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## **‘Living Lightly, Living Well’: Kitcher on the Philosophical and Everyday Value of Literature**

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Does engaging in rigorous philosophical dialogue have the power to change our beliefs and commitments? Can a belief of an interlocutor be changed through demonstrating to him that his premises are inconsistent or his reasoning unsound? No doubt many philosophers would respond to these questions in the affirmative and might recall witnessing, or perhaps causing, a thoughtful person’s rejection of a view that has been proved to be erroneous. However, at least some philosophers maintain a skeptical attitude towards the idea that rational argument carries much force to challenge and shift belief and note instead that a common response to being tripped up by faulty logic is to suspend discussion in order to backtrack through one’s premises and conclusions and the connections between them. Such backtracking is likely to result in the interlocutor returning to the conversation with revised premises that seek to protect the favoured conclusion rather than a change of heart about the merit of the initial belief.

The capacity of conventional philosophical argument to influence our beliefs can be especially weak with respect to normative issues involving the assertion of value commitments. Questions such as: “what would count as a worthwhile life?”, and “by what principles should one live?”, notoriously draw incompatible responses. As well as being central to moral philosophy, these questions typically arise in the fields of religion and art – fields that philosophers often judge to be non-philosophical. Here I must leave aside the fascinating issues raised by religion’s relation to philosophy. My focus will be exclusively on art. Does philosophical thought necessarily take an argumentative form that is antipathetic to artistic expression and practice?

In *Deaths in Venice*, Philip Kitcher mounts a compelling case in favour of viewing art (e.g. certain kinds of literary fiction, film, and music)

as a valuable and powerful way of “doing philosophy”. Moreover, he holds that certain artistic works have the potential to not only alter beliefs but, more profoundly, to transform and enhance our experience of life through expanding our conceptual resources, generating new perspectives, and forging new connections. Crucially, this potential of art to transform human experience involves showing rather than arguing. As Kitcher rightly asserts: “fiction that argues is typically dead” (12).<sup>1</sup> The philosophical thrust of literature – its ability to do “*real* philosophy”, as Kitcher emphatically puts it – “lies in the showing. Instead of a rigorously connected sequence of clear and precise declarative sentences, we are offered a rich delineation of possibilities – accompanied by a tacit injunction: Consider this” (23).

For example, the power of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, lies with the manner in which it engages the reader’s imagination (e.g. through vivid representations of Aschenbach’s tortured obsession with Tadzio’s beauty) and emotions (e.g. pity, disgust) as well as the reader’s capacity to consider the complexities of plot, event, character, and so on. On this view, literature can meaningfully be deemed philosophical insofar as it does not merely mention a philosophical work, or illustrate this or that philosophy through its particular subject matter, but rather presents its own independent philosophical view that genuinely contributes to our understanding of philosophical topics, such as weakness of will or moral culpability.

Literature can provoke us to think and to judge but it does so in a different manner than does traditional philosophy. It self-consciously engages not only our powers of deliberation but also our memories, emotions, and imagination. Kitcher’s treatment of the power of art to engage in philosophical thinking seeks clarity on two questions. First, does the transformative power of art reach persons on the street in a way that makes a difference to their everyday lives? Second, what is it that art uniquely contributes to philosophical knowledge? (179f). In what follows I critically engage with Kitcher’s responses to these questions but, for reasons of space, will confine my comments to literature, mostly to Mann’s *Death in Venice*.<sup>2</sup>

## I. ARTISTIC EDIFICATION AND THE CULTIVATION OF JUDGMENT

The potentially productive relationship between art and philosophy presented by Kitcher takes its general orientation from John Dewey.

Like him, Kitcher views art (music, film, literature) “as playing a fundamental role in exploring and communicating [cultural] values, receptivity to which is the goal of education, properly conceived” (217, n12). Compared to the dry treatise literature is more suited to promote reader receptivity to the exploration and communication of value because it embeds and embodies principles and themes that are often inaccessibly presented in abstract philosophy. Quality literature engages not only a reader’s cognitive power but also her affective and imaginative powers. Successful literature engages readers in a holistic way.

We know from Mann’s letters and diaries that he was reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche while composing *Death in Venice* and that he was especially interested in their critical stance on Aristotelian notions of character and virtue and the roles that they play in human well-being (or *eudaimonia*). *Death in Venice* also explores Platonic themes concerning art, love, and beauty. Kitcher argues that Mann’s novella makes a significant contribution to the philosophical resources available to us in our deliberations about these weighty themes. But Mann does so through the literary presentation of complex and thought-provoking exemplars that make tangible, visible, and palpable the abstract theoretical propositions one finds in philosophy. In *Death in Venice* Mann treats universal themes of art, beauty, and failed ambition, but he does so through a painful exploration “of the value of a *particular* type of life: Aschenbach’s” (19, emphasis added). On this view an exemplar should not be reduced to the idea of an embodied universal. On the contrary, exemplars in literature are necessarily plural and particular. Indeed, they derive their force to engage our attention precisely through their compelling singularity. For example, Othello’s vulnerability to feelings of sexual jealousy and rage may be universal but the specificity of his situation (a Moor in Venice, a victim of Iago’s treachery) and his character (an astute and brave general but sadly lacking the canniness required to handle political intrigue) inevitably complicate the simple application of moral imperatives deemed suitable to his case. The broad outline of his tragedy is universal but the experiential texture of the events that compose it is uniquely his.

How does literature edify? In what sense does the reader’s receptivity to the critical exploration of dominant cultural values help her to live her own life more fully or satisfactorily? This question goes to the heart of the first question introduced above, concerning the power of fiction to positively affect the lot of the person on the street. First, it should be noted that a literary exemplar has the potential to serve as a kind of hypothesis with which the reader can experiment in the relative safety of

fictional space (recall Kitcher's injunction: "Consider this"). Similar notions have been explored by other philosophers who argue that literature can be seen as a kind of fast-forward simulator in which one can gain invaluable experience of numerous virtual lives in a variety of 'possible worlds'. Greg Currie, for example, suggests that "we can think of fictions as just further examples of endogenously supplied survival mechanisms" [Currie (1998), p. 171]. But Kitcher's explanation of the relations obtaining between an author and his reader is complex and involves the deployment of a number of personae. These personae include the skeptic, the artist, the citizen (more accurately in the case of Mann, the *Bürger*, or "solid citizen"), the "blue-eyed", the philosopher, and the "liaison officer". Kitcher conceives of the task of the philosophical critic to be to connect the work of art to abstract philosophy in a manner that prepares the reader (or viewer, or listener) to receive the work in a new way - a way that recognizes "what is presented as a potential way to embody value and thus to serve as a basis for judgment, for endorsement or rejection". The conception of the philosopher-critic as "liaison officer", namely, someone who makes "reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues" is borrowed from Dewey (25).

Kitcher's response to the two questions that undergird and motivate his study should now be coming into focus. Art has the unique capacity to supply fine-grained knowledge about universal philosophical themes in a way that can engage a broad audience. Literature especially has the capacity to transform everyday lives but this may require the supplementary role of the philosopher to aid in the translation of knowledge across different discourses or practices. Furthermore, it is now evident that the two questions Kitcher raises - concerning art's relation to the everyday, and art and philosophy - are linked through the philosopher's talent for making difference intelligible. Philosophers are able to render different practices, with their distinct approaches to knowledge, mutually understandable. The liaising task appears to involve part instruction, part translation. Of course, the author, the literary critic, and the person on the street, might view this claim as evidence of philosophical arrogance: from a non-philosophical perspective isn't the language of philosophy also provincial? Or, even worse, it might be argued that the translation of so-called provincial tongues into a philosophical *lingua franca* (that sees itself as preeminently 'intelligible') risks the denial of difference altogether. But perhaps these objections go against the spirit of Kitcher's proffered account of philosophical fiction. After all, he does advise that his "aim is not to convince readers of particular theses but to provide materials

through which they can transcend what I have written" (26). At the end of the day it is the reader's judgment – her endorsement or rejection of what is presented – that decides what power any given artwork does, or does not, possess. Readers (or listeners, or viewers) may, and do, and are perfectly entitled to, decline the services of liaison officers.

## II. LIVING LIGHTLY, LIVING WELL

Kitcher's contrasting personae of the artist and the "blue-eyed" highlight a particular way of understanding the difference between those who create and those who receive art. In a passage that was partially quoted above, Kitcher notes that the exploration of the particular life that is Aschenbach's is also a painful questioning of Mann's own life experiences and values. In *Death in Venice*, "Mann placed himself on trial" (19). Mann's own doubts about the worth of his novels, and his own insecurities about his sexuality and aging, are explored through the figure of Aschenbach. Artists engage in risky, sometimes agonizing, self-examination for the sake of art. These forays into dangerous territory where one questions the value of one's values, explores the role of these values in one's self-constitution, and lays bare those vicissitudes of life that serve to test, or even destroy, are not for the faint-hearted. The trope of the socially excluded or outcast aesthete is common in literature. Often such a character will be portrayed as arrogant and hostile to the everyday. George Eliot's portraits of the hypersensitive Latimer and his brother Alfred, in *The Lifted Veil*, track Mann's distinction between the painful lot of the artist compared to those who 'live lightly'. Alfred encourages his delicate brother to accompany him on a bracing horse ride because, he says, it is the "finest thing in the world for low spirits!" As the robustly healthy Alfred rides away Latimer thinks to himself: "that is the sort of phrase with which coarse, narrow natures like yours think to describe experience of which you can know no more than your horse knows. It is to such as you that the good of this world falls: ready dullness, healthy selfishness, good-tempered conceit - these are the keys to happiness." This depiction of the 'normal person' versus the 'temperamental artist' couldn't be made clearer in the contrast Latimer draws between "Alfred's self-complacent soul, his freedom from all the doubts and fears, the unsatisfied yearnings, the exquisite tortures of sensitiveness, that had made the web of my life" [Eliot (1999), p. 25].

Mann is acutely alive to the difference between these styles of life but resists presentations that involve the artist adopting a contemptuous attitude towards the blue-eyed, healthy type.<sup>3</sup> In *Tonio Kröger*, for example, the titular figure is an artist who feels alienated from a world where although he is not able to “speak the same language” as the easy-living “blonde and blue-eyed” among whom he must live, nevertheless strives to love and defend all of humankind through his art [Mann (2010), pp. 90-91]. Mann’s artists live intensely, painfully, but without resentment. They may be thought to ‘live well’ (in the Aristotelian sense) but they do not enjoy the lightness of being of the person on the street. On Kitcher’s view Aschenbach’s devotion to his art has involved enormous costs, including the cultivation of stern discipline, a point underlined by Kitcher’s choice of title for the first chapter of his book: ‘Discipline’. His sketch of Aschenbach’s character includes comparing him to “a public servant, even a soldier, who guards the culture others take for granted, who understands possible challenges to it and dedicates his writing – and his life – to combatting them” (49-50).

*Death in Venice* details the progressive erosion of Aschenbach’s regime of order and control and the abandonment of the artistic values that he has spent his life defending. After he gives in to his increasingly inappropriate feelings for Tadzio, Aschenbach falls further and further into the kind of foolishness that he had observed and disdained only weeks before, on the boat trip to Venice. Aschenbach begins to “brighten his dress with smart ties and handkerchiefs and other youthful touches” and pay “frequent visits to the hotel barber”. It is the barber’s cosmetic treatments –the barber dyes his hair, plucks his eyebrows, applies face cream, rouge, and lipstick - that inevitably recall to the reader’s mind Aschenbach’s dismissive assessment of the pathetic aged dandy traveling with a youthful group, with his loose dentures, who made Aschenbach “shudder” and who he found “shocking” and “repulsive” with his “coloured scarf, and red cravat” [Mann (2010), pp. 17-20]. The bitter resignation conveyed by Aschenbach’s statement: “What were art and virtue worth to him, compared to the advantages of chaos?” (46) indicate the depth of the break between his present “unhinged, powerless” state and his past life [Mann (2010), p. 68]. His complicity with the authorities over the concealment of the presence of cholera in Venice not only endangers his own life but that of Tadzio, Tadzio’s family, and ultimately all those whom he could warn and who remain in Venice because they are ignorant of the risks.<sup>4</sup>

Aschenbach's obsession with the beauty of the boy defeats his discipline, his self-avowed values, and his fidelity to his life project. He can no longer claim the high ground of Socrates, who occupied the powerful position of [chaste] lover to the beloved [and objectified] Alcibiades. Rather, he is reduced to the clichéd figure of the old man with a dirty secret. Aschenbach's shameful secret is mirrored by the "secret the city kept hidden at its heart, just as he kept his own". He abandons his values in favour of his chaotic passion for Tadzio. Read in this way the novel might be interpreted as offering an application or illustration of the philosophies of Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. The tragic failings of Aschenbach's life may be understood as an extended presentation and confirmation, a showing, of "the inevitable failure and frustration of the individual will [i.e. Schopenhauer's stance] and the contradiction within the ascetic ideal [i.e. Nietzsche]" (47). But this interpretation fails to capture Kitcher's more profound venture. Recall his three grades of how literature may interact with philosophy: literature may allude to, or mention philosophy, literature may apply or illustrate a philosophical stance, and finally, literature may actually "do philosophy", that is, it may genuinely contribute to philosophical thought (11-13). To read *Death in Venice* as an extended presentation and confirmation of Schopenhauer's or Nietzsche's philosophy, including their critical engagement with Greek ideals of beauty and virtue, would be to have achieved only the second grade of art. It would be to entirely miss Mann's original contribution to philosophical thought.

What does Kitcher see in *Death in Venice* that warrants counting Mann among those who do *real* philosophy? What are the philosophical problems that Mann explores and what does his novel offer by way of response to these problems? Addressing these puzzles returns us to what is arguably the fundamental question of philosophy: "how to live?" along with its corollary "what would it take to judge that a human life has been worthwhile?" On Kitcher's reading, this "oldest and deepest" philosophical question lies at the heart of *Death in Venice* and subsumes all the other themes that it treats (e.g. beauty, sexuality, the will, asceticism) (17). Kitcher's provocation to his reader to consider *Death in Venice* anew involves also considering Mann as philosopher. On Kitcher's strikingly original interpretation of the novella, Mann's engagement with the oldest and deepest question of philosophy yields an ironic yet unambiguous endorsement of the worth of Aschenbach's life.

On this reading, the moralizing voice of the narrator is marginalised, as is Aschenbach's own harsh self-assessment of his putatively failed life.

Aschenbach's ignoble end, Kitcher would have us concede, does not negate all that came before; and the value of a life – any life – cannot be destroyed by momentary or episodic lapses of judgment or discipline. As we will see, it is significant that Kitcher refers to Aschenbach's trip to Venice as an "episode" and an "epilogue". Kitcher's interpretation raises an important philosophical debate about the significance that the shape of a human life has for how we might assess the worth of that life. Serious engagement with Kitcher's judgment concerning the worth of Aschenbach's life needs to at least gesture towards explaining why the issue of the shape of a human life matters to the value of that life.

### III HUMAN SINGULARITY AND THE WORTH AND SHAPE OF HUMAN LIFE

We are all born into an already constituted world with a long history that precedes us. As many have noted, along with Kitcher, "The human predicament is always to start in the middle" (16). *In medias res*. Still, within this common predicament there are different ways to respond to the specificities of the milieu into which each is thrown. Artists, and indeed certain types of philosopher, willingly forgo the relative ease and security of living lightly within given, culturally sanctioned, roles and values. Recall that the artist is one who risks, contests, defends, perhaps even seeks to transform, the values that most folk are content to accept. One only has to contemplate Latimer's complaint about the cheerful and complacent Alfred to feel the difference between those who are comfortably "fluent" in the dominant cultural dialect and those who struggle and stutter. The *raison d'être* of the artist is to dwell in discomfort, to question old, and create new, values and it is success or failure in this project that determines the worthiness of his or her life. All human lives are singular because of the sheer complexity of human experience that derives in part from the unique manner in which the events that constitute each human life become significant or meaningful through their incessant connections with other events in that life. But arguably the lives of artists are especially singular insofar as they intensely live and re-live, imaginatively work and re-work, the experiences and events that compose their lives. As Kitcher rightly notes, such lives can be lacerating.

Kierkegaard's famous point, that although life is lived forwards it can only be understood backwards, must be supplemented with the further observation that attempts to understand life zigzag, and so the present, the past, and the anticipated future are constantly being traversed in

experience, in thought, in memory, in imagination - back and forth, intricately crisscrossing and overwriting - and so forming ever more labyrinthine patterns of connections, disconnections, and reconnections. A decision tree can only ever be a crude and simplified representation of the patterns underlying human thought and action. The shape of a human life is not linear, or arboreal, or unidirectional, but rather is composed of plural and irregular patterns. A human life is more helpfully conceived as a "rhizome [that] has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" [Deleuze and Guattari, (1987) p. 25]. This is not to say, however, that a human life lacks definite shape or form. Rather, it is to insist that where there is life, its shape or form is continually evolving.

The notion of 'living lightly' or complacently is clear enough but what does it mean to live well? For those who aim to 'live well' rather than 'lightly' the shape of a life acquires a profound significance. The kind of life that Aschenbach sought necessarily is lived self-consciously and a robust regime of discipline, as we have seen, will be paramount to the achievement of the aim of a life devoted to the pursuit of beauty through art. Aschenbach's (and Mann's) point of reference for living well is Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* (often translated as happiness but, more accurately, well-being), a notion that necessarily involves deliberation, discipline, and virtue. For Aschenbach to judge his own life as worthy, as a life well lived, would necessitate being true to the values and virtues of his art. In my view, the tragedy presented in *Death in Venice*, is doubled: first, it is tragic that when confronted with Tadzio's (representationally and physically) unattainable beauty Aschenbach betrays the values he up until then had steadfastly embraced. Second, it is utterly tragic that Aschenbach dies in this degraded state and so is denied the opportunity to address or repair his failure to be true to his reflectively chosen life. It is the second tragedy that highlights the philosophical import of the shape of a life to the worth of a life. It is to this second tragedy that Kitcher's ironic reading does not sufficiently attend, and this inattention detracts from the viability of his overall interpretation of *Death in Venice*, as I shall try to show.

The viability of Kitcher's presentation of Mann's novella as an instance of the third grade of literature's engagement with philosophy depends upon the reader's capacity to consider the events in Venice as episodes in Aschenbach's life that do not (cannot?) have the force to very significantly alter how that life should be assessed overall. But, to paraphrase Aristotle, who was paraphrasing Solon: judge no person's life

as well lived, or worthwhile, until after he is dead. Along with Aristotle, I agree that it is premature to judge the overall success, or failure, of a human life before it has ended. This is not to say, however, that the successes or failures in a life are akin to keeping some kind of scoreboard that could total life's losses and gains. The highs and lows of experience cannot be added or summed in order to furnish a final score. David Velleman has offered compelling arguments for why this is so.

The value of a life and the amount of well-being it encompasses cannot amount to the mere summation of all its pleasant or positive moments. One reason for this is because "an event's place in the story of one's life lends it a meaning that isn't entirely determined by its impact on one's well-being at the time" [Velleman (2000), p. 63]. We may learn from life's events, even or perhaps especially, from painful or unpleasant events. But in order for this to obtain, moments, experiences, or events in a life, would need to stand in the appropriate relation to each other. Typically, one learns from past experiences when an experience is linked to other experiences in one's life in a way that yields insight, knowledge, and meaning. Indeed, the significance of an experience often will change over time depending on what has preceded it, what succeeds it, and the manner in which each relevant experience links with all the rest. Of course, a minimal requirement for learning from one's past experience is that one has a future in which to contemplate its significance! Crucially, this is what Aschenbach does not have. His degradation is almost immediately followed by his death. The timing of one's death might be thought of in terms of chance, or moral (bad) luck. Nevertheless death imposes a definite shape on life that is different to the shape that it previously had, or that would have evolved had one enjoyed a longer life. Given the chance, a man like Aschenbach would have reflected long and deeply on the affect his trip to Venice, and his encounter with Tadzio, had on his art and his life. But he does not get that opportunity. Death forecloses any further consideration of the roles and values of beauty, desire, discipline, and art in his life.<sup>5</sup>

Kitcher wants us to entertain the idea that the details of the end of Aschenbach's life do not *annul* or *invalidate* the worth of his life. He makes such assertions several times throughout *Deaths in Venice*:

The novella is largely devoted to a period of a few weeks, an epilogue to Aschenbach's career. It is an *episode*, one that surely does not fit well with the overall pattern of his career. Does the fact of a problematic ending

necessarily invalidate the shape or nullify the worth of a human life? (53, emphasis original).

Perhaps Gustav von Aschenbach is not to be conceived as a failure: the events of his death might be a *minor deviation* from the hard-won but triumphant perseverance of his life (60, emphasis added).

In his despair, Aschenbach takes himself to have failed completely. That is an overreaction: for two decades he has brought off the trick with great virtuosity. If the *episode* in Venice discloses his failure, readers need not accept his pessimistic verdict ... (102, emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

I think Kitcher is right to claim that Aschenbach's breakdown in Venice does not *annul*, *cancel*, or *invalidate* his life achievements. I think he is wrong, however, to see the events that take place in Venice as minor or episodic and so, in a sense, able to be detached from how one views Aschenbach's life as a whole. In my view, his interpretation is not sufficiently alive to the import of the profound importance that the shape of a human life and the finality of death have for judgments about the worth of a life.

When Latimer compares his brother's simple sensibility to that of a horse he echoes an ancient view about the distinction between human and animal lives. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that "neither an ox nor a horse nor any other animal" can be considered happy in the human sense. Human well-being requires "both complete virtue and a complete life since many changes and all sorts of events caused by chance occur in a lifetime" [Aristotle (2013), 1100a, p. 14]. Velleman concurs with Aristotle: a non-human animal can have "no interest in its life as a whole"; the "totality of [a non-human animal's] life simply has no value for him, because he cannot care about it as such, and because its constituent moments, which he can care about, have *values that don't accumulate*" [Velleman (2000) p. 84, emphasis added].

It is not only the relationships between experiences that matter but also the overall shape of accumulated experiences insofar as they add up to a life: human experiences are cumulatively significant. Although philosophers disagree over the idea of whether the shape of a life matters to its overall value there are strong reasons to endorse the claim that a life with an upward trajectory is preferable to one with a downward trajectory even when the total amount of well-being in each life might be equivalent. It is surely a general truth that everyone appreciates being better off than they were and feel disappointed when events render them worse off

than they were. Put differently, “the temporal sequence of good and bad times in a life can be a valuable feature of that life as a whole” [Dorsey (2015), pp. 304-05; see also Glasgow (2013)]. Velleman, rightly in my view, explains the general preference we have for a life that improves as we move from youth, through middle age and then old age, in terms of the relative narrowing of opportunities available to remedy one’s situation, or to redeem one’s regretted actions. Whereas the significance of many events of one’s youth will lie in one’s (as yet undetermined) future the things that happen in old age take place against a relatively formed past. “Thus”, Velleman remarks, “one looks forward to a lifetime in which to redeem one’s youth, but confronts events of middle age as having a single, determinate significance once and for all” [Velleman (2000), p. 69]. His point is not simply that the additive scoreboard approach to well-being fails to account for the way that the significance of events and experiences are influenced by those with which it is meaningfully linked but also that the capacity of given events to contribute to or detract from well-being can be influenced by one’s stage of life. It is not that what happens in middle or late age is more important *per se*. Rather, it is prudent to take more care with our lives as we age because our criteria of what it is to succeed in life will have narrowed and so “fewer of the possibilities [present in an older person’s situation] will result in a life that’s any good at all” [Velleman (2000), p. 69].

Against this canvas the question for Kitcher’s interpretation of *Death in Venice* is not properly posed in the either/or terms that he presents: *either* the events in Venice annul the worth of Aschenbach’s life, *or* so long as we treat the events in Venice episodically, or as deviations, then Aschenbach’s life may be redeemed through his past achievements: he may be judged to have “achieved enough” (189). Both possible readings fail to acknowledge the complex way in which the Venice trip tragically re-shapes the meaning and worth of Aschenbach’s life – both for Aschenbach himself and for the reader. For this reader *Death in Venice* shows the tragedy of a life that is radically reshaped by events that permanently distort and scar the life achievements of a great artist. Moreover, death cheats the artist of the opportunity to redeem his life. Kitcher’s suggestion that there is an ironic dimension to Mann’s presentation of Aschenbach’s lot fails to convince me. Of course, this disagreement does not foreclose the endorsement of Kitcher’s claim that a “world without Aschenbachs would be a lesser place ... a world of the ‘lightly living’” (189). Aschenbach’s flaws and failings certainly do not

annul or negate the worth of his life. To paraphrase Kitcher, it definitely matters that *he has been*.

#### IV CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have suggested that to accept Kitcher's argument for why Mann's novella is an instance of the third grade of literature's engagement with philosophy would also involve accepting his interpretation of the events in Venice as mere episodes in Aschenbach's life, episodes that do not have the force to significantly alter how his life should be viewed overall. The episodic reading of events in Venice seems necessary if Kitcher's proposed ironic reading of *Death in Venice* is to be judged viable. On Kitcher's reading, the novella emerges as a more subtle and complex work than had been previously appreciated. But the block that prevents me from following Kitcher's lead is precisely his treatment of what takes place in Venice as more or less detachable from the rest of Aschenbach's life. To my mind, this treatment obscures the profoundly tragic timing of Aschenbach's death and the fixed shape that death necessarily imposes on a human life.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I use numerals in parentheses to refer to the page numbers in *Deaths in Venice* [Kitcher (2013)].

<sup>2</sup> As implied by the title of Kitcher's monograph, he treats deaths in Venice and the cases of Aschenbach, in the plural. His analyses include Visconti's film and Britten's opera, both of which explore and extend themes found in Mann's novella.

<sup>3</sup> I do not want to give the impression that George Eliot had any sympathy with an artistic temperament that is hostile to the everyday. On the contrary, the character of Latimer is atypical of her portraits of artists and it is surely significant that he is an artist who does not create or produce any works of art, that is, he has "the poet's sensibility without his voice" [Eliot (1999), p. 7].

<sup>4</sup> Kitcher's claim that Aschenbach's failure to disclose the dirty secret of the Venetian authorities is "inconsequential" and "has no impact on [Tadzio or his family]" seems to me to miss the point. Moral luck (the fact that they do not contract cholera) does not cancel moral culpability.

<sup>5</sup> As Kitcher notes, Mann's *Death in Venice* involves quite a bit of autobiographical writing. Hence, it is Mann not Aschenbach who enjoys the opportunity to reflect on events and feelings that were aroused on his trip to Venice.

<sup>6</sup> For some other instances of Kitcher's references to Venice events as *episodes*, that should not negate or cancel the worth of Aschenbach's life, see (20, 23, and 54).

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#### RESUMEN

Philip Kitcher argumenta que ciertas clases de arte pueden correctamente considerarse como modos valiosos de hacer filosofía y que *Muerte en Venecia* de Thomas Mann debe verse como un ejemplo de filosofar por parte de un artista. Por mi parte, argumento que en la medida en que Kitcher trata lo que acontece en Venecia como si fueran meros episodios de la vida de Aschenbach, su evidencia para leer la *novella* de Mann como una respuesta irónica y filosóficamente original a la pregunta sobre cómo juzgar el valor de una vida, no resulta demasiado convincente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *eudaimonía, forma de vida, ética, filosofía y literatura, Thomas Mann.*

ABSTRACT

Philip Kitcher argues that certain kinds of art may rightly be regarded as valuable ways of doing philosophy, and that Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* should count as an instance of an artist philosophizing. I argue that insofar as Kitcher treats the events in Venice as mere episodes in Aschenbach's life, his evidence for reading Mann's novella as an ironic, and philosophically original response to the question of how to judge the worth of a life, fails to convince.

KEYWORDS: *Eudaimonia, Shape of Life, Ethics, Philosophy and Literature, Thomas Mann.*