

teorema

Vol. XXXV/2, 2016, pp. 125-140

ISSN: 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2016) 35:2; pp. 125-140]

Philosophy by Showing: On Philip Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice: The Cases of Gustav von Aschenbach*

Jesús Vega-Encabo

I. INTRODUCTION

Philip Kitcher's book *Deaths in Venice: The cases of Gustav von Aschenbach* clearly exemplifies the work of a "liaison officer" that assembles new constellations of ideas, imaginings and emotions in synthetic complexes of philosophical significance. Subtle, detailed, careful remarks and reflections on what makes life worth living provide new insights into the philosophical question on the source of value. Kitcher's book undertakes the defense of the classical Socratic ideal of a life examined reflectively by scrutinizing a character, Gustav von Aschenbach, variously incarnated in Mann's novella, Britten's opera and Visconti's film *Death in Venice*. Despite our finitude, the ephemeral and incomplete nature of our strivings and accomplishments, value grows out of creating connections with what "endures beyond the individual self" (186)¹ coupled with a variable, but surely high, "standard of reflective stability" (187).

The book is built on at least three levels of discussion: it provides a meta-philosophical debate that seeks to exemplify a way of doing philosophy that contrasts with more traditional analytically-driven methods; it raises interesting questions in moral psychology through a nuanced description of Gustav von Aschenbach's character; and finally it engages in substantive philosophy by proposing a source of value for our lives. My comments will focus on these three levels, although, the meta-philosophical one will occupy most of my attention.

II. SHOWING

Mann's novella and its adaptations to opera and film *do* philosophy. This is the most radical way of presenting the meta-philosophical point

in Kitcher's book. Literature, music and other arts like film² could be considered "as philosophical explorations in their own right" (10). It is not just a question of philosophical significance, but of philosophy *done* in a particular way. Kitcher distinguishes three levels of philosophical involvement in artistic works: 1) the first one proceeds by enriching texts or music or film through the use of philosophical references or allusions; 2) the second one works by taking over and applying philosophically substantive ideas; 3) at the third level, a fictional work is used for the exploration of philosophical questions (11). Kitcher is convinced that *Death in Venice* explores the oldest philosophical question "how to live" at this third level and seeks an intermediate position that delineates a possible solution to the impasse in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's philosophies on the issue of what makes life worth living.

Kitcher seems to side with those who have defended the possibility of literature or film *as* philosophy. The thesis, nonetheless, is far from being clearly delineated in Kitcher's book. It fluctuates between two different readings:

- i) a strong one: Mann himself *does* philosophy with his fiction; and
- ii) a weak one: Mann's novella can be *legitimately* read in philosophical terms under the guide of adequate *criticism*.

Kitcher provides a wonderful work of philosophical criticism that, at the same time, seems to be grounded on the fact that *Death in Venice* makes by itself a philosophical contribution that *needs* to be spelled out in detail. One way of reconciling both strands would be to claim that the novella (and some of its adaptations) *unreflectively* raises philosophical questions and provides possible responses. But Kitcher seems to want more than that. He insists that the novella "can stand as an original piece of philosophy" (51) and Mann "emerge as an original philosopher" (52). If this is true, philosophical issues cannot simply be viewed as grains of truth that are not sufficiently explicit in the novel. I have to say that for many reasons I am not sympathetic to certain readings of the slogan *literature (or music, or film) as philosophy*. They exaggerate the legitimacy of an adequate criticism whose aim should consist in being sensitive to the philosophical *significance* of many cultural works. But this won't be the focus of my comments. I am interested in *how* literature (or music or film) can manage to do philosophy, if they do, or better in how the philosophical critic manages to do philosophy based on the alleged contributions of litera-

ture (or music or film). And Kitcher has an intriguing meta-philosophical response to this: they do it *by showing*.

Mann's novella does philosophy by showing, as many other musical or literary works do:

Wagner and Joyce do not argue. They do not even present precisely articulated theses about the worth and value of human lives. Nevertheless, they do philosophy, *real* philosophy that can lead listeners and readers to improved perspectives on a (if not the) central philosophical question. The philosophy lies in the showing. Instead of a rigorously connected sequence of clear and precise declarative sentences, we are offered with a rich delineation of possibilities –accompanied by a tacit injunction: Consider this (23).

The contrast implicit in this quote seems straightforward. Literary and musical works do not paradigmatically state theses or provide clear cut arguments for them; they seem to do philosophy by the gesture of pointing to a possibility that they have contributed to delineating. If traditional philosophy is done through assertive speech acts (and declarative sentences), philosophy by showing seems to be preferably done by a sort of directive speech acts that give an orientation to our gaze: “Look *at this*”. They do philosophy by displaying before our mind's eyes (or even our bodily eyes) a possible situation that deserves our attention. They show it and *guide* our gaze in a particular way towards it. I would say that this has been part of philosophical practice from the beginning. An assorted set of rhetorical devices has been multiply used in philosophical literature; it is nevertheless hard to sort out which ones contribute to showing versus saying or stating. So my contention is that Kitcher is not explicit enough in his book about what is distinctive about the practice of doing philosophy by showing, in particular through literature, music or film. My aim in what follows is to make some suggestions that may contribute to showing how problematic this idea can be. In any case, none of them helps to justify that there is a distinctive practice of doing philosophy through narratives or artistic works.

One way of spelling out what philosophy by showing is could be to appeal to a distinction that Kitcher takes from Wittgenstein. Philosophy could be done by saying and by showing. “I draw the distinction from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*”, he adds in a footnote (200). Unfortunately, the reference is not very illuminating. Wittgensteinian musings on philosophy are quite diverse and hard to summarize. It is commonly accepted

that Wittgenstein rejects a way of doing philosophy by stating theses and providing clear-cut arguments. There is no prospect of formulating a philosophical doctrine. For Wittgenstein, the more advisable move in philosophy is to give up on the idea of a corpus of substantial truths that claim the status of a *sui generis* sort of knowledge. But the Tractarian saying/showing distinction is not particularly relevant regarding this.

Commentators are far from agreeing on a reading of the distinction in the *Tractatus*. Neither is it clear what Kitcher has in mind when he appeals to it. There is a certain consensus, nevertheless, that the contrast raises a question about *the inexpressible*. According to one possible reading, we show those thoughts that cannot be said. There are thoughts that we can grasp but not say or express in language. At some points, Kitcher seems to hold something similar about Mahler's music in *Das Lied von der Erde*. Verbal translation is not only hard, "it ought to be resisted. Instead, we should allow the music to show what cannot be directly stated" (171). As if truths revealed by music could not be grasped otherwise. One possible reading is then that there is in Wittgenstein a commitment to substantial nonsense, that is, truths that can be grasped but not expressed or said; they can be just shown. This does not seem to fully correspond to what Kitcher has in mind, because his book is a constant effort to give voice to philosophical thoughts and insights that are part of what makes sense. So some other reading must be possible. In a recent paper on the inexpressible in Wittgenstein's philosophy, Juliet Floyd identifies a fundamental divide among interpreters of Wittgenstein's philosophy: on the one hand, we find those that insist on the expressive limitations of language; on the other hand, those that stress his criticism of the desire for arguments, a desire that hides "the variety, and the irreducible complexity of human powers of expression" [Floyd (2007), p. 177]. She immediately adds: "The former kind of reader sees the inexpressible as a limitation, a reflection of what is illegitimate in grammar or fails to be epistemically justifiable; the latter sees the inexpressible as a fiction, an illusion produced by an overly simplified conception of human expression." [Ibid. p. 177]. Wittgenstein's injunction was not to restrict our capacities of expression by establishing the limits of language. He seems open to explore new modes of human expressiveness that include *philosophical expressiveness*.

Much can be learnt from this move. Different ways of doing philosophy can take advantage of the diversity, richness and potentialities of expression. No doubt, Stanley Cavell has encouraged us to view Wittgenstein's philosophy, from its very prose, as determined by the different rela-

tions to expressiveness. Philosophy seems to struggle to build a perspective that hardly gets to be expressed, to give voice to what otherwise would remain untellable. This fight against the conditions of expression is substantial to philosophy itself. To a certain extent, stating theses could then be viewed as the exercise of an arrogant voice. Talking about *showing* could just be a way of insisting on the diversity of expressive modes in philosophy, of styles and, more importantly, of authorized voices in philosophy.

I am then suggesting that a first way to spell out the idea of doing philosophy by showing is by characterizing the modes of expression that can be used for the philosophical exposition of *thoughts*. This, in turn, could be understood in different ways. I like to use the contrast that S. Langer has introduced between discursive and presentational forms in his fascinating book on symbolism, *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* [Langer (1956)]. One could apply this to philosophy and argue that it is not exclusively done through discursive forms. Langer requires us to abandon two basic assumptions: “(1) That *language is the only means of articulating thought*, and (2) That *everything which is not speakable thought, is feeling*” [Langer (1956), p. 87]. This could be of help to Kitcher in elucidating what “showing” means. Philosophy is not done exclusively through discursive forms; it can legitimately use other forms of expression. But this by itself does not justify a strong contrast between ways of doing philosophy³, only between modes of expression.

This should not make us forget the limitations that may constrain every expression of philosophical ideas through presentations (if the later are appropriate means of exposing them). First, their lack of *intrinsic* generality. If the paradigm of this sort of non-discursive symbolism is visual displays, then –except through a process of schematization– these just deliver the particularities of individuals in simultaneous⁴ and integral presentations. At least, they cannot convey generality in a *direct way*. This does not mean that some *general* ideas could not be “perceived” or grasped through presentations, at least in the sense that significant aspects of a situation are revealed through an image. Of course, the other way to proceed is by renouncing the idea that the way philosophy contributes to illumination and understanding should be constrained by this requirement of generality. I will say something on this later. There is a second important limitation of this use of presentations for our purposes:⁵ it has to do with the fact that they are just fitted to some contents and not others. In itself, this should not be a problem. Some contents, some thoughts, of particular philosophical interest, are more suitable to a practice of showing. Maybe that’s true. It is beyond my purpose to be

more specific about concrete meta-philosophical issues. The crucial thing is that *showing* does not correspond in a distinctive way to narratives, fiction or other artistic works as such.

Let me introduce a second contrast that could help us understand what showing means in Kitcher's philosophical practice. I acknowledge from the beginning that this contrast is far from Kitcher's concerns, but – I think – it reveals some ambiguities in the very idea of philosophy by showing. In narrative theory, a certain American school has introduced a contrast between telling and showing in narration [Booth (1983)]. It is a distinction closely related to the Platonic distinction between *diegesis* and *mimesis*, and points to different modes of rendering the events and words in narration. By showing, the narrator does not intrude in what is narrated or tell us what to think or how to view the events. By not rearranging the story, a narration expresses a certain truth by showing and not telling. Gérard Genette (2007) sees *diegesis* as a tale whose style is characterized by the features of “indirection” and “condensation”, where the narrator intervenes and creates a distance to the events and condenses the story into a few decisive elements. This style contrasts with more mimetic renderings in which the narrator provides us with a detailed, precise and “living” presentation of events and words and at the same time creates distance from them. In a sense, every story can be told or shown.

True enough, it would be rash to project this distinction into the saying/showing contrast that Kitcher is suggesting. It would be extremely difficult to identify a particular style of philosophizing by telling as contrasted with a style that works by showing. Nevertheless, one should not forget that when Kitcher presents the different ways philosophy can be part of the literary work he condemns (in the very same sense, I think, that a certain school of critics had condemned a “telling” style) texts that *tell* philosophy, that are explicit about the debates and the details of philosophical arguments. Narratives that are dominated by abstract argumentation are typically dead. In narratives, philosophical exploration should not be translated as philosophical discourse; it has to be “organically integrated” in it. But it seems clear to me that this does not help much to characterize philosophy by showing. Kitcher explicitly claims: “I want to focus on a different category of philosophical fiction, one that comprises works in which philosophical explorations are organically integrated with the narrative, with the evocation and development of character, and with the literary style” (12). I have trouble identifying the conditions of “organical integration” of philosophical themes within a narrative. Particularly, if the issues should not be told or explicated, may-

be, by a *philosophical voice*, by a sort of *narrator* that adopts a philosophical point of view and “talks” with the voice of authority. Kitcher indicates that this kind of voice appears in Mann’s narratives, but that this only provides a sort of “philosophical summary”. What a novella like *Death in Venice* really shows requires adopting a particular “ironic distance”. Philosophy by showing in the novella goes beyond the philosophical ruminations of a mediating philosophical voice that *tells* us what to think. The question is then: is there a philosophical voice that teaches us how to achieve philosophical illumination through the novel? Is it Mann who takes distance and shows us what the case of Aschenbach actually teaches us? Or is it the philosopher-critic who does it? If it is Mann who philosophizes by showing (and attains the third level of philosophical involvement), this distance is revealed through the novella and enables Mann (or the implicit author of the literary work, if this notion makes any sense) to *endorse* different philosophical perspectives and ideas. It is true that this is not *said*, or *told*, but it is difficult to see how it has been *shown*, meaning *philosophically shown*. Remember it is not the critic that is supposed primarily to show; the role of the critic is just to *make more evident* what is actually shown in the work.

Dare I adventure a third reading of this contrast, in which philosophy by saying is just a traditional philosophical argumentation for-or-against theses and where philosophy by showing amounts to a sort of learning by examples? Current analytical philosophy has been criticized (by Kitcher himself) for tailoring examples and counter-examples that seem artificial, cut off from real life and concerns. It is obvious that film, literature or music can provide more lively, rich and detailed exemplifications of philosophical ideas. This drives philosophy back to the *particular* in the sense that one could claim that every work of philosophical criticism must give primacy to the particular over abstract and general considerations, especially when one considers questions on how to live. Only prejudice can support a thorough rejection of this involvement with particularity in philosophical reflection. The style of philosophy by showing that Kitcher promotes encourages overcoming this prejudice and acknowledges a certain need of having a new relation to examples. In fact, philosophy by showing should not just be understood as insisting on exemplification but primarily as requiring a transformation in the way examples illuminate ideas. That is: a kind of contribution to making concepts more precise or even helping to identify unseen aspects of a problem as well as giving new insights that call for understanding. Narratives, musical works, images of any kind, could in certain circumstances be le-

gitimately viewed as *philosophical examples* whose main role is not arguing for a particular thesis or state a universal truth, but *showing* through the display of concrete circumstances and characters ideas of philosophical significance.

Kitcher could appeal to any of these suggestions to substantiate a proposal about what philosophy by showing consists in. Neither of them are clearly applicable to narratives or, in this case, to Mann's novella. And above all, I do not see that an emphasis on the need of being open to different ways of expression, to a style that promotes indirectness/condensation, or to particularity and rich and lively exemplification creates a *distinctive* way of doing philosophy, distinctive in a way that could be extended to other intellectual and artistic achievements. "Showing" is elusive as a procedure, as we have seen. And nothing permits us to suppose that one can aim at philosophizing by avoiding the statement (saying) of what one is disposed to endorse. Maybe non-philosophical works, such as Mann's *Death in Venice*, are open to more indeterminacy and ambiguity in the way they elaborate human experience than philosophical reflection allows. It is true that some of them, and this is the case with the novella, exhibit a deep and challenging philosophical significance, but they do not engage in a different and distinctive way of doing philosophy.

I think that Kitcher's meta-philosophical ideas have more import when they focus on the role of the philosopher-critic or the Deweyan liaison officer that makes "reciprocally intelligible voices speaking provincial tongues" (25). Now this critic, who has to justify when and how *philosophical* criticism is adequate (and Kitcher clearly does it for *Death in Venice*), needs to go beyond whatever showing means. Sure, she has to attend to particularities, to the variety and richness of our experience, and she has to appeal to our imagination and emotions besides argument, if she wants to contribute to the formation of what Kitcher calls "synthetic complexes" with the maximum degree of reflective stability. Maybe, what is at stake, is what we understand at the end of the day by reflection and which elements should integrate (rational) deliberation and philosophical discussion. On this, I will go along with Kitcher. We should promote a new sort of philosophical criticism.

What is the role of the critic? Romanticism had proposed art criticism as a procedure that crowns by its reflections an artistic work that would otherwise remain incomplete. Criticism was a way of bringing to light the truth contained in artistic works. The critic goes beyond performing an evaluative judgment and contributes to culminating the essence of artistic works by explanation and understanding. Of course, we

should reject such a categorical predicament. But the critic, and particularly, the philosophical critic has a crucial role to play at the core of the public arena. I think that I essentially agree on this aspect of Kitcher's meta-philosophical conception that I assume was inspired by John Dewey. If there is something valuable in our struggle for views and pictures that aspire to reflective stability, then philosophy could contribute as a reflective response to our individual and collective elaboration of experience. Dewey used to say that philosophy has also to be subject to the test of experience; there it will show its real value. But this test does not consist in a mechanical application of ideas from here and there; it proceeds through elaboration and enrichment at a certain level of generality and in continuity with other forms of elaboration, scientific or artistic. From this point of view, Kitcher's *Deaths in Venice* is a major contribution to philosophical criticism and an unbeatable philosophical test.

III. ASCHENBACH'S CHARACTER

In his book, Kitcher holds that there is something particularly *philosophical* in Mann's novella. This shows itself in the way Aschenbach's character is depicted in a situation that is "radically simplified" (37). Mann's examination does not focus on "species and genera of human lives" (36), as Nietzsche could have done in his philosophy. But nevertheless a particular life is presented in such a way that even if it is not a "generic subject", Aschenbach's character "is defined in ways that avoid potential complications. Aschenbach is detached from many of the conditions of human life" (37). That makes him suitable as a philosophical character. Kitcher dares to call him a "philosophical abstraction" (188).

Philosophy is usually thought to be concerned with claims of generality, though it is not easy to substantiate what philosophical generality means, especially when one faces issues of practical philosophy. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle pointed out that some issues relative to our discourse on actions should be treated in a schematic way and not with precision (τύπῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀκριβῶς, 1104a1). He meant by this that we cannot treat them scientifically; nevertheless, there should be some generality in our explanations about how we act or should act. This generality is couched in *types*, in *schemes*, maybe in *models* of action incarnated by paradigmatic figures and characters. Aschenbach could be regarded as one of the paradigms of what a conception of a valuable human life is, a

schematic character, simplified in his essential traits and treated as a sort of *ideal type*. But is it so?

Literature makes vivid life; it elaborates life itself. Characters could be more or less typified, more or less like stereotypes. But this does not make them *abstractions* and I find it difficult to grasp in what sense Aschenbach might be a *philosophical character*, even if it were schematically treated in the novella (something I do not think happens). First, Aschenbach does not seem to be “detached from many of the conditions of human life”. He lives a particular human life, in isolation, devoted to his writing. We can see in him a representative of an ascetic model of life, but also a man that attempts to conform to concrete human ideals, maybe *too human* ideals. It is easy to imagine his ordinary life; details are given to us of a *complete* life, with its routines and its strivings and sufferings. Becoming “a socially isolated subject” does not make Aschenbach an idealized/abstract type; it is a common human reality that the writer has adopted for itself. It is part of *his* way of life, not a strategy to render some philosophical ideas more vivid.

Maybe Aschenbach as a philosophical character should be understood otherwise. One way is by taking seriously the comparison with the Socrates of many Platonic dialogues, in particular the *Symposium*. In its last discourse, after the initiatory journey through the realm of Forms that Socrates has undertaken guided by Diotima, the dialogue ends its multiple praise of love by incarnating it in Socrates as a paradigm of virtue. Socrates is the *image* of virtue itself, a human reality transformed by the vision of the Forms or, at least, someone that embodies the ideals of an examined life. Aschenbach would share with Socrates some of the traits that make him a philosophical character: first, as the novella insists on, Aschenbach carefully analyzes his own feelings and thoughts, he constantly attends to his reasons and passions; second, he attempts to conform to the ideals that shape his self-conception as an artist-*Erzieher*, a moral educator; third, the key to his character is a combination of rigorous discipline and search for beauty and purity of form that requires from him self-control and a constant will.

Mann’s novella could be viewed as an analysis of the moral psychology of Aschenbach’s character. There is an image he wants to conform to. Moreover, it seems to be an image, a self-conception that complies with the requirements of reflective stability of an examined life. It is true that his *moral* world answers, first of all, to the values and ideals of a *good* society, to the conventional morality of his time, and, in particular, to the values of a bourgeois society and high culture. Nonetheless,

these values are genuinely examined and endorsed through a life of restraint and endurance, in which as I have just said he expects to articulate discipline and self-control together with the praise of beauty and form. This articulation is nonetheless instable, prone to manifesting its deep tensions. Mann's novella tells us about an episode, the last and most revealing one, in Aschenbach's life, where the self-adopted stability of his character is deeply undercut. Kitcher's question is how deep this episode *permeates* Aschenbach's character and life. What does the episode *reveal* about his character, about how he *adequately* answers his own drives, urges and impulses?

Kitcher urges us not to hasten to a conclusion about the stability of such a character and about the *value* we attach to it as a life worth living. A reader of *Death in Venice* initially gets the impression that Aschenbach has suffered from a serious moral lapse, but also that this is not purely accidental, that it is the outcome of a life that has not adequately *acknowledged* certain impulses and drives. In this sense, the last moments in Aschenbach's life reveal something particularly important about him; they are not just incidental and inconsequential. Kitcher puts it in terms of *failure* and the question becomes what sort of failure it is, if it is one. Is it the failure of a certain ideal of the disciplined life, such that *it is deprived of any worth?* Kitcher resists this conclusion. In fact, once we discover that nothing in this *episode* undercuts the reflective stability of Aschenbach's self-conception, we are able to grasp what gets to be philosophically *shown* in Mann's novella because he *exemplifies* it. That's the point of making Aschenbach a philosophical figure.

At first sight, Aschenbach's own judgement about himself is harsh. Failure comes from the impossibility for a poet to avoid the abyss. The anti-Socratic musings that close the novella, just before the coda, are easily understood as an acknowledgement (maybe it is significant that it is presented as part of the logic of dreams) that the life of the artist-*Erzieher* is doomed to become a farce. The ideal itself does not seem coherent; the disciplined life seems to lead inevitably to failure. Kitcher, and this is one of the crucial points in his reading of the book, draws our attention to the coda, where the quiet disciplined life returns and its value is, in a sense, vindicated. How could one *episode* affect a whole pattern of life? It is significant how Kitcher puts his point: in the coda, we are attending to "a return to his former self" (59). The episode, and the logic of the dream that dominates in it, is over and the accomplishments of his life through the acknowledgement of what he *really* is triumphs. His *whole* life

cannot be so profoundly disrupted by a single (and confined) episode. Endurance, perseverance, will prevail over this “minor deviation” (60).

One can say that Kitcher’s vindication of Aschenbach’s moral character is designed to uncover through legitimate criticism what Mann’s novella philosophically *shows*. The episode does not reveal the ultimate unruliness of the will, as Schopenhauer may claim; and neither does it bring to light the unavoidable failure of the ascetic ideal in a heroic attempt of self-affirmation, as the Nietzschean would contend. Aschenbach’s will finally recovers itself from its internal tear. Despite Aschenbach’s own verdict of failure, his moral psychology passes the test of reflection. In fact, he is in a position to *acknowledge* what has made his life worth living, the disciplined struggle to live according to an aesthetic ideal and a self-conception as moral educator. Kitcher assumes that, in a sense, Aschenbach had already “faced” the urges and drives that put into jeopardy the internal coherence of his character, and shaped them under the weight of a cultural complex of ideas he comes to participate in⁶. That goes with the recognition that any life is full of doubts and shadows, the fruit of our finitude.

My point is that, even if we agree with Kitcher that Aschenbach’s own judgement is hasty, his character does not particularly *show* or *exemplify* philosophical ideas. As I have said at the beginning of this section, it is difficult, if not strange, to regard Aschenbach as a philosophical *abstraction* or even an idealization or simplification of a model of life. But what is most important, I don’t think that his life needs to be viewed as being governed by the set of philosophical ideas that intelligent criticism could help to uncover. In fact, the core ideas that we can draw from a vindication that insists on the incidental and episodic nature of Aschenbach’s moral lapse are far from addressing the real philosophical challenges that Kitcher identifies in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The moral of the book is easily put: regarding a *whole* life, accomplishment or failure are necessarily imperfect and partial. As any other *human* life, Aschenbach’s reveals this fate. The true question is how deep our common experience of the disturbance of our will is rooted in reality; maybe it is so deep that it prevents us from *sharing* a world of values. That’s why I find it suspicious, first, to address Schopenhauer’s concerns about the disruptive character of the Will in non-metaphysical terms. There is no obvious threat to the loss of value in Aschenbach’s life, because only a conclusion at the metaphysical level about the eternal struggle and suffering of beings that are governed by the blind Will could generate a real skepticism about the stability of a character, and only a conception posed in the very same terms could answer to such concerns.

In my view, Aschenbach's character is fascinating not because it exemplifies, as a paradigm of virtue, a way of life that incarnates a true perception of value (goodness and beauty) in a world of finitude and transience, or because he incarnates a philosophical ideal or gives life to a set of philosophical ideas. Kitcher is right that the coda encourages the critic to go beyond the harsh voice of the moralizing narrator or the voice we can attribute to Aschenbach himself⁷. But this means that the whole episode is not incidental and that it is full of reverberations. Remember: the tensions provoked by his collapse and daydreams have not fully disappeared at the end. On the contrary, Aschenbach feels distress and anxiety. And it is not daily discipline that is restored either. The scene of the coda represents a last moment of surrender, but this time, maybe, accompanied by an attitude of acknowledgement and renouncement. It is *eros* the *psychagogue* that will finally lead him to a world of promises.

IV. THE NATURE AND SOURCE OF VALUES

The ambition of Kitcher's book is not just to provide a possible answer to the traditional question of "How to live" but also to argue for substantive philosophical theses about the nature and source of value. In the previous sections, I have tried to defend that Mann's novella is not a philosophical work that proceeds by showing and that Aschenbach is not a particularly philosophical character. Kitcher's argument tries to place Mann's philosophical contribution as a middle way between Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's responses to human finitude and the challenge of nihilism. It is not one of my purposes to engage in a debate of such wide scope and significance. To close, I will briefly suggest that Kitcher's proposal does not easily fit with the novel.

First, Kitcher argues that Aschenbach's attitude helps to show an overcoming of Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean attitudes, as "a mixture of affirmation and abnegation" (176). On many occasions in the book, he insists that Mann's way of addressing the philosophical challenge behind this tradition is by renouncing the dubious metaphysics that animates it. Maybe this is a sensible pathway to follow, but it could also reveal a lack of interest in the core (and base) of the philosophical positions that create the challenge. One can remove any metaphysical flavor from the idea of a disruptive Will and at this very moment the challenge loses its philosophical attractiveness. If disruptiveness is not a feature of the will and of any particular will, then worthlessness or the responses of

self-abnegation or selflessness do not have the same grip on us? Any solution that doesn't address the challenge in its own (metaphysical) terms lacks the same philosophical scope.

Value grows from a combination of two features: first, creating connections with "something that endures beyond the individual self" (186); second, engaging in a reflective activity that contributes to endorse them. In one of the last pages of the book, Kitcher gives a hint about some conditions that would suffice to generate value: "value is a matter of having enough of the right sort of impact on others..." (188) and it "lies in the relationship itself". Value is built through our bonds. Maybe terms are important here and for Kitcher "relationship" tries to capture a broader sense than "bond" has. Nevertheless, if the source of value lies in our bonds with others and in holding lasting links with what is beyond oneself, it is not clear to me that Mann's novella would positively endorse this conception of value. Remember that Kitcher himself insists that the *philosophical* genius of Thomas Mann lies in having simplified a situation and a character; Aschenbach has been deprived of any human and social relations. His bonds are in the dark for us. He keeps himself in the distance, retired from any *personal* engagement. In moral terms, he remains attached to conventional, bourgeois morality.

I think this suggests some alternative readings of the novel. I agree with Kitcher that the coda, and how Aschenbach seems to accept his own finite condition and death and the kind of life he has lived, with its accomplishments and failures, redeems him from his moral lapse. Probably, Kitcher is right and Aschenbach accepts the connection with the infinity of nature guided by Tadzio, his own bearer of souls, and the dissolution into non-individuality, into non-existence. But his attitude remains the same, an attitude that Visconti manages to imprint in his film: Aschenbach combines the delectation of distanced contemplation and the impossible entanglement of bodies through mutual gazing. When cut off from any real bond, value is just aesthetical. He strives for this moment in which beauty could be reached and maybe fixed in an image.

*Departamento de Lingüística General, Lenguas Modernas, Lógica y
Filosofía de la ciencia, Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura comparada
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
28049 Cantoblanco, Madrid
E-mail: jesus.vega@uam.es*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper has been written under the framework of two research grants awarded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2013-45659-R; FFI2014-55256-REDT). I would like to thank Josep Corbi and Fernando Broncano for helpful comments on my text and interesting discussions about the novel.

NOTES

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

² In no place in the book is film included among the arts that can make philosophical contributions. Film is not treated at the level of literature and music by Kitcher.

³ Showing is here related to the way a *picture* does not say but shows its object. There is then another possible contrast: the one contained in the language/image dichotomy, in the sense that paradigmatically language signifies and images show. Something like that lies behind the distinction Langer proposes. But I think that the more general term *presentations* is more adequate to state what is involved here, especially if we want to include *music* among the forms that contribute to showing.

⁴ Obviously, the crucial thing is integration and this can also be understood temporally.

⁵ Langer obviously mentions other limitations, but they are not our concern now.

⁶ I mean the ideals of erotic aestheticism that replace the disordered sexual impulse by a serene and restrained contemplation of beauty.

⁷ In the novella, one sometimes gets the impression that the moralizing narrator is giving voice to the core of Aschenbach's self-conception, the one he identifies with, and that gathers the values and ideas of a conventional bourgeois society that can hardly accommodate the pursuit of beauty and the erotic impulse that goes with it. It is as if this inner impulse could not be disciplined, as Aschenbach has tried to do, even less through the lens of the complex of cultural values that mainly contribute to cover it up.

REFERENCES

- BOOTH, W. (1983), *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
- FLOYD, J. (2007), "Wittgenstein and the Inexpressible", in A. Crary (ed.), *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life. Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, pp. 177-234.
- GENETTE, G. (2007), *Discours du récit*, Paris, Seuil.

- KITCHER, P. (2013), *Deaths in Venice*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- LANGER, S. (1956), *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press.

RESUMEN

En su libro *Deaths in Venice*, Philip Kitcher sostiene que la novela de Mann (i) hace filosofía no mediante el establecimiento de tesis y argumentando a su favor sino mediante mostración; (ii) presenta a un personaje especialmente filosófico (Gustav von Aschenbach); y (iii) aboga por una concepción original sobre la fuente del valor. En este artículo defiendo que ninguna de estas afirmaciones está suficientemente apoyada por la obra de Mann. Sin duda, la novela puede ser leída filosóficamente de modo legítimo y uno puede insistir en su significación filosófica, pero es difícil ver cómo hace filosofía mediante mostración, pinta un personaje filosófico o propone nuevas respuestas al enigma filosófico sobre la fuente del valor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *filosofía, mostrar/decir, crítica, carácter, valor, disciplina.*

ABSTRACT

In his book *Deaths in Venice*, Philip Kitcher holds that Mann's novella (i) does philosophy not by stating theses and arguing for them but by showing, (ii) presents a particular philosophical character (Gustav von Aschenbach); and (iii) defends an original philosophical conception on the source of value. In this paper, I contend that neither of these claims is sufficiently grounded in Mann's work. No doubt, the novella can be legitimately read in philosophical terms and one can insist on its philosophical significance, but it is hard to see how it crucially does philosophy by showing or that it depicts a philosophical character or proposes new answers to the philosophical riddle about the source of value.

KEYWORDS: *Philosophy, Show/Say Distinction, Criticism, Character, Value, Discipline.*