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Reflections on *Deaths in Venice*

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Philip Kitcher takes Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as the starting point for an extended meditation on the nature of art and on the consolation that it brings. He moves from Mann's story to the works that have been inspired by it – Benjamin Britten's opera and Visconti's film – and to the music (the adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony) which Visconti used as background. But the argument ranges far more widely, exploring the meaning of both art and life, and also the philosophical question as to how *we* – you and I – should understand the goal and achievement of these melancholy works that attempt to look back on life from its final one-sided boundary. What do they give to us, what do they help us to understand, and why are they so precious? For that they are precious Kitcher does not doubt, and his often beautiful descriptions – of Mahler's sublime *Das Lied von der Erde* in particular – leave the reader in no doubt that he is writing of things that have a supreme value for him.

Kitcher conceives Mann and Mahler (and, I assume, Britten and Visconti) as responding to the challenge presented by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, which he expresses in the following words:

> Human finitude undercuts the worth of what we are and do: our strivings are endless, our accomplishments incomplete. We should either recognize the futility of our actions (abnegating the will) or find the way to transcend the run of common humanity (in some act of self-affirmation). To this challenge Mann's coda and Mahler's *Abschied Lied* have been taken to *show* the possibility of value in the connection with something that endures beyond the individual self. The novella and the *Lied* evoke a synthetic complex into which readers and listeners can absorb their experiences and integrate them with the endorsement of finite human worth (185-6).[1]

By 'synthetic complex' Kitcher means a connection, forged by art, to the wider scheme of things. A work like *Das Lied von der Erde* shows individ-

uals as neither alone nor trapped in their own life-spans, but connected to nature and its cycles, to others who love them or who will, in some future time, re-enact their experiences, their hopes, their loves and their fears. The synthetic complex is a kind of answer to the one who, fully conscious of life's finitude and fragmentariness, nevertheless looks for its meaning: an answer which is the special gift of art since only in art is the connection between the individual and the wider context *shown*, rather than described. Art acquaints us with an *experience* of synthesis, and this is of special value to us since it infects our way of experiencing the contingency and incompleteness of everything we feel and do.

I have used my own words there, in an attempt to summarize Kitcher's concluding argument. The question he addresses is really two questions: the first concerns the value of life, the second the value of art. Here is how he puts the point, in his persuasive account of *Das Lied von der Erde*:

> … the answer offered by the *Abschied-Lied* is rooted in familiar and elementary features of our lives. The leave-taker has lived and loved, her joys and successes are transient, her life will have an effect for a while, its actions traceable in the enduring, indefinitely renewed world from which she departs, but, like the ripples caused by a stone thrown into a pool, the impact will eventually, perhaps even quite soon, diminish to nothing. The connections, transitory as they are, are real, not to be argued away or to be embedded in conjectures about the ensoulment of everything. *The philosophical question asks whether those connections are enough. Mahler's singer affirms that they are – or, to be more exact, that they can be, that finitude is no obstacle to value – and the power of the answer lies in its moving listeners to a corresponding affirmation* (171).

There is truth in that description of the final movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*. But does it suggest an answer to either of Kitcher's questions – that about the value of life, and that about the value of art? I doubt it, for the following reasons. First, the question about the value of life is a question that is intimately connected with the first-person perspective. It is a question about the worthwhileness of being *me, here, now*. I am seeking the thought, the experience, which will permit a supreme affirmation, a 'yes' that will also be an acceptance of contingency, of suffering, of finitude. That is surely what Mahler is offering with that nine time repeated '*ewig*', dying away with shining triads on which seconds and sixths lie glinting and unresolved. But why should the knowledge that my life sends out those dwindling ripples permit an affirmation of it, if the life cannot be affirmed as it is in itself, and as the life that is mine? Surely the

search for the 'yes' that affirms my life is like the search for a blessing – the gift bestowed on me by another, which brings reconciliation and peace. And that reminds one of the element that is missing from Kitcher's account, which is the parallel with religion. What Mahler is evoking is surely aptly described as 'the peace that passeth understanding'.

Second, I don't think that we can give an account of the value of art in Kitcher's way. It is true, of course, that works of art bring things together in an act of synthesis, that they make connections through metaphor, allusion, symbolism and juxtaposition that create the sense of a hidden order, in which the superficial contingencies and contradictions of existence are resolved. But that does not explain the peculiar contribution of *art* to the search for the worthwhileness of life. Those connections could be made, perhaps more laboriously, by philosophy – indeed Kitcher makes a start at making them in the passage I quoted. Why do we need *art* to make them, and what special character does art add to the things that it brings together?

Kitcher is aware of this problem. Throughout the book he is wrestling with it, aware that we get something from a great work like *Death in Venice* or *Das Lied von der Erde*, which comes to us through the aesthetic experience. He alludes to this in the passage last quoted, writing that Mahler's music moves us to 'a corresponding affirmation'. But why and how does it move us? And why do we need art in order to be moved in this way? In a later passage (186) he shifts the emphasis slightly, arguing that the coda to Mann's story and Mahler's *Abschied Lied* are taken 'to *show* the possibility of value in connection with something that endures beyond the individual self' – and the emphasis on showing (as opposed to telling) seems to connect with a distinctive feature of the aesthetic experience. But why is it important to *show* the possibility of value, and how exactly is that done?

In no way do I wish to dismiss Kitcher's fine and humane treatment of his examples. But the points that I have raised suggest a certain lacuna in his argument, and one that connects to his wider philosophical stance. Kitcher does not believe that religion will satisfy the one who doubts life's value. How, he asks, can our being part of 'a Great Plan for the Universe' lend significance to what we do? (170). Whatever our response to that rhetorical question it is surely relevant to point out that religion is not, in the normal case, just a matter of believing in the existence of a divine plan. There are other aspects, to the Christian religion in particular, which are just as important to the devotee, and which have little or nothing to do with far-reaching metaphysical doctrines. Religions consist of communal rituals, processes of purification, of confession,

atonement and forgiveness. People come to the altar burdened by sin and the consciousness of sin, and receive the sacrament that lightens them. In moments of prayer and worship they stand astonished before the absolute simplicity of being, and are renewed by this. They seek redemption and find it in the moment of sacrifice – perhaps, as in Christianity, in the sacrifice of the god himself.

I don't say that any of that is rational or that it provides a theoretical answer to the two questions that trouble Kitcher. Nevertheless, religion, described in that way, is an *experience* of the value of life. It imparts a serene blessedness, a benediction that compensates for all the ways in which the worshipper has diverged from the path of righteousness. Is this not an archetype on which works of art draw, when they present to us the spectacle of suffering, and invite us to share it in imagination, to step into the already occupied circle of grief, and to move there 'in measure, like a dancer'?

If we think of religion in that way, we can see a little more clearly that there are *experiences* of life's worth or meaning which are not just narratives about some Grand Plan, or attempts to connect our lives to a wider universe by some 'synthetic complex'. It is surely just such an experience that is invoked by Mahler at the end of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Kitcher quotes an interesting remark by Benjamin Britten concerning this ending: 'It has the beauty of loneliness and of pain: of strength and freedom. The beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love. The cruel beauty of nature, and everlasting beauty of monotony… And there is nothing morbid about it…a serenity literally supernatural. I cannot understand it – it passes over me like a tidal wave – and that matters not a jot either, because it goes on forever, even if it is never performed again – that final chord printed on the atmosphere' (165). Kitcher endorses Britten's rapturous response entirely, except for the one word that seems to explain it, the word 'supernatural'. Britten is describing something that is surely familiar to all of us, whether or not we have any theological beliefs with which to embellish it, namely the vision, granted in *this* world, of a light shining from a place beyond it. The moment in and out of time of which Eliot writes in *Four Quartets,* and which the Japanese try to capture entirely without the aid of religious doctrine in the form of the haiku, is promised by both art and religion. It is what each can add, in its own special way, to the life of contingency and finitude: the sense that the moment alone can 'redeem the time'.

Can we make sense of this? Here are a few thoughts, taking off from Kitcher's discussion. Wagner, whose death in Venice occurred only

shortly after his great spiritual journey in *Parsifal*, argued that, once religion loses its doctrinal basis, it remains to art to capture its essence in symbols. The essence of religion, he believed, is not contained in truths about God, because there are none that we can know; it is contained in truths about us. But these truths must be put on display in symbolic form if they are to be understood. Two in particular occupied Wagner in his later works: the truth that we find fulfilment in moments, feelings and experiences that have a sacred aura, and the truth that, when we are granted those moments we do not merely affirm life – we affirm death too, as an inseparable part of it. To experience life as meaningful is to be true to those moments, when we confront what is before us as sacred and necessary, its own sufficient justification. In such moments, as one might put it, we 'come home to ourselves'.

Those moments form the heart of religion in our tradition. They are the experience of benediction, the sense of a serene gaze in which we stand, and which affirms our being. They are what the Jews call *shakhanah* and Christians the 'real presence', the gift that is presented at the altar to the one who comes *in nomine domini*. Strip away the theological doctrines and what remains is the experience of the sacred, of the moment rescued from contingency and presented as complete in itself, its own fulfilment.

The aesthetic experience, as it has been cherished and embellished by our post-romantic sensibility, is adjacent to the experience of the sacred. It comes about when we are confronted by some sensory aspect of the world, and we affirm that aspect as intrinsically worthwhile. This, before us, we think, is not just an instrument, a means for the pursuit of our interests, but an end in itself. It has the quality that Kant beautifully summarized as 'purposefulness without purpose'. Seeing it in that way we also isolate it as a symbol, as something that brings together and fuses the many thoughts and feelings that somehow belong to it. And this 'fusing' (which is what Kitcher refers to, I believe, as a 'synthetic complex') has meaning for us because it transfers the intrinsic value of the aesthetic object to the emotions that are inspired by it. We are consoled by this, because it is a kind of homecoming. This moment, 'printed on the atmosphere' as Britten puts it, is its own full justification. We need look no further for the proof that life is worthwhile, since this is what the worth of life consists in.

I am struggling here, I know. But the connection that I am trying to make between the religious and the aesthetic moments can be understood in another way through the problem of tragedy. Ever since Aristotle philosophers have puzzled over the tragic experience, wondering what it is that we take from the spectacle of death and suffering, and why

the effect is more serenity than calamity. It seems entirely reasonable to suggest that the experience of tragedy involves an acceptance of death, and an affirmation of life *through* the acceptance of death. And it is also reasonable to suggest that this aesthetic experience has much in common with the religious experience, as the victim who is also the redeemer is sacrificed at the altar and his blood shared among the worshippers. The late René Girard has made this primary religious experience the subject-matter of his many imaginative explorations of the idea of the sacred, and even if, at the end of his explorations, some of the mystery remains, it is surely reasonable to suggest that the experience of tragedy contains a residue of that primordial moment of collective worship, when the victim of our aggression turns to us with a blessing.

In many places Kitcher draws attention to another aspect of the aesthetic vindication of our lives, and one that is not, in my view, sufficiently attended to. The sense of meaning is delivered by a great work of art as part of a process. Something is put before us and gradually worked out, so that the ending is experienced as the conclusion and resolution of something. This is why the coda to Mann's story and the *Abschied Lied* of the Mahler affect us so profoundly. They are the *answer* to what precedes them, the resolution of the given *problem*. We move in sympathy, so as both to share the affirmation that these works express, and to feel that affirmation as a necessity, as contained within the very experience of loss. This, surely, is where the value of art lies. Only in the aesthetic experience can we be led in this way to feel from within that our losses are also gains, and that life in its tragic aspect is its own consolation. We come away from the work of art with the sense that something has been resolved by it, and that resolution has been bestowed on us as an enduring treasure. That is surely how we hear those great wrestlings with death in the late Schubert quartets, or the working through from loneliness to praise in the late quartets of Beethoven.

Kitcher's study is a fascinating and painstaking account of some of the greatest works of art produced in modern times, and a rare example of an accomplished analytical philosopher applying his argumentative powers to the most elusive aspects of the inner life. The questions with which the book deals are of the greatest importance for aesthetics, and even if the answers are not entirely satisfactory, they are a real contribution to clarity, in an area where clarity is rarely found.

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NOTES

[1] I use numerals in parentheses to refer to the page numbers in Philip Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice. The Cases of Gustav von Aschenbach*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

RESUMEN

El arte, de acuerdo con Kitcher, puede presentar la vida individual como parte de un 'complejo sintético' y, ligando nuestras experiencias a su contexto más amplio, puede mostrar de distintas maneras artísticas que la 'finitud no es un obstáculo para el valor'. Por mi parte, sugiero que mientras que el valor de la vida podría ser inseparable de su finitud, el papel del arte en nuestra reconciliación con esta está más cerca del de la religión de lo que Kitcher admite. La presentación artística del momento intenso es comparable a una bendición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *valor, arte, religión, redención*.

ABSTRACT

Art according to Kitcher can present the individual life as part of a 'synthetic complex', and, by linking our experiences to their wider context, show in distinctly artistic ways, that 'finitude is no obstacle to value'. I suggest that, while the value of life might be inseparable from its finitude, the role of art in reconciling us to this is closer to that of religion than Kitcher admits. The artistic presentation of the intense moment is to be compared to a blessing.

KEYWORDS: *Value, Art, Religion, Redemption*.