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METAPHYSICS AND HEAVY BREATHING (OR TIPPETT'S FOURTH SYMPHONY)

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Abstract: Michael Tippett's Fourth Symphony opens with the striking sound of an intake of breath, a gesture, which – according to the composer – describes the very nature of existence. Such statements are not uncommon from Tippett, yet nevertheless this is a broad claim, which naturally poses more questions than it answers. This article explores whether such a claim has any validity, presenting a philosophically led reading of the opening breath motif in an attempt to understand whether art can really shed new light on the well-rehearsed arguments of metaphysical enquiry.

> I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.
> — Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Presentation[1]

Tippett's *Symphony No. 4* (1977) is a large and complex tone poem, portrayed by the composer as a work concerned with life, death and the very essence of being. This is an impressive list of topics for a composer to deal with, perhaps, but it is not unexpected from a figure whose music tackles issues ranging from political activism to religious belief, in works such as *A Child of our Time* and *The Vision of Saint Augustine*. As David Clarke notes, Tippett's self-constructed 'grand narrative' was often concerned with these universal metaphysical issues, though it was rarely presented through verbal questioning in his own writings. Instead, Tippett seems to question these issues through the music itself, as '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'.[2]

Indeed this implicit Kantian critique of reason (or rather, reason as the product of rational scientific enquiry) provides an interesting view of works like the Fourth Symphony not only as musical representations of metaphysical issues, but as ontological doctrines in themselves, searching for answers through non-verbal investigation. Such an investigation must still be concerned with the fundamental

[1] This form of this article mirrors my reading of the score itself, inspired by the layered analysis of Edward T. Cone's seminal article 'Three ways of reading a detective story', *The Georgia Review*, 31/3 (1977), pp. 554–74.

[2] David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.

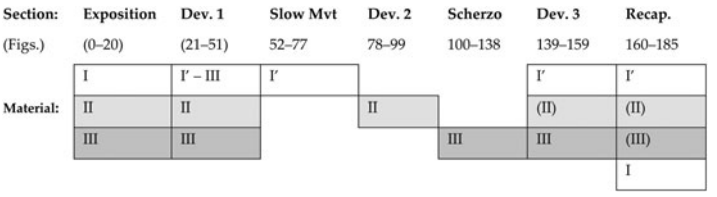

Figure 1:
Structure of Tippett's *Fourth Symphony*

questions of being – particularly, in Tippett's case, the question of what it means to *be* in the modern age – but importantly it is a transcendental enquiry, posed by the musical material itself. But how can music answer such large questions? What can art in general offer to such well-rehearsed arguments? In order to begin to verbalize such an enquiry, we need to address first the musical material as a product of itself, and then its relationship with historical examinations on the nature of metaphysics and with the world around us.

Rotation One

Tippett described his Fourth Symphony as 'a birth to death piece',[3] a story of the life of an imaginary protagonist. Set in one movement, the seven section arch-form echoes other protagonist-led programmatic structures, such as Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*. Tippett mirrors Strauss' reminiscence of earlier works, with quotations of his own Third Symphony and *The Vision of Saint Augustine* being hinted at in the penultimate section, 'Development 3' (Figs. 140 and 151 respectively). Like *Heldenleben*, Tippett casts the work in a large-scale sonata-form, interleaved with suggestions of a symphonic structure (see Figure 1).

As with the middle period 'mosaic' works, such as the *Concerto for Orchestra*, Tippett forms his structure out of the interplay between three discrete thematic groups, each with its own strikingly distinct material. Initially these blocks are delineated by tempo and instrumentation (slow tutti writing, faster brass homophony and very fast unison string triplet passages respectively) but these distinctions are broken down through the course of the work's unfolding, as each block begins to expand and affect the surrounding musical material. The arrangement of these blocks forms three large-scale sections, each with their own processes, tracing through Tippett's metaphor of the protagonist's birth to death teleology:

- 'Early years' [*Meta-exposition*]. As with the early stages of development, the piece opens with an 'exposition', discovering the musical world for the first time, followed by 'development 1', reiterating the material to strengthen its understanding.
- 'Middle years' [*Meta-development*]. With experience, the material is expanded, explored and developed through a 'slow movement' and 'scherzo'.
- 'Final years' [*Meta-recapitulation*]. The material is now critically appraised through the lens of experience (vis. 'development 3'). Less important sections are discarded ('recapitulation'), as the music distils down to its essence in a coda ('block 1').

[3] Notes to 'Tippett: Symphonies Nos 2&4' in CD issued with *BBC Music Magazine*, III/6 (1995).

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This final coda reinstates the original block I material in its undeveloped state, heard only briefly at the opening of the piece – a passage of amplified heavy breathing. Now infamous amongst lovers of Tippett's music, this breathing effect involves reproducing the sound of human inhalation and exhalation in the concert hall in duet with the orchestra at key moments in the music. The breathing is marked meticulously in the score, and is meant to be particularly prominent at the beginning and end of the symphony (block I), the latter diminishing towards a single, unaccompanied intake of breath which forms the work's conclusion.

This suggests a process of distillation reminiscent of numerous of Beethovenian late-period structures, not surprising, considering Tippett's affinity with that master's music. 'When I was a student', Tippett wrote, 'I submitted entirely to the music of Beethoven';[4] and this connection that pervades Tippett's work, including clear examples of structural 'homages' appearing in *Second Quartet*'s slow movement (from Op. 131, first movement), the First Symphony's fugal finale (*Große Fuge*, Op.133), and even full quotation from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* appearing in his own Third. The discovery of the work's key element through distillation here shows a clear reference to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* (Op.120), which takes the small gesture of the trill from Diabelli's original waltz, gradually developing, expanding and varying it over three large-scale sections, until it is revealed as the central musical and aesthetic concern of the work.[5] Like the *Diabelli* trill, the unadorned breathing that Tippett distils is a mundane and commonplace thing. At first hearing in the context of 'high art' it comes across as a disconcerting gesture, even humorous, with the amplified heavy breathing more redolent of an out-dated porn film than a symphony. But beyond the theatricality, it is quite clear that the human breath is a signifier for life – the basic physiological function that maintains existence.

Maynard Solomon describes how Beethoven's world in Op.120 moves from the everyday ('Diabelli's theme conveys ideas, not only of the national, the commonplace, the humble, the rustic, the comic . . . the earthly, the sensuous'[6]) to a transcendent reality. It is a teleology that echoes the three stages of life Kierkegaard characterises in *Either/Or*. For Kierkegaard, existential meaning in life comes from the pursuit of the singular *telos* (or goal): the distillation of moral value achieved by making an ascent from the lowest stage of existence, the aesthetic – a place of sensuous, even sensual energy – through the higher, ethical stage, to the spiritual.[7] The distillation that we find in Tippett's score is clearly an echo of Kierkegaard's thinking. As the music journeys towards its last, solitary intake of breath, the imagined protagonist's life is given new meaning in lieu of the final goal of death.

Rotation Two

During the premiere, given by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under Sir Georg Solti, the breathing effect was performed by a

[4] Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius* (St Albans: Paladin Books, 1974) p. 101.
[5] Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 20–25; Cf. William Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 70–84.
[6] Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 20.
[7] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Classics, 1843), pp. 112–32.

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wind machine nestled in the orchestra's percussion section. Shortly after the concert, Tippett declared the wind machine to be unsuccessful in recreating the sound of live human breathing, and insisted that the sound had to be made by a human. In order to please the composer, assistant conductor Henry Mazer provided the sound offstage during the second performance, amplified with a microphone. This anecdote is very telling to Tippett's intention of this gesture, that it should represents a decidedly human 'life force'. The abstraction of this sound into a metaphorical gesture removed the humanity that a human voice provides.

In a review of the symphony, Tippett's biographer Ian Kemp (also the work's dedicatee) wrote:

> In the final section life passes in review, as it were, the breathing begins to fail and is extinguished altogether. There is a death. Of what? An exemplary or 'real' death?[8]

Kemp is right to question this ambiguity in Tippett's score. Is the final intake of breath the death knell of an abstract protagonist, whose narrative lies at the heart of the work? Or is the gesture an extension of the composer himself, Tippett surreptitiously framing the work as an autobiography? Many critics suggest the latter, with Thomas Schuttenhelm describing the breathing as a 'revelation of [Tippett's] Self into the subject of the symphony'.[9] Through the process of composition, Tippett has removed his self from the world, implying a transcendental aspiration from the physical realm to its reformation as noise in the abstract.

Importantly, this suggests that it is not just Tippett whose being has become transformed into the abstract realm: we, the listeners, are drawn in too. The ambiguity of the open fifth that begins the work, and the seeming timelessness of the expansive tempo (♩ = c. 50), form a negative space – a space of potential. The pitched content is consciously withdrawn to the background, framing the empty expectancy of the musical space, waiting to be filled with melody or – in this case – breath. This embodiment becomes an invitation for the listeners to consider our own breathing,[10] as we equate the expectancy of the hollow space to our own physicality – the inevitable anticipation of inhalation that follows every exhalation.

As Tippett redefines the focus of the breathing gesture towards the listener, the mode of experience shifts, and this becomes a piece about our own being in the world. Philosopher Keith Lehrer writes that 'artworks and the creation of them confront us with [a] conscious awareness that yield[s] the exemplars of representation, creating form and content, that enters into the story of our life'.[11] The process of interpretation involves the instinctive transfer of the content of the artwork to the world and life outside the work, and we imagine the breath, the heartbeat as our own. By being invited to share in the universal act of breathing, the listeners become spectators to themselves, invited to consider their own subjective ontology and its (metaphysical) nature.

In the discipline of metaphysics, these ontological questions of being have been thoroughly explored through philosophical

[8] Ian Kemp, 'Tippett's Fourth Symphony', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 123, No. 1670 (1982), p. 266.
[9] Thomas Schuttenhelm, *The Orchestral Music of Michael Tippett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 259.
[10] Cf. Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*, ed. Jane Collins (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 39.
[11] Keith Lehrer, *Art, Self and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 111.

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examinations, with many narratives played out by the two main metaphysical stances of monism and dualism. Monism, the theory that we are made of one substance, is typically divided into two types: Parmenidean monism – that we are literally made of one thing (a staple of stoic thought, later taken up by Spinoza) – and that we are one *type* of thing, but this can produce outwardly different elements (cf. Hume's bundle theory of self, Hegel's doctrine of the 'concrete universal' and Leibnitz' monads). Dualism on the other hand, the notion that mind and matter are two different but interconnected things, has a very singular philosophical lineage, borne out of Plato's discussions with Aristotle, and later forming the foundation of Cartesian thought.

Rotation Three

In terms of staking a claim in the monist/dualist debate, there is clearly a dualist Cartesian thinking underpinning Tippett's representation of the basic physical act of breathing: to paraphrase Descartes' maxim, 'I breathe therefore I am'. The sound of breathing is present in a separate self, here the offstage breather who is simultaneously linked to the physical body (the orchestra), but palpably different. However, the embodiment of this simple act of breathing is so far removed from the 'real' of the body, that in many ways neither the monist nor dualist notions are satisfactory lenses through which to examine the complex understanding of identity in the symphony's musical journey.

We are aware that, as the music comes winding down in the last moments, the return of the distant breathing marks an ending, a final drawing out of the last threads of breath. When we hear a breath, we understand the new life it gives to 'be' in the world, to have a real and physical place, even if the sound of it is only abstract. The inherent physicality of the breath is synonymous with life, even when its telling backdrop of an ever-quietening musical score points only to death. One gets the sense from listening to Tippett's works that he understands this contradiction. David Clarke notes that 'in *King Priam* and beyond he begins to wrestle with a dark "anti-self"; an agon breaks out between his old humanistic side and a form of anti-humanism whose archetype bears comparison with … the later Nietzsche'.[12] Such darkness might superficially negate qualities of purity, beauty and closure in the music – a Nietzschean *amor fati* – but Tippett's is an artistry constantly searching for metaphors for worldly experiences to act in some way as poetical agents, bringing his physical understandings of the world into the abstract sphere of music in order to strengthen and empower their meanings. These metaphors can be both musical, as in the famous example of the traditional spirituals he brings in as modern day 'chorales' in the oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, and extra-musical, for example in his use of the writings of Saint Augustine in the eponymous work.

This concept of worldliness, or at least 'worldifying' is a far cry from the abstract esotericism of Hegelian or Cartesian notions of being. A philosopher whose thought provides a far more helpful viewpoint in addressing Tippett's symphony is Martin Heidegger, much of whose work deals with this notion of worldliness or presence. One of Heidegger's biggest philosophical breakthroughs was the concept of *Dasein*, which translates roughly as 'being there' (German: *da*

[12] Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett*, p. 24.

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'there'; *sein* 'being') or 'presence', and refers specifically to the experience of being that is peculiar to human beings: the being that occurs in-the-world.

This notion of *Dasein* provides us with a reinterpretation of 'the very *activity of existing*',[13] shifting focus of the metaphysical investigation from the subject-centred notions of the ideal corporeal being that we find in the monist/dualist lines of thought, to a phenomenological enquiry which engages the reality of existence and the authenticity of everyday experience. For Heidegger, it is a direct critique of Cartesianism, and thus of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole. According to Heidegger, in his metaphysics, Descartes attempts to present a world 'with its skin off',[14] in that he treats theoretical knowledge as more important than experiential or sensual knowledge. Heidegger posits:

> What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking waggon, the motor-cycle . . . [it] requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'. The fact that motor-cycles and waggons are what we proximally hear is the phenomenal evidence that in every case *Dasein*, as Being-in-the-world, already dwells alongside what is ready-to-hand within-the-world; it certainly does not dwell proximally alongside 'sensations'; nor would it first have to give shape to the swirl of sensations to provide a springboard from which the subject leaps off and finally arrives at a 'world'. Dasein, as essentially understanding, is proximally alongside what is understood.[15]

In order fully to understand our being, then, we need to understand it in relation to the way we experience it. The subject must use what Heidegger calls 'value-predicates' (context-dependent meanings) to understand how it fits into the world, and subsequently answer any questions it has about its position within that world. Understanding Tippett's Fourth through a Heideggerian model, it is apparent that the sensory nature of the aesthetic experience – hearing the ready-at-hand (or 'real world') element of the breathing in an artistic form – better equips us with the requisite value-predicates to better understand the metaphysical issues posed by the piece's metaphysical questioning.

Rotation Four

Heidegger's definition of the 'world' in which *Dasein* exists is of a network of signifiers and experiences, a 'totality of involvements'[16] that surround the subject. To clarify this, he gives the example of a hammer undertaking the act of hammering. Thus the hammer's world is intelligible as existing with respect to both the physical action of hammering that lies at the core of its current function, but also the other involvements to which this task is connected (making an object, pulling out nails, dismantling wardrobes, moving house, packing, van-driving, etc. *ad infitum*).[17] If for Heidegger the notion of a world is created by its phenomenological universality, then one key aspect of the world we experience must surely be birth, with the furthest point in the 'totality of involvements' being death. *Dasein* is inherently not

[13] Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 40.
[14] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1953) p. 132.
[15] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 207.
[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 97.
[17] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 93.

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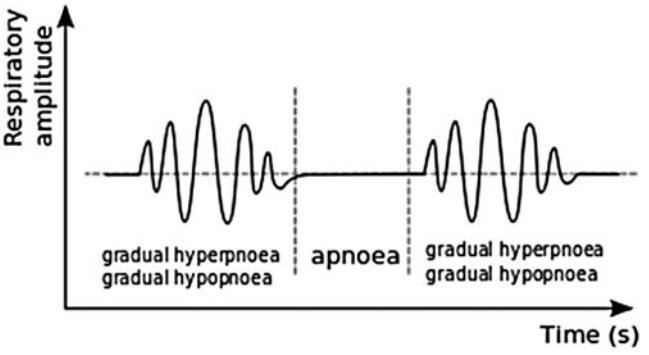

Figure 2:
Cheyne-Stokes respiration

only aware its own mortality, but it must be shaped by it: the world in which we are being is preconditioned, even boundaried, by the experiences of birth and death.

The final moments of Tippett's Fourth we hear are of a body dying. The repeating oscillations of swelling *messa di voce* breaths followed by a drawn-out pause reflects exactly the breathing patterns of patients on their death-beds, known as Cheyne-Stokes respiration (Figure 2), particularly common in patients with heart failure or brain injuries. But this is not a traumatic death. The music arrives at its earlier A-centric tonal plane (with hints of the C♯ area from Group II) and the gradual decrescendo of breath does not hold the restlessness of the artist in *Tod und Verklärung*, painfully remembering the struggles of his lifetime. Rather it is a dignified death, whose final utterances are a calm submission to the next stage of being.

For Heidegger, death has a metaphysical significance equal to – if not greater than – life. The journey towards death not only reaffirms life, but it reveals our real selves in our truest and most authentic forms. Death is not an empirical event for Heidegger, but rather a non-relational ecstasy, outside the linearity of time, with a universal potential for what happens next. When we live our lives as a Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) we see death a triumphant 'unconcealment' of the self, and as such – perhaps paradoxically – as an affirmation of life.[18] This strongly recalls the 'Romantic notion' of the 'universality and inevitability' of Schiller's 'concept of joy', which Arnold Whittall suggests was one of Tippett's great inheritances from Beethoven.[19]

Perhaps death is not the denial of life here, but rather the movement towards a positive goal. If so, we can view the piece as one singular trajectory of attainment, with three and a half rotations of attempt before a final arrival (see Figure 3). In this reading, each arrival of the Group I material has the potential to complete the trajectory, but as each one is imperfect or altered there is a 'crisis', a turning point that kick starts another attempted rotation, finally reaching a breakthrough at the arrival of the original, 'pure' Group I material.

In programme notes for his Third Symphony Tippett describes how 'the terms "arrest" and "movement" are metaphysical, implying

[18] Cf. Karl Jaspers' notion of a *Grenzsituation* ('limit situation'), the conceit that humans only discover truths pertaining to their being in extreme situations.
[19] Arnold Whittall, 'Resisting Tonality: Tippett, Beethoven and the Sarabande', *Music Analysis* 9/3 (1990), pp. 267–86.

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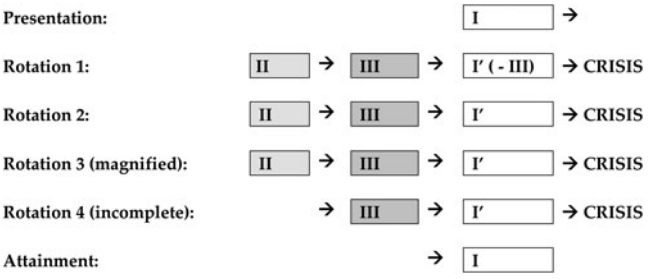

Figure 3:
Rotational representation of Tippett's *Fourth Symphony*

a compression of energy, and an explosion of energy'. These concepts of 'arrest' and 'movement' form the key opposition that drives the cycles of 'attempt–crisis' described above. However, where in the Third the terms relate to processes of energy, in the Fourth, they relate to the movement-arrest of a metaphysical transfiguration, which takes place over the course of the work's span; namely the music's journey away from – and return to – the opening Group I. Considering this material in light of the above rotational reading, there is something different, almost pure about this material, in that it is the only material that does not generate a crisis. Indeed this material, described by Tippett as the 'wind of the spirit', could hold a quasi-religious affect, suggesting both the ideal of purity imbued at birth, and the 'rebirth' at life's end.

Yet again, this recalls a Beethovenian model, in this case, the *Heiliger Dankgesang (Holy song of thanksgiving)* from his Op.132 Quartet. The movement oscillates between slow modal chorale-like sections in F Lydian and faster sections, '*Neue Kraft fühlend*' ('feeling new strength'), in D. Each of the cycles is broken by a crisis point – typically a fragmenting, or breaking down of the material – before the music can begin again. Each is a plea to a higher power, a prayer to be completed. As with the above reading of Tippett's symphony, it is only after a half rotation (an iteration of only the first group of material in both cases) that that cycling can stop.

This allusion suggests a final metaphysical perspective that this piece might unlock, not just on the body–mind duality, but also on the deeper question of our relationship to a higher power. The final breaths that complete Tippett's cycling allude to the possibility of a future after death, be it the hope of resurrection, reincarnation or afterlife. There is a sense that these final breaths act out an answer (if such a thing is possible) to the question posed by their opening counterparts. There is a sense of death, but also of completion, a revelation of self experienced by *Dasein*. We are guided to feel the essentiality of existence.

Attainment

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger posits that experiencing art opens up our world-experience and reveals hidden truths.[20] Yet all too often, the function of art in philosophy is to illustrate or exemplify an

[20] Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Vittorio Klostermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 29–37.

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argument.[21] Art is so deeply connected to human experience that it can open up a metaphorical world that cannot be reached by philosophy alone, making art the ideal medium to extend and enhance the metaphysical debate through its experiential quality. In Keith Lehrer's words, 'we cannot know all there is to know about a work of art without experiencing it'.[22]

This is exactly what happens in Tippett's Fourth Symphony: the use of live breathing acts as a signifier of the essence of *Dasein*, of our presence in the world. Even if the work is performed with the 'breather' offstage – as it sometimes is – we hear the breath and know its human quality. It acts as an exemplar for the worldly experience of breathing shared by all humans. It is a snapshot of *Dasein* that is at once a celebration of life and a reminder of our mortality, which reminds us how finite these discrete, fleeting moments are in our lives. It is a snapshot of the very essence of being, opened up through human experience.

I do not pretend to have conclusively verbalized this metaphysical essence, nor to have more than scraped the surface in explaining how Tippett's music sheds light on it. However, I do hope I have demonstrated a 'way in' to considering the non-verbal power of art to question and respond to the fundamental philosophical questions around us. Art is pure, direct, unmediated and – most importantly – tangible to us in the world, removed from the stuffy face of academic debate. In Tippett's words, 'art's greatest power is to reveal the marvelous beyond and behind the everyday'.[23] By hearing, seeing, touching, smelling or even tasting art, we transfer the content of the artwork to our world, and we are forced to consider how we interact with it. Art provides feeling and emotion to a discussion, shining a light on philosophy. Art makes philosophy real.

[21] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), p. 19.
[22] Lehrer, *Art, Self, and Knowledge*, p. 9; cf. Wittgenstein's notion that the form of representation cannot be described, it can only be shown.
[23] Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, p. 77.

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