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Gustav von Aschenbach's Inner Impulse and the Value of His Life

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Deaths in Venice constitutes an exercise in philosophical criticism, as Philip Kitcher understands it:

On the one hand lie the abstract treatments of philosophy, the catalogue of Aristotle's *Ethics*, or the challenge posed by Schopenhauer. On the other is the rich variety of literary, musical, artistic resources. Philosophical criticism consists in bringing them into relation with one another, of showing how the elaborated presentations of a novel or an opera bear on the problems and schematic answers of philosophical treatises (25)¹.

In this passage, Kitcher assumes that philosophical treatises determine what counts as a philosophical issue and claims that philosophical criticism seeks to elucidate the bearing that a certain work of art may have on one or another such issue. His book focuses on the latter kind of undertaking; more specifically, Kitcher deftly explores the bearing that *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann – and, derivatively, Benjamin Britten's and Luchino Visconti's homonymous productions – may have on “the oldest and deepest question of philosophy: *how to live*” (17; my emphasis).

In this comment, I will distinguish two ways in which this question can be interpreted. On one reading, it amounts to the question ‘how to lead a valuable or worthy life?’, whereas on the other it involves a more elusive – and, in my view, more fruitful – idea, namely, that a person may breath and walk and still be dead in a relevant sense, that is, from a perspective in which being alive does not reduce to biological survival. In my view, Kitcher's reflection on Mann's novella relies on the first, more standard reading, both when he dwells on the question as to whether the protagonist's final surrender to the lure of beauty diminishes or nullifies the value of his otherwise successfully disciplined life, and when he seeks

for an alternative source of meaning in the last paragraphs of *Death in Venice*. I will argue, though, that the being-alive interpretation sheds a more unified light on *Death in Venice*; in fact, I will conclude that the need to shift from one to another interpretation constitutes a fundamental concern in the novella.

I. A VALUABLE LIFE

‘How to live?’ is the question that, according to Kitcher, Mann addresses in *Death in Venice*:

Death in Venice is not focused on some particular question about moral obligation or social justice. Rather, it is concerned with the oldest and deepest question of philosophy... how to live (17).

Quite inadvertently, Kitcher interprets this question as equivalent to the question about the conditions under which a human life can be valuable or worthwhile:

A concern with the question whether and how lives can be worthwhile pervades Mann’s early writings, subsuming his reflections on the apparent conflict between artist and citizen, his examinations of the predicaments of outsiders (24; see 22)

Thus, Kitcher’s major interpretative concern lies precisely in whether Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist, has led a worthwhile life and, more specifically, whether his life is finally affirmed as such in Mann’s novella. Aschenbach led a disciplined life whose achievements were acclaimed by his fellow citizens and rewarded with all sorts of honours, including a title of nobility and the inclusion of some pages of his in the official textbooks. And, yet, by the end of his life, he travels to Venice, falls in love with Tadzio and indulges in a kind of behaviour that is apparently disreputable from the viewpoint of the principles that had guided his life that far. The oldest philosophical question takes then a rather concrete shape in Aschenbach’s case, namely, how a problematic ending affects the value of his life as a whole:

Does the fact of a problematic ending necessarily invalidate the shape or nullify the worth of a human life? In what ways has Aschenbach actually

failed, and in what precisely his failure consist? What alternative, if any, is revealed in Venice to disclose the inadequacy of the values by which he has lived? (53; see 55)

Kitcher initially discards two customary answers to these questions. On the one hand, there is a rather moralistic answer according to which Aschenbach finally emerges as a 'whited sepulchre' and his life as a complete failure. From this perspective, what the final events reveal is how bleak and immoral his life had been all the way through and the value of his previous achievements and recognitions is, as a result, nullified or at least severely diminished.² From a less moralistic approach, those events will instead be perceived as a manifestation of the harm that society can inflict upon its members, that is, how our lives can be deformed under the pressure of some rigid social constraints:

... The novella can be read... as a depiction of the deformation of a once-vulnerable youth who has been compelled, throughout his life, to confine and deny central elements in his character (63; see 62).

This reading favours the idea that Aschenbach's life was wasted insofar as the demands of severe discipline prevented him from fulfilling his most fundamental needs in any reasonable manner. Kitcher wants, however, to depart from this pessimistic conclusion and claim that Aschenbach's life was worthwhile after all, that it was *a life of achievement despite his ending and also because of it*. But how does Kitcher motivate his view? He attributes to the less moralistic reading the assumption that there are drives or needs fully formed independently of one's upbringing in one or another particular social environment. He objects, however, that even a person's sexual drives are shaped and transformed by the social and cultural environment where she has been raised, the projects she has engaged in and the aspirations she has been inspired by:

Aschenbach may be confined by the society to which he belongs, but his complex sexuality is also shaped by it... We should reject the idea of some 'core identity' in Mann or in Aschenbach, a biologically fixed drive that continues to yearn for complete sexual intercourse... (93).

We must, then, reject the idea of a biologically fixed drive or a pre-formed self whose needs must find appropriate expression and satisfaction in a person's life. Kitcher concedes, however, that the rejection of

'the myth of the performed self' allows for the idea that a person's life could have been confined by her social environment and also that she might have been prey to self-deception or pretence:

Without lapsing into the myth of the preformed self, the idea that the social environment has confined a person retains its sense... To claim, as I have done, that a particular form of sexual identity, attributed to Aschenbach or to his creator, goes 'all the way down' allows for the possibility that the expression of that identity, in some episode of attraction or infatuation, might involve self-deception or pretense (93).

A person's life will thus be deformed insofar as her needs have not been sufficiently met or satisfied, and this holds even in the absence of a preformed self. In this respect, Kitcher's view sounds very close to Bernard Williams' in *Truth and Truthfulness*, where he presents a person's acknowledgement of her national or religious identity as placed between discovery and decision:

A relevant notion here is acknowledgement. Someone may come to acknowledge a certain affiliation as an identity, and this is neither a mere discovery nor, certainly, a mere decision. It is as though he were forced to recognize the authority of this identity as giving a structure and a focus to his life and his outlook [Williams (2002), p. 203].

In general, Williams argues that a person's commitment to her ground projects is subject to wishful thinking and fantasy or, in other words, that we must make room for the idea of a resistance on the side of the agent's psychological condition, so that her capacity to be faithful to a certain project may be severely hindered or even undermined:

.... Acknowledgement is more than mere factual discovery, while at the same time the sense that there is discovery involved is related to the need to resist fantasy in making sense of my beliefs and allegiances in this way [Williams (2002), p. 204].

This sort of resistance does not presuppose, as we have seen, a preformed self whose demands could be identified independently of a person's ability to engage in one or another project. It follows that a general argument against the idea of a preformed self does not really call into question the fundamental claim in the less moralistic interpretation, namely: that the point of *Death in Venice* is to show how Aschenbach's

life was deformed by the demands that his ancestors (and, in general, society) placed upon him. A more specific argument needs to be developed to challenge the less moralistic view; as I see it, Kitcher's argument to this purpose divides into two steps: firstly, he argues that Aschenbach's life was worth-living *despite* his ending whereas, as at a second stage, he vindicates the value of Aschenbach's life *because* of its resolution.

Regarding the first step in the argument, Kitcher stresses that Aschenbach's failure is not trivial because it derives from the risks involved in his determined and ambitious search for harmony between artist and citizen. A mistake of this nature enhances, rather than tarnishes, the value of Aschenbach's previous achievements, for it brings to the fore the difficulties and perils he was ready to confront. One could compare his case with that of an expert climber who, after conquering a number of remarkable summits, slips in the snow and falls into an abyss. She may have taken the necessary precautions, but some threats and dangers are constitutive of her life as a climber. There are situations where a minor mistake may be lethal. Would we be tempted, though, to deny her achievements as a climber were this fatal mistake to occur? Wouldn't we instead be inclined to regard this mistake as enhancing the value of her endeavour, given the risks we now realized she had voluntarily faced? Kitcher invites us to view Aschenbach's ending in a similar manner. He presents Aschenbach as engaged in a rather ambitious project that comes with its difficulties and temptations, namely, the pursuit of the Socratic ideal:

Higher beauty is most accessible in the human form, indeed in boys and young men. For, on the Platonic account, sensible manifestations of higher beauty should kindle love, love not simply directed at the object perceived but at the qualities it embodies. Erotic yearnings are bound up with the recognition of higher beauty, but the erotic response must be of a special sort, one that is not debased or corrupted (71).

Aschenbach assumed the dangers of approaching beauty in the hope that he could keep its lure under control, but at the end of this life the attraction of beauty prevails over his discipline (95). In his despair, Aschenbach may think that he has failed completely, but there is no need to endorse his view. Kitcher stresses, by contrast, that the author may have had an altogether different view, namely, that the achievements in Aschenbach's life can be vindicated *despite* his ending:

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 failures, readers need not accept his pessimistic verdict -- nor, for that matter, the judgment of the moralizing narrator. Even if the complete identification Tonio Kröger envisaged has eluded him, Aschenbach has come close. Perhaps his creator did, too (102; see 122).

There is, however, a further, more fundamental reason why Kitcher defends the value of Aschenbach's life: it is not only valuable despite its ending but *because* of it. This second step has to do with the final paragraphs in the novella. Kitcher quotes a letter where Mann confesses his difficulties to find the right end for *Death in Venice*. The difficulty could not lie, given the title, in whether Aschenbach will die, but in *how* he should die for his death to convey the right meaning. Chapter 3 in Kitcher's book is explicitly an attempt to make sense of this difficulty and, for this purpose, he highlights the shift in the narrative that comes after the scene in the fountain, where the novella could easily have ended with Aschenbach's fall into the abyss. And, yet, a coda is added, why was it required? What was it meant to communicate? To answer this question, Kitcher, following up on Visconti's suggestion, explores Mahler's symphonies and, in particular, *Das Lied von der Erde*. He claims that this work of art addresses the issue as to how to affirm one's life in a transient world. Kitcher concludes that such possibility requires a kind of acceptance that can be

... achieved by *finding a sense of connection*... Our lives can connect us to something larger than our individual selves -and that is enough to lend them worth (169; my emphasis).

This sense of connection is not foreign to our experience as readers of a novel or as listeners to a piece of music. Such experiences give rise to what Kitcher calls '*synthetic complexes*' that include a variety of radically disparate components:

... Memories of our own experiences, images of earlier perceptions or encounters with other works of art, judgments previously endorsed or rejected, emotions now excited by different objects, or even emotions now excited by different objects, or even emotions of types we have no previously felt (181).³

Kitcher interprets Aschenbach's fundamental project along these lines. His project as an educator was oriented towards reaching and conveying synthetic complexes that are inaccessible to most of us.⁴ But, most importantly, a particular version of the idea of synthetic complex, namely, the sense of connection that allows Mahler to accept the transitory and incomplete character of his achievements, is employed to interpret Aschenbach's final experience:

Resting his head on the back of his chair, he had slowly turned it to follow the movements of the walking figure in the distance; now he lifted it towards this last look, then it sank down on his breast, so that his eyes stared up from below, while his face wore the inert, deep-sunken expression of profound slumber. But to him it was as if the pale and lovely soul summoned out there were smiling to him, beckoning to him; as if he loosed his hand from his hip and pointed outwards, hovering ahead and onwards, into an immensity rich with unutterable expectation. And as so often, he set out follow him [Mann (1998) l. 5280].

Kitcher sees here a sense of connection that conveys Mann's final affirmation of the value of Aschenbach's life:

At the end of *Death of Venice*, Aschenbach can accept the end of his strivings. His heart, worn out by his years of steadfast discipline, of dutiful service, is taxed beyond its powers by the threat to what he has tried to apprehend and to express —beauty is almost overcome before him. Aware of his finitude, of his inability permanently to cherish and protect what has been most important to him, he can nonetheless recognize himself as *having lived and loved, as having struggled and created*. He can see himself as connected with the enduring world he must now leave. He is not deceived: the connection is affirmed in the novella's closing lines, in the shocked respect with which news of his death is greeted (176; my emphasis).

Aschenbach had certainly 'struggled and created', but I do not think Aschenbach recognizes himself 'as having lived and loved', not even that the narrator -or the creator- invites us to see his life this way. To motivate this claim, I will sketch an approach to Aschenbach's predicament that focuses on the inner impulse that led Aschenbach to travel abroad and whose connection with Aschenbach's passion for Tadzio Kitcher hardly explores. This will motivate a significant shift in the way the question 'how to live?' is to be interpreted. More specifically, I will argue that, once we approach the novella as an exploration and unfolding of this ini-

tial inner impulse, we will better understand Aschenbach's predicament not in terms of whether his life was valuable or worthwhile, but instead on a different interpretation of the question 'how to live?', namely: as a question about how to be alive in a sense that goes beyond physical survival. And, from this perspective, Aschenbach's inner impulse will rather emerge as a manifestation of the depth of what his disciplined life had denied, namely, his need to love and to live.

II. BEING ALIVE

Kitcher interprets the question 'how to live?' as concerned with the value of one's life and, therefore, with the question as to what makes someone's life worthwhile. This interpretation typically invokes a rather general model of what a valuable life must look like, so that the life of each particular person must be scrutinized to determine whether it meets the demands that this model imposes. Those demands tend to be rather external to the particular person under consideration insofar as it typically disregards the specifics of this person's character or situation. This is apparently Aschenbach's case, whose model of a citizen and artist was imposed upon him by his ancestors and was often experienced as a burden [Mann (1998), l. 4091]. Only strict discipline in the exploitation of his resources and capacities could deliver the achievements that were expected from him [Mann (1998), l. 4147]. He was, though, unsuited for such a strenuous self-discipline, partly due to his physical constitution and also to his sensitivity [Mann (1998), l. 4149]. To reach perfection in his artistic production he had to curb his feelings so that his struggle may not be visible in his works [Mann (1998), l. 4112]. His life of effort and discipline was rewarded with some remarkable achievements —he was awarded a title of nobility, a few of his pages were included in the official textbooks and his was burdened with a large amount of correspondence that he never left unattended [Mann (1998), l. 4145]. Despite all these achievements, Aschenbach is haunted by *an unexpected inner impulse* to travel abroad, and this is the starting point of *Death in Venice*. The irruption of Aschenbach's inner impulse occurs for the first time while his attention is caught by the appearance of a stranger during one of his customary walks:

But whether his imagination had been stirred by the stranger's itinerant appearance, or whether some other physical or psychological influence

was at work, he now became conscious, to his complete surprise, of an extraordinary expansion of his inner self, a kind of roving restlessness, a youthful craving for far-off places, a feeling so new or at least so long unaccustomed and forgotten that he stood as if rooted, with his hands clasped behind his back and his eyes to the ground, trying to ascertain the nature and purport of his emotion [Mann (1998), l. 4078].

He initially tries to identify his impulse as the product of exhaustion and, therefore, as the familiar call for some rest and idleness. Thus construed, this impulse could easily be accommodated within his disciplined life. After all, he knows that the exacting demands of art require some rest from time to time, so that the artist might come back to the struggle with renewed energies; only that this time a retreat in the mountain would not suffice—in fact, Aschenbach finds the idea of this retreat dreadful [Mann (1998), l. 4119]. He yearns to travel abroad. His first destination proved to be wrong. He was convinced he had to depart, but he did not know in what direction. The impulse to depart was certain, but the direction unclear; until the study of shipping timetables delivered the right place — “the... self-evident destination stared him in the face” [Mann (1998), l. 4256]. He had to leave for Venice. It came as the dawning of an aspect, as the formation of a synthetic complex -to put it in Kitcher's terms.

Why Venice? What experiences did Aschenbach associate with it? We aren't explicitly told. We are just acquainted with the transformations that he undergoes during his trip and, especially, as he arrives in the Lido. On his way to his hotel in Venice, he meets two figures that challenge his well-ordered world, ‘the dandified old man’ who was drinking wine with the young in ridiculous oblivion of his physical condition [Mann (1998), l. 4319], and the illicit gondolier whom he hardly manages to challenge [Mann (1998), l. 4373]. These two types weight on his mind for a while; perhaps, he obscurely perceived within himself the lure of the youth and, consequently, the temptation to behave like the old man he so much despises; whereas the illicit gondolier could intimate that, by travelling abroad, he exposes himself to forces that he will no longer be able to control [Mann (1998), l. 4410]. Both intuitions prove to be right. By the end of the novella, the impulse to travel abroad could no longer be construed as a call for a pause, for a period of idleness, so that he might resume his art with new vigour. There is a scene at the beginning of Aschenbach's stay in Venice whose structure foretells this final recognition:

And with his hands folded in his lap, he let his eyes wander in the sea's wide expanse, let his gaze glide away, dissolve and die in the monotonous haze of this desolate emptiness. There were profound reasons for his attachment to the sea: he loved it because as a hard-working artist he needed rest, needed to escape from the demanding complexity of phenomena and lie hidden on the bosom of the simple and tremendous; because of a forbidden longing deep within him that ran quite contrary to his life's task and was for that very reason seductive, a longing for the unarticulated and immeasurable, for eternity, for nothingness. To rest in the arms of perfection is the desire of any man intent upon creating excellence; and is not nothingness a form of perfection? But now, as he mused idly on such profound matters, the horizontal line of the sea-shore was suddenly intersected by a human figure, and when he had retrieved his gaze from limitless immensity and concentrated it again, he beheld the beautiful boy, coming from the left and walking past him across the sand [Mann (1998), l. 4516].

Aschenbach is on the beach, sitting in a chair, protected by his awning, and contemplating the desolate emptiness of the sea. The narrator distinguishes two reasons for his attachment to the sea. One has to do with Aschenbach's attempt to accommodate his travel within his disciplined life: it is a short vacation, that's all; the other invites an openness to a kind of experience that is at odds with the idea of discipline, of the measurable. To confirm the robustness of the second reason, a human figure crosses his line of sight and, from then on, Aschenbach will make every effort to render the attraction he feels for this boy compatible with a disciplined life. He appeals to the Socratic ideal, as we have seen, but only to be led beyond it by the impulse that had induced him to travel to Venice in the first place and is now focused on Tadzio. The touching report of Aschenbach's final experience suggests his recognition of this continuity. Now, he can understand why his imagination was stirred by the stranger's itinerant appearance, why he had hallucinations where he

... Saw a landscape, a tropical swampland under a cloud-swollen sky, moist and lush and monstrous, a kind of primeval wilderness of islands, morasses and muddy alluvial channels; far and wide around him he saw hairy palm-trunks thrusting upwards from rank jungles of fern, from among thick fleshy plants in exuberant flower; saw strangely misshapen trees with roots that arched through the air before sinking into the ground or into stagnant, shadowy-green, glassy waters where milk-white blossoms floated as big as plates, and among them exotic birds with grotesque beaks stood hunched in the shallows, their heads tilted motionlessly sideways [Mann (199), l. 4082].

All these remarks suggest that the model of a valuable life so successfully promoted by Aschenbach's ancestors and instilled into him is, at least in some respects, *external or alien to him*. It is true that Aschenbach had devoted the best of his time to meet the demands that this model imposed upon him. There is no way in which he could really estrange those demands; whenever he infringes them he is punished with a pang of guilt. Still, his relation to those demands, the kind of discipline that structure his life, may be rather compulsive, alien to a proper understanding of his character, to the kind of life that could be good or valuable for him. But, what does a valuable life look like?

When facing this question, I would suggest avoiding the temptation to articulate an alternative model, that is, an alternative system of principles that might specify the demands and constraints that a valuable life must meet, for *such models are essentially external*. A model of this kind either is rather abstract and disregards the specifics of the person's character or includes a detailed reference to her traits of character. In the first case, the model will be trivially external to the agent's specific needs and that's partly what Aschenbach's inner impulse expresses; in the latter case, the model may include a set of very complex principles that take account of the details of an agent's character and their relevance in a given situation. I do not see, however, how this enriched and meticulous model could make sense of the role that a person's character actually plays in first-person deliberation, for it is constitutive of her agency that she may decide to estrange one or another aspect of her character as part of her deliberative process. It follows that an agent cannot take her character traits as a mere fact about herself that should figure in the antecedent of a very complex principle. We must then regard any detailed model as equally external insofar as it cannot make sense of the conditions under which she may decide to revise or challenge some aspects of her character. Therefore, if it is not on the basis of a system of principles, how else should this revision proceed? What kind of deliberation could be sufficiently first-personal and, therefore, respect the specific way in which an agent relates to her character? This is not a question I can properly address in this paper [Corbí (2012), ch. 6], but let me sketch a few ideas in light of the second interpretation of the question 'how to live?'

On this alternative interpretation, the question 'how to live?' does not presuppose that a person has a life to live that could fail to be worthwhile, but assumes that the hard job is to have lived at all, that is, to manage to be alive in a sense that goes beyond physical survival. What does being alive mean in this stronger sense? We can contrast being alive

in this sense with the condition of being a mummy or a living dead. In *The Needs of Roots* (1978), Simone Weil grounds the obligations that we may have to one another on the needs of human life. She associates the nonfulfillment of such needs with a kind of death. It can be a physical death in the case of thirst or starvation, but it can be a different sort of death. Our body may remain alive and still we may become a thing, a living dead:

Here we see force in its grossest and most summary form -the force that kills. How much more varied in its processes, how much more surprising in its effect is the other force, the force that does *not* kill, i.e., that does not kill just yet. It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment. In whatever aspect, its effect is the same: it turns a man into a stone. From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet -he is a thing [Weil (1986) 165].

Weil associates the idea of force with the harm that we can cause to each other and regards the impact of force upon a person as turning her into a thing that still breaths and talks, that is, a living dead. This is in fact the way some survivors from genocides or wars describe their lives after the impact of force. Thus, a soldier who fought the Soviet war in Afganistan in the eighties reports:

After I got back I couldn't bear to wear my 'pre-war' jeans and shirts. They belonged to some stranger, although they still smelt of me, as my mother assured me. That stranger no longer exists. His place had been taken by someone else with the same surname... I rather liked that other person [Aleixievich (1992), p. 38.; see Corbí (2012), ch. 3].

Christine Korsgaard takes the concept of a living dead beyond the experience of force or harm, and argues that our practical identities are so dear to ourselves that our inability to be faithful to them may amount to being 'for all practical purposes dead or worse than dead' [Korsgaard (1996), p. 102].

A person can certainly be blind as to whether she has actually become a living dead, but any identification of this condition from a third-person perspective must rely in more than one respect on the agent's ex-

perience, that is, on how she experiences a number of situations, even though she may be unable to see all those experiences as unified under the pattern or synthetic complex that makes of her a living dead. A similar line of reasoning applies to the condition of being alive. Its identity conditions must also be anchored to some experiences on the agent's side, even though she may fail to notice the pattern in question. Still, the ability to experience oneself as being alive comes to enhance this condition when adequately grounded, for the experience of being alive involves some normative constraints.

I will argue however that, unlike the normative demands that might be derived from a model of the valuable life, these normative constraints are *internal* to the particular person we might be concerned with. They are internal because whatever project, gesture or attitude we may consider must ultimately be assessed with regard to this person's ability to experience herself as being alive. It follows that those external impositions that might diminish a person's ability to live should be resisted. Moreover, the notion of being alive allows us to challenge the authority of the model instilled into Aschenbach by his ancestors insofar as this model might deliver the most brilliant achievements but at the price of turning him into a living dead, that is, into someone who is no longer alive despite the fact that he still walks, eats and talks. There is, indeed, room for a third-party intervention within the being-alive approach, but the kind of intervention a third-party may conduct differs significantly from what the valuable-life interpretation invites. A third party could certainly observe that someone is a living dead or that she is not properly alive but, in such cases, the right question to ask would be: how could she be resurrected? And it is clear that a mere admonition or an accusation – which is what the idea of a model would typically prompt – will hardly be of any avail; perhaps, a certain gesture, an invitation to expose oneself to some specific situations, might be of some use but it will always be constrained by the agent's capacity to experience the situation in certain way, namely, in a way that enhances her capacity to be alive.

Now that the contours of the being-alive reading have been briefly outlined, let me briefly rehearse the benefits of addressing Aschenbach's predicament from this perspective as opposed to the inquiry as to whether his life is finally affirmed as worthwhile. The most significant benefit is that it allows us to stress the unity of the novella as the exploration of an inner impulse whose depth is confirmed each time Aschenbach fails to accommodate it to some external model. This impulse is first examined and reinterpreted in light of the model provided by his

ancestors, but the development of the novel reveals the inadequacy of any attempt to accommodate it within this model. Aschenbach's impulse resists any such interpretation. It also resists an idealized model like that of the Socratic ideal. His impulse goes beyond that and seems to be appeased only at the end while Aschenbach sits once again on the beach, deprived of any aspiration to accommodate his feelings within his life as a renowned artist. There, he vaguely anticipates a future, a promising life in connection with his beloved Tadzio. This – we could say – is the kind of life he hadn't had, the life his intense, persistent and robust impulse revealed as missing.

In this respect, my interpretation differs fundamentally from Kitcher's. Unlike what he claims, I don't think we can read the final coda as a situation where Aschenbach "... can nonetheless recognize himself as having lived and loved, as having struggled and created" (176). He has certainly struggled and created but, if I am right about the nature and content of his inner impulse, the discipline that lies behind his creative achievements has unfortunately deprived him of the ability to live and love. A discipline life has been unable to suppress his inner impulse to live, but has prevented him from being in connection with it. There is indeed a life that persists beyond his own, where he is a famous writer and an impeccable citizen. But this life is so external to him that it can survive his own physical end, as the last paragraph in *Death in Venice* comes to highlight.

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NOTES

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

² "Readers inclined to say 'Hm. Hm' on hearing the theme of the story but then reassured by its 'respectability' approve the unmasking of Aschenbach as a sham, the opening of the 'whited sepulcher' to disclose the foulness it contains" (67-8).

³ Synthetic complexes contribute to our understanding of the novel or a piece of music. Still, they may be enlightened by a more analytic or theoretical

approach, for any judgement that one might reach must be reflexively stable and, therefore, it must take into consideration how our synthetic complexes may be challenged or at least altered by some more analytic or theoretical views (149). Synthetic complexes, together with the idea of reflexive stability, allows us to understand the possibility so much stressed by Kitcher that philosophy, literature and music could illuminate each other, basically by giving rise to new and fruitful synthetic complexes that might help us to lead our lives in a more valuable way. Philosophical criticism occupies a privileged stance insofar as it is meant to highlight those interconnections.

⁴ "The true Artist-*Erzieher* seeks an extreme standard of reflective stability, one in which the most basic endorsement are embedded in synthetic complexes again and again and scrutinized from perspective after perspective" (187).

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RESUMEN

En su libro, Kitcher estudia el significado que *Muerte en Venecia* de Thomas Mann pueda tener para "la cuestión filosófica más antigua y profunda: ¿cómo vivir?" En este artículo, distingo dos interpretaciones de esta cuestión. Una que la equipararía a la pregunta "¿Cómo vivir una vida valiosa?", mientras que la otra apunta a una idea más elusiva, a saber: que una persona puede respirar y caminar y, sin embargo, estar muerta en un sentido relevante. En mi opinión la reflexión de Kitcher descansa en la primera de las lecturas; argumentaré, no obstante, que la segunda interpretación nos permite comprender mejor la unidad narrativa de *Muerte en Venecia*; de hecho, concluiré que la necesidad de transitar de una interpretación a la otra constituye una de las aportaciones filosóficas de la novela.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *valor, percepción de aspectos, necesidad práctica, razones internas, razones externas.*

ABSTRACT

In his book, Kitcher explores the bearing that *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann may have on “the oldest and deepest question of philosophy: how to live.” In this paper, I consider two ways in which this question can be interpreted. On one reading, it amounts to the question “how to lead a valuable or worthy life?”, whereas on the other it involves a more elusive idea, namely, that a person may breath and walk and still be dead in a most relevant sense. In my view, Kitcher’s reflection relies on the first, more standard reading. I will argue, though, that the being-alive interpretation sheds a more unified light on *Death in Venice*; in fact, I will conclude that the need to shift from one to another interpretation constitutes a fundamental concern in the novella.

KEYWORDS: *Value, Aspect Perception, Discipline, Practical Necessity, Internal Reasons, External Reasons.*