

1 Tippett and the ‘world vision’ of modernity

The concept of ‘world vision’ and the concept of modernity

On the plane of personal psychology, there are no people more different than the poet, who creates particular beings and things, and the philosopher, who thinks and expresses himself by means of general concepts . . . [Yet] we must accept the existence of a reality which goes beyond them as individuals and finds its expression in their work. It is this which I intend to call the *world vision*.

At a crucial point in his career Michael Tippett (1905–98) would probably have read these lines. The book from which they come, Lucien Goldmann’s *The Hidden God*, is appropriately discussed in the Tippett literature as being influential on the tragic conception of the composer’s second opera *King Priam* (1958–62).¹ But Goldmann’s text affords other possibilities too. For one thing it offers me a way round the invidious problem of beginning this book, which – because it deals with a complex of issues where none takes priority over the others – has no natural starting point. In the spirit of the present volume I want to use Goldmann as an interpretative catalyst or intermediary through which to read out certain of Tippett’s own values.

Tippett’s growth to artistic maturity is rightly correlated with the technical development of his musical language. Yet his claim to the status of composer of stature depends on something beyond this: something which conforms to that characteristic Goldmann terms ‘world vision’. The notion, which he adapts from Wilhelm Dilthey, refers to ‘the whole complex of ideas, aspirations and feelings which links together the members of a social group’. Goldmann continues:

A philosophy or work of art can keep its value outside the time and place where it first appeared only if, by expressing a particular human situation, it transposes this on to the plane of the great human problems created by man’s relationship with his fellows and with the universe.²

No doubt Tippett would have empathized with these sentiments. Indeed the words themselves appear to find an echo many years later in his description of *The Mask of Time* (1980–2) as a response to ‘the most fundamental matters bearing upon man, his relationship with time, his place in the world as we know it and in the mysterious universe at large’.³ No one

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could accuse Tippett of humble artistic pretensions! Whatever the hazards of operating on ‘the plane of the great human problems’, the fact that he risked doing so forms an irrefutable part of his chemistry and significance as a composer. Perhaps the first work where this tendency became evident was *A Child of our Time* (1931–41), and thereafter all his operas and choral–orchestral works were in one way or another concerned with making big statements about the human condition. But the trait is discernible – often as a preoccupation with the ‘visionary’ – in the instrumental and orchestral works too. It would be remiss, of course, to characterize Tippett’s entire *œuvre* in this way, but the engagement with ‘grand narratives’ (to borrow a term from Lyotard) is certainly a vital stream within it, and it forms a key ingredient of this book’s subject matter.

What makes such impossibly grandiose aspirations potentially tractable (for the musicologist as well as the composer) is the mediation of the universal in the particular – a point evident in the preceding quotations from Goldmann, and also in his observation that ‘as we move away from the abstract idea of the world vision, so we find that the individual details of each vision are linked to historical situations localised in place and time, and even to the individual personality of the writer or thinker in question’.⁴ Concentrating for the moment on the middleground of this panorama, what is the historical situation to which Tippett’s world vision relates?

Even here, the scope is anything but modest. What Tippett engages with in many of his major works (even though he does not quite put it this way) is nothing less than the social, epistemological and psychological conditions of Western modernity. This is modernity considered as a historical *longue durée*: the period from around the time of the age of Enlightenment (some would place it earlier) to the present day. To define its conditions in a nutshell is a tall order. But a working basis is found among theoretical accounts which characterize modern consciousness as *divided* following reason’s rise in the Enlightenment to the West’s dominant paradigm of knowledge. Whereas, so such narratives run, the received dogma of religion had, in pre-modern times, provided men and women with a unified basis for their perception of the world, their moral conduct and their sensuous being, reason’s dominion over conceptual knowledge causes a schism between that realm and those of ethics and other, sensory sources of insight. As J. M. Bernstein puts it:

Modernity is the separation of spheres, the becoming autonomous of truth, beauty and goodness from one another, and their developing into self-sufficient forms of practice: modern science and technology, private morality and modern legal forms, and modern art. This categorial

separation of domains represents the dissolution of the metaphysical totalities of the pre-modern age.⁵

Tippett was neither an intellectual historian nor a cultural theorist, yet lying in the background of his *œuvre* are comparable perceptions. Although he tended to fasten on to the more directly instrumental manifestations of a dominant rationality (science, technology and mass industrialization) and the more overtly catastrophic consequences of its eclipse of the spiritual (Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the Gulag), it is clear that he recognized the separation of epistemology, ethics and aesthetics into discrete domains as fundamental to the problematics of our contemporary condition. (As writer, pacifist and composer Tippett engaged with each of these spheres, and though the last role came most obviously first, his art would be of lesser consequence had his path to individuation not also encompassed moral action and theoretical reflection; only because of this does the label ‘a man of our time’ not degenerate into a cliché.) One pertinent example of his awareness of the division of experience into autonomous domains comes in the postscript to his essay ‘What I believe’. Here he posits a dualism familiar in his writings, between the ‘outer’ world of empirical reality and the ‘inner’ world of a reality left uncharted by rationality:

I believe in a reality of the physical world outside, experienced through the senses and formulated generally by the scientific intelligence.

I believe also in a reality of the spiritual world within, experienced, in my own case, by some intuitive, introspective apprehension of a kind which, in the past, was formulated generally by dogmatic, revelatory, received religions.⁶

From this follows the mandate for his own art (in which Tippett effectively rehearses an agenda set for the domain of the aesthetic by Kant): to hold open and make palpable the reality of the ‘inner world of the imagination’ and perhaps to envision some future situation in which the rift between different types of knowing might be healed.

While this certainly did not mean Tippett yearned for what Bernstein terms ‘the metaphysical totalities of the pre-modern age’ (as a composer such as John Tavener has arguably done with his turn to the Russian Orthodox church), the kinds of ‘introspective apprehension’ to which he refers seem symptomatic of a dogged metaphysical remnant within modern Western consciousness: a kind of metaphysics despite itself, which while not rejecting the emancipatory moment offered by reason, suspects that the way things really are is not reducible to scientific reasoning alone, and which is alert to possibilities of being that transcend reason’s reductive,

subject-eclipsing categories. This situation can be understood dialectically. Reason, in the very demonstration of its remarkable instrumental possibilities for our lifeworld, also makes evident its non-identity with other significant areas of human experience. Hence it becomes imaginable that the kinds of discourse whose vocabulary includes epithets such as ‘transcendent’, ‘visionary’ or ‘sublime’, are not necessarily anachronistic to modern consciousness, but are indeed generated from it.

Tippett as ‘post-romantic modernist’

Tippett was alive not only to the problems of modernity but also to the manner in which these had been sounded within the art of his century – in other words to the aesthetics of modernism. Modernism itself was never a single coherent movement; paradoxically, if it is characterized by any single thing this might be the idea of fragmentation. Similarly, Tippett’s *œuvre* might be seen as a succession of modernisms, but nowhere are the condition of fragmentation and the knife of an inwardly directed critical scepticism more apparent than in the period ushered in by *King Priam*.⁷ The stylistic characteristics of this second style-period are well enough documented within the Tippett literature. As against the lyrical emphasis, largely tonal orientation and developmental forms of his first period there is now a shift towards the rhetorical gesture, a post-tonal – at times atonal – soundworld, and an emphasis on musical discontinuity. On the face of it, this new world of sound and structure might have seemed inimical to the affirmative strain of the earlier works, to their vision of integration and wholeness. Yet just as the music of Tippett’s post-*Priam* period did not so much liquidate his earlier stylistic traits as transform them and set them in strange new contexts, so its aesthetic relation to his first period is not one of total repudiation. With the move to a more hard-hitting soundworld Tippett did not abandon his previous visionary aspirations; rather he profoundly problematized them. What makes the discontinuities between the later period and the earlier one so startling is the agon with a value system whose pertinence endures through the very critique to which it is subjected.

Comments by Goldmann are again pertinent here (the ‘problems’ to which he refers are those ‘great human problems created by man’s relationship with his fellows and with the universe’ indicated in an earlier quotation):

Now since the number of coherent replies that can be given to these problems is limited by the very structure of the human personality, each of

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the replies given may correspond to different and even contradictory historical situations. This explains both the successive rebirths of the same idea which we find in the world of history, art and philosophy and the fact that, at different times, the same vision can assume different aspects.⁸

The works of Tippett's second period bespeak a 'different . . . historical situation'; they present his world vision in a 'different aspect'. In addition to paying recognition to a more internationalist modernism they reflect, I would argue, the crystallization of a consciousness of the deepening Cold War. This is a consciousness which, threatened by the ominous course of history, is paradoxically also thrown back into its own deepest subjective reaches for something with which to counter the mounting negative forces of the lifeworld. But here is also the point of continuity with the past – both Tippett's and that of European (and Western) culture at large. For the alienation experienced by individual subjects under the threat of the atom bomb – a quintessential product of instrumental reason – is only(!) a more acute version of that felt culturally under the rational paradigm of the Enlightenment. As Julian Johnson puts it, Enlightenment thought, in rendering subjects autonomous, also bequeathed 'a model of man that was cut off from the world around him, from "nature"'. The 'romantic agenda' of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel and Schleiermacher was 'to create a conceptual framework in which the unity of man and nature, shattered by the mechanistic and atomistic implications of Enlightenment theory, might be restored'.⁹

Within a work such as *The Midsummer Marriage* Tippett deploys a similar romantic agenda – a 'new humanism' of 'The Whole Man' as he puts it.¹⁰ The idea of oneness with nature and its appeal to the fractured post-Enlightenment mind provide an illuminating context for the pastoralism of his first period, whose epitome is the magic wood of *The Midsummer Marriage*. However, in *King Priam* and beyond, particularly in the last three operas, the magic wood is displaced by urban townscapes – a move consistent with an immanent critique on Tippett's part of his 'new humanism'. It is not that this humanism is dispensed with or seen as bankrupt (the later operas also hold on to the idea of some magical 'other' space); but it is tested by a kind of self-inflicted scepticism which allows other voices to speak – among them, I will argue, post-humanist ones. What becomes acute in this period – audible in the music's conflicted, heterogeneous soundworld – is the friction inherent in Tippett's application of a twentieth-century realist and materialist consciousness to the nineteenth century's aspirations to the ideal and the absolute. Arnold Whittall is right to call the composer a 'post-romantic modernist'.¹¹

Much of this book explores this characterization. Its emphasis is on Tippett's later works (though I do not confine myself to these exclusively), many of which seem to me to be interesting precisely because their distinctively twentieth-century soundworld brings with it a revitalization of ideas from the nineteenth century – understood here as a 'long' nineteenth century, extending back into the later eighteenth. Hence one strategy I adopt is to interweave analysis of those works with consideration of aesthetic questions from the traditions of philosophical and literary romanticism and idealism – especially in their Germanic incarnations – and their late nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors.¹² (This seems to me one possibly profitable way to engage with the debate about Tippett's later works, and perhaps help to loosen up some of the critical rigidities that have become established there.) And the theme of nature will surface on a number of occasions and in various guises.

Romanticism's attempt to articulate man's position within a nature from which he has become alienated is conformant, Johnson argues, with 'an attempt to define the relation between rationality and irrationality within the human subject, between its linguistic ordering of itself and the world, and its non-linguistic experience'.¹³ Even if it is unlikely that Tippett possessed specialist knowledge of the early romantic and idealist philosophical tradition (bar his close acquaintance with the works of Goethe) a form of this consciousness could have been transmitted to him in mediated form. One of the most conspicuous conduits in this regard would have been Jung, whose opposition of the conscious mind and the collective unconscious expressed perfectly for Tippett the dualism between the rational and irrational. As I argue in chapter 2 this is also contained in microcosm in the concept 'image' which is central to Tippett's aesthetic thinking and musical practice, and has its most significant provenance in Jung's psychoanalytic theories. What has also become clear to me, however, is that different incarnations of this dualism between a 'linguistic ordering' and 'non-linguistic experience' surface throughout Tippett's *œuvre*. In successive chapters, I figure its several metamorphoses in relation to 'successive rebirths of the same idea' (to borrow Goldmann's phrase) within Western modernity – or, less reductively, to different historical–intellectual formations around an abiding philosophical problem: Kant's noumenon and phenomenon in relation to *The Mask of Time* (chapter 5); Schopenhauer's Will and Idea, and Nietzsche's Dionysiac and Apollonian, in relation to *The Midsummer Marriage* and *King Priam* (chapter 3); Adorno's materialist metaphysics in relation to *The Vision of Saint Augustine* (chapter 4); and Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic in relation to *Byzantium* (chapter 7).

Tippett's writings, and writing about Tippett

An invaluable resource in this book's interpretative–aesthetic project – an intermediary between Tippett's musical works and the (linguistic) texts alongside which I contextualize them – are the composer's own writings. His numerous essays and interviews suggest that in his case a considered analysis of the relationship between the artist, the artwork and society was far from peripheral to the activity of composing. Indeed we might consider these writings, reproduced in such collections as *Moving into Aquarius*, *Music of the Angels* and *Tippett on Music*, as a legitimate part of his *œuvre*.¹⁴ Our opening quotation from Goldmann is again pertinent, in its assertion that, from their different corners, poet – for which, read artist in the general sense – and philosopher might tackle the same realities of their age. It is less the case that Tippett belies the claim that 'there are no people more different than the poet . . . and the philosopher'; more that he demonstrates that it is possible for the same individual to practise both roles and benefit from the interplay of their different modalities of thought.

There is, however, a wrinkle in this convergence which is of key significance for us. While it is true that, as was once said of Tippett, 'whatever this man touches he philosophizes',¹⁵ his very 'maverick' nature (an epithet of which he was fond) and the sheer eclecticism of his reading habits militate against direct alliances with any recognized philosophical corpus. Tippett philosophized without a philosophy. Yet, for all this, I would argue that scattered across and embedded within his writings is evidence of a coherent aesthetic position, even if the vocabulary used to voice it is idiosyncratic, heterogeneous, and at times obscure. For example, Tippett did not use a word like 'dialectic' in any systematic way, but when he describes his own music in terms of 'polarities' he means something closely cognate. Similarly, his talk of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds concerns the philosophical dualism of subject and object; and even his discussion of 'moving into Aquarius' – to an age of 'attempted union of the opposites'¹⁶ – alludes to a dialectical movement of history reminiscent of Hegel, for all that it also indicates a brush with astrology. Just as the individuality of Tippett's music inheres in the idiosyncratic stance it takes towards received historical genres, structural conventions and musical styles, so his intellectual work is distinctive in simultaneously resisting and inviting comparison with canonic Western philosophical ideas.

I have felt this tension quite acutely in writing this book. On the one hand I have been concerned to assemble a profile of Tippett's aesthetic stance (more extensively, I think, than in any previous study); and in so

doing I have tried to represent Tippett's position accurately, and allowed his own words to tell their story. On the other hand, simply to leave matters there would also be to leave unchallenged the notion that Tippett was a composer completely *sui generis*, a maverick pure and simple. While his individuality unquestionably contributed to his significance, it only carries weight – that is, amounts to more than mere eccentricity – because as an individual Tippett also engaged with the wider discourses of modernity (otherwise, once again, 'a man of our time' is nothing more than a publicity slogan). It is therefore incumbent on us to attempt to locate Tippett's thought, both musical and verbal, in the context of those discourses. Accordingly I have attempted to mobilize different facets of Tippett's music, his writings, and the thinking of others into interpretative constellations that I hope will offer new insights into his *œuvre* as well as showing the coherence and richness of his aesthetic position.

This process, then, is a kind of dialogue, though its involvement of a subjective, speculative element carries risks. For it is one thing to explore Tippett's *œuvre* in relation to figures he is known to have read and been influenced by: for example Jung or Yeats (even if my concern with such writers – as with Goldmann in this chapter – soon turns from their influence to the hermeneutic possibilities offered by their writings). But it is arguably more contentious also to line Tippett up with figures with whom he expressed no or little acquaintance or affinity: for example Adorno, Nietzsche, Camille Paglia or Julia Kristeva. On whose authority can such connections be posited?

In one way or another this question has also been addressed by Lawrence Kramer, whose putatively postmodern musicology is centred in a notion of music as constitutive of subjectivity. While acknowledging composition as an aspect of 'the process of musical subject formation', Kramer none the less chooses to privilege reception; his is in effect a species of reader-orientated criticism.¹⁷ Invoking Mikhail Bakhtin, he states that 'in addressing us, [music] is "half-ours and half-someone else's" . . . It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, this is, freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts."¹⁸ Some of the more speculative relationships I have posited below are in this very interest of reinvigorated contextualization. They allow for a 'dissemination' (to borrow a term which Kramer borrows from Derrida)¹⁹ of new, I hope enriched, meanings from the works in question – arguably paying the composer greater homage than merely tautologically retreading known paths of influence.

However, I am less eager than Kramer to put a postmodernist spin on this approach. I want to show where and how Tippett is situated in the

'web of culture' (a metaphor which Gary Tomlinson borrows from Clifford Geertz)²⁰ – a web which includes such figures as Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Shelley, T. S. Eliot and Saint Augustine. But my argument is that these connections – even the ones Tippett may not have intended or recognized – are conditioned intrinsically by the sound and formation of his music; its interpretation is not just a matter of the free play of the signifier. This is not to discount the role of the imagination of the listening subject, but it is also to place emphasis on the role of the musical object – as a phenomenon that retains an autonomous substrate – in mediating that subjectivity. Like Kramer, I have ventured to construct an interplay of musical and linguistic meanings; indeed, for whatever reasons, I have tended to prioritize philosophical, critical and literary sources of contextualization over musical ones. However, while I agree wholeheartedly with him that the differences between music and language should not – indeed must not – inhibit the linguistic discussion of music, I feel less easy that this opposition is as deconstructible as he claims.²¹ My experience in the following essays is that the passage from formalist discussion of music to other modes of contextual discourse is one of profound discontinuity. It is entirely conceivable that better equipped intellects than mine might handle this problem more adeptly, but my own strategy has been to accept these disjunctures as in some way essential. While I have ventured to find points of mediation between purely musical and conceptual structures, this does not guarantee an easy translation from musical to linguistic signifiers.

Furthermore in pursuing homologies between Tippett's thought and that of other figures, I have tried to remain as sensitive to difference as to similarity. Thus the 'others' with which I have aligned him serve as a kind of ideological litmus, rather than figures of complete identification. It is through both drawing comparisons and locating the points at which comparisons break down that Tippett's individuality – what is non-identical about him – within larger cultural formations of modernity can be established.

All this has also meant accommodating the structure of this book to such discontinuities and disjunctures. At just about every level there is resistance of the part to complete assimilation by the whole. Hence each chapter is intended as a free-standing essay, notwithstanding the fact that it also contributes to a more or less chronological analysis of selected works²² which reveals discontinuities and discontinuities, as much as continuities, within Tippett's *œuvre*. Within the longer chapters, numbered sections might almost be read as mini-essays in their own right; and, within these, individually titled subsections also have a measure of autonomy. Although I make no claims to emulate Adorno's antinomic and

quasi-paratactic prose style, I have been open to the notion behind it that the structure of writing might in some way be shaped by the contradictions and problematics of its object of enquiry; and that the most appropriate way to treat such an object might be to build around it a 'constellation' of concepts which interact dialectically upon one another rather than unfold in a logical sequence from some assumed first principle. Hence the character of the present chapter, which is to a degree autonomous, but also functions (heuristically and synoptically) as a simultaneously necessary and dispensable introduction and conclusion to the book as a whole.

The resistance between part and whole is a notion also relevant to the works on which I focus. For, with the exception of *The Midsummer Marriage* (1946–52), they all purvey the fragmented world vision and problematized subjectivities of Tippett's post-*Priam* period. The pieces in question – *The Midsummer Marriage* as mentioned, *King Priam* itself, then *The Vision of Saint Augustine*, *The Mask of Time*, the Triple Concerto and *Byzantium* – individually offer particular perspectives on the general constellation of issues which is the book's concern. I have chosen them because in one way or another they all have a visionary dimension – whether this be metaphysical or social, affirmative or ambivalent. But there is inevitably an element of contingency in their selection; other works – say, the Third Symphony (1970–2), *New Year* (1986–8) or *The Rose Lake* (1991–3) – might equally have taken the limelight (which is not to say that these and yet other pieces are absent from discussion). The point is that the issues in question do not determine *a priori* a necessary and finite set of affected works; moreover, the works one happens to select reciprocally determine the constellation of issues. Again, particulars resist total subsumption into generality. The chosen works are not merely case studies – exemplars of more universal concerns – but are also of interest in their own right, free-standing particulars. And, since I have not ruled out the importance of subjectivity, I may as well add that I have also picked them because they have excited my admiration, and because they afford opportunities to explore issues I believe to be urgent within contemporary culture. (This is also to argue for a more interventionist musicology, not confined to passively commentating on a composer's *œuvre*, but actively engaging with it towards critical, perhaps in the broadest sense political, ends.)

A man of whose time?

I have saved until the end of this chapter a discussion of that part of Goldmann's description of world vision which holds the greatest potential