

Address at the funeral of Anna Mahler  
Ernst Gombrich, 19 June 1988, Highgate Cemetery, London

I think Anna Mahler would have wanted me to say here that her work speaks for itself and represents her more truly than anything I could say about her. Her oeuvre was to be shown this year at the Salzburg Festival which gave her much satisfaction. Here in London, where some of these works were created, we can only call up our memories of these powerful images. How appropriate would it have been if we could have passed this afternoon through the entrance of a cemetery for which she created a model twenty-four years ago: the erect figure of an angel standing on a square pillar, wiping his tears with one of his wings – an austere vision, utterly devoid of sentimentality, but as deeply felt as were all her creations. It would have reminded us of her words that value in art “is not determined by superficial characteristics but by the ability to reach and touch our innermost feelings”.

In the lecture of 1962 from which these words are taken, she forcefully and fearlessly expressed her convictions which she had followed throughout her life. She knew that nobody could suspect her of being ignorant of the extremist movement that had dominated this century, but she also explained why so much of that art which she knew so well appeared to her a mere pursuit of novelty for novelty’s sake, a pursuit that had ended in the dehumanisation of art. Her masterly portrait busts are witness to her utter rejection of these tendencies. So, of course, are her monumental creations, highly stylized as they may seem. “Nature” she wrote “is the realm of art, but Nature must be represented by the work of a human mind and hand. This means stylization, consciously or unconsciously. The true artist will always try to get as close to Nature as possible, not to its surface but to its core, its essence ... an image not in the sense of superficial representation, but in the Platonic sense... It will reflect a universal image of the world, the true essential reality – in the language of the medieval German mystics – the Ground of all Being”. This, she also wrote, will give us “the almost mystical certainty that the universe makes sense”.

For anyone who sees the calling of the artist in this awesome light, the straining after superficial effects must seem indeed irrelevant, if not worse. To be facile is tantamount to frivolity, if not blasphemy. Only the utmost effort was worthy of the reward, a glimpse, at least, of that ultimate revelation. Thus it is fitting that her favourite medium was monumental sculpture, the physical struggle with the hard unyielding block which she wished to shape into images of superhuman scale and dignity.

She might have agreed with the ancient writer who searched for the secret of that feeling we call ‘the sublime’. How, he wondered, can we distinguish this impression from the merely bombastic or grandiloquent? “The sublime”, wrote Longinus, in a memorable phrase, “is the ring of the noble soul”. Hers was such a soul. For Anna Mahler had no patience with the cult of self-expression. She did not think of herself when she was at work, but she sometimes thought of others, of us. “Art” ...she wrote, “is one of the apparently indispensable means by which the generally drab every-day life is made bearable and which provides transcending force for the average mind, which gives meaning to the human existence”. There is one word which is too frequently missing from our critical vocabulary, the word GRATITUDE. Yet, consciously or unconsciously Anna Mahler’s noble sentiments echo those expressed by a great composer nearly 200

years ago, – appropriately so, for music was of course the other passion of her life. After a performance of Haydn's 'Creation', members of a German music society sent a letter of thanks to the master who responded with a moving confession: "Frequently, when I struggled with obstacles of every kind that dogged my work, when the strength of my mind and my body began to falter and it was hard for me to persevere ... a secret feeling whispered to me: 'There are so few happy and contented people here on earth, everywhere they are beset by sorrows and sufferings. Maybe your work will sometimes be the source from which the care-worn, who are burdened by worries, can derive a few moments of repose and recreation' This, then, was a powerful spur for me to keep striving and this is also the reason why I now look back at the endless trouble and labour I spent on that art, over so many years, with an easy and joyful heart" (Joseph Haydn, September 11, 1802).

In anticipating her visit to Salzburg Anna Mahler was surely entitled to look back at her life as an artist with an easy and joyful heart. We thank her.