

# Introduction

## “Death in Venice”: Some Indices of the Messianic

As a dying Gustav Aschenbach settles a final time into his “sdraio” or chaise upon the mostly deserted beach of Venice, Tadzio appears to signal him. Aschenbach’s last breaths, his final but feckless attempt to grasp the image of the beloved, all respond to the enigmatic but irresistible gesture that points beyond, to something on the other side of consciousness, even perhaps to a love redeemed, somewhere, someplace, somehow in the future. Given the importance of the following passage for this project, I quote it at some length. The purpose here is to read these final scenes as opening onto a possibility that is neither fully articulated nor foreclosed. At the same time, I am arguing that the plague and Aschenbach’s passion are inextricably linked, even indistinguishable. And it is this convergence of disease and passion, as it points to something beyond the tragic fate of its victim, that is a central concern of this book. Working through the implications of this passage, which will take some time, will also serve as an example of how messianic echoes are pursued in the chapters to follow.

Now, he paused again with his face turned seaward, and next began to move slowly leftwards along the narrow strip of sand the sea left bare. He paced there, divided by an expanse of water from the shore . . . a remote and isolated figure, (*verbindungslos*) with floating locks, out there in the sea and wind, against the misty inane. . . . With a sudden recollected impulse, he turned from the waist up, in an exquisite movement, one hand resting on his hip, and looked over his shoulder at the shore. [Aschenbach] . . . lifted his head, as it were, to answer Tadzio’s gaze. . . . It seemed to him the pale and lovely summoner out

there smiled at him and beckoned; as though . . . he pointed outward . . . into an immensity of richest expectation. And, as so often before, [Aschenbach] rose to follow. (Mann 74–75)

Who is this Aschenbach, abject and alone, squandering his final breaths in a series of hapless gestures as he beholds the magnificence of a figure framed by the endless, boundless sea? The trajectory of Eros has not lead Aschenbach to the union of truth and love anticipated by Plato, but rather to a “pernicious intoxication” (Mann 73), a floundering toward an abyss that was never far away for the bourgeois artist now enraptured by an impossible and even scurrilous desire. To touch or address or even approach this magnificent, prepubescent embodiment of classical perfection would defile such beauty, blaspheme it. Preserving but never possessing that love has driven Aschenbach through the hidden and dirty passageways of Venice, as he tries to keep in and out of touch with Tadzio. Simultaneous with this game of hide-and-seek is Aschenbach’s attempt to track rumors of a plague and its cover-up. The apparent origins of the plague are as mythical and sinister as Tadzio’s appeal is erotic and irresistible:

For the past several years Asiatic cholera had shown a strong tendency to spread. Its source was the hot, moist swamps of the delta of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that primeval island-jungle, among whose bamboo thickets the tiger crouches, where life of every sort flourishes in rank abundance,



Figure I.1: “He paced there, divided by an expanse of water from the shore . . . out there in the sea and the wind, against the misty inane.”

and only man avoids the spot. Thence, the pestilence had spread throughout Hindustan, raging with great violence; it brought terror to Astrakhan, terror even to Moscow. (Mann 63)

The confirmation of his greatest fears, the relentless march of a disease that emanates from where no person dare visit, could just as easily describe the morass that engulfs him, as he tries to explore without exposing himself to the voracious desire that keeps him in pursuit of his beloved. “He was not feeling well and had to struggle against spells of giddiness only half physical in their nature, accompanied by a swiftly mounting dread, a sense of futility and hopelessness—but whether this referred to himself or to the outer world he could not tell” (Mann 73). The hallucinatory effects of the plague thus derive from its origins and situate it outside the fertile grounds and classical skies of ancient Greece. Aschenbach has gone too far. Or his lust has taken him too far. The question now arises whether Aschenbach is in pursuit of the plague or is the plague in pursuit of Aschenbach? “And yet our solitary felt he had a sort of first claim on a share in the unwholesome secret; he took a fantastic satisfaction in putting leading questions to such persons as were interested to conceal it, and forcing them to explicit untruths by way of denial” (Mann 57). The secret in this instance is the plague, but the description equally resonates with exploration of closeted desires. “It [the plague] ought to be kept quiet,’ he thought, aroused. ‘It should not be talked about’” (Mann 53). In this instance the convergence of the plague with illicit desire is unmistakable. Lastly, note how the plague’s renewed strength mirrors the heightening of Aschenbach’s passion. His questionable source, a British travel agent, seems all too capable of embellishment well attuned to Aschenbach’s fears and passions: “Yes, the disease seemed to flourish and wax strong, to redouble its generative powers . . . For the onslaught was of the extremest violence, and not infrequently of the ‘dry’ type, the most malignant form of the contagion” (Mann 63–64).

Aschenbach is not just exposed to this diseased passion but is in fact a carrier of it. The plague, fortified by its bond with illicit passion, carries as much of a malignant risk for the narrator as it does for Aschenbach. Submerged in a miasma of his own making, Aschenbach no longer carries the narrator’s favor. On the contrary, the narrator evinces repulsion to the point of a virtual excommunication from the graces or sympathies of Western civilization. As Eros draws him closer and closer to the precipice (“So they too [the passions], they too lead him to the bottomless pit”; Mann 73), the narrator gradually withdraws, finally expressing absolute rejection

of Aschenbach, when the latter finds himself enraptured by the plague that his forbidden passion self-generated:

Too late! He thought at that moment. Too late! But was it too late? This step that he failed to take would very possibly have been all to the good, it might have had a lightening, gladdening effect, led perhaps to a wholesome disenchantment. But the fact now seemed to be that the aging lover no longer wished to be disenchanted, the intoxication was too precious to him. (Mann 47)

For Dorritt Cohn the passage signals a definitive turn by a narrator no longer willing to indulge Aschenbach's sordid descent in quest of physical beauty. Aschenbach's indisposition to "self-criticism" requires the narrator to abandon him (Mann 143–45). In other words, Aschenbach needs to be quarantined.

The final sentence of the novella seems to confirm the narrator's full reversal. "Before midnight, a shocked and respectful public would receive news of his decease" (Mann 75). In contrast to the unbridled outpouring of passion evinced by Aschenbach, the narrator and the world maintain their dignity with a properly restrained expression of sympathy. But is that really all there is? Does something else not unhinge the narrator? The first description offered above described Tadzio as isolated and without ties (*verbindungslos*), when he gestures to Aschenbach. On the one hand, his beauty is not defiled or compromised, at least in this moment, by any earthly consideration. On the other, does he perhaps gesture toward the possibility of a world without ties or restrictions, one whose entry is barred, i.e., the narrator with his/her ties to respectable society? Initially, it is barred to Aschenbach as well. Perhaps, there is no crossing that threshold. Aschenbach is thus tethered to the structures of respectable society that both produce and condemn his quest to capture the sensual in art. His final monologue, bemoaning the fate of the artist hopelessly condemned to pursue damnation, becomes then his recognition of the tentacles of respectable society and their reach in determining the acceptable limits of love. "His [final] monologue takes on the meaning of an *anagnorisis*, the expression of that lethal knowledge the hero of Greek tragedy reaches when he stands on the verge of death" (Cohn 144). Left unanswered is how such recognition informs his final gaze through love-sick eyes at the forbidden.

The narrator's pleasure in telling the story of a man fallen from grace has more than the casual hint of a pleasurable sadism, not far removed from the *Schadenfreude* of his friends back home when his late work is met with

rejection.<sup>1</sup> Upon landing in Venice, Aschenbach is plagued by a group of Polish “ragazzi” on vacation; their source of greatest displeasure comes in the figure of an old and pathetic fop who appears suspiciously out of place among so many young men. “Aschenbach was moved to shudder as he watched the creature and his association with the rest of the group. Could they not see that he was old, that he had no right to wear the clothes they wore or pretend to be one of them?” (Mann 17). Indeed, there is much that is vulgar or “gemein” about the fop’s eventual drunkenness, as he tries to find a way to ingratiate himself with the virile lads surrounding him. What most disturbs Aschenbach is the premonition that he will suffer a similar humiliation, that those dark forces of Eros will entrap him in an affair as ridiculous and crude. Little recasting of the citation above is required to turn the disdain on Aschenbach, particularly as he frantically pursues the plague, while his makeup and hair dye peel away and with them any veneer of respectability (Mann 69–70). In this instance, the fop staggers from side to side, but however ridiculous he may appear, the fop has the last laugh. “Give it (*dem Liebchen*) our love, will you, the p-pretty little dear” (Mann 17). The fop knows all about Aschenbach; he knows Aschenbach’s story and what he will have been up to. And so the novella unfolds the history of the fop’s double, Aschenbach, and his willingness to disgrace himself, to invent and infect himself with the plague so as to preserve but demonstrate an unconditional love for an impossible subject.

Moreover, the fop’s bitchiness resonates with the exasperation of the narrator when he/she finally abandons Aschenbach: “Too Late! Too Late!” Aschenbach sighs, as once again he is swept away by Tadizo, or as the fop prefers, “the p-pretty little dear.” Just as the fop knows that it is too late for Aschenbach (the two are brothers of a sort), the narrator questions Aschenbach’s resignation: “But was it too late? [. . .] [T]he truth might have been that the aging man did not want to be cured, that his illusion was far too dear for him” (Mann 47). The text’s pleasure, if I can put it that way, in placing Aschenbach at the mercy of respectable society in the form of a judgmental narrator accommodates easily the darker pleasures Aschenbach seeks. That is—and now we begin to understand just how shaken but perhaps secretly delighted the world was by Aschenbach’s fall—love’s passion is fueled by the sadistic pleasure the narrator derives in watching culture’s one-time darling disgrace himself. The humiliation and dejection that drove Aschenbach to Venice, that masochistic urge for perfection met now with rejection and scorn by a once-adoring public, pushes him over the abyss. “I go. You stay . . .” (Mann 47).



Figure I.2: “Could they not see that he was old, that he had no right to wear the clothes he wore or pretend to be one of them.”

The narrator, however, does not have the last word. As Cohn points out, the narrator protests too much; an unclaimed space or position is opened up by the gap between the narrator’s indictment of Aschenbach and the text’s ultimate position(s) vis-à-vis its protagonist. In other words, a space emerges between the narrator and Aschenbach, not because the narrator’s disdain registers the text’s condemnation of Aschenbach’s moral failure, but rather because the narrator’s own intractable morality creates a textual blind spot or no-man’s land that beckons to Aschenbach: “I go. You stay.” Is he returning to a place as inhospitable to polite society as the miasmatic origins of the plague? And what possibilities for a different moral order, a different kind of love, might be bred from diseased origins? Or to pose a question asked by others: “Is not art, which so peremptorily dismisses ‘sympathy with the abyss,’ incomplete?” (Pike 120–41).

Possible answers to such question take us back to Tadzio’s pose and enigmatic gesture that draw from Aschenbach his last breaths. “It seemed to him the pale and lovely summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though . . . he pointed outward . . . into an immensity of richest expectation” (Mann75). What does it mean to follow that gesture, where might it lead, what potentialities remain unrealized or beckon with messianic hope? Luchino Visconti’s film of Mann’s novella in 1971 offers some profound clues to what this other moral order, or rather, amoral order might promise in terms of love. For one, whatever distancing devices and tropes employed by the narrator hardly function in the same fashion as they do in the film. Mahler’s stirring adagio from the fifth symphony attracts rather

than repels, invites spectators to follow Aschenbach to the abyss. The free, indirect discourse of the novella always held out the possibility that the narrator could just pick up and leave, drop in a few quotation marks and return to a language separate and ethically barred from the pleasures of a dissolute and dying man. But if Aschenbach's final monologue no longer carries credibility for the narrator, do the attachments summoned by the music of the film draw Aschenbach so completely outside the moral purview of any respectable person that the narrator's retreat in the novella marks less an unwillingness than an incapability to follow Aschenbach?<sup>2</sup>

Like the origins of the plague, Aschenbach's new dwelling allows for no "human" to approach. "A photographic apparatus, apparently abandoned, stood on its tripod on the edge of the ocean, and a black cloth, spread over it, flapped and clapped in the colder wind" (Visconti 58). The camera applauds what it has blinded and distanced itself to: a world free of masters and men (*herrenlos*) at the edge or on the verge of something it is not prepared to take in. The abandoned camera or surveillance device expresses, as it were, the exasperation of the panoptic gaze, the futility of any narrative posture absorbing what is just about to unfold but never quite does, or rather, what will not have not happened.

If we take seriously the role of free indirect discourse, that part of speech intended to signal the subject (Aschenbach's) participation in an amorphous community of speakers with a shared language, then the film marks Aschenbach's retreat from such a community of speakers with what Gilles DeLeuze would call "free indirect images." Without a master narrative to dictate proceedings, images and voices and sound can circulate and form connections that defy the panoptic order. "Cinema releases us from connecting images to form a shared external world, rather we see imaging itself, freed from a fixed point of view" (Deleuze 19). But do they? Perhaps. To be sure, another camera stands behind or over and above the dysfunctional one on the beach. But in that interstitial space something remarkable happens. As the panoptic moves outward or distances itself from the subject, things get fuzzy and out of focus. Tazio's initial appearance on the edge of the sea—after surviving a playful but sadistic tussle with a companion—is dappled. While the music finds a second breath and moves toward a crescendo, the image of Tazio appears about to dissolve in the mist of the sea. For at least that moment the mechanisms of surveillance cannot find purchase or focus. When Aschenbach attempts to lift himself from his chair and grasp with what energies remain him the fleeting figure of the beloved, this momentary freedom from life and death, from

narrative commentary, from condemnation or just observation, leads him to an “immensity of richest expectation” (Mann 75). What can await him, whose boundless love for a forbidden beauty left him no means to express that poetry or passion save to summon and succumb to the very vapors which now come to shield and enshrine the beloved?

As we know, it takes little time for the narrator to reestablish a perch above or apart from the deceased and allow respectable society to pay its muted tributes before closing the book on this sordid tale. It is the purpose of this book to reopen and explore the possibilities foreclosed by the reestablishment of panoptic surveillance before such immensities could even be articulated. What I am proposing is to view the last scene as an assemblage or mosaic of immensities that threatens to exceed the limits of the panopticon and does so, paradoxically, only when the narrator severs all ties. In other words, Aschenbach can take the final leap into the abyss and escape whatever controls narration might impose, when even the seeing eye of the respectable world must avert its glance from the disgraceful acts of its subject. “And, as so often before, he [Aschenbach] rose to follow” (Mann 75). This time, however, is different, and so it is my aim to explore those differences with an eye turned toward what might have been or could still be. For reasons to be explained below, my focus will be on mostly German texts written around 1800 and their interlocutors, often belated as in the case of Roland Barthes’s reading of Johann Goethe. Mann’s “Death in Venice” is offered as a trenchant example for opening up such a discussion if for no other reason than that the trajectory of love moves in a direction quite distinct from current gay politics and its agenda of marriage equality, a goal achieved, of course, as we proved ourselves to be good liberal consumers keenly committed to preserving family values. But in what other directions might queer love lead? Precisely, what historical possibilities foreclosed for queer love in the past two centuries might be remobilized according to the indices established by “Death in Venice”?

I have chosen to postpone providing a summary of the chapters to provide first an overview of much of contemporary queer theory. By presenting the theory before the literature, the former articulates possibilities for the messianic that are left to the literary texts to actualize, which, as we will see, means to echo. The theoretical, however, not only defers representation of the messianic to the literary but also precludes the actualization with which it charges literature. In response—and the general summary of the chapters provided at the end of this introduction will speak more to this—the literary produces something unforeseen but underwritten by the



theoretical. That is, the theory both fosters and disables articulation of the messianic, offering only echoes instead. Just as important, proceeding in this fashion underscores how the messianic possibilities of the literary still echo today and offer indices for a politics removed from the nationalisms and hierarchies of gay politics. The extended discussion of contemporary queer theory that follows thus brings together work from various disciplines to offer a map of where we stand today. It also presents a different narrative that seizes upon the messianic character of these thinkers as a direct challenge to the current state of affairs. Indices and literary articulations are all that the messianic can present of itself; in each instance it refuses conceptualization. Before concluding with a map of the argument, I review some of the more recent attempts to normalize same-sex desire to underscore why the movements that got us to the SCOTUS decision are neither tenable nor desirable and thus necessitate a look backward to restore a lost dimension to the theoretical work discussed in the earlier parts of the introduction. The November 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the immediate rollback of newly won protections for LGBTQ people signals the failure of our current politics to prevent a recrudescing homophobia from obtaining. The early targets of the new administration are many—immigrants, refugees, women, people of color, Muslims. Whatever successes the last decades have brought, they also have made it politically incorrect to see all forms of difference as suspect and threatening.

### Queer Temporalities: The End of Empty, Progressive Time

“We are always already dead,” so Judith Halberstam quipped in a published symposium devoted to queer temporalities (Dinshaw 194). Of course, she is referring to Lee Edelman’s insistence upon no future; that is, resisting the refuge of the good, linked among other things to procreation and future generations. Carla Freccero puts it this way, “I often work on the dead, and as time goes by I have begun to think of myself as a future dead person writing myself out of my time while time is running out” (Dinshaw 183). The dense remark, and we will have occasion to explore what kind of love future dead people might still have time to discover, prompts the rather bold question by Christopher Nealon:

In writing about “time” and “history, we definitely [. . .] are writing about the possible forms and destinies of queer community

[communities?]. . . . How are our theorizations of alternate temporalities legible not only as attempts to think through the possibilities of movement and community but also as attempts to think through or around or against the dominant form of the social organization of the time, that is, the time of the commodity. (Dinshaw 186)

To live as one already dead, or rather, to love as one already dead or always about to die is the central conceit of this project. Before investigating the theoretical possibilities of inhabiting, in the language of Giorgio Agamben, the time that remains, or rather, the time that will have remained, let me position the project in terms of current theoretical debates, after which I will return to discuss what kind of temporalities might be foreclosed and opened by readings of texts from around 1800, texts that prepared the ground for the predicament and pathologies that continue to challenge queer thinking

What necessitates such a project, I believe, is the emergence in contemporary Western societies of homonormativity. As one-time sexual outlaws whose threats to the bourgeois, nuclear family might well have mobilized different relations of power and knowledge, the contemporary, and particularly American, gay subject has achieved “equal” status by committing to late capitalism’s agenda of consumerism (i.e., “the time of the commodity”) in service of the middle-class family of four. The precise concern of this project is to identify textual moments in selected texts that speak of a potentiality, not something that is on the threshold to actualization but rather something that could be or might never be. These moments of radical meaninglessness or textual stuttering speak to a different kind of gay politics free of the nationalisms and hierarchies of contemporary heteronormativity. Stated otherwise, what might (or might not) be realized in those regions (where the plague originated?) becomes a lost horizon of gay politics that I am trying to recover or reinvigorate.

My use of potentiality draws upon Agamben’s philological recuperation of an obscured but decisive aspect of the term.<sup>3</sup> Precisely, potentiality is an entity in itself freed from the binary logic that prescribes an entelechy for potentiality. That is to say, potentiality is itself queer, insofar as the entity resists all attempts at conceptualization and defies traditional markers of being; it both is and is not. Not surprisingly, the apparent opposition of its defining characteristics, the not-yet-real and the never-to-be real, offers a productive grid upon which to map or read the current debates surrounding queer theory in the American academy. The refusal of any think-

ing that accommodates a future or possible actualization of potentiality is most forcefully proposed by Lee Edelman. In the appropriately entitled, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman baldly avers that the future is “kid stuff” (Edelman, *No Future* 4). As an emblem of the nuclear family’s hope for a future in which the divisions constitutive of the subject are overcome, the child and the promise of its future reduplicates the social order and its hierarchies in service of a future forever deferred but preserved through the child as a carrier of meaning and hope. The charge is for a nonrelational thinking/being in which the queer subject, traditionally linked to Freud’s death drive, threatens the social order as a stubborn marker of the non-sublatable difference and disorder announced by death or a present with no future. At the other end of the spectrum are those who imagine queerness as something yet to be realized; a true future, unhinged from the social structures of the present, is for these scholars, truly queer. Among these utopian thinkers is the late José Esteban Muñoz who seeks to redeem futurity, if for no other reason than that current conditions, particularly for queers of color, are intolerable. Recent attention paid to police violence in particular underscores the need to recognize the added dimension of misery that people of color face. As President Obama made clear in his visit to the El Reno Federal Corrections Institution, poorer people of color end up in an endless cycle of incarceration for doing pretty much the same “stupid things” all teenagers do.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, queer people of color are already living a life with no future.

Drawing on the utopian impulse that underwrites the thought of Ernst Bloch, Muñoz in *Crusing Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* argues that queerness has not yet been truly imagined. A queer future brings to consciousness those missed or repressed possibilities of the past in such radically reimagined or unimagined ways that new possibilities, particularly queer ones emerge. The past recaptured has never truly been a lived or actualized past, but remains just out of reach on what I suggested above is a permanent state of being on the threshold. Muñoz, in fact, pushes Agamben’s understanding of potentiality to resurrect from the fragments of the past an actualization of a queer future as the dual deixis of the subject of the subtitle indicates. In other words, restoring a utopian dimension to queer hermeneutics transforms or actualizes what has not yet been imagined so that an authentic queerness can appear. But does potentiality, in the process, lose once again its character as a distinct entity?

No future/A utopian future. However absolute the difference between these two propositions may be, queer theory, I argue, is obligated to think

of these two positions together, if not simultaneously. “It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics” (Jagose 1). The origin of the word “queer,” derived from the Low German “terk,” mandates a project that serves as a torque or pivot to think and preserve this difference, a potentiality that I mark with my use of the word messianic. Without rehearsing Jacques Derrida’s distinction between messianism and the messianic, Jagose’s further (in)determination of the term “queer” might suffice for now: “I use queer to designate a zone of possibilities always inflected by a sense of potentiality that cannot yet quite be articulated” . . . and never will be, I would like to add (Jagose 12).<sup>5</sup> The difference lies as much in the impossibility of fulfillment signaled by the messianic as it does in the posture toward being necessitated by such an impossibility. Stated otherwise, what does it mean to listen to or exist in a past whose only evidence of being is that it will have been? Of course, the same has been said and will have been said of homosexuals: not self-declared (until recently) until the lack of progeny says all that need be said but dare not be said about them. The most felicitous formulation of the messianic potential or its impossible possibility comes in the last two chapters of this book: *I will not have not loved*, or in language reminiscent of Muñoz: *I will not have not been queer*. This is not intended as a word game. It seeks to elide the trap and trappings of the future perfect that has always predicted the fate of the homosexual. At the same time, the phrase articulates a kind of love that escapes the controls, for one, of logocentric discourse and preserves the elasticity of the queer project. Like the dappled image of Tadzio as he prepares to signal Aschenbach that it is time, the image flickers in and out of focus. Meaning appears to adhere to the phrase, yet it really only approaches it. The double negative does not cancel out to yield a positive phrase that leads us back to a simple, future perfect. But rather, as an echo it decidedly precedes the possibility of the love that it seeks to recapture. Even the double negative offers an unreadable echo of itself. *The “not” resounds before anything has been actualized*. Romance languages, as we know, can only say “no” twice; that is, the use of the double negative is standard practice. If in English saying “no” twice becomes too often “yes,” obscuring the indeterminate space occupied by the double negative, my use is intended to hold all possible meaning in play—and none of them. What I am seeking to preserve is thus an absolutely queer space that suspends all and any structures of power and meaning, that leaves the meaning of the phrase, “I will not have not loved,” unsettled and unsettling.

The messiah, of course, can never make good on her promise, lest it cease to be a promise. Fulfilled, it would then become something other than a promise since a promise, by definition, must retain the possibility of being broken, its terms never being upheld or actualized. Important is not that the messiah will always be delayed, held back and paradoxically announced by the catastrophes of history, but that she might still come. As long as time has not yet ended, who can say?<sup>6</sup> A promise, after all, is a promise. In other words, *she might not have not arrived*. Yes, she will never arrive, but she could. And given the outside chance that she will—which of course she won't—one must be ready. How pathetic, it seems, for the messiah to arrive—and not be prepared! As Hamlet reminds us, “The readiness is all.” (Act V.2, 237) That is the impossible proposition that grounds my response to the theoretical poles of queer thinking represented by Edelman and Munoz. Central here is less the semantics of the impossible, but rather the kind of queer being in the world summoned by such readiness, which, to cite Agamben again, is living in the time that remains. As Gershom Scholem says of the messianic idea in Judaism, one is compelled to live a life of deferment in which nothing can be irrevocably accomplished (Scholem, *Messianic* 35).

It cannot be stressed enough that the focus of queerness in this project is less about sex or sexuality and more about a subjunctive masculinity that has not actualized and certainly would not be structured along the same lines of a binary distinction that censors, ignores, or erases the female body and her sexuality. In this regard, the argument seeks to open up new possibilities for exploring the female (same-sex) desire and its obscured history. While I do not take this up directly here, there have already been some very interesting readings in this regard, such as the remarkable work of Katrin Pahl.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, all the readings here are reparative rather than strictly interpretive. In other words, they seek to provide what Eve Sedgwick-Kosofsky has called a reparative rather than a paranoid reading. While the latter focuses on exposing hegemonic or dominant relations of power, reparative reading seeks its pleasures in assembling fragments from the past and discovering or uncovering dormant potentialities that could have unfolded or unfolded differently: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (Sedgwick-Kosofsky, *Paranoid* 146). What I described as strictly interpretive are those readings that offer maps and guides to the past but fail to

reconfigure its pieces of knowledge or interpretive bounty in any ways that challenge the past and seek to alter queer histories going forward.

Secularization in the West prompted a dismissal of the restorative aspects of the messianic idea in favor of Enlightenment ideals. These ideals were linked to a progressive notion of history with the aim of humanity perfecting itself (Scholem 37). The recasting of “Death in Venice” as perhaps the first modern gay-plague novella emphasizes the restorative rather than purely utopian impulse of my understanding of the messianic. In the examples to follow, as well as in the Mann novella, the eruption of the messianic can occur at any moment, suddenly and unexpectedly and, especially, when hope has been abandoned. Scholem’s understanding of the messianic is also instructive here: “Jewish Messianism is in its origins and by its nature—this cannot sufficiently be emphasized—a theory of catastrophe” (Scholem 7). It is “transcendence breaking in on history, struck by a beam of light shining onto it by an outside light?” (Scholem 11). On the one hand, the messianic is always looming off-scene (after the camera has been discarded) as something obscene, while the narrator avoids it like the plague because it is the plague. On the other, it is the dazzling mix of sun and sea that captures, transforms, and enshrines Tazio’s last gesture, all the more irresistible for its flickering and fleeting instantiation of classical perfection. In this regard, we might recall the words of a rabbi cited in the Talmud: “May [the Messiah] come, but I do not want to see him” (Scholem 13). Such words could easily have been uttered by Aschenbach’s narrator or the upstanding folk appalled by the obscene. But not by us. Given the intense backlash over the SCOTUS decision legalizing gay marriage and the registration of that backlash in the 2016 presidential election, we need to be ready.

### Soteriologies of Disease

One of the more instructive and lurid possibilities prepared by this confluence of the messianic with the plague is presented by Leo Bersani in *Intimacies*, as it explores the soteriological potentiality of Paul Morris’s video *Plantin’ Seed* (48). The video shows bottom’s receiving fluids from those penetrating him. That community is enlarged by the number whose fluids are mixed into a Tupperware container and then funneled into the bottom’s rectum. More than demonstrate the kinds of queer communities that can emerge in the space of potentiality signaled by Tazio, they also highlight the nervous tension between literature and life, the complex but necessary boundary

that delimits literary exploration or narrative from actual life. The uneasy space that separates literature from life, the impossibility of bridging the two as in this example, may also reserve a space for something fully other to emerge, a fully other kind of community.

Barebacking practices exemplify the complex political significations of a love that transgresses the bio-political regimes and its obsessions with bare life or the homo sacer. “What is at stake isn’t the survival of the individual but the survival of the practices and patterns, which are the discoveries and properties of the sub-culture.” (Bersani, *Intimacies* 46) What Paul Morris intends with sounding the summons to barebacking in dangerous times is, as Leo Bersani notes, a literalization of the death drive. “It is as if barebackers were experientially confirming a specifically Freudian and Lacanian notion of sexual desire as indifferent to personal identity, antagonistic to ego requirements and regulations and, following a famous Freudian dictum, always engaged in group sex even if the actual participants are limited to the two partners of the socially approved couple” (Bersani, *Intimacies* 43). All of the isms necessary for perpetuation of the future under the watchful eye of a camera *oscuro* or even the NSA vanish, but so, it seems, would the practitioners of such unsafe practices. In the lingo of a particularly provocative group of practitioners, there are the bug chasers and the gift givers; and HIV, of course, is the gift of choice. Bersani, who admits to wincing himself at the health implications of such practices, cannot resist reflecting upon the odd spirituality of the bug chaser as perhaps saintly: “For him, their identities [“the nameless and faceless crowd”] that have infected him are nothing more than viral remains; his willingness to allow his body to be the site of their persistence and reproduction is not entirely unlike the mystic’s surrender to a divine will without any comfortably recognizable attributes whatsoever” (Bersani, *Intimacies* 53). As a lonely carrier of the “stigmatized remains” of those who preceded him into death, the saintly bug chaser is absorbed into his beloved until his disease is passed onto another for consumption.

The introduction of PREP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), whereby sexually active gay men (not exclusively) take a daily dose of Big Pharma’s Truvada, changes the dynamics of barebacking, even if bug chasers specifically have no interest in the potentially life-saving protocol. Most dramatically, it extends the reaches of the panoptic regime as these potential sexual outlaws, so to speak, are now bound to a subscribed regimen, monitored and policed according to sound medical practices. These communities might therefore (and thankfully) survive, but the dynamics completely change when the fatal

consequences of the behavior have been greatly reduced, if not eliminated, by the drug, and nothing suggests that bug chasers are not now chasing drugs rather than disease.<sup>8</sup>

Reconsidering the NAMES project (AIDS quilt) in this light offers an opportunity to consider what kind of communities are forged in attendance to those who died before they were to have died, who died for the most part as outcasts and lepers as a genteel public did what Aschenbach's did and turned away. The quilt panels create communities as diverse as the loved ones of the many deceased. Each individual panel, stitched to the main canvas, brings that first community into contact with others, if not all the others, comprising what has now become—due to its size—a fragment of the entire quilt, which cannot be held down or displayed in one place. (1,920 panels were included in the first unraveling in Washington, DC, covering a space the size of two football fields. Four months later 3,000 panels arrived in the San Francisco office, indicating both the growing number of mourners and the work of mourning accomplished by quilting.<sup>9</sup> As anyone who witnessed the quilt being unveiled in those early days of the late 1980s knows, the unknown and the famous, the glamorous and the plain, the queer and the straight, the black and the white and the brown and the yellow all share equal billing. "Each quilt panel has its own tale. They tell of people who worked and played, who laughed and fought and are finally remembered" (13). If the initial act of mourning and remembrance was inspired by a need to at least name those who Reagan and Bush were unwilling to acknowledge as beings even deserving of bare life, its afterlife hinges on the new kind of communities that emerge when the already dead, the soon to be dead, the ones living in dire uncertainty, and those completely queer to the queer community rediscover each other. "As one man dying of the disease commented, 'I decided I had to take the lead in order for them to get to know me again and to get to know what it's like for me living this disease, and what it might be like for them'" (*Quilt* 49). If such a plea for community and shared love is based upon the semiotics of disease as a kind of contagion, then its founding members, so to speak, are not just the disease carriers but those who care for them, commemorate them, and stitch their memories into a panel where they are joined to a community of panels whose aesthetics, values, techniques, materials, and messages have only a shared measure in common. The panels are all uniform in size, 3' × 6'; Rock Hudson's is no more easily found than John Trowbridge's or James Mooney's. The book documenting the project carries an introduction by Elizabeth Taylor, but it is the 25,000 unnamed victims that are



named and remembered here, not so much because the epigraph preceding Taylor's instructs us to un-forget them (they were never even counted but rounded up or down.), but rather in the very kind of coming together and cancellation of selfhood that Bersani highlights among the gift-giving crowd and their chasers. The borders of the self extend beyond the measure of the panel for no other reason than that the self represented by the quilt is already dead. The dead one inspires the sewer, whose stitching reminds us of how make-shift and "unnatural" or inorganic this community is, that such a coming together is only held together by a promise of certain death and dissolution. All notions that the joining together of so many different kinds of people might leave only a name as a mark of difference is easily dismissed. The rest of a snickering "US" may have defined us wholesale as a group of diseased faggots whose bad end confirmed just how disposable and indistinguishable from one another we were, but as the quilt unfolds, such monolithic assertions dissolve; the vast variety of elements comprising the panel and its sheer scope defy a comprehensive or panoptic gaze. One panel may collect several objects or references to objects dear to the deceased; others may offer a message from a mourner; another might offer a playful collage of sex paraphernalia; or some, a nicely stenciled epitaph with name and dates of the deceased.

The style and material of one panel thus establishes all sorts of random connections with those of another. Consider the following note accompanying a panel addressed to the lover of the deceased: "Please know my intent, when making this panel, was not to invade your memories or life with David. I have no memories to share of him but I do share one thing with you. On October 23, 1986, a pain went through my heart that was unbearable. A loneliness for the loss of a complete stranger—a *potential* friend. To this day I cry when I think of how you must miss each other." (*Quilt* 63; ital. added). The signature block of the panel prepared by Cindy reads, "For your lover, from Cindy, he loves you very much." Who is Cindy in this affair? How does she come to be a part of this community? What potential for friendship might such a threesome have offered?

Adjusting a reading of the quilt to accommodate Bersani's understanding of the gift-giving crowd and their beneficiaries cannot help but fail at the crucial moment. The mourners wandering the periphery of the quilt hardly harbor hope of finding someone to funnel the collected semen of a group of anonymous donors into their anus. Most are still terrified of the disease, many already have it and know it, others have it and don't know it, and still others just know someone who does. Simply stated, those connected

via the quilt are unlikely to have been chasing the bug and would eagerly debug themselves as quickly as possible. Still, as Cindy suggests above, a different kind of coming together, which will never obtain save as a potentiality informing and structuring that union, seems ready to present. Two other examples from the quilt point as well to modes of relating that help to understand the sorts of queer love that might have emerged around 1800 and can serve as indices to direct inquiry into that earlier period.

Wayne Hadley learned from his landlord that a man dying of AIDS was moving in next door. He would sit “on the couch and gaze out my bay window and wonder what he was doing [ . . . ]. And then I’d get frightened and angry and then just wait—and I knew he was doing the same” (*Quilt* 64). Waiting for a cure that will not come and, depending upon whether it is pre- or post-1994, will not have not come, such is the mode of readiness that brings these two together. Hadley never met his neighbor and doesn’t even know if he ever saw him. His panel features a silhouette of a single figure whose shadow extends across the yellow background. Above the shadow’s end, written in purple, are the words, “Our brother next door.” Their friendship, never actualized and existing only in waiting, extends beyond the death of the one to forge a brotherhood of or in shadows.

The story behind the panel for Clarence Robinson, Jr., (*Quilt* 23) also lends energies to different and unlikely forms of advocacy and friendship. Clarence was placed in an open hallway, avoided by all except for one nurse. His panel features a McDonald’s hamburger and a milkshake. Afraid of his fate and of dying alone, Clarence would extend the stay of his visitors by requesting the above junk food. The oddness of breaking bread under these conditions with the least auratic of foods is nonetheless occasion to celebrate or acknowledge a different coming together. Clarence’s sole advocate was his divorced father, a burly phosphate miner who often broke into tears while pleading for proper treatment for his son. The person who sewed the panel never met Clarence. Of course, no one should allow the pathos underwriting these unlikely relationships diminish the massive grief that occasioned such coming together. Regardless, the quilt offers a different kind of temporality, interrupted, disjunctive, restorative, and always just outside consciousness or on the other side of it.

A most trenchant analyses of a being unto death before one’s time—and thus also a reflection on Heidegger—is offered by Alexander García Düttmann in *At Odds with Aids (Uneins mit AIDS; 1992)*. García Düttmann considers what the plague means in terms of embracing one’s finitude and more specifically, in terms of how it forces us to re-think being unto death

and the horizon of subjective unity that underwrites Dasein. As we will see, the interrupted life, the life that mourns its loss before it has been lived, allows García Düttmann to re-read or adjust a Heideggerian understanding of Dasein in concert with Jacques Derrida's assertion that AIDS is an event, "an Ereignis, [that] one could call *historical* in the epoch of *subjectivity*, if we still give credence to *historical*, to *epochality*, and to *subjectivity*" (García Düttmann 90). Here then is the rub and the reason for the title. The subject, to be brief, has always already died. The three highlighted terms have long been discredited, and yet their half-life extends as means to measure to what extent AIDS is an event by not being an event, or a pure event, as García Düttmann emphasized. "At its core, anxiety about AIDS consists of nothing but anxiety about dying before one's time" (García Düttmann 2). Baldly stated, one has been pronounced dead before one has constructed any serviceable horizon for Dasein, (with respect to the three terms Derrida invokes above). The AIDS patient is at odds with a subject that has never been there, only mourned.<sup>10</sup>

If the death of the subject is the event that marks the death of a subject whose only evidence of being is having been or having always already been, then the deployment of AIDS's destructive forces is a compelling paradigm. By definition, AIDS pits one at odds against oneself. The virus engineers control of the immune system to leave the host defenseless. Opportunistic infections, diseases against which a host capable of defending itself would easily defeat, prosper. The self is turned against itself. The body is refused the right to be for itself. Lurking in the deepest recesses of the body, a latent virus can be reawakened, eager to prey upon the unsuspecting. As such, the AIDS virus bears a striking similarity to the one conjured by the travel agent and fed to Aschenbach. One is born and always potentially activated in the forbidden and murky reaches of "the Ganges," where paradoxically no humans dare tread.<sup>11</sup>

To be at one with AIDS, to accommodate, accept, and resign oneself to a linear and highly accelerated narrative of death by disease is then to seek to suture the rupture, which by definition the disease introduces. In other words, being at odds with oneself and the disease, as shown above, is inseparable from the Event that ushers in the death of the subject, to the extent that "ushering in" as understood in this instance disavows any claims to epochality. Aligning one's identity with the disease is foreclosed by the fact that the disease preempts any attempt to construct a unified subject. Succumbing to the disease now means that the never-to-be subject seeks what is unrecoverable, if for no other reason than it was always already mourned.

Fighting the disease, for García Düttmann, never consists in confessions of guilt since confessions presume a subject to issue such self-recriminations. Aschenbach calls forth the disease and seeks to obliterate his subjectivity as an expression of unqualified love for one too perfect to be defiled by a fallen artist. This makes for an uneasy dialogue with García Düttmann, as if the charge were for gay men to become bug chasers. On the one hand, such incompatibility may well result from the incompatibility of literature with life. At the very least, it calls for new forms of cultural production such as the NAMES project. On the other hand, all share a call to imagine new ways for the subject-less to relate. In this instance, the love that dare not speak its name does not because of any taboo (although ones certainly still exist), but rather because such love is speaker-less. Naming our love, if we dare to demonstrate our lack, produces a plenitude of names, a promiscuous mixing of potential partners.

Stated otherwise, to be at odds or not one with AIDS (*uneins mit . . .*) one has no time to live life following an avenue that eventually leads to death. For Heidegger the horizon of Dasein depends upon the indefinite definiteness of death. It will happen, but its certainty is pushed out into a future that allows for a construction of something like an autobiographical subject. A timeline of one's life can be imagined and constructed. For sure, Dasein is constantly threatened by the definite indefiniteness of death. In such manner Dasein anticipates or projects a horizon under the sign of death to disclose a temporality arising from the future of this possibility. Such would be, in Heideggerian speak, authentic. "One is not one with AIDS to the degree that one is not one with time, to the degree that one exists in the Being-not-one of time and that one is incapable of determining a measure of time that still permits the construction of a lifetime" (2).

That is to say, the destructive character of AIDS has the potential to effect a radical political upheaval. Rather than being the "mummy of 1968" as the French linguist Jean Claude Milner claimed, the illness does not signal merely the dead body politic of the promises of the student revolts, but rather it marks the total dissolution of the panoptic systems that require a subject to trail. García Düttmann can thus proclaim that AIDS is not the mummified body of the failed cultural politics of '68, but rather the event that marks the destruction of character in politics. Exploring just what a politics without character means is certainly one of the tasks of this book. How does the pre-pathologized subject of around 1800 present possibilities for coming together before sexual character determined the character of the individual or his/her fitness for politics? To recall Aschenbach's remarks,