

Part VI

The Nature of Art

For Tallis, the scientific investigation of the physical, biological and human worlds and the creation of art are the two great, and distinctive, accomplishments of The Explicit Animal. Progress in science has been driven by the twin aims of advancing human understanding and of increasing human control over the natural world and the human body: to make the world on the one hand safer and more comfortable and on the other better understood. At times, art, too, has been thought to aim at improving the world – for example, through improving the behaviour of people in the world by refining sensibility – and to advance our understanding, even if that understanding is informed by a tragic sense that things cannot be ameliorated. For Tallis, however, the central function of art is not so much to make the world a better place or to advance our knowledge of it, as to round off our sense of the world, to perfect consciousness.

Tallis would argue that our explicit awareness of the world and of ourselves in the world is haunted by the feeling that the response we have to the world is incomplete. This is experienced most poignantly in our inability fully to experience our experiences: no experience is precisely congruent with the idea of itself and no complex experience encompasses at any one moment the whole of itself. There is an ineradicable flaw in the present tense of experience. Tallis believes this to be why we never quite arrive in the present: there is no moment at which we have an experience corresponding to our idea of how experiences should be.

Art offers us experiences that do correspond to the ideas we have of them. The key to this, for Tallis, is form, the ‘moving unmoved’ which links the passage from one moment to the next with a static structure, so that the whole is signalled, shines through, the part. This is most completely realised in music, where each note exists as an explicit part of

an unfolding and yet already prefigured whole. Tallis argues that through art the most fundamental division within us – between our general ideas and our particular experiences – is temporarily healed and that for a time we are made whole.