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The Analogy between Ornament and Music

My paper is divided into three sections. In the first part I shall examine Gombrich's analysis of the analogies between the decorative arts and music in his book *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (published in 1979 as a sequel to *Art and Illusion* from 1960). In the second part I shall discuss Peter Kivy's recent essay 'The fine art of repetition', where he presents an argument to the effect that music, that is, pure instrumental music or absolute music, is in fact a decorative or ornamental art. In the third and final section I shall make reflections on the significance and purpose, or rather purposes, of art, taking particular note of some of the salient differences between music and the decorative arts.

I

The central theme in *The Sense of Order* is our search for order in the visual world. Design, ornament and decoration are ways of creating order in the visual world. The need for order, however, can also manifest itself in an auditory medium. In *Art and Illusion* Gombrich writes about music as the discovery and articulation of an inner, mental order. When art turns away from the visible world, according to Gombrich, '[it] may re-

ally have found an uncharted region which awaits to be discovered and articulated, as music has discovered and articulated it through the universe of sound'.¹ But it is in the last chapter of *The Order of Sense*, entitled 'Some Musical Analogies', that Gombrich systematically explores the relationship between the decorative arts and music.

Gombrich begins his discussion by quoting Walter Pater's remark to the effect that all art constantly aspires to the condition of music, and he paraphrases, or rather comments, on Pater's view as follows:

The existence of music, an art devoid of ostensible subject matter, an art not even serving a physical need like architecture nor rivalling nature through *mimesis*, rarely failed to excite wonder and jealousy. For without these supports music appeared to achieve pre-eminence both in its power over the emotions and in its appeal to the intellect.²

Gombrich clearly regards music as a non-mimetic, non-representational art, which appeals to the intellect through its intricate structure and at the same time is capable of powerfully affecting our emotions. Music, Gombrich claims, is the highest achievement of 'The Sense of Order'. His purpose in the epilogue to *The Sense of Order* is to 'probe analogies and metaphors [between music and] other forms of pattern-making for their validity and limitations'.³

The following similarities and dissimilarities between music and the ornamental arts emerge from Gombrich's analysis:

1. The perceptual alternation between figure and ground is of great importance in design, but lacks an exact analogy in music. The 'auditory patterning' we find in instrumental music does not alternate; it is laid down by the composer in the score.
2. The perception of symmetry in music is confined to the brief time span we can hold in our echo memory, whereas the perception of symmetry in design and the resultant impression of balance is considerably more flexible.

¹ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 1960, 5th ed., (Oxford: Phaidon, 1983), p. 303.

² E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 1979, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984) p. 285.

³ *ibid.*

3. Like all arts occurring in time music is relentlessly asymmetrical. There is a firm sense of directedness in music that is lacking in most ornamental works. Nevertheless, an element of directedness can be introduced into design as in the transition from geometrical form to representational motifs.

4. The motifs occurring in decorations create 'a field of force', which corresponds to tonality in music, which can also be described metaphorically as a 'field of force'. We place representational elements in decorative design into a spatial context and a gravitational field. In music the experience of chords 'gravitating' towards the tonic is to a certain extent analogous to this experience. Moreover, the melody in a musical composition has a definite shape and is grasped as a whole like a motif in decorative art.

5. The use of metaphors is a further point of contact between decorative art and music. 'Colours can be described as warm, sweet, loud or cheerful, much as sounds can be characterized as bright, soft, harsh or sad', Gombrich says.⁴ He is, however, somewhat apprehensive about metaphors, for he questions whether the use of metaphorical description is justifiable in a theory. He recognizes that metaphorical descriptions are inevitable when it comes to describing temporal patterns, and therefore we should not feel guilty about using them. Nevertheless, he betrays a crypto-positivistic view of language and aesthetic analysis because he seems to think that it would be better if we could dispense with metaphorical descriptions of artworks; somehow metaphorical descriptions do not seem to be entirely respectable. But metaphorical descriptions are not only inevitable: there is also, what Wittgenstein called the use of the secondary sense of words, which in contrast to the use of metaphors is not guided by any criteria at all. Had Gombrich realized how prevalent this use of words is in aesthetics he would probably have been horrified. I shall comment on the difference between metaphors and the use of words in their secondary senses further on in connection with a musical example.

Many things could be said about these five points. I will, however, confine my comments to only one of them, viz. the fact that music

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

is an art of time, and therefore 'relentlessly asymmetrical' as Gombrich puts it. He does not, I think, pay sufficient attention to the fact that music is a performing art and that the most interesting and important differences between music and the decorative arts are a consequence of this. We ascribe expressive properties both to designs and to musical works. An ornament and a sonata movement can be gay or sad, a design as well as a chord can be shrill or soft. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that whereas decorations or designs are never performed, music is primarily a performing art. It is normally designed to be performed, not to be read, or looked at.

We should bear this fact in mind when discussing the expressive properties of music. When philosophers speak about the expressiveness of music they tend to abstract from real-life performances and ascribe the expressive properties to the music itself, i.e. to the score or to an ideal performance. It is clear, however, that different performances of the same music can vary greatly and that the expressive properties of the music vary accordingly. As an illustration of this point I shall consider two strikingly different interpretations of the famous *Adagietto* from Mahler's 5th symphony. In the recorded live performance by the London Philharmonic under Klaus Tennstedt in December, 1988, the *Adagietto* takes 11 minutes and 21 seconds, and, as the sleeve notes say, the interpreters apparently believe that the music is 'ineffably nostalgic'⁵ and accordingly do their best to bring this out. The performance of the *Adagietto* by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the American businessman Abraham Kaplan, takes only 7 minutes and 57 seconds – the time difference between the two performances is more than 3 minutes and the expressive properties of these two *Adagiettos* differ. In contrast to the standard view that the *Adagietto* is 'ineffably nostalgic', Kaplan believes – on the authority of the Dutch conductor Mengelberg – that the *Adagietto* was a musical love letter from Mahler to his future wife. Kaplan draws the conclusion that 'while the movement has a tempo mark *sehr langsam* (very slow), as a message of romantic love there is a limit to how slowly the *Adagietto* can be

⁵ Alan Blyth 'Sleeve Notes, Mahler, *Symphony No 5*', EMI CDC 7 498882.

played without distorting its essential character'.⁶ Because of its speed Kaplan's interpretation has different expressive qualities from the usual, slower interpretations. We might speak of *expressiveness in musical performances* in the case I have been considering. The upshot of these considerations is that the expressive properties of a musical work can vary in a way that the properties of an ornamental work cannot.

II

I now turn to Peter Kivy's analysis of instrumental music as a decorative art. The problem Kivy considers in his essay 'The Fine Art of Repetition', published in 1993 in the volume of essays with the same title, is the problem of musical repeats. Kivy is concerned with those passages that should be played twice. In performance these repeats are frequently omitted. If the repeats in Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were omitted the work would be almost half its original length and if the repeats in the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* are skipped we lose one fifth of the music. According to Kivy a theory of absolute music must be able to account for the occurrence of repeats in music. He considers three different theories of absolute music; the 'literary' model, the 'organism' model and the 'wallpaper' model.

According to the literary model a piece of absolute music has some kind of conceptual content. Kivy distinguishes between three variants of the model. There is the discourse model, which conceives of music as a kind of discursive argument, the dramatic model which likens music to a kind of emotive stage play, and the narrative model which regards music as a recited emotive story. In Kivy's view the literary model has many defects. In the first place it cannot justify the repeats in music. In the second place the view that music is a conceptual or descriptive language is incorrect. Of course it is a mistake to conceive of all instrumental music in terms of a programme and to listen to music as if it always described something may be positively harmful.

⁶ 'Sleeve Notes Mahler, *Adagietto* from *Symphony No.5*' GKS 1001.

As Frank Sibley remarks in his brilliant essay 'Making Music Our Own', 'descriptions constrain experience of music, rather as performed plays inject specificities absent from silent readings', and therefore, 'listeners, like readers, may want to avoid them'. The inability to read *Hamlet* without hearing or seeing Olivier may become quite infuriating, Sibley remarks.⁷ Or consider this: the protagonist of Christer Kihlman's novel *Dyre Prins* (Dear Prince) believes that Sibelius's symphonies are really about sexual intercourse. I myself have never thought of his symphonies this way but once the suggestion has been made, all kinds of unwelcome associations can crop up when listening to the second or fifth symphony. But let's return to Kivy.

Quite apart from other deficiencies in Kivy's view the literary model cannot make sense of repeats in music, since, as he puts it, it is absurd to tell the same story over again. The 'organism' model fares no better, since it views a musical work as an unfolding process, and it does not make sense to think of an organic process as going backwards, as it were, and repeating an earlier stage. 'The literary and organism models are what they are: process models that do not allow of their doubling back on themselves', Kivy concludes.⁸

The third model is what Kivy, taking a hint from Kant, calls the wallpaper model. In his third critique, *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant writes about what he calls 'free beauty' as follows:

So designs *à la grecque*, foliage for frameworks or on wall-papers, & c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing – no Object under a definite concept – and are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words. (Kant, *Critique of Aesthetics Judgment* § 16).

Kant's view that music can profitably be likened to wallpaper is taken seriously by Kivy: 'Kant's original insight, that the comparison with wallpaper means to uncompromisingly make plain, is that music, in-

⁷ Frank Sibley, *Making Music Our Own*, in Michael Krausz, *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), p. 175.

⁸ Peter Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition*, in P. Kivy, *The Fine Art of Repetition: Essays in the Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 338.

deed, possesses no content. It is pure, empty decoration: arabesque.⁹ To regard absolute music as a kind of wallpaper may seem to be an unutterably philistine trivialization of the greatest musical works of the classical and romantic tradition. Should we choose Bachian, Beethovenian, Brahmsian or perhaps Brucknerian wallpaper? Kivy takes the charge of trivialization seriously. He realizes that '[t]o make of such music [pure instrumental music, at least since the time of Viennese classical style] mere decoration many would say is reason enough to reject the wallpaper model out of hand'.¹⁰ He nevertheless believes that the wallpaper model, without in the least trivializing our experience of music, neatly solves the problem of musical repeats. It solves the problem, because if a musical work is likened to decorations instead of being compared to discourse or to an unfolding process, it becomes clear why it is wrong to leave out the repeats. To leave out the repeats is like cutting off a couple of borders from a Persian carpet (Kivy himself possesses at least one such carpet), on the grounds that they are just 'the same old thing'.

Music, Kivy argues, is 'merely sonic wallpaper, but it is wallpaper with some pretty impressive features. It is multidimensional wallpaper. It is quasi-syntactic wallpaper. It is deeply expressive wallpaper. And it is deeply moving wallpaper'.¹¹ Decorative art is not necessarily trivial because it lacks content; on the contrary it can be very impressive, even sublime, Kivy remarks, and reminds us of the *Alhambra*. To understand pure music on its own terms is, in Kivy's view, to regard it as a decorative art.

Nevertheless it seems to me that Kant, who was an unmusical fellow, is not a particularly good guide in musical matters. Hegel, of course, was even worse, for he thought that music was empty and meaningless because it lacks spiritual content and expression which are for him the hallmarks of art. Before criticizing Kivy's wallpaper model with the help of a few musical illustrations, it may be worth pointing out that not only un-Orphean people such as Kant and Hegel have likened music to ornaments. Hanslick exhorts us to 'think of an arabesque as

⁹ Ibid., p. 348.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 353.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 358.

not dead and static, but coming into being in continuous self-formation before our eyes' which is something very similar to our experience of music, he believes.¹²

I shall discuss Kivy's view that pure instrumental music is an ornamental art by means of two musical examples. My first example, which *can*, without great absurdity, be regarded as sonic wallpaper, comes from Erik Satie, one of the most eccentric and bizarre composers. Who else could think of writing a *Sonatine bureaucratique* or a *Prélude canin*? Since one of Satie's remarks about his friend Claude Debussy's *La Mer* is both famous and of considerable philosophical interest I cannot refrain from quoting it, although it is strictly speaking irrelevant to the present discussion. Debussy, who gave descriptive titles to each of the three movements of his symphonic sketches, calls the first 'de l'aube à midi sur la mer' (from dawn to noon at sea). Satie's remark that he particularly liked the moment at 11.15 graphically indicates the limitations of representation in programme music. From a person who wrote in his diary, published in a musical journal, that he regularly got up at 7.18 in the morning and was inspired from 10.23 to 11.47, we can either expect rubbish or original and intriguing work. I think that most of Satie's work belongs to the latter category.

The piece I have chosen is his *6th Gnosienne* for piano, composed in 1897. The subtitle of the piece is 'Avec conviction et avec une tristesse rigoureuse' (with conviction and with a rigorous sadness), which indicates how the piece should be played. There is of course a difference between saying that the piece should be played with 'a rigorous sadness' and saying that it is expressive of rigorous sadness. I think, however, that we are entitled to say that Satie's composition, when played in the proper way is expressive of rigorous sadness. *The Blue Danube* can probably be played with conviction, but I find it hard to imagine that it could be played with a rigorous sadness, nor can I imagine that Strauss's famous waltz is expressive of any kind of sadness. Consider, on the other hand, the final movement of Tchaikovsky's 6th

¹² Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, 1854, transl. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986) p. 29

symphony, the *Pathétique*, which is certainly sad, but far from rigorously sad.

When I first came across Satie's piece, I naturally wondered what rigorous sadness is. We all know, or should know, what a rigorous argument is, and when Derrida tells us what a concept means 'en toute rigueur' we can be sure that it means almost the exact opposite. But it is not only arguments that can be rigorous or lacking in rigour. The nordic climate is often quite rigorous, and we should not commit crimes so that we avoid the rigour of the law being applied to us, not to mention the rigours of prison life. And even if we manage to avoid all kinds of unpleasant rigours in life, one day, alas, rigor mortis will set in, because as Anthony Burgess puts it in his autobiography: 'Life itself is lethal but, we hope, not yet'.

What then, is a rigorous sadness? It is this. [Musical example 1: Erik Satie, *6e Gnossienne*. Avec conviction et avec une tristesse rigoureuse. Riri Shimada, piano, Sony Classical CD 52510]

To describe a piece of music as rigorously sad is not to speak metaphorically, but to use language in what Wittgenstein called a secondary sense. In the *Philosophical Investigation* Wittgenstein writes:

The secondary sense is not a 'metaphorical' sense. If I say 'For me the vowel e is yellow' I do not mean: 'yellow' in a metaphorical sense, – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea 'yellow'.¹³

The fact that Wittgenstein gives a rather outlandish example of a secondary use of a word should not blind us to the fact that there are 'examples [...] in other places that are clearly examples of the secondary use of words [which] are not at all idiosyncratic', as Ben Tilghman points out.¹⁴ Bitter food and a bitter sorrow are more ordinary examples.¹⁵

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd. ed., transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 216^e.

¹⁴ Ben Tilghman, *But is it Art?: The Value of Art and the Temptation of Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 160.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1. § 68, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)..

One fundamental difference between a metaphor and the use of words in the secondary sense is that whereas metaphors normally can be paraphrased and also justified in terms of similarities and analogies this is not the case with the secondary use of words. Consider the statement 'Richard is a gorilla', which according to Searle means the same as 'Richard is fierce, nasty, and prone to violence.'¹⁶ If the Richard we are referring to is, in fact, a gentle, kind, and agreeable person, we would have to withdraw the metaphorical description. Or consider the use of the word *sweet* in different contexts. We speak of sweet foods, sweet children, sweet sounds. These examples are taken from Oswald Hanfling's article 'I heard a plaintive melody: (*Philosophical Investigations* p. 209)'.¹⁷ 'A sweet tooth' and a 'sweet girl' are further examples. Is there something common to all these cases, i.e. sweet foods, sweet children, sweet sounds, sweet girls and a sweet tooth, on the basis of which we call them *sweet*? We might think that they are all nice. But although sweet children and sweet girls are nice, a sweet tooth is not and I doubt whether sweet sounds are nice. Sweet foods are tasty and savoury, but sweet children are not, nor are sweet girls; dishy girls are in a sense tasty, but they are rarely *sweet* or nice. So, I think the use of '*sweet*' in these cases does not depend on similarities or analogies, but are cases of the secondary use of language. When we use words in a secondary sense there need be nothing in common between what a word ordinarily denotes and how it is used in its secondary sense. Another important feature of the secondary use of words is that the ability to use a word in a secondary sense presupposes an understanding of how to use the word in its primary sense. The latter condition applies also to the use of metaphors. So in order to understand the characterization of Satie's piece as rigorously sad, we need to master the word '*rigorous*' and the word '*sad*' in their primary senses. Having learnt the expression '*rigorous sadness*' from Satie, we can then go on and apply it to other pieces of music, certain passages in Sibelius's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, for

¹⁶ John R. Searle, 'Metaphor', in Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 82.

¹⁷ Oswald Hanfling, 'I heard a plaintive melody: (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 209)', in *Wittgenstein: Centenary Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 117–133.

example. Moods as well as emotions, even landscapes, can be 'rigorously sad.'

And now for my second musical illustration, the beginning of the first movement of Gustav Mahler's 6th symphony, 'the tragic symphony'. [Musical example 2: Gustav Mahler, *Symphony 6*, beginning of the 1st movement, Vienna Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein, DG 427 697-2].

If this is sonic wallpaper, it is quite loud – not to say screamingly loud wallpaper. I doubt whether anyone of his own free will would wish to spend the time it takes to perform the whole symphony – approximately an hour and a half – in a room with wallpaper that *looked* the way Mahler's tragic symphony sounds.

Now, the question I want to raise is this: is it possible or fruitful to view Mahler's music as a purely formal design, as some kind of decoration or ornament with expressive properties? I fear that those who, like Kivy, incline to a formalist view of music, cannot make much sense of Mahler's music, nor of Bruckner's or of the music of a host of other late classical and romantic composers. In fact, formalists tend to avoid Mahler altogether. In Kivy's many publications on the philosophy of music there are only a couple of references to Mahler. On one occasion he wishes to illustrate the distinction between the expressive properties of a piece of music and the personal associations that a particular piece of music may arouse. Mahler's song cycle, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, makes Kivy feel a bit off colour, as he puts it, even the happy parts, because for him the music is associated with a particularly unhappy part of his life.¹⁸ The distinction between the phenomenal, expressive properties that a piece of music possesses in virtue of its structure, orchestration etc. *and* the personal associations it may call to mind, is a valid one, but is not of any particular relevance with regard to Mahler. The second reference to Mahler in Kivy's writings occurs in connection with his discussion of the distinction between what music might be expressive of and what it might be symptomatic of.¹⁹ Mahler's music, Kivy suspects, is

¹⁸ Peter Kivy, *The Corded Shell: Reflexions on Musical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1980), p. 30.

¹⁹ Peter Kivy, *Music Alone: Philosophical Reflexions on the Purely Musical Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1990), pp. 178–180.

symptomatic of neurosis, but it does not express neurosis. Again, the distinction is valid, but does not contribute to our understanding of Mahler, nor is it meant to.

With the exercise of a certain amount of self-restraint I suppose it is possible to listen to Mahler's symphonies as if they were nothing but musical ornaments. But an entirely different approach to Mahler is open to us, an approach which I believe is more natural as well as more rewarding.

Consider Frances Berenson's contention that '[t]o ignore the overwhelming emotional content of Mahler's music as something of no importance is to completely fail to understand it, completely to misinterpret it'.²⁰ A formalist, or semi-formalist of Kivy's ilk might be able to accommodate the view expressed by Berenson, for Kivy, of course, does not deny that music can be expressive of emotions, although he would quarrel over the phrase 'the emotional *content*' of music, since for Kivy music has no content at all. Berenson's further claim that Mahler's music brilliantly conveys the universality of the human condition goes far beyond anything Kivy is willing to envisage. Berenson does not offer us much of an argument for her view. Instead, she quotes Mahler as saying that the 6th symphony expresses 'the sum of all the suffering [he has] been compelled to endure at the hands of life'.²¹ Berenson evidently wants to suggest that the *character* of Mahler's 6th symphony is somehow the result of and the expression of his life experiences. Obviously this view gives a pivotal role to the artist and apparently a knowledge of the artist's life is assumed to be necessary for the understanding and interpretation of the music. This view is not without its problems. The analytic aesthetician is likely to rush at us and ask how real life experiences can be embodied in a work of art; how the intentions of an artist can determine the character of an artwork, etc. etc. Also, of course, we expose ourselves to the mocking laughter of the poststructuralist, since talk about the artists' intentions and experiences is childish, humanist nonsense. According to poststructuralist thought, flowing freely from the springs of wisdom, the artist is, in fact, dead and gone.

²⁰ Frances Berenson, 'Interpreting the Emotional Content of Music', in *The Interpretation of Music: Philosophical Essays*, p. 65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

But even if we grant that there are problems involved in speaking about the life experiences of the artist as being embodied in a work of art, I do not think it is unintelligible or absurd to talk about Mahler's 6th symphony in the manner outlined. For some reason a parallel case in the decorative arts would strike me as absurd. A design may be said to be tragic or sad, if the colours are dark and brooding, or if a tragic mask occurs as a motif in the ornament, etc. But I would be puzzled if an artist said that the repugnant patterns in an ornament or decoration expressed all the ghastly misadventures he or she had experienced in life, and that the design in addition, expresses the universality of the human condition.

I don't think the example of the ornament is analogous to the musical one, even though I cannot account for why it isn't. But then there are many things I know without being able to account for *how* I know them. To be sure, there are theories which try to explain how a work of art can embody human experiences and how the creator of a work of art relates to the work. According to Susanne K. Langer's theory of art, art is 'the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling'.²² A similar conception is elaborated by Paul Crowther, who conceives of art as a 'symbolically significant sensuous manifold', which is founded 'on an *internal relation* between the creator's experience and the made artefact'.²³ In my view these theories explain too much and too little. In the first place many works of art, in particular most modern and post-modern works, cannot intelligibly be viewed as symbolic of human experiences; secondly, both theories seem to make sense primarily in regard to *successful* classical and romantic works of art. In other words, they do not give us a definition of art as such as they claim: the characteristics of certain successful or great classical and romantic works of art are incorporated into a definition of art as such. Even if Langer's and Crowther's theories cannot be accepted as general theories of art they can nevertheless contribute to our understanding and interpretation of works of art of a certain kind. Mahler's 6th symphony is, I believe, such

²² Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from 'Philosophy in a New Key'* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 40.

²³ Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), p. 6.

a work, but Bach's solo sonatas or John Cage's music for prepared piano are not.

III

There are things music can do that are beyond the powers of the decorative arts. I will now try to make good that claim. My strategy will be clear from what I have said about Mahler's 6th symphony. To a greater or lesser extent the understanding and enjoyment of certain works of art demand a knowledge of real life. Some works of art cannot be described and valued without importing categories from real life. Of course, the import of categories can be applied in the opposite direction. Real life events can be understood in terms taken from the aesthetic realm. Real life events are said to be romantic, tragic, comic or grotesque. These terms have their home in drama, literature and the visual arts; the term 'tragic', in particular, seems to be overused in the description of real life events. As Iris Murdoch remarks, real life events are not tragic, they can in fact be a lot worse. That sounds horrifying, but she is, in fact, only making a conceptual point, albeit an important one, for in a tragedy all the terrible events unfold according to a certain pattern and appear as somehow justified and reconciled. A horrible event in real life, such as the ethnic purge in Bosnia or the holocaust, which is Murdoch's example, 'is not tragedy, it is a fragment of something far more awful, not just because it is real, but because it is different; it has no formal context, it is not modified and solaced by any limited surround'.²⁴ Murdoch's observation also explains why the extreme horrors of wars and genocide are not fit subjects for real art. Nevertheless the cautious use of the literary categories of tragedy and comedy in describing real life events can be illuminating.

But I am digressing. To return to ornament and music. We certainly need metaphors from various fields of experience when we wish to describe ornaments and works of decorative art, but I cannot

²⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 1992, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 95.

see that our real life experiences are as relevant to the appreciation of ornament and works of decorative art as they are to the interpretation and appreciation of literature and music. Formalist analyses of literature and music are of course both possible and useful within limits, but in contrast to the analysis of ornament, a formalist approach to literature or music leaves out something essential. 'Understanding [a] story', writes Frank Palmer in his engaging work, *Literature and Moral Understanding* (1992), 'involves understanding the characters as people'.²⁵ And we could add that understanding characters in a novel or a play as people presupposes understanding real people, which is not always easy. This means that some of our reactions to real people and real events are carried over to our attitudes towards fictive persons and fictive events. Consider, for example, Kafka's novel *The Trial*, where there are some very funny scenes. If, however, we thought the novel as a whole was hilariously funny, we would certainly have misunderstood it. *The Trial*, after all, is not *Three Men in a Boat*. If somebody giggled throughout a performance of Mahler's tragic symphony the performance must have been pathetically inadequate unless there was something wrong with the listener.

Life experiences are relevant to our appreciation of art, and art is relevant to our experience of life. How does this come about and in what manner can art be relevant to our life experiences? Consider Crowther's answer to this question. A work of art, he says,

reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world, and by clarifying this inherence it brings about a harmony between subject and object of experience – a full realization of the self. In the creation and reception of art, we are able to enjoy a free-belonging to the world.²⁶

I have indicated earlier my disagreement with Crowther's theory of art, but I agree with the view expressed in the above passage, if its applicability is confined to certain great works of art. In a similar vein, Iris Murdoch writes in her extremely stimulating and wide-ranging work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992):

²⁵ Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding: A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), p. 103.

²⁶ Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, p. 7.

In enjoying great art we experience a clarification and concentration and perfection of our own consciousness. Emotion and intellect are unified into a limited whole.

The art object conveys, in the most accessible and for many the only available form, the idea of a transcendent perfection. Great art inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing, it is for itself. It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified, presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex.²⁷

Too good to be true? Yes, of course it is too good to be true. Only certain works of art function that way. It is to Murdoch's credit that she does not regard the description I have quoted as a *definition* of art; she is fully aware of the fact, as she puts it, that '[t]his enthusiasm depends upon a certain amount of discreet switching between art and great art'²⁸ and she adds, for good measure, that most works of art are mediocre or bad.

Perhaps the values Murdoch speaks of can be realized and experienced in the decorative arts as for instance the *Alhambra* Kivy mentions in his essay, as well as in the art forms Murdoch is primarily concerned with. But I think it is more likely that the experience she has in mind is to be had in our encounters with works of literature and music.

Formalist analyses of art, whether of the Gombrichian or Kivyian variety, cannot do justice to the quasi-religious and ecstatic experience Murdoch is referring to. Hence I conclude that we should try to break out of the charmed circle of formalist aesthetics. By freeing ourselves from the magic of formalism and structuralism, not to mention post-structuralism, we would save ourselves a great deal of intellectual trouble and gain a fuller and richer understanding of art.

²⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.