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# The Ecology of Suffering Thinking with the Elements in Decadent Literature

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How should one seek out a suitable place to suffer in the world? What would a city built for sorrow look like? And what sort of elemental conditions or precise ecosystem would it need for the right amount of melancholy to thrive? In 2019, the American poet and essayist Anne Boyer published a literary meditation on her cancer diagnosis in *The New Yorker*. In it, she detailed the blueprints of a space for communal grief that she had dreamed up long ago:

Before I got sick, I'd been making plans for a place for public weeping, hoping to install in major cities a temple where anyone who needed it could get together to cry in good company and with the proper equipment. It would be a precisely imagined architecture of sadness: gargoyles made of night sweat, moldings made of longest minutes, support beams made of *I-can't-go-on-I-must-go-on*.<sup>1</sup>

Boyer writes how she took pleasure in envisioning how this gathering of distraught bodies might enrage societies at large because it would expose the exquisite, rotten truth – that suffering is what is shared – and something in this idea, with its prodding of ugly societal ethics and its excessive indulgence in the luxuries of sadness, feels potently decadent. If fin-de-siècle European writers and artists had contributed to a decadent handbook of suffering, what advice might it have included? What maps would they have drawn up, and where would they have told us to go?

Throughout the course of this essay, I intend to work towards finding answers to some of these questions primarily through the close reading of two decadent texts – Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novella *Bruges-la-Morte* and Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*], first published in 1912 – alongside a small constellation of other secondary texts that will act as further critical coordinates towards my final argument. Each of these novellas, set in different European cities and written almost two decades apart, intertwine, I will argue, through the language of the elements. The protagonists of both stories opt to travel to aqueous cities with suffocating atmospheres in order to buttress their respective experiences of grief and desire, and it is for this

reason that of the four elements – water, fire, earth, and air – I have chosen to hone in specifically on the shaping presences of water and air.

Ultimately, I aim to propose the beginnings of a framework for a decadent ecology of suffering. In order to do this, I have structured my argument into several parts. The first, ‘Mapping Out a Place to Mourn’, sets out the parameters of my thesis and offers some critical explorations into both the nature of living in cities at the times in which these novels were set, and the uses of elemental language to extract stories of human sorrow from within their very infrastructures. In part two, ‘Where the Sea Meets the Sky’, I attempt to unpick the importance of thresholds in maintaining the precarious elemental dreamworlds each of the protagonists have conjured for themselves. Finally, in ‘Towards A Process of Mattering’, I present some concluding observations on what happens to the narratives of these stories when their elemental equilibrium is disrupted, and how this may alter our reading of them in years to come.

### **Mapping Out a Place to Mourn**

Was the place to be loved for its life or for its beautiful death?<sup>2</sup>

When attempting to conjure an image of Boyer’s temple of tears, Rodenbach’s description of Bruges in ‘The Death Throes of Towns’ – the essay he wrote to accompany *Bruges-la-Morte* – is especially apt for inspiration:

And in the prison of those quais of stone [...] there is the eternal weeping, the streaming and dripping of the gutters, the drains and sporadic springs, the overflow from the roofs [...] like a great euphony of sobbing and inexhaustible tears.<sup>3</sup>

Rodenbach paints the picture of a tormented, porous place made up of the elements of suffering, and the town appears as a body, breathing and leaking, ‘shivering in the bareness of its stones’ while its very bones are ‘the tears of things in which one truly senses an almost human sorrow’.<sup>4</sup>

Just as Boyer’s temple would likely cause uproar, so too did Rodenbach’s depiction of Bruges. As Alan Hollinghurst notes, at the time that *Bruges-la-Morte* was published there was talk of ‘reopening the city to the modern world after centuries of decline brought about by the silting-

up of its old sea-canal' and thus the people of Bruges did not take kindly to Rodenbach's representation of it as cold and dead.<sup>5</sup> Rodenbach writes of the North Sea retreating in 1475, leaving Bruges to dry up, its remaining waters becoming stagnant. The sombre medieval architecture of the city is empathetic to the sorrow of the people that pass through it, and it suffers with them, providing architectural, atmospheric company for human misery. In the novel, Rodenbach goes on to directly highlight the elemental importance of Bruges to the story's mood, writing, 'in Bruges a miracle of the climate has produced some mysterious chemistry of the atmosphere'.<sup>6</sup>

In both novellas studied here, the protagonist grieves for a dead wife while finding a new obsession to stalk. *Death in Venice* follows the story of Gustav von Aschenbach, an ageing writer who travels to Venice for a break. While there, he finds himself so taken by the beauty of a young boy, Tadzio, that he fails to notice the ominous disease that is beginning to pervade Venice's streets. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, the widower Hugues Viane arrives in Bruges, having selected his destination because 'he needed a dead town to correspond to his dead wife. His deep mourning demanded such a setting' (p. 30). He then becomes obsessed with a mysterious woman, later identified as a dancer called Jane, who is the very image of his dead wife.

On the subject of still, cold waters, in *Monsters Under Glass* (2018) Jane Desmarais quotes Donald Flanell Friedman:

The watery depths and blindly meandering passageways of the canal city provide a structural paradigm for both the unconscious mind and a stygian zone, site of narcotized underworld voyage, by turns paradisaical and infernal, lenitive and tormented.<sup>7</sup>

These words feel pertinent to the reading of *Death in Venice* too, because although Italy's waters are not cold and northern, they were, at the time, wrapped up in notions of sickness due to the nineteenth-century cholera outbreak that forms the backdrop of infectious threat in Mann's novel.

Desmarais writes that Belgian writing at the time *Bruges-la-Morte* was published was 'rooted in [...] the spirit of geographic place. Poets used concrete imagery to suggest abstract states of mind and the exterior became an index for the interior'.<sup>8</sup> We find this everywhere in Rodenbach's

text, and we learn that Hugues ‘liked to walk, looking for analogies to his grief in deserted canals’ (p. 26). This is true also of Mann. Both writers chose places upon which they could map the vicissitudes of grief and desire, and in each of these cities two adventures unfold simultaneously: one physically, with the protagonists guided by the waterways, and one mentally, into the very heart of human suffering. In *Death in Venice*, we learn of Aschenbach’s love of a motto by Frederic the Great – ‘durchhalten!’, meaning ‘to last’ or ‘to soldier on’ – because to him it ‘epitomised a manly ethos of suffering action’.<sup>9</sup> Hugues too, it would seem, is a disciple of this cult of male suffering action.

There is an elemental gaze present in the decadent texts I am studying here; one in which the forms of cities and bodies fold into one another and merge through the language of the elements. Both towns and people are sick in these stories; both towns and people are dying. ‘He was already starting to resemble the town’, writes Rodenbach of Hugues as he spins further into his own madness (p. 90). Will Stone points out that in *Bruges-la-Morte* the different elementally charged parts of the town (the windmills, for instance) conspire as ‘agents of melancholia’, seeming to Rodenbach to be ‘grinding down [...] the sky’.<sup>10</sup> This is as if the elements are mouldable, like pigments tinted to our moods. Emphasising this notion, Rodenbach writes: ‘It is as if the frequent mists, the veiled light [...] the granite [...] the incessant rain [...] had combined to influence the colour of the air’ (p. 61). The cultural and literary episodes which are combined under the umbrella term ‘fin de siècle’ include both decadence and symbolism, each of them thematically intertwining in myriad ways, each of them drawing on the era’s greatest anxieties. As a result, the literary and artistic production of the time is full of phantoms and split selves, grotesque doublings, uneasy slippages between sleeping and drowning, and the morbid threat of infection. Perhaps most importantly, emerging scientific theories of the time were of great allure, in ways both exciting and unbelievably terrifying.

‘Water makes death elemental’, wrote Gaston Bachelard in his seminal text *Water and Dreams* (1942), ‘for certain souls, *water is the matter of despair*’.<sup>11</sup> Two such souls are found in

Aschenbach and Hugues, and we are truly able to understand the importance of water to their stories. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, for instance, Hugues is found resting his head against the cool window-pane in order to feel ‘the freshness of water in which to soak away all his anguish’ (p. 122). But while water is crucial to the fabric of each narrative, it is perhaps air that really drives the elemental progression forward, as both an aesthetically and atmospherically shaping presence, as this line in *Bruges-la-Morte* demonstrates: ‘Every town is a state of mind, a mood which, after only a short stay, communicates itself, spreads to us in an effluvia which impregnates us, which we absorb with the very air’ (p. 93). Wherever there are types of water explored in these texts – seas, lagoons, canals, tears – so too are there types of air. Airiness is often used to describe the natures of Jane and Tadzio early on in these novels (as I will demonstrate later in this essay), but air can be a darkening force too. It can become thick, affecting breathing and vision in ways that water cannot, as in this scene in *Death in Venice*:

An unpleasant sultriness pervaded the narrow streets; the air was so thick that the exhalations from houses and shops, and hot food stalls, the reek of oil, the smell of perfume and many other odours hung about in clouds instead of dispersing. Cigarette smoke lingered and was slow to dissipate.

Odours and clouds, smoke and heat. An ecosystem of the senses invoked through types of air emerges here. It continues:

The further he went, the more overwhelmingly he was afflicted [...] caused by a combination of the sea air with the sirocco, a condition of simultaneous excitement and exhaustion [...] the sickening stench from the canals made it difficult to breathe.  
(p. 228)

The elements are mingling and the result is both an emotional and a physical human response. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, we see ‘drifts of mist gathering’ in the town and Hugues subsequently feeling ‘the pervasive fog flooding his soul’ (p. 89). Likewise, as the sirocco picks up in *Death in Venice*, the mood changes and the city becomes gloomy and threatening. ‘Every wind that blows makes a difference [...] each change in air matters in the fabric of existence’, write Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino in ‘Coda: Wandering Elements and Natures to Come’, which I will draw from more closely in the final section.<sup>12</sup> Just before the zenith of *Death in Venice*’s action, Aschenbach

finds himself wishing ‘if only [...] he had taken a chance on acclimatising himself to Venice or waiting for the wind to change’, highlighting the true importance of climate and man needing to find a way to work together (p. 229).

In *Bruges-la-Morte*, we are told that ‘in the muted atmosphere of the waterways [...] Hugues was less sensitive to the sufferings of his heart’ (p. 33). This is an example of the ‘spiritual stagnation’ that Desmarais tells us Charles Baudelaire incited in later symbolists.<sup>13</sup> To look for a place without weather is impossible, though this passage suggests it may have been Hugues’ ultimate desire, and so instead he seeks out a place to dull his senses, and this is satisfactory, at least for a while. Lamentably, however, the elements have the power to enliven even the deadest of places, as each of these protagonists come to find out.

### **Where the Sea Meets the Sky**

I am living in a real phantasmagoria [...] all around me dreams and mirages.<sup>14</sup>

When the Belgian symbolist painter Léon Spilliaert wrote the letter from which the above evocative words are taken, it was 1920 and he was informing a friend of his return to his home in Ostend after an extended period of travelling. For Spilliaert, this coastal city was a profoundly elemental place, where the sea meets the sky, lived in and loved by other painters he admired, including James Ensor. Spilliaert had wanted to connect with Ensor, but the older painter was reportedly irritated by the young man. The story goes that Ensor once caught Spilliaert following him through the streets.<sup>15</sup> It is poetic to imagine this strange, spectral figure stalking the object of his interests through dusky streets, footsteps quick and light on the stone, just as Hugues did when following Jane in *Bruges-la-Morte*, and Aschenbach did while trailing Tadzio in *Death in Venice*.

There is a particular work by Spilliaert entitled *The Shipwrecked Man*, painted in 1926, in which an apparitional figure floats above a long, low boat. The water it travels upon is visualized as undulating washes of Prussian blue and grey dulled to almost-black by crepuscular light, and it slices right across the painting. Many of Spilliaert’s paintings probe this elemental threshold, with

rivers and seas and prismatic shafts of light carving through the centres of landscapes, separating painter from scene, or scene from audience. In Spilliaert's paintings, writes Desmarais, 'we encounter images of a subjective world that evoke anxiety and depression'.<sup>16</sup> Spilliaert's vision emerges from a particularly Belgian strain of symbolism, often equating dreams and mental states with the weather, and this same preoccupation is powerfully present in Rodenbach's work.<sup>17</sup>

Rodenbach constantly refers to thresholds and gaps in his writings, and his letters especially, as highlighted by Hollinghurst, show the idea of separation as being important to his thinking:

Truly to love one's little homeland, it is best to go away, to exile oneself for ever [...] and for the homeland to grow so distant it seems to die [...]. The essence of art that is at all noble is the DREAM, and this dream dwells only upon what is distant, absent, vanished, unattainable.<sup>18</sup>

Both Hugues and Aschenbach are at their calmest when in states of half-reverie, and able to walk the canal's edges or sit on the shore in such a state, to dream, recall or imagine. The person-objects of their affections – Jane and Tazio respectively – and their shapeless recollections – each of their dead wives – are only truly alluring as long as they feel unreachable, as if behind glass, underwater, or made of vapour. However, what happens in the lacunae is often what intensifies or upends the narratives. Consider this moment from *Death in Venice*:

Under a pallid overcast sky the sea lay sluggishly still and shrunken-looking, with the horizon in prosaic proximity [...]. When Aschenbach opened his window he thought he could smell the stagnant air of the lagoon. Vexation overcame him. (p. 221)

The turning of the elements is unpleasant to Aschenbach, and it inspires rage within him. The elements are kept at bay in a number of pointed ways in the early pages of these novels, but when they do rush in, they alter and overwhelm the moods of Hugues and Aschenbach.

In *Death in Venice*, Mann is preoccupied with the exact meeting-places of the elements. He writes of Aschenbach finding 'the sensuous ease at the brink of the element' (p. 223) when on the beach, and shortly after, he watches Tazio emerging from the water:



And to behold this living figure, lovely and austere in its early masculinity, with dripping locks and beautiful as a young god, approaching out of the depths of the sky and the sea, rising and escaping from the elements [...]. (p. 227)

The idea that Tadzio should be escaping, as if in danger, gives an important indicator to the power Mann attributes to the elements. That same sense of foreboding is present in Hugues' experience, as we find him perpetually seeking to remain at the very edge of that elemental threshold; just enough to keep the dream alive, but not so far as to burst the bubble: 'Above all he felt a horror at the idea of being left alone, face to face with this town, without anyone between him and it anymore'.<sup>19</sup> The thing between him and the town, that is somehow holding together the atmosphere he is cultivating, is Jane. What Spilliaert's paintings can teach us visually about vibrating at the precipice of changing matter are, I argue, the same things Mann and Rodenbach attempted to show us in language about the substance of sorrow, or grief, or suffering as it changes.

Where the elements combine, Opperman and Iovino write, a 'unique ecology' emerges, and in that process is disclosed 'surprising worlds, challenging narratives, the tangling of nature's chain'.<sup>20</sup> For the unique ecologies of both *Death in Venice* and *Bruges-la-Morte* to be maintained, and for their cycles of suffering to be able to renew, each of the protagonists would need to remain oscillating indefinitely at the edge of elements, but of course this is not possible. Both narratives culminate in death, but only one protagonist dies. Why is this? In the final part of this essay, I will endeavour to investigate what happens when the elemental equilibrium of these stories is tipped too far in one direction or another.

### **Towards A Process of Mattering**

what is there to talk about, if not what is in the atmosphere everywhere?<sup>21</sup>

In *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire* (2015) the cosmic philosophy of the Greek pre-Socratic Empedocles is reassessed. Empedocles thought of all 'world-process as the product of the combination and separation of the four elements [...] under the influence of Love

and Strife'.<sup>22</sup> That is to suggest that all of Earth's matter, and all of our experiences within it, are composed of the four elements in varying combinations; some woven together by love, and others torn apart by strife. As summed up by Opperman and Iovino in their coda to this essay collection, the largely outgrown science of the elements needs to be revisited, and a renewed intimacy with literary uses of the elements in centuries past holds the potential to help us re-frame contemporary environmental ethics:

Elemental ecocriticism wants to show that the elements *matter* and follow the forms qua stories that their mattering assumes. The narratives emerging from this process of mattering are stories of returns and encounters [...] humans may be just an elemental episode, but [...] the way we narrate stories, and the stories themselves, can shape the earth(s) to come.<sup>23</sup>

Later, they write of reanimating stories that make use of the lexicon of the elements, 'to make them glow with renewed meaning'.<sup>24</sup> Decadent texts are particularly powerful to relate to in this process of mattering. Each of the works studied here is a thinking, feeling text that probes the texture and terms of raw human emotion. Their words breathe and sweat, and for all their grotesquerie, they are deeply empathetic to the substances of suffering and ennui, and all of this is achieved through richly elemental language.

Concluding her essay on hothouses and aquariums in decadent literature, Desmarais writes:

Filtered through the splenetic and surreal tendencies of Decadence and Symbolism, they become modern metaphors for human isolation and serve as continuous reminders of human destructiveness. They leave unsettling impressions of man's relationship to the natural world, and dramatise his retreat from or defeat by forces beyond his control and his failure to look after the environment; they are metaphors of individual despair, political inadequacy and social delinquency.<sup>25</sup>

Illuminated behind glass, elemental processes are placed under a microscope, maintained in precise ecosystems, and slowed enough for us to see in decadent literature. Both *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Death in Venice* are stories of individual despair, but so too are they set against backdrops of social unrest, the rapid modernization of cities and the political choices that were having a grave effect on human lives at the time. It could be suggested, then, that each of these novels function as aquariums or dioramas, focusing on single lives that act as microcosms for far larger climates of anxiety.

‘Retreat from or defeat by’ are words to draw from too. The two protagonists of the novels I have studied here would, I suggest, each exemplify one of these routes. Both Hugues and Aschenbach are solitary men on similar paths, but the elemental make-up of their solitudes lead them to very different fates. Where Hugues allows the elements to swell his anger into usable force, Aschenbach succumbs to them completely. Hugues ends up committing a murder, whereas Aschenbach does not make it to the end of his novel alive. Each of these stories teaches us about the ecosystems of suffering, but also about how humans weather emotional sorrow. ‘Weathering’ has a double meaning that is crucial to reading these novels differently, because weathering is both erosion by the elements, and resilience against them. Aschenbach became eroded; Hugues chose resilience.

Rodenbach and Mann often describe the energies of their protagonists. In *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach is portrayed as a man preoccupied with the ‘constant harnessing of his energies’ (p. 203), and with a fondness for ‘ordering energy’ (p. 202). In *Bruges-la-Morte* Rodenbach writes that Hugues wants to ‘feel his last energies silt up, slowly but surely grind to a halt beneath this fine dust of eternity’ (p. 62). In both novels, the material states of these energies transform as the narratives wear on. In *Death in Venice*, Mann writes the following on the subject of solitude: ‘The observations and encounters of a devotee of solitude and silence are at once less distinct and more penetrating than those of the sociable man; his thoughts are weightier, stranger, and never without a tinge of sadness’ (p. 218). This idea of weight, or heaviness, and its relationship to suffering, is woven throughout both novels in an elemental way. Mann writes of Aschenbach’s ‘solitude which has been full of hard [...] sufferings and struggles’ (p. 207). This use of ‘hard’ can arguably be read as difficult, but also as dense and with the capacity to weigh on the soul. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, images of Jane begin as airy and watery. Early in the novel she is described as ‘an apparition [...] a dream [...] with a slow, fluid gait’ (p. 35), whom Hugues wants to ‘drink in’ (p. 41). To further accentuate her fluid impermanence, the other women of the town could not seem more solid. Those

performing next to Jane are clunky to Hugues, 'like wooden dolls' (p. 46), and later, he indicates a group of 'women with their faces of old ivory' (p. 71).

Mann employs this same technique in *Death in Venice*. The townspeople who approach Aschenbach are described at length with hard and ugly adjectives. Often they appear as animalistic figures, with skin leathered by the elements, and their descriptions are tinged with heaviness. Aschenbach's gondolier is 'displeasing, indeed brutal' (p. 215) in appearance, Tazio's governess is of 'corpulent' (p. 220) build and his sisters are solemn-faced, dressed in 'stiff' blue linen (p. 222). Meanwhile, Tazio enters the scene with grace, phantom-like, as if floating, murmuring words in his 'soft liquescent language' (p. 222).

Slowly, in *Bruges-la-Morte*, Jane's behaviour begins to disrupt the elemental balance of the narrative. As she mocks Hugues' dead wife's dresses, the atmosphere between them begins to become 'polluted' (p. 69). This is where we can pinpoint the catalyst of elemental change in Hugues' vision of Jane. From here, Jane is often referred to as hard, in lines such as 'Hugues was suffering [...] Jane's face had acquired a certain hardness' (p. 102) and later, as 'expressionless, hard' (p. 122). Slowly and violently she loses her lightness. Where once Hugues had decided that 'as long as they were kept at a distance, with the mists of death between them, the illusion remained possible', eventually Jane's fluidity hardens entirely (p. 86). We find her finally portrayed as 'glacial', and her very presence is said to have 'placed more barriers of ice between them' than could be overcome in the end (p. 124). Hugues blames Jane entirely, believing that 'the weight of sorrow [had] accumulated in his soul because of her' (p. 107).

As Hugues' rage bloats beyond all reason, the atmosphere in the town intensifies as if in chorus: 'The poplars beside the water moaned' and 'the swans [...] were alarmed, emotional, fevered, tearing the watered silk of the canal [...] like a sick man thrashing about' (p. 109). On the last morning Hugues wakes up in the novel – the last morning Jane will spend alive – the air suddenly has a 'fineness' again, and the 'sky carries a hint of joy' (p. 115). This is perhaps best read as the calm before the storm. The very same thing happens to Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* when

he decides to leave the city: ‘When he opened his windows in the morning [...] the air seemed fresher, and – he began even now to regret his decision’ (p. 229). His journey away from Venice is described with creaking arduousness as ‘a voyage of sorrow’ (p. 230) while the boat’s journey back towards it is fast and full of light, ‘with spray tossing before its boughs’ and Aschenbach is barely able to contain his bubbling excitement (p. 232). Back on the beach, ‘the sea had turned pale green, the air seemed clearer and purer’ (p. 233). Suddenly the elements have conspired, shifted the weather into more pleasurable circumstances and enticed Aschenbach to stay – which, of course, he does, and this decision leads to his eventual demise.

It is also worth highlighting that the cholera spreading through the city and shaping the backdrop to *Death in Venice* is described in its most acute form as ‘the “dry” type, which is the most dangerous of all’ (p. 257). Mann is at pains to explain the science of the illness to the reader, describing how heat warms the water and creates the perfect breeding ground for the virus to spread, and how bodies that succumb to the disease go through a gradual process of massive fluid loss that eventually kills them. This is surely not just empty indulgence in the lexicon of disease, but another way to reinforce that elemental drying up leads to death. In *Bruges-la-Morte*, as Jane dies, she assumes her final elemental composition and evaporates, emitting a ‘sigh, like the breath from a bubble expiring on the surface of the water’ (p. 128).

Elements are energy, and the cyclical nature of elemental processes is what keeps the world moving, but they can also drain us, and this is what happens to the men of *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Death in Venice*. In the introduction to his translation of *Death in Venice*, David Luke suggests that ‘it is structurally necessary that “Aschenbach’s” experience should be brought full cycle [...] it was needed to restore the balance after “sensuality” had triumphed’.<sup>26</sup> If this same theory of cyclical process were to be applied to *Bruges-la-Morte*, one might imagine that it was crucial for Hugues to destroy the person he believed was causing his suffering in order to break his own cycle.

How do we get from water to steam, or solid to liquid in each of these stories? Is it the protagonist’s emotions that shape the elements, or the opposite? In each case, a precarious

decadent ecology of suffering needs to be maintained in order to perpetuate the cyclical nature of suffering. The final lines of ‘The Death Throes of Towns’ read as follows:

And in the vast mystic enclosure [...] one gradually submits to the creeping counsel of the stones, and I imagine that a soul, bleeding from some recent, cruel sorrow, that had walked amidst this silence, would leave that place accepting the order of things – not to live any longer – and, beside the neighbouring lake, sense what those gravediggers of Shakespeare said of Ophelia: it is not she who goes to the waters, but the water which comes to meet her grief.<sup>27</sup>

The small constellation of decadent texts studied in this essay undoubtedly demonstrates to us, in the most decadent of ways, what nature can do to the human mind at the most elemental level, and how humanity can infect the world in return. Our reading of these texts will shift across the centuries, but their relevance will endure precisely because that relationship will always exist. The two literary labyrinths conjured out of the stones of real cities and brought forth by Rodenbach and Mann each offer aquatic, breathing spaces in which the elements come to meet the pain of the protagonists, and by proxy, to meet us too.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Boyer, ‘What Cancer Takes Away’, *The New Yorker*, 8 April 2019

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/15/what-cancer-takes-away>> [accessed 6 May 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, ‘Introduction’ to Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. by Mike Mitchell (London: Dedalus, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Georges Rodenbach, ‘The Death Throes of Towns’, in *Bruges-la-Morte*, pp. 141–61 (p. 149).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 149–50.

<sup>5</sup> Hollinghurst, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 61. All subsequent references to this novella are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Flannell Friedman, ‘Belgian Symbolist Poetry: Regionalism and Cosmopolitanism’, in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice*, ed. by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Milan V. Dimić with Irene Sywenky (Paris: Champion, 1999), pp. 365–74 (p. 369), quoted in Jane Desmarais, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), pp. 191–92.

<sup>8</sup> Desmarais, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. by David Luke (London: Vintage, 1988), p. 204. All subsequent references to *Death in Venice* are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Will Stone, *Poems – Georges Rodenbach* (Cornwall: Arc Publications, 2017), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. by Edith R. Farrell (Texas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 92. Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, ‘Coda: Wandering Elements and Natures to Come’, in *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water and Fire*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 310–17 (p. 311).

<sup>13</sup> Desmarais, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> Léon Spilliaert, as quoted in Laura Cumming, ‘Discovering the art of Léon Spilliaert, Belgium’s unsung genius’, *The Guardian*, 9 February 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/feb/09/leon-spilliaert-belgian-artist-ostend-royal-academy>> [accessed 2 May 2020].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Desmarais, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> This year, the first monographic exhibition of Spilliaert's work in the UK was organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in collaboration with the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (23 February–25 May 2020, extended to 20 September 2020 due to Covid-19). The paintings in this exhibition ranged from his self-portraits to the more dreamlike depictions of the North Sea coast.

<sup>18</sup> Rodenbach, quoted by Hollinghurst, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Opperman and Iovino, pp. 312–13.

<sup>21</sup> Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> Edwin L Minar Jr., 'Cosmic Periods in the Philosophy of Empedocles', *Phronesis*, 8.2 (1963), 127-45 (p. 127).

<sup>23</sup> Opperman and Iovino, p. 316.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Desmarais, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> David Luke, 'Introduction' to *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, pp. vii-xliv (p. xlii).

<sup>27</sup> Rodenbach, 'The Death Throes of Towns', in *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 161.