

# Ritual in Tippett's *King Priam*

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*In the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory.*

(W.B. Yeats, 1900).<sup>1</sup>

As a young composer, Tippett (1905 - ) schooled himself not only in the techniques of composition but in the achievements of his contemporaries in the fields of poetry and of drama. Like them he became intrigued by the myths and rituals of the ancient world. 'All art', T.S. Eliot claimed in 1923, 'emulates the condition of ritual, this is what it comes from and to what is must always return for nourishment'.<sup>2</sup> W.B. Yeats wanted to create 'a play that will be more a ritual than a play'<sup>3</sup> and W.H. Auden described the poem as a rite in itself: 'the true poem in the French sense of *la poésie pure* would be, I suppose, a celebration of the numinous in itself in abstraction from all cases and devoid of any profane reference'.<sup>4</sup> Latin was for Stravinsky the quintessential language of ritual and convention, appropriate for 'subjects touching on the sublime'.<sup>5</sup> Shaw saw the role of the artist as an 'iconographer of the religion of my time'.<sup>6</sup> In Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, one of Tippett's sources for *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), the She-Ancient claimed that 'Art is the magic mirror you make to reflect your invisible dreams in visible pictures. You use a glass mirror to see your face: you use works of art to see your soul'.<sup>7</sup> Following such examples, Tippett declared art to be that icon of the numinous which can transform the everyday.

Such an iconography must reflect a *live* religion and Eliot was adamant on this point:

Of what value is it to 'revive' the Sword Dance except as a Saturday afternoon alternative to tennis and badminton for active young men in garden suburbs? For you cannot *revive* a ritual without reviving a faith. You can *continue* a ritual after the faith is dead...but you cannot revive it.<sup>8</sup>

While myth could express collective experience, the symbolism of ritual and liturgy expressed something further: aspirations beyond

human understanding, the eternal, the numinous or the transcendent. Each of these artists possessed some sense of such aspirations and their attraction to ritual was the symptom rather than the cause of a fundamental belief. Although Eliot and Auden were affiliated with the Church of England, Stravinsky with Russian Orthodoxy and Tippett with none, they adhered to some form of belief in order to counter a world of frightening scientific rationalism.

In 'A Note on Poetry and Belief' (1927), Eliot chided those who separated the two and in response to criticism of *The Waste Land*, assured his readers that 'doubt and uncertainty are merely a variety of belief'.<sup>9</sup> Yet 'the era of Joyce', he claimed in 1935, 'is of those who have never heard the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism'.<sup>10</sup>

Eliot could well have been referring to Tippett, whom he had met in that year. Tippett had by then found his spiritual model, not in organised religion, whether eastern or western, but in the writings of Jung. His 'conversion' in the early thirties was the equivalent of Eliot's for Tippett has never apparently altered his stance. When he came, in the 1970s, to edit a 1945 talk for *Moving into Aquarius*, he found buried in the earlier words, 'hints of more complex ideas'.<sup>11</sup> The stated attempt of transfiguring 'the everyday by a touch of the everlasting', he discovered, carried the suggestion of a creed in formulation. In 1956, his essay, 'What I believe', reiterated the old dichotomy between amoral scientific rationalism and the world of the imagination but applied Jungian ideas to the latter. Science, Tippett claimed, is repressing our longing for a more spiritually active life. In this essay also Tippett was most critical of Eliot's pompous 'us and them' attitude. He claimed that he, like Eliot, had had (spiritual) experiences, but his were of a kind which Eliot would reject as theologically false.<sup>12</sup> Tippett himself sought a more universal religion or philosophy than Christianity, which he saw as irretrievably tied to western puritanism. As an artist he rejected traditional faiths but believed 'that the faculty the artist may sometimes have to create images through which these mysterious depths of our being speak to us is a true

fundamental. I believe it is part of what we mean by having knowledge of God'.<sup>13</sup> In the 1978 postscript to the same essay, the argument was further refined. He believed that 'spiritual treasure' could be legitimately separated from the trappings of dogma and liturgy.

In his essay, 'Drum, Flute and Zither' (1953), Tippett set out his interpretation of the history of ritual drama and music. The innovation of the Greeks, he suggested, was 'the raising of stage verse beyond incantatory speech into recitative and song'.<sup>14</sup> Racine, conscious of the heritage of the Greeks, knew that 'to remove the divine, transcendent element from the drama, whether because one holds the Greek religious experience to be false or because one is enlightened and sceptical, is to move oneself toward a world of spiritual impoverishment'.<sup>15</sup> Tippett then distinguished between Racine's works of the poetry of transcendence and Goethe's reduction to mere 'goodness'. In Goethe's form, 'there is no tragic element; no "life enflamed by death"; no "soft, feathery shape" beyond death; no music of pipe and drum'. Nor did Shaw receive any approbation for his revival of religion on a scientific basis in *Back to Methuselah*. The result, according to Tippett, was sentimental rather than numinous, the artist an historian rather than iconographer. Yet in Yeats's drama, Tippett discovered an 'ineffable perfume', the quality which Goethe did not display. At the moment of the murder of Cuchulain in *The Death of Cuchulain*, Yeats called for the music of pipe and drum and this 'theatrically poetic situation', for Tippett, expressed 'the otherwise inexpressible'.

Particularly in Yeats's *Plays for Dancers*, both Tippett and Eliot found a contemporary precedent. Like them, Yeats believed that drama should renew a faith and to do so it should be distanced and strange. Invoking the Japanese Noh drama, Yeats developed an increasingly stylised stage, of poetic chant, dance and negligible scenery to render a spiritual and mythical world. Eliot had seen Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* at its first performance and was entranced by the appearance of the hawk. In 1924 he had been so taken with Yeats's model that he informed Arnold Bennett that he wanted to give up poetry and write a drama of modern life in rhythmic prose and 'perhaps with certain things in it accentuated by drum-beats'.<sup>16</sup> The principle of music as

heightened drama, whether literally or virtually music, was formed from the Greek paradigm. Yeats's three instruments symbolised rhythm, melody and accompaniment, in order of significance. Though the actual nature of this music was never defined, Yeats's simple 'music of pipe and drum' in its very vagueness acknowledged the intensity of music and its essential element, rhythm. Abstract notions which cannot be verbalised, especially religious ones, could yet be expressed in music *because* music is untranslatable.

Tippett concluded his panorama of spiritual affirmations in drama with a discussion of Eliot's plays. Tippett was fascinated by Eliot's comments in 'Poetry and Drama' (1951), where he saw Eliot as

someone we imagine as wholly within the Christian experience, but in *The Family Reunion* he uses a Greek myth, as Racine and Goethe do, though not like them on a stage set in a scene of ancient Greece; for *The Family Reunion* is set in a scene of the present day. As if to emphasise a further difference from Racine and Goethe, Eliot does not dismiss as they did, if for different reasons, the Greek religious experience from his stage.<sup>17</sup>

Eliot himself described holding up the action with intimations of religious experience as putting up with a 'poetic fantasia'.<sup>18</sup> Tippett, however, believed this a great gain for the theatre and found opportunity to inform Eliot of his opinion.<sup>19</sup> It was Tippett's view that 'by just such operatic tricks as lyrical suspensions of the action to savour a situation, the play can be given new dimensions' and implicitly, moments of the unity of poetry and belief. Tippett's most direct acknowledgement of Eliot lies at the end of this essay where he praises Eliot's exemplification of spiritual experience in art.

The Greek religious experience adapted by Eliot was a ritualistic one. These spiritual aspirations, if not religious affiliations, were revived (or, in Eliot's term, revived) by the discoveries of the ritual origins of primitive myth. Jane Harrison, F.M. Cornford and their associates revealed the transcendent images of Greek life and theatre.<sup>20</sup> Primitive rituals, she discovered, dealt with symbols of birth, death and the after life. Man could not outwit fate or evade destiny: birth and death were immutable experiences. Tippett noted the occurrence of

these themes in *The Rite of Spring* which he described as 'a drama of renewal. But it is a renewal only at the cost of sacrificing a virgin girl. Life is only renewed by death. Yet life is renewed - if only by an ecstatic religious rite'.<sup>21</sup> That work pooled ritual games, ceremonial ritual, images of birth and death and, by implication, the cycle of the seasons. Tippett discovered that primitive ritual was inherently expressive of religious belief. Avebury, near his home, was

a strange place, full of magic, where certainly art and religion were practised together. It is four thousand years old coming right out of our ancient past . . . and it wasn't for things like defence or for living in: it was for practising ritual. Could we, by imagination, go back to that time, and see the people moving about, we would find that they danced to music and sang and dressed themselves in particular clothes, because at that time the religion and the art were absolutely together.<sup>22</sup>

The distillation of life into the archetypal progression marked by birth, death and rebirth was the very basis of primitive ritual and religion.

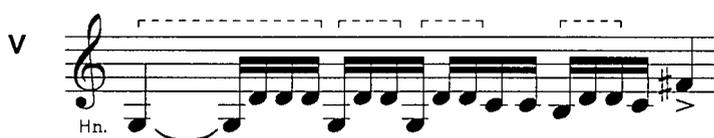
Tippett's opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*, exemplifies the Greek practice of ritual drama in its Ritual Dances and overall structure. According to Harrison, the centrepiece of Greek drama was the orchestra and dancing place. The 'union of dance and music and verse' as Yeats described it, was the vehicle of symbolic expression.<sup>23</sup> The adulation of dance was, in the early twentieth century, evidence of artists' attraction to ritual. Eliot's formulation of the constituent elements of drama included a symbolism of gesture. For 'the drama was originally ritual and ritual, consisting of a set of repeated movements, is essentially a dance'.<sup>24</sup>

Having read Eliot's seminal essay 'Poetry and Drama' and written essays and an opera of his own, in 1958 Tippett came to compile *King Priam* and the impact of his discoveries in religion and ritual is evident in that work. The opera was ostensibly an historical drama about family relationships. But Tippett's appraisal of humanity in its mythological light dictated the model of a great tragedy. Certain scenes were, therefore, invested with a ritualistic significance. He noted in *Music of the Angels* that he had read an essay by Freud entitled 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' (1913).<sup>25</sup> Freud found archetypal, mythological associations in the choosing of three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* and in *King Lear*, where a choice is made between three daughters. In *Lear*, the third daughter, Cordelia, is the youngest, fairest and most faithful. But in choosing her, Lear chose death. Tippett described Priam as 'a sort of King Lear'.<sup>26</sup> In the Judgement of Paris which Tippett set in the opera, Paris inexorably chooses Helen, as Aphrodite, the third of three goddesses. Helen appears dumb, a representation according to Freud, of death. The symbolism of the number three pervades the work: Priam has three monologues, the third of which is tripartite, and consults the triumvirate of Old Man, Young Guard and Nurse.

In the opera, the judgement scene takes place in a world of dream. Tippett created structural and intervallic analogues for 'the mirrored world' which, as Shaw described, reflects the soul. There are five principal gestures: at the appearance of Hermes (Fig. 193), a polytonal chord (i) is juxtaposed with a rapid figure in the xylophone (ii). Hermes's message from Zeus is presaged by repeated E in piano (iii), the xylophone motive,

The image contains three musical examples labeled i, ii, and iii.   
 Motive i: A polytonal chord for 8va-7, marked *ff* (forte) and *con 8* (con sesto).   
 Motive ii: A xylophone part marked *xyl.* and *mp* (mezzo-piano), and a piano part marked *pft.* and *marcatissimo secco*.   
 Motive iii: A tuba part marked *Tbn.* and *pesante marc.* (pesante marcato), and a piano part marked *pft.* and *marcato*.

Example 1a: Motives i-iii



Example 1b: Motives iv-v.

and, on the word 'choose', a timpani fragment which includes the tritone Ab-D associated with death (iv). As Paris dreams, with a melodic line falling ominously from Ab to E, the accompaniment is a new set of cyclic ostinatos (v).

Paris quails at his task (iv, ii, iii) but is encouraged by Hermes. These three motives are then continuously recycled for the entrance of each of the three goddesses and their motives. The tritone Ab-D continues to plague Paris as it is evident that his life is predetermined (202). His ritual question to Aphrodite is in a phrase reminiscent of 'returning to the light' in *The Midsummer Marriage*, with an E roll on timpani. As the goddesses depart, Paris's melody, from Ab to E, is heard above (v), Hermes sings 'To Troy' in D-Ab and the complex cluster (i) finishes the scene.

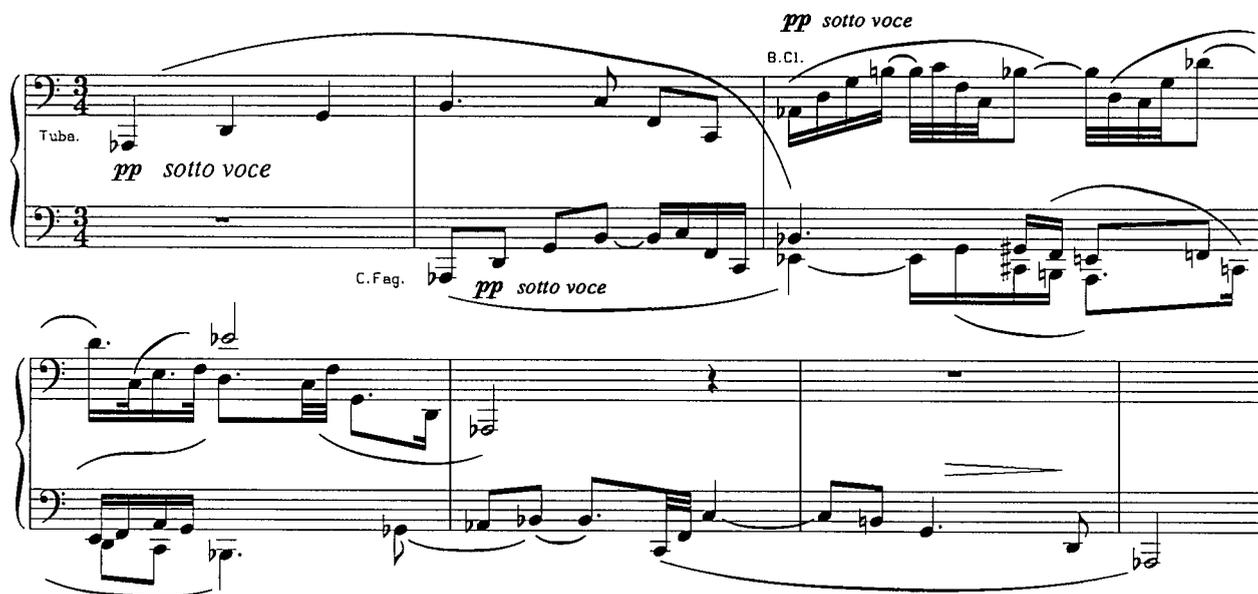
This scene, as the opera, is pervaded by the interval of the tritone, which is itself a symbolic mirror. Moreover, the construction of the whole scene is approximately palindromic, each horizontal line here being mirrored by another:

i, ii  
iii, ii, iv, v/  
iv, ii, iii/

ii, iii, iv (Hecuba motive,  
Andromache motive)/  
iv, ii, iii, (Helen motive) v/  
ii, i

Within this structure, the motives themselves carry a weight which is greater than their surface appearance: the associations of the tritone D-Ab with death, the Freudian inevitability of Paris's choice, and the continual recycling of material, point for the characters to ramifications for the future and derivations from the past.

As Paris chooses death in choosing Helen, so Priam has chosen death and the scene in which he finally accepts that death is made a ritual scene. In Tippett's studies of Purcell he had noted the power of Dido's lament when she too 'prepares herself [sic] for a great ritual death'. There, wrote Tippett, the music and the drama are so closely united, that the situation is expressed by



Example 2: Priam's ritual turn at the altar.

the music, 'the music is eating up the words'.<sup>27</sup> Priam 'ceases to live on the same plane of existence as the rest of his family'<sup>28</sup> and has a vision of life as a Yeatsian series of mirrors (from Yeats's *The Statues*, 1938). Priam's scene at the altar begins with a ritual turn (568, 581, 589), shown in Example 2.

Built from a motto of an augmented fourth, the same Ab and D, and a perfect fourth, it is stated in crotchets in tuba, followed by quavers in contra bassoon and semiquavers in bass clarinet. As Priam turns back to the altar, a retrograde statement of this motive is heard, thereby creating another mirror structure. This sequence is reiterated three times as Priam turns to farewell members of his family.

The symbolic use of motive and phrase in reference to poetic and visionary concepts imbues the opera with an element of 'distance'. This implies a distance not only from the contemporary world of the twentieth century but draws the action into the realm of the supernatural. In doing so, Tippett was articulating a concept of ritual drama in opera.

Charles Fiedelson Jnr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.215.

<sup>5</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *Chronicles of My Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936), p.205.

<sup>6</sup> G.B. Shaw, *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch* (London: Constable, 1921), p.lxxxv.

<sup>7</sup> Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, p.254.

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Ballet,' *Criterion* 3 (April 1925), 441.

<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'A Note on Poetry and Belief,' *Enemy* 1 (January 1927), 17.

<sup>10</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature,' in *Faith that Illuminates*, ed. V.A. Demant (London: Centenary, 1935), p.39.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius* (London: Paladin, 1974), p.14.

<sup>12</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, pp.81-2.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Tippett, *Music of the Angels* (London: Eulenberg, 1980), p.52.

<sup>14</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, p.71.

<sup>15</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, p.75. In Tippett's classification of French dramatists he was echoing Eliot, who stated that the high points of French drama were those of religious significance. See T.S. Eliot, 'Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern,' *University of Edinburgh Journal* 9 (Autumn 1937), 8-17.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Newman Flower, ed., *The Journals of Arnold Bennett 1921-1928* (London: Cassell, 1933), p.52.

<sup>17</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, p.81.

<sup>18</sup> T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), p.83.

<sup>19</sup> Tippett, *Music of the Angels*, pp.118, 213.

<sup>20</sup> Amongst the abundance of studies of ancient art and ritual were Harrison's *Religion of Ancient Greece* (1905), *Themis* (1912), *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) and *Epilogomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921).

<sup>21</sup> Tippett, *Music of the Angels*, p.89.

<sup>22</sup> Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius*, p.149.

<sup>23</sup> W.B. Yeats quoted in Priscilla Thoulless, *Modern Poetic Drama* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1934), p.151.

<sup>24</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Beating of a Drum,' *The Nation and the Athenæum*, 6 October 1923, p.12.

<sup>25</sup> Sigm. Freud, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 4, 2nd ed., transl. Joan Rivière (London: Hogarth, 1940), pp.244-56.

<sup>26</sup> 'Mr Michael Tippett Talks About His New Opera,' *Times* 18 January 1960, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> Tippett, *Music of the Angels*, p.215.

<sup>28</sup> Tippett, *Music of the Angels*, p.74.

<sup>29</sup> 'Mr Michael Tippett Talks About His New Opera', p.3.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Symbolism of Poetry' (1900), in *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.160.

<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Marianne Moore,' *Dial* 75 (December 1923), 597.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Denis Donoghue, *The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp.33-4. Isherwood in 1937 described Auden as 'a musician and a ritualist. As a child, he enjoyed a high Anglican upbringing, coupled with a sound musical education. The Anglicanism has evaporated, leaving only the height: he is still much preoccupied with ritual, in all its forms...If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass'; quoted in R. Carter, ed., *Thirties Poets: The Auden Group* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.75.

<sup>4</sup> W.H. Auden, 'Poetry as a Rite,' in *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature*, ed. R. Ellman and