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Richard Thomas Eldridge
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

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Philosophy, Literature, Death, and Wisdom: On Philip Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice*

Richard Eldridge

Philip Kitcher's study of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, paired with the Britten opera and the Visconti film that each adapted it, is extraordinarily rich, reflective, and informed. One of its great virtues is its resistance to both simplistic reading and simplistic moralizing. That is, Kitcher undertakes not to offer the one straightforwardly correct reading of the novella centering around solutions to interpretive cruces such as "Why does, or must, Aschenbach die?" or "What does Mann really think about the value and allure of beauty?" or "Is Mann a Nietzschean?". Nor does he undertake to extract from the novella and to defend any particular standard moral philosophy such as Kantianism, utilitarianism, or virtue theory. Instead he reflects on multiple questions, issues, and themes that the novella raises, guided by how Britten and Visconti have taken up and emphasized certain strands of thematization that are present in the novella while suppressing others. The result is a kind of polyphonic meditation on human life, conducted by Kitcher, in which his readers are invited and enabled to share, that is akin to the polyphonic meditation, as Kitcher rightly sees it, of *Death in Venice* itself. Kitcher's way of reading and reflecting hence respects the richly textured structure of the novella in part by mirroring it in invoking large ideas about human life that are held in dramatic tension with one another and, in doing so, refusing pieties.

I have nothing but sympathy and praise for both Kitcher's way of proceeding and for the rich details of his reading and thinking. There is, however, some danger that his book will prove difficult to understand for both philosophers, accustomed to abstraction, formal argumentation, and theory, and literary scholars, accustomed to focusing on texts and contexts and shy about abstraction, philosophy, and intermedial comparisons. Kitcher himself offers intermittently a number of general remarks about why he is proceeding as he is, and in these passages he is a valua-

ble and accurate guide to his own work. Nonetheless, it may be of some use to focus on these passages about, as it were, philosophico-ethico-literary methodology more or less seriatim. The result of this focus on methodology will be substantially more flat-footed than Kitcher's own writing, but it may also help to make Kitcher's readings and reflections more available and significant to a wider range of readers than they might otherwise be. I divide my remarks about Kitcher's way of proceeding into two broad, related clusters: 1) Why philosophy *and* literature? and 2) philosophy as preparation for death.

1) *Why philosophy and literature?*

"Mann," Kitcher tells us, "merits our attention *as a contributor to the philosophical discussion in which his sources* [Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wagner] *were engaged*" (10).¹ Likewise, both the Britten opera and the Visconti film count, for Kitcher, as "philosophical explorations in their own right" (10). In one sense, these claims may seem obvious and require no argument: each of these works focuses on a character, Gustav von Aschenbach, in the midst of a crisis about what is worth doing in life. But then one may also wonder: why should Mann's or Britten's or Visconti's accounts of a particular person undergoing a crisis of valuation themselves count as offering original and fruitful thinking about how to respond to philosophical problems rather than as merely illustrations of general theories of value that might be better worked out systematically elsewhere?

One strand of answer that Kitcher offers to this question is that Aristotelian-style general theories of value, developed by abstracting from, reflecting on, integrating, and generalizing over a range of cases of the achievement (or defeat) of value in ordinary life are themselves "shallow and inadequate" (18). Why might one think *this*? Part of the answer is that Mann, Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche share a sense that the world is not per se suffused with value and possibilities of meaningful life. This sense is plausible enough in modernity as an epoch of widespread secularization, division of labor, and the development of forms of competitive individuality. There are no clearly evident natural or social phenomena into which any individual might integrate herself so as unproblematically and unchallengeably to live well. The goods of friendship and meaningful work, even if available, are often enough circumscribed by class or gender antagonisms, in such a way that their achievement is

not likely to receive general endorsement. As a result, individual human beings are likely to retain a sense of powers of making meaningful life that might and should be better actualized otherwise.

One aspect of a sense of pervasive antagonism and of human powers less than fully actualized surfaces in a conflict, thematic for Mann, between the values and life of a Wagnerian, mythical, outsider artist figure, who possesses exemplary powers of meaning making and the cultivation of individuality, but who is alienated from social life as it stands, and a Joycean ordinary citizen – Kitcher is thinking of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* – who is decent, forgiving, generous, and more or less socially integrated but at least potentially shallow (24). Or, as Kitcher puts the question that animates much of Mann's work: "must any attempt to write (seriously) and simultaneously to live as an insider, a proper member of the bourgeoisie, rest upon a trick, an illusion that will be unmasked if anyone is allowed to go behind the scenes?" (7). That is, must one choose between the intensities of art and the routines of ordinary life, between richly attentive, expressive subjectivity and common life with others? This is a question that is central to twentieth-century artistic modernism, but it is also, I think, fair to say that this is a question about how to lead a worthwhile life that has not much been faced by standard, regnant moral philosophies.²

This question while perhaps particularly pressing in modernity with its normalizing institutional apparatuses and within artistic modernism, is, moreover, itself metonymic for a yet larger question about how, if it all, it is possible to achieve enduring value in human life, how it is possible to live well. This larger question is about how, if at all, more or less Platonic-Apollonian, highly disciplined, redemptive meaning making that runs against the grain of commercial social life as it stands can be combined with more or less Aristophanic-Dionysian eroticism, bodily experience, and commitment to the value of immersion in natural life processes, even to the point of the dissolution of identity. (Sexual experience is the natural model for what is to be valued in this latter Aristophanic-Dionysian stance. Not for nothing do we have the expression *le petit mort* to describe one form of its culmination.) Schopenhauer – an important source for Mann – faced openly the question of how, if it all, it is possible for a world-representing, reflective human being to enjoy the continuous satisfaction of desire, and for Schopenhauer the answer is that it is not possible. World-representing and reflection abstract one from and in fact misrepresent the course of nature, and identity-dissolving satisfactions of desire in sexual experience are at best tempo-

rary and so necessarily fail to relieve the burdens of either reflection or desire effectively. For Mann with respect to Schopenhauer, as Kitcher puts it, “the metaphysics goes; the psychological theses remain” (49). That is, there is a genuine problem about “the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of finding value in human life” (51-52), a problem that continuously haunts Mann’s writing, even while he also is able to maintain some ironic distance on his own obsession with it (52).

And it is this combination of obsession and ironic distance both in Mann and expressed in his writing that gives his works a special claim on our attention in relation to problems of meaning and valuation in human life. Mann’s particular honesty, and arguably the particular honesty of art as such, literary and otherwise, at its highest ranges of achievement, consists in facing up to the problem of integrating form, individuation, discipline, and meaning-making with eroticism, immersion in natural life processes, and the dissolution of identity. (In Freudian terms, this amounts to the problem of responding productively to the imperatives of both the life-instinct or Eros and the death-instinct or Thanatos.) Facing up to these problems requires, significantly, more than merely either registering them or describing them, even with mature resignation (as in Schopenhauer and some strands of tragic virtue theory). Instead it involves presenting dramas of temporally sustained, lived engagement with these problems as addressable, in various ways and with various consequences, even if not solvable. We live, together with fully developed literary protagonists, within what Kitcher calls *synthetic complexes* (181) of emotions, judgments, conceptions, imaginings, perceptions, memories, and moods that are, at their deepest levels, responsive to the fundamental problems of the human situation. In doing so, the issue arises for us of whether any particular synthetic complex is *stable* (181). That is, have we, or has the protagonist of a literary work, thought, felt, remembered, perceived, imagined, and judged as a whole in a way that is continuously livable over time? If so, one will have exercised distinctively human powers of attention, response, and meaning making in a way that is good enough to merit reflective endorsement, even if the problem of continuing within any synthetic complex is not thereby brought to an absolute end. If not, then adjustments to the elements of the synthetic complex are in order.

A work of art, pre-eminently a literary work in which a protagonist is presented as living within such an evolving synthetic complex in relation to an evolving problem situation, can call up our own synthetic complexes, related to those of the protagonist in virtue of a shared problem situation at a deep level. Hence a work of literary art can prompt re-

flection, as well as changes in feeling, mood, and imagining, as the elements of any synthetic complex are tested for aptness to their target situation and for stability in relation to one another. This is, moreover, true not only of literary art at its highest levels of achievement, but also of high art as such. A mood or emotion or imagining may be invited and sustained by a pattern of intentionally organized sounds or images that have to do with fundamental human problems, even without direct description or presentation of the travails of a particular protagonist. Hence there are powerful “affinities among works of art, music, and literature and philosophical themes” even if these forms of work are “radically external” to one another if considered materially and medially rather than functionally (149).

This picture of the role of synthetic complexes in our lives and of how they may develop toward increased stability and aptness to the conditions of life implies a picture of maturity as a matter of living within a relatively stable synthetic complex that is not hubristically closed off from yet further development. According to this picture, the role of philosophy, or at least of the kind of philosophy that takes problems of value in human life as its subject, cannot be to prescribe any single, fully formed, correct valuational stance. (Given his other work, it seems plausible to surmise that Kitcher has developed this view out of his reading of Dewey.) Instead of aiming impossibly toward fixed legislative authority according to principle,³ philosophizing about value within human life should, for Kitcher, be understood as aiming “to bring [one’s readers or auditors] to a previously unanticipated perspective, a different Gestalt on life and on the factors that make a difference to its mattering.”⁴ As Kitcher puts it, “the philosophy lies in the showing” (23) that a literary writer, a composer, a filmmaker, a critic, or a philosopher may accomplish, insofar as such a showing is able to guide us in modifying our synthetic complexes in the direction of increased alertness and stability. “The true Artist-*Erzähler* [– a conception of his own cultural role that Mann developed out of his reading of Nietzsche and that Mann himself fulfilled in exemplary fashion, according to Kitcher –] seeks an extreme standard of reflective stability, one in which the most basic endorsements are embedded in synthetic complexes again and again scrutinized from perspective after perspective” (187). Hence true Artist-*Erzähler*-composer-filmmaker-critic-philosophers function for their audiences (and for themselves) as bootstrapping devices, continually refashioning their synthetic complexes in the direction of increased stability and alertness to life and to values within it.⁵

2) *Philosophy as preparation for death*

Given the picture of maturity in valuational stances that Kitcher elaborates out of the achievements and defeats of Gustav von Aschenbach variously presented, there can be no such thing as a life of unambiguous and absolute value. As Kitcher puts it, “the vindications of the past never seem adequate to the shadows that fall on the present, and even the effort to solve the problem [of vindicating the value of a life] once and for all by denying the need for vindication cannot succeed” (146). Arguably, modesty and humility alone will likewise not suffice to dispel these shadows,⁶ and the need for vindication will be haunted by a sense of its unavailability, at least in any absolutely redemptive terms.⁷ Hence there will come for many, as it comes for Gustav von Aschenbach in gazing at Tadzio on the sandbar at the moment of his death, “a moment at which the call for more striving can be –should be – refused, when the desire for dissolution, for a final union with the vast simplicity of the cosmos becomes acceptable and compelling” (174).

Kitcher explores the nature of this moment and how one might best meet it by considering the music of Mahler, the composer whose Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony Visconti used as a major portion of the soundtrack for his film version of *Death in Venice*. Visconti’s Gustav von Aschenbach is, Kitcher rightly notes, not Mann’s: Visconti’s lacks the “homeroetic yearnings,” “rigorous inherited discipline,” and classical-Platonic “striving for purity of form” that are distinctive of Mann’s (and of Mann himself) (135). Nonetheless, Visconti’s version brings into the foreground this problem of coming to terms with human finitude and of living with and within less than absolute vindication that is central for Mann’s Aschenbach, for Mann himself, and for Mahler. In close readings of Mahler’s symphonies, *Das Lied von der Erde*, and *Kindertotenlieder*, Kitcher traces Mahler’s continuing “impetus to affirm, despite human finitude, the enduring significance of life’s joys and beauties” (137). Most fully in the final movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, as the soprano completes the lines “The lovely earth all over / Blooms in the spring and grows green anew / Everywhere, and the distance forever shines blue, / Forever, forever” with a triple pianissimo repeated “*Enig*,” set over quadruple pianissimo strings, flute, and oboe in their lower registers, all in a continual *ritenuto*, one can hear in Mahler a “closing moment of serenity [that] restores the connection between the life that is ending and the indefinitely renewed earth” (167). Or

the symphonies can be heard – perhaps almost always *are* heard – as struggles to reach a moment of affirmation. For that moment to emerge, it must be preceded by a real sense of the poles of experience as they have been felt in the recent life of the composer; there must be darkness and sorrow, bitterness and defeat, ecstasy and wonder, whimsy and everyday happiness (142).

In each case, what is needed and what is provided is a “gesture that produces consolation through the fact that it can be made” (144) so that “the act of affirmation endorses itself” (145), despite its being imperfect and set within the temporal flow of nature’s development that human subjectivity is unable to overcome or fully to master. “The answer [is] expressed in the music” and shown, not “directly stated” (171). It is offered to us by the composer in order to solicit and sustain our imaginative and emotional identification with the gesture, through which we might arrive at an experience of consolation rather than a discursively formulated answer to the problem of vindicating one’s life in time. A similar sort of showing and offering is present, too, in the twinned images that occur near the end of *Doktor Faustus* of the lingering smell of Max Schweigestill’s pipe set against the lingering sound of “the high g of a cello, the last word, the last suspended sound, in a pianissimo fermata, slowly fading” (178, quoting *Doktor Faustus*) of Adrian Leverkühn’s oratorio *The Lamentation of Doktor Faustus*. In each of these images, there is “a mixture of affirmation and abnegation, the one grounded in a recognition of what [one] has done and its reverberations in the continuing world, the other based on knowing that [one’s work] is incomplete and that the echoes [it] leaves will eventually diminish into silence” (176).⁸ In each case – the ending of *Das Lied von der Erde*, the struggles and moments of relative acceptance in Mahler’s symphonies, the smell of Schweigestill’s pipe, the lingering cello high g, and (forming the center of the family grouping or perspicuous representation that these cases establish) Gustav von Aschenbach’s gaze toward Tadzio in meeting his death – we are, Kitcher suggests, offered “a philosophical contribution that goes beyond Nietzsche and Schopenhauer” (171) (as well as beyond any simple formulae) through which we might, by identifying with the image or gesture, ourselves come to terms with the nature and value of our human lives in time. The best preparation for death is to resonate emotionally and imaginatively with such offerings, along with leading a life in which moments of such resonances are woven through the texture of whatever it is that one otherwise does. *Es war doch so schön*.

This is not to say that friendship, family, love, politics, inquiry or whatever one is otherwise involved in do not matter. Nor does it deny the importance of such things as rights and duties or either cognitive or moral virtues. Prior to meeting his death on the Venice Lido in his gaze toward Tazio on the sandbar and the sea beyond, Gustav von Aschenbach (like Thomas Mann) had led a life of disciplined commitment to the generation of artistic forms through which human perceptions and sensibilities might be elevated, and he had also, apparently, led a good enough bourgeois family life, whatever homoerotic yearnings it also included. In this Aschenbach and Mann exemplify the value that is named by Aschenbach's watchword "Durchhalten": persistence, or discipline, or endurance, or seeing things through. Friendships, loves, work, citizenship, and other involvements must be taken seriously, with full responsiveness to their imperatives, not merely engaged in for pleasure or show. But such involvements will also best have their own value – will be most human and least marked by time-denying hubris – when they are also informed by participation in images and gestures of finitude. Philosophy's wisdom in figuring preparation for death is best achieved not in principles or plans alone, but also and more centrally through participation in such images and gestures.

Is this suggestion about philosophy's wisdom right? If it is, then, paradoxically, this question should itself have no simple answer. Instead the answer should be displayed in the generation and reception of such images and gestures, ever anew, in response to both the changing conditions of human life and the deep facts of human finitude and human powers of reflection. It is difficult not to think of Philip Kitcher himself as, at the deepest stratum of his writing, setting himself as a philosopher-critic-writer in producing his study next to Aschenbach, Mann, Visconti, Britten, and Mahler as one who shows in his own articulate responses to art and life how an achievement and acknowledgment of a good-enough life is possible.

Friedrich Hölderlin gave up philosophy in favor of poetry upon realizing that the absolute character of the whole of nature in which we live is something that we cannot grasp as finite, discursive creatures, so that we are fated to live, well or badly, with the fact of reflection always *en mesure* unsatisfied, the problem of orientation on the basis of knowledge of specifically legislative absolute values always *en mesure* unsolved. He suggested and showed in his major poetry that we might live most fitly with this fate by moving through moments of selfhood and independence, on the one hand, modulated with moments of love and absorption, on the oth-

er.⁹ Wordsworth arrived similarly at the orientation-defeating thought “Hard task, vain hope, to analyse the mind, /If each most obvious and particular thought, /Not in a mystical and idle sense, /But in the words of Reason deeply weighed, /Hath no beginning,”¹⁰ and he pursued orientation more modestly through the recovery and rehearsal of moments of experience that alternated between fear and beauty, apocalypse and akedah, selfhood and absorption.¹¹ To think the achievement of wisdom on the part of finite reflective creatures who lack absolute orientation as a matter of alternations, modulations, recoveries, rehearsals, and workings-through of complexes of mood, affect, judgment, perception, and thought is to see philosophy, insofar as it pursues this wisdom, as more akin to art and criticism than to mathematics and science. Given current academic formations, this suggestion will not be to every philosopher’s (or every literary scholar’s) liking. But it is, nonetheless, faithful to fundamental facts of human existence.

Department of Philosophy
Swarthmore College
Swarthmore, PA 19801 USA
E-mail: reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

NOTES

¹ I use numerals in parentheses to refer to the page numbers in *Deaths in Venice*.

² One philosophical writer who has taken this question seriously is Stanley Cavell in his accounts and defenses of moral perfectionism. But Cavell himself insists that perfectionism is not a moral theory that competes with Kantianism or utilitarianism, but is instead a concern with an aspect or dimension of human life that is aslant to concerns with permissibility and obligations to others, and Cavell himself is not an orthodox moral philosopher. This point applies likewise to some more or less philosophical writers who form part of Cavell’s canon but are themselves not widely received within mainstream academic moral philosophy: Emerson, Thoreau, and Nietzsche. For an insightful survey of Cavell’s thinking about morality, see Stanley Bates, “Cavell on Ethics,” in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 15-47.

³ Plausibly, some forms of Kantianism that emphasize both the perfectionist strand of Kant’s thinking, centering around the priority of imperfect duties, and the necessary open-endedness of imaginative casuistry with respect to an abstract principle that is quite different from any more or less specific rule of thumb, might also fit with this stance. I have argued for this kind of perfection-

ist Kantianism in my *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴ Here there are interesting affinities with Arnold Isenberg's conception of the proper task of the art critic as offering not verdicts but "directions for perceiving" that may or may not be taken up ("Critical Communication," *Philosophical Review* 57 [July 1949], pp. 330-44; reprinted in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, eds. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley [New York: McGraw Hill, 1995], pp. 363-73, at p. 367. Building on related work by Stanley Cavell ("Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* [New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1969] pp. 73-96), both Ted Cohen and I have suggested that Isenberg's picture of the activity of the art critic also aptly describes the activity of the philosopher, at least with respect to problems of valuation in human life. See Ted Cohen, *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 22-23, and Richard Eldridge, *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 4-5.

⁵ Kitcher suggests that understanding how progress of this kind is possible would require "a psychological account and a synthesis of psychology with philosophy that we do not yet have" (244, n. 120). I think the situation is not quite so bleak. Not only is there what Kitcher describes, with excessive modesty, as his "sparse sketch" (244n.120) of the development of synthetic complexes, there is also rich work by a range of figures who develop a similar line of thinking. I have in mind, among other things, Aristotle on catharsis (and contemporary clarificationist developments of this concept in contemporary philosophy of literature), Spinoza on moving from passively suffered affections to actively maintained ones, Wordsworth on the strengthening and purifying of affections in his *Lyrical Ballads* Preface, and above all Collingwood in *The Principles of Art*. I have made some effort to develop and integrate these lines of thinking in *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 19-22, 109-14.

⁶ A good Humean might deny the need for strong vindication and urge us to accept finitude and naturalness and to take to avocations such as backgammon rather than aiming to fulfill any objective vocation for humanity. To a Humean, those who seek strong vindication might be regarded as suffering from overly rigid superego development and weak ego formation. It is a canny insight on Kitcher's part that this kind of Humean stance is itself legible as a form of claiming vindication through humility tinged with the pride of claiming it. Can one humbly claim humility?

⁷ This need for vindication, haunted by a sense of its unavailability, is what lies behind the motif in German thought of *Sehnsucht nach dem Tod*, as in Hölderlin's drama *Empedocles* and in Freud's treatment of the death instinct.

⁸ Kitcher is here characterizing the final moments of Gustav von Aschenbach's life, but now as illuminated by one what can also hear in Mahler and find in *Doktor Faustus*.

⁹ For an overview, building on Dieter Henrich's epochal work, of how Hölderlin's major poetry emerges out of his move away from philosophy, see Richard Eldridge, "To Bear the Momentarily Incomplete: Subject Development and Expression in Hegel and Holderlin," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal: Special Issue on Expressivism*, 27, 2 (2006), pp. 141-58.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* [1850] in Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillingier (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), II, 228-32, p. 212.

¹¹ The terms *apocalypse* and *akedah* are Geoffrey Hartman's in his *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, 3d. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). For an overview of Wordsworth's recollective-narrative response to the problem of orientation, see Richard Eldridge, "Internal Transcendentalism: Wordsworth and A New Condition of Philosophy," in Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 102- 23.

RESUMEN

Un artículo de revision sobre el libro de Philip Kitcher, *Muertes en Venecia*, que se concentra 1) en el papel distintivo que las obras literarias pueden y deben desempeñar (y, de hecho desempeñan) en la reflexión moral sobre el significado y el valor de la vida humana y 2) en el papel que las imágenes y los gestos de finitud pueden desempeñar en nuestro reconocimiento y preparación para la muerte.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Kitcher, Mann, valor, significado de la vida, muerte.*

ABSTRACT

A review essay on Philip Kitcher's *Death's in Venice*, concentrating 1) on the distinctive role that literary works can, do, and should play in moral thinking about meaning and value in human life, and 2) on the role that images and gestures of finitude can play in acknowledging and preparing for death.

KEYWORDS: *Kitcher, Mann, Value, Meaning of Life, Death.*