails to recommend political utility and does not convey an affirmative portrayal of its narrator but aggravates his pathology, keeping him antisocial, death-driven and decadent.

CONCLUSION

Tadzio's confessional letter is a story of acceleration into decadence and a temporal regression into a primitive territory of male homoeroticism. Tadzio's sexuality follows a regressive cultural tradition of the libertine rather than the libertarian, thus, endorsing the narrative's representation of a decadent present, rather than a sexually emancipatory one. The novel draws attention to critical issues of influence and decadence. In line with Edelman's criticism, decadence is also suspicious of hegemonic notions of progress and the social promise of a redemptive future.

This article further suggests the existence of a delicate matter within queer fiction. Martín's novel exacerbates a figure whose cultural associations have conflated male-male sex with death. This is an aspect that would likely discard the classification of this novel as a queer text. I argue that simply turning away from past damage to a progressive future means ignoring the damages of the past; it further ignores the non-progressive persistence of that uneasy cultural memory. The importance of damage in queer criticism exists in

conflict with a need to undermine it and validate non-heteronormative subjectivities. Still, Martín's novel inverts hegemonic views of progress and our contemporary perception of gay identity. As such, it confirms how the history of damage persists in the present. However, stigma becomes useful if it is exploited within an antihomophobic agenda. Therefore, the significance of queer depends on what, in Foucauldian terms, we would call reverse discourse. The controversial problem with this novel is that it fails to recommend a strategic response to pathologizing discourses. Moreover, certain forms of political radicalism that readers may expect from contemporary queer fiction are missing.

Martín's novel is not interested in redeploying political agendas to validate queer subjectivities but, instead, moves beyond our contemporary scripts. It does not reclaim homophobic issues of stigma but rejects any form of social paradigm. The novel does not promote subversive nor radical politics. Its transgressive value is only defined against the societal script and thus fails at subverting anything. The dilemma with this novel has to do with its uneasy classification as a queer text. To affirm that the value of queerness is limited to Edelman's antisocial hypothesis is to reduce an array of many other different (and more politically inclined) cultural experiences. Consequently, Martín's novel engages and, most considerably, disengages from contemporary queer critical issues.

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