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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

Composing an American Cultural Trauma

John Adams and September 11

Mats Trondman

Professor in cultural sociology at the Department for Cultural Sciences at Linnaeus University in Växjö/Kalmar. He is also a guest professor at the Department for Child and Youth Studies at Stockholm University. E-mail: mats.trondman@lnu.se

Jens Trondman

BA in social science, sociology, and is currently working with operational development at Skåne Regional Council, office for Habilitation and Technical Aids. E-mail: jens.trondman@skane.se

ABSTRACT

The article explores the possibility of understanding music as a contribution to the forming of cultural trauma. The case being explored is the Pulitzer Prize and Grammy winning piece of music *On the Transmigration of Souls* written by the American composer John Coolidge Adams. The piece concerns Adams's response to September 11: a spiritual journey of musical meaning making integrating prerecorded street sounds with two choruses, large orchestra, and the reading of, among other things, the names of victims. For Adams the artist is someone who uses the possibility of being an autonomous creator of art, and, at the same time, takes on the role of the craftsman and servant for the sake of the spirit of listeners in an art world and wider society. While doing that the artist redefines the artistic expressions in a rich dialogue with the past and challenges current times. In dialogue with the cultural trauma theory in cultural sociology, and with political theorist Michael Walzer's understanding of social criticism, the article tries to tease out an understanding of how music as a historically embedded cognitive, moral, and aesthetic expression could be part of an emerging cultural trauma within the American society. Hence, how music, as art with relevance to life as it is lived and experienced in time and place, generates capacities for feelings for suffering others, social criticism, and democratic integration. In doing that the article also enlarges the understanding of how cultural trauma enacted by art might emerge as a composing of an American cultural trauma.

Keywords

artistic process | cultural trauma | september 11 | john adams | classical music | social criticism | cultural sociology

PROLOGUE

Although the opening of the piece seems like a sound collage, Adams does not mingle noises, words, and tones randomly. He sets them in a careful, therapeutic course from the secular to the sacred, leading to a vision of redemption when the sonic chaos converges to form a vast carillon. First we hear only street sounds, as if the walls of the concert hall have been blown away. In place of Adams's usual percussive groove a taped boy's voice repeats the word 'missing,' a verbal heartbeat that gives the unformed sound of cars and footsteps a rhythmic undertow. The chorus (at first wordless), strings, and harps enter, playing slowly rocking lines that sound like a medieval chant. Are we in the street, a concert hall, or a cathedral? The choral syllables slowly become stammered words and phrases: 're-mem...re-mem...re-member,' 'you will... you will... you nev...' Noises, words, prayers: for ten minutes the music seems to drift uncertainly and in fragments on memories of Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, in which a distant trumpet poses the eternal question of existence. Over undulating ripples in the woodwinds the children's chorus picks up the gentle rocking lines of the opening with new words that are at once journalism and incantation: 'I see buildings, I see water.' Without warning the orchestra blasts a sustained chord of anguish, announcing a move to the next level of contemplation. The music becomes simpler. The two choruses repeat the words, now in full sentences, of fathers, mothers, sisters (The daughter says, 'He was the apple of my father's eye'), intensifying at the lines 'I wanted to dig him out. I know just where he is.' The orchestra again erupts, this time in mounting waves that lead to the long-awaited answer to the question posed by Ives: their voices transformed, transmigrated, into human chimes, the choruses sing out the words 'Love' and 'Light' over and over, fortissimo. Very gradually the music subsides to the sound-on-sound texture of the opening, but with a new feeling of calm. Orchestra and choruses fade out; a recorded woman's voice, in an unidentifiable accent, repeats the words 'I see water and buildings.' The street sounds return us to our everyday lives. (David Schiff, 2006: 193–194)

INTRODUCTION

On the Transmigration of Souls – described above by professor of music David Schiff – is the American composer John Coolidge Adams's response to the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Adams, who grew up in a rural part of New England, has become the most frequently performed living American composer in the field of classical music (May:xiii). Or, as music critic Pierre Ruhe claims: 'Not since the mid-century heyday of Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein has one composer so successfully balanced the combination of a genuinely populist spirit with concert-hall popularity and critical esteem' (Ruhe 2006:53).

The New York Philharmonic commissioned *On the Transmigration of Souls* as its musical memorial to September 11. A year after the tragedy it was premiered at the Lincoln Center in New York City. The performance by the Philharmonic and conductor Lorin Maazel ‘held,’ as Ruhe states it, ‘everyone in the Lincoln Center frozen in their seats, engrossed in the music, and for moments in the middle, weeping’ (2006:57). In 2003, *On the Transmigration of Souls* – from now on ‘the Transmigration’ – earned Adams the Pulitzer Prize for composition. In 2005 the New York Philharmonic’s recording of the work was honored with three Grammy awards.¹

Every musical piece, of course, has its own history in the making. And it is to this making, or, rather, *meaning making*, that we will now turn. In doing so we will encounter an artist enacted by particular beliefs and practices in search of an artistic expression of his own while at the same time hoping to enact others with his artistic vision and art. This double search, then, of meaning enacting art and art enacting meaning in the aftermath of September 11 is, to paraphrase literary critic Stephen Greenblatt’s take on William Shakespeare’s plays, ‘*in the world and of the world*’ (2004:128). As such Adams’s commemoration is inevitably engaged with the deepest feelings of suffering and fear, and, of course, hope, both within Adams himself and among his potential listeners. So, what are we going to do with Adams and ‘the Transmigration’? Let us start with our focal point, theoretical approaches, and the questions they evoke.

Focal point, theoretical approaches and guiding questions

Our search for meaning involves two theoretical approaches. One concerns a particular way of understanding an artistic process in context, in other words, the making of a piece of art. The other provides a possibility to read a particular outcome of such a process as a contribution to the forming of a cultural trauma in the American society. Thus, the possibility that a piece of art, as a text in front of the world, can contribute to an emergent cultural trauma on a wider societal level. There is then not only an *artistic process* but also a *trauma process*. And we need to understand both and their relationship. Accordingly, we are going to frame Adams’s artistic making of ‘the Transmigration’ in terms of composing a cultural trauma. This is the *focal point* of our analytical endeavor. We need, then, to look at these two theoretical approaches.

The first approach refers to a particular understanding of the relationship between art and society and underlies our understanding of the making of ‘the Transmigration’. Art cannot, argues Greenblatt, be understood as something detached from its context (Robson 2008:9). ‘Political and social concerns’ thus needs to be seen as, in Greenblatt scholar Mark Robson’s words, ‘a backdrop

1. The Grammy awarded *On Transmigration of Souls*, performed by New York Philharmonic and Lorin Maazel (conductor), was released on Nonesuch Records Incorporation in 2004. *On the Transmigration of Souls* can also be heard on the CD, *Transmigration*, performed by Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Choruses and released by Telarc International in 2009.

against which the aesthetic work plays itself out' (Robson 2008:9). However, it is likewise 'necessary to take account of how artistic texts contribute to the production of culture' (Robson 2008:9). We will thus approach Adams's writing of 'the Transmigration' as a sensitive meaning-absorption of the September 11 event in the American context *and* as an evocative meaning-contribution to the same context in terms of a particular artistic expression.

Accordingly, we will not only focus on 'the Transmigration' as a piece of art in hope of contributing to a particular meaning, we shall also focus on the artistic process. That is, how a basic idea through aesthetic meaning making finds its completed art form in a specific time and place where people held different and contested points of view about how to understand and handle September 11. Inspired by a seminal constituent of the hermeneutics of Luigi Payeson, we will try to, in the words of philosopher Gianni Vattimo, 'form an image of the work' by 'grasping the work's form' and thereby, 'somehow retrace, albeit not chronologically, the entire process by which the work was formed' (Vattimo 2008:83).² The artistic process that Payeson 'has in mind' is, as philosopher Santiago Zabala states it, 'the interpretative process through which the artist has formed the work by pursuing his initial idea' that at first was 'unformed and hence indefinite' (Zabala 2008:xviii). Consequently, our first theoretical approach is brought to bear on, as stated above, the *artistic process*, that is, Adams's finding of his basic idea, his struggle, and his aesthetic manifestation within the American context of September 11.³

Now, within this first theoretical approach, we are guided by two particular questions. First, *why* and with what beliefs, hopes, and intentions did Adams, in terms of his own public claim making, decide to write 'the Transmigration'? Second, *how* and informed by what basic artistic idea did he do it? There is of course a strong connection between the first and the second question. The *how*-question helps us to understand what a composer guided by an artistic integrity did while having found his answer to the *why*-question. The *how*-answer, then, is his art form-answer to the *why*-question. If we bring them together, we can ask what Adams in his public claimmaking thought, felt, and did to make the artistic creation of 'the Transmigration' possible. Indeed, this artistic process, as will be laid out, has got a strong affinity with the trauma process that makes a cultural trauma possible. Hence, we do not intend to stop at our understanding of the artistic process unfolding in the actual meaning-context. We will also read Adams's understanding of the making of 'the Transmigration' through the lens of the cultural trauma theory, as it is laid out in its more theoretically systematized way by cultural sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004).⁴ This is our second theoretical approach.

2. We are here relying on Vattimo's presentation (2008) of Payeson's thoughts.

3. Our approach, then, differ from cultural sociologist Ron Eyerman's seminal study *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) by focusing on a particular artist and a particular piece of art in relation to a particular tragic event, that is, the Transmigration, rather than a more general take on many artists in different genres within the broader historical formation of the African American cultural trauma.

We will thus try to argue that it is possible to put the cultural trauma theory to use in order to illuminate what Adams was actually up to while creating ‘the Transmigration’. This concerns his hope of a particular understanding and handling of the events of September 11. Both on the personal level of each mourner, family, and connected networks *and* on a more shared collective level among people in the American civil sphere (Alexander 2006a). Hence, the artistic process and its outcome are going to be interpreted as composing a cultural trauma. For now, as a pre-understanding of what is to come, it might be useful to provide the reader with Alexander’s initial definition of cultural trauma.

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changes their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (2004:1)

We can also put it somewhat differently, and perhaps more immediately graspable. Sociologist Neil J. Smelser, one of the co-founders of the cultural trauma theory, characterizes September 11 as a cultural trauma in terms of ‘an initial reaction of shock, disbelief, and emotional numbing’, ‘affective and collective-behavior reactions’, ‘widespread collective mourning, both spontaneous and officially scheduled’, ‘a collective endowment of the events with a sacred character’, ‘sustained public interest in the remembering process, including, down the line, some contestation among politically interested groups over *how* the remembering should take place’ and a ‘culminating sense that American identity has been altered fundamentally’ (2004:266–267).

However, following Alexander, a cultural trauma is not the same phenomena as the event that can become such a trauma (2004). So, there is not only a need of an artistic process to produce a piece of art like ‘the Transmigration’, there is also a need of a trauma process that can turn a particular event into a cultural trauma. It is, then, our cultural sociological mission to try to illuminate how Adams’s artistic process and particular longing to reach out to the grief-stricken members, as well as a wider audience, within the American society contributed to represent the September 11 event as a cultural trauma in music that, in turn, could contribute to the emergence of a societal cultural trauma. Accordingly, our second theoretical approach is guided by the following question: How can Adams’s artistic process and its outcome, that is, ‘the Transmigration’, be comprehended in relation to the cultural trauma theory? Or, more specifically, how the artistic process, increasingly so, both absorbs and enacts

4. It is of great importance to state the following: according to Alexander, ‘the idea of “cultural trauma” developed over the course of an intensive year-long dialogue among the coauthors’. Alexander mentions the following names: Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka, and Björn Wittrock. The title of the actual anthology is *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004).

the trauma process, and, hence, how the ‘the Transmigration’, as a piece of art can, in turn, contribute to an emergent trauma process. Thus, when we get to know why Adams decided to write ‘the Transmigration’, we will also know what came to guide the how of its becoming and the hope of its sounding existence. Again, how trauma process, more and more so, came to inform the artistic process and its outcome. Hence, the title of our paper: ‘Composing an American Cultural Trauma’. Nevertheless, will not end up in complete harmony with the cultural trauma theory. Accordingly, the cultural trauma theory will have something to learn from our analytical endeavor.

Aim and the meaning of the composing

The *over-arching aim*, then, is to understand Adams’s artistic response to the aftermath of September 11 as *composing* an American cultural trauma in terms of music, libretto, and sound. This is where the answers to the how- and why-questions meet, or rather analytically merge with, cultural trauma theory. Adams’s *artistic process*, then, in time and place, leading up to the composing of a cultural trauma, will be theoretically recognized as a possible contribution to the cultural trauma process following September 11. In doing this Adams’s claim making will intersect with our theoretical assertion.⁵

According to *The New Oxford American Dictionary* ‘compose’ carries several etymologically meanings. It means, at the most basic level, to write or create a work of art by arranging parts to form a whole. But to compose also means to do it with care and thought. Further, the archaic meaning is to ‘settle a dispute’ (2005:349).

In accordance with our integrative reading of the lexical meanings of the word ‘compose’, we study why and how Adams composed ‘the Transmigration’ by arranging certain parts into a whole, through a focus on the artistic process. By doing so, we shall also make explicit how he, through our interpretation, composed a cultural trauma with ‘care and thought’: how he by making art tried to settle a dispute both within himself and within the American society and, hence, contributed to the societal trauma process. The practiced meaning of ‘composing’ an American cultural trauma is in our understanding of Adams’s claim and meaning making the conjunction of the artistic *and* the trauma process. Indeed, we are in search of an understanding of an artistic practice that carries the possibility to contribute to the enlargement of shared remembrances and civility.

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5. One could, then, argue, that we actually are trying to bring together significant aspects of all the three phases that according to French sociologist Nathalie Heinich runs through the history of the sociology of the arts: the relation of art and society, the socio-cultural and art institutional contexts that frames the making of art, and the workings of artist interacting with other artist and people in relation to the inherent structures within art worlds, that is the outcomes of the relationship of the artistic process and the trauma process: a piece of autonomous art that, only seemingly paradoxical, tries to communicate art as trauma and social criticism within art institutions and to individuals, families and networks in the wider society (see Larsen 2014:91–92)

The pragmatics of our methodological doings

In our course of action, we will do as most of us do when reading a text or taking other people's lines of argument into account. We will try, in the words of political theorist Michael Walzer, to 'puzzle out' (2002:193) what an actual writer has to say. Accordingly, our primary focus will be, as stated, on Adams's own accounts of the aftermath of September 11 in the American public, his artistic vision, and the writing of 'the Transmigration'.⁶ Nevertheless, we will also take into account other people's claims about his work and vision. Following anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1999; Trondman 2008b) mode of cultural analysis, we will gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which Adams enacts the composing of 'the Transmigration'.⁷ This also involves discovering who Adams thinks he is, what he thinks he is doing and to what end he thinks he is doing it.⁸ Guided by the frames of meaning that enact Adams's composing, we will construe a second order of interpretation. This is what cultural analysts like us do. We interpret other people's interpretations by taking into account the understandings that those under study give their own action. Hence, Adams's claim and meaning making, the artistic process and the piece of art that comes out of it, will be interpreted as a contribution to a societal cultural trauma. Or, in other words, by composing a particular piece of music, that is, *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Adams creates a piece of art that carries the hope and the possibility of contributing to, what we, informed by Alexander and Smelser, understand as a cultural trauma in the American society. Thus, we need also to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning that makes it legitimately possible – through our second order of interpretation – to illuminate it as a piece of art carrying a particular form of social criticism that might turn mourning, individual and shared, into cultural trauma that in its lived forms represent civility and democratic integration. Yes, indeed, there is a particular politics hidden in this. We will of course in due time have to reveal and explain the puzzling meaning of that too.

Ways of being critical

Before we end this introduction and give the reader a view of how the rest of the article is disposed it might be of worth to meet some critical comments and affects that so far could possibly have been aroused in the reader's mind. We are of course well aware that our presentation of Adams's claims and the

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6. Walzer formulates it in the following way: '[...] I shall take a 'constructivist' position [...]. I shall do what most of us do with any book we read: try to puzzle out what the author is saying' (2002, p. 193). Our purpose is, thus, to try to introduce, again in Walzer's words, 'a systematic fashion' (2002, p. 193).
 7. Here, we are paraphrasing Geertz from his 'Haskins Lectures', where he writes that it is 'necessary to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning within which they enact their lives' (1999, p. 11).
 8. Again, we are paraphrasing Geertz from the 'Haskins Lecture'. Geertz writes: '[...] the study of other people's cultures [...] involves discovering who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it' (1999, p. 10). See also Trondman 2008a, p. 201–217.

answers to our questions is not about the mere presentation of pure evidence. They are outcomes of our reconstruction of a more held together view of Adams's public utterances of his own meaning making. It is, then, not our intention to try to look at the socio-material conditions or the ideological framing that work behind his back or in his favor. Neither is it to deconstruct the rhetoric of Adams's claim making about what he is up to. In the first instance our interest is to make explicit his public meaning making. We are thus treating him, if you like, as someone worth listening to and, hence, learning from. First, because we want to know why and how he, in his own terms and through his own agency, did what he did while composing his commemoration to September 11. Second, because we decided to treat him with the same taken for grantedness as critical theorists tend to treat their critical archangels. They tend to trust Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, or Herbert Marcuse whatever background they had and lives they lived. They tend to quote the claims of Michael Foucault or Judith Butler without connecting them with their prestigious schooling, institutions, and networks. We do not necessarily have any problem with that, we just decided to see what happens if John Adams, as an artist, is treated the same way. To that, and third, Adams is also a critic himself, so instead of criticizing him according to whatever logic, we decided to display how and informed by what normativity he, as a critic, composed 'the Transmigration', or, as we interpret it, a cultural trauma. So why not, for a change, be informed by novelists as George Eliot or Joyce Carol Oates. 'The foundation of all true mental power', Eliot assures, is *not* 'to formulate opinions' but 'to receive deep impressions' (2009:155). To read 'literature of the criticizing sort', at least, 'to read much of it', seems to her 'seriously injurious' (2009:155). According to journal writing Joyce Carol Oates, 'there is nothing inherently better about writing against instead of for'. And 'to be for' is 'difficult', she cheekily adds, because it 'will not seem', that is, to 'shallow people, sophisticated at all' (2007:62). At its most worrisome the seemingly legitimate ground for criticism turns out to be nothing, as critic Kenneth Burke once put it, but 'interests and aims', that 'do not closely coincide with those of the critic' (1954:8) (See also Trondman et al 2012:533).

We are thus not launching yet another critical study. This article is not informed by the desire for transcendent critique or critical deconstruction. Or as it is laid out by novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson in *The Death of Adam*: 'It is as if there is nothing to mourn or admire, only a hidden narrative now and then apparent through the false, surface narrative. And the hidden narrative, because it is ugly and sinister, is therefore true' (2005:78). We are thus fully aware that we are composing a narrative on Adams's composing of an American cultural trauma that stays close to Adams's own claim and musical meaning making.

Walzer, commenting on September 11 in *The Company of Critics* (2002), gives the reader a hint of the territory we, studying Adams's artistic process, are entering. 'Someone who cannot acknowledge the suffering of the victims', he argues, 'will have nothing to contribute' since 'the absence of compassion is

more dangerous than the distortion of guilt' (2002:xvi). Why? Because, again in Walzer's choice of words, 'guilt-ridden critics [...] they stay where they are. They criticize their own people, but in a wholesale way, without *distinction*, *nuance*, or *restraint*, as if driven by self-hate or by desire for collective self-erasure' (2002:xvi). Are they not, he asks, 'feeling the pain of their own children' (2002:xvi)? And might it be that 'sometimes intellectuals can't acknowledge the pain of victims because their attention is focused elsewhere by some theory about the world' (2002: xvi).

Adams, at least so it seems to us, do share Walzer's point of view about being a critic. Indeed, in this we share belief. We do not only, to quote philosopher Paul Ricoeur, 'believe in order to understand' (1970:28), because we cannot understand by only rehearsing or criticizing what is said. We also need to 'understand in order to believe' (1970:28). In other words, the restoration of meaning demands a trustful listening and interpretation. The outcome of such an intended work is, as Ricoeur designates it, 'proclamation' or event 'faith' (1970:27). This is not, he goes on to say, 'the first faith of a simple soul'; rather, it is 'the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics' (1979:28). And to the practice of the hermeneutics of reconciliation we now turn.

Disposition

We begin by exploring Adams's initial rejection of composing a memorial piece for September 11. In the second section, we explore Adams's reasons for accepting the commission from the New York Philharmonic. By doing that we will answer the why-question, that is, why Adams came to accept writing what came to be 'the Transmigration'. The third section deals with four interrelated levels of how-answers concerning the making of 'the Transmigration': its basic idea, its search for artistic possibilities and the finding of its musical spirit within the American context. To that we also add Adams's understanding of the meaning and purpose of 'the Transmigration' as a 'memory space'. This fourth level also deals with Adams's understanding of the concept of 'transmigration'. Finally, we turn to our over-arching aim, that is, to demonstrate how Adams's writing of 'the Transmigration' can be interpreted as composing an American cultural trauma. Our interpretation of Adams's process of composing provides cultural trauma theory, we will try to argue, with a challenging empirical insight concerning trauma in the making. To conclude, via Walzer and Alexander, we will also learn something about the meaning and possibility of social criticism.

THE INITIAL REJECTION

That's true. I got the commission, and I frankly didn't want to write it – I hadn't a clue how I could possibly write a piece about September 11.
John Adams (in Colward 2006:196)

A few months after September 11 in 2001 Adams received a call from the artistic administrator at the New York Philharmonic. ‘Would’ Adams, as he puts it himself in *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*⁹, ‘compose a memorial piece for the victims of the World Trade Center attacks’ (2008:259)? At first, he recalls, it seemed an ‘impossible assignment to compose a piece with a subject like this’ (2008:264). In accordance with our reading of his remembrances, Adams had three intertwined reasons for his rejection. ‘In the intervening months after the attack’, he argues, ‘the images of the collapsing World Trade Center towers, of dust-covered survivors, of valiant firemen, and of the smoking pile of toxic rubble dubbed Ground Zero had saturated our consciousness’ (2008:263). There was, he states, ‘no escaping the iconography of the event and its aftermath’ (2008:263). Still Adams found it a complete impossibility to reverberate what he calls ‘these tortured emotions’ in ‘any kind of music’ (2008:263). He could not in any way imagine how such a piece of music would sound. It would come to nothing, he feared, but ‘an exercise in the worst possible taste’ (2008:263). Thus, the first reason to reject the commission from the Philharmonic was his sense of *the impossibility of representing musically the emotional suffering following September 11*. These lines from ‘The Dead of September’ by American novelist and poet Toni Morrison seem to us, and, indeed, we will return to this, enunciate Adams’s structure of feeling: ‘To speak to you, the dead of September, I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera’ (2003:1).¹⁰

Adams also expressed deep concerns about how the event was being framed politically. This is how he articulated his fears about the actual President’s address to the nation regarding September 11:

Once George W. Bush had seized the moment, standing on the pile of rubble at Ground Zero and mouthing into his bullhorn a John Wayne oath of vengeance, the country as a whole began to buckle, yielding up decades of hard-won civil rights and allowing itself to be manipulated by cynical appeals to patriotism, xenophobia, and paranoia. (2008:264)

‘Speaking to the broken and dead is too difficult for a mouth full of blood’, Morrison writes in her poem (2003:1). Adams’s second reason for rejecting, then, was *the risk of doing art that might feed into a political process that could conceivably work against hard-won civil rights, and, thus, support a politics of revenge*. Adams also felt, as he states it, ‘a nagging unease’ about not only the political framing but also ‘about the way Americans had reacted to the event’ (2008:263). ‘What had begun as a genuine shock and trauma’, he deemed, ‘developed into an orgy of narcissism and collective victimization’ (2008:264). Consequently, the third reason for rejecting the commission was

9. *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life* is Adams’s personal memoir.

10. The poem ‘The Dead of September 11’ is published in the anthology *Trauma at Home – After 9/11* edited by Judith Greenberg.

the danger of making a piece of art that would be misinterpreted and misused. At the same time, Adams sensed that families and friends of the victims, despite their different backgrounds, life courses, and destinations, embodied the same need to cope with their experiences of grief. 'If I can pluck courage here', Morrison writes, 'I would like to speak directly to the dead – the September dead. Those children of ancestors born in every continent on the planet: Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas...' (2003:1). Undoubtedly, Adams wanted to reject the politics of revenge while at the same time having hopes for a democratic integration of suffering others, both inside and outside United States.

For these claimed reasons Adams could not yet see any possibility to represent September 11 through music. Indeed, on one hand, he was rejecting it. Nevertheless, on the other, and in concordance with his own beliefs, his composing was supposed to be informed by what we would like to call a strong *artistic vision*, which definitely worked against the rejection. According to this self-claimed vision, music to Adams is a 'public art form' (2008:263) that ought to be 'communicative in spirit' (2002).¹¹ Or, as Adams formulates it on his homepage: 'Whenever serious art loses track of its roots in the vernacular, then it begins to atrophy'.¹² This statement is strongly related to Adams's belief in the need for 'an emotional rhetoric in music' (see May 2006:xv). Furthermore, it is the role of the artist to be a 'craftsman' in the service of the public, that is, in his own words, 'someone who uses his gift to lift the audience's spirit' (Adams quoted from Ruhe 2006:54). In an interview for a classical music radio station in Cincinnati, Adams expressed his artistic dilemma concerning representing September 11 in musical form in the following way: 'This was not something I should just simply say no to. I needed to find a way to say yes' (2008).¹³ Adams stood at a junction with an artistic dilemma. He was looking for a way out of his predicament.

THE ACCEPTANCE

After 9/11 some people gave blood, some people wrote books; everybody was moved to do whatever possible, and writing music was, for me, the obvious possibility.

John Adams (quoted from Rich 2006:64)

In an interview with violist and writer Daniel Colvard, Adams describes why he, despite the initial rejection and the artistic dilemma, decided to accept the commission from the New York Philharmonic. So, why first hesitate, then change his mind, and finally accept the commission? This is how Adams puts it.

I really didn't want to do it, but it was the New York Philharmonic, and it was the New Yorkers, people that I deal with on a daily level, and I felt that

11. Quoted from the DVD *John Adams. A Portrait and a Concert of American Music*, 2002.

12. Quoted from John Adams's homepage on MySpace: www.myspace.com/johnadamsmusic the Fourth of July 2010.

13. www.wguc.org/content/display.asp?id=48

it was something I had to do... but I really didn't know what to do. (Colvard 2006:196).

There are then, we will argue, four partly overlapping self-claimed reasons for Adams's move from rejection to acceptance. The first answer to the why-question is, undoubtedly so, *the 'totemic' meaning of the New York Philharmonic*. This is how Adams himself explains this multilayered meaning in a *LA Weekly* interview with music critic Alan Rich.

For my generation – and for the generation before – growing up with music meant growing up with the Philharmonic: the concert broadcasts on Sunday afternoons, and the educational programs with Leonard Bernstein; this was a totemic orchestra (Rich 2006:64).

It seems quite obvious then that Adams *wanted* to write a piece for September 11. 'I knew immediately', he admits in an interview published on the homepage of the New York Philharmonic, 'that I very much wanted to do the piece'.¹⁴ However, he was not 'sure what kind of shape the music would take' (Colvard 2006:196), and what it would offer the American public. Obviously, there was an implacable search for an artistic solution in place from the very first moment of rejection. The initial rejection, then, was not about not wanting to do it, but rather about facing the seeming impossibility of how to do it. To revisit Payeson's understanding of the artistic process: to find a possible interpretative framework through which Adams as a composer could grasp the work's form by pursuing an initial idea that was at first indefinite.

Adams's acceptance must also be understood in relation to, as stated above, the art world people (Becker 1982) in New York that he, through his work, dealt with on daily basis. A second answer to the why-question, then, was *the expectations from a supportive network of friends and professional colleagues*. Writing music was, as stated above, Adams's 'obvious possibility'.

Adams also agreed to do it because he 'felt', as he puts it in *Hallelujah Junction*, that 'a serious artist ought to be able to rise to the occasion and fulfill a need for a public statement that went beyond the usual self-centered, auteur concerns of his own personal individualism' (2008:264). Accordingly, the third answer to the why-question has to do with *the self-imposed demand of a serious artist to take on a public role with the aim of making a statement, and in doing so, to contribute to civic pride in diversity and communality, that is, to be enacted by his own artistic vision*.

Finally, in Adams's own words, 'music is above and beyond all else an art of feeling' (2008:263). He had also convinced himself that 'in the days of 9/11 intelligent people were in need of an experience that spoke to those wounded

14. This quote from Adams was initially to be found on the homepage of the New York Philharmonic. It is now available only on Adams's own homepage (www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html).

feelings' (2008:263). Thus, the last answer to the why-question concerns *the search for a well-thought-through and emotional aesthetic response to September 11, that is, the need of composing a commemorative piece of music with care and thought*. Thus, it is in the third and fourth answers to the why-question that we can see Adams's obvious longing to take part in a wider societal dialogue about the meaning and handling of September 11, or, informed by our theoretical terms, the strong connection between his artistic process and an emerging trauma process.

Enacted by these four self-claimed reasons, or, in Geertzian terms, frames of meaning, Adams started to look for the answers to the hardest question of all: how could one create a piece of music commemorating September 11? What would it be like? How could it sound? What, in terms of meaning making, could it, or, rather, ought it, contribute to? Finding answers to these questions meant coming to terms with both Adams's own and other Americans' complex feelings about how to cope with the tragic event. It also gave him, he declares, 'a chance to give something to others' (Colvard 2006:196). Adams needed to find a musical expression that could reach out to suffering others in the American public. And he needed to do it without feeding into an orgy of narcissism, collective victimization and, consequently, a politics of revenge. It is to this artistic search process that we now turn, that is, to the becoming of 'the Transmigration'.

'THE TRANSMIGRATION' IN THE MAKING: THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

The answers to the how-question will be construed in three interrelated steps. We start out with the basic idea that came to inform Adams's making of 'the Transmigration'. This idea, of course, is closely related to his artistic vision and, hence, to his move from rejection to acceptance. In the second step, we will focus on Adams's search of artistic possibilities, that is, what he did to find his idea and the significant, meaning-bearing elements that would carefully merge into the finished piece. Finally, we will present what we call the framing of the actual idea and its elements. It means setting forth how particular aesthetic expressions of American culture and music and its historical context, intertextually, came to inform the meaning making in Adams's composing of 'the Transmigration'.

The basic idea

So I had very, very conflicting feelings about it. That's why I chose to focus on individual family members, the mother that lost her son, the young girl who lost her fiancé, the father who lost a daughter.¹⁵

John Adams

15. This quote is taken from WGUC (2008) (www.wguc.org/content/display.asp?id=48).

'I decided', Adams writes in *Hallelujah Junction*, 'that the only way to approach this theme was to make it about the most intimate experiences of the people involved' (2008:265). He also wanted to bring the particularity of personal grief in contact with what could be commonly felt as a shared experience of mourning. Adams writes about the need of a 'national mourning process' (2008:265). Furthermore, he strongly felt that he needed to do it with his artistic integrity intact. 'You just have to write the piece you want to write', he says in the Colvard interview, and continues: 'And I couldn't have written the *Transmigration of Souls* if I didn't feel the freedom to do just what I wanted to do' (Colvard 2006:199). Somehow, then, Adams had to write a public piece without losing what he considered to be his personal artistic integrity. He thus needed to reconcile a sort of art for art's sake with a reaching out to the vernacular. In our theoretical understanding, Adams followed an interrelated *two-way dual process*. On one hand, there was a 'dual process of particularization', that is, artistic integrity combined with the respect for the particularity of personal grief. On the other was a 'dual process of incorporation', that is, an artist in search of an audience open to an art experience and individual mourners, who could experience and recognize a shared, mourning process. Accordingly, with these sensitizing conceptualizations, we have captured Adams's basic idea. We now need to figure out how that idea was established and expressed through his search for artistic possibilities, that is, the meaning-bearing elements that made the making of 'the Transmigration' possible. In other words, an artistic process turning also into a trauma process.

In search of artistic possibilities

So I spent the first month just reading on the Internet, looking for an inspiration, frankly, looking for some material, verbal or visual, or some kind of image that would suggest something. It was like walking around in the dark with a match trying to find something.

John Adams (in Colvard, 2006:196)

Adams started out by doing 'nothing but [surfing] the Internet' (2008:264). In accordance with his basic idea and beliefs he was 'not', as he puts it, 'looking for the public, political face of the event, but rather searching for its effects at the most intimate, most personal level' (2008:264). He also found 'Portraits of Grief', a daily column in *The New York Times*, which provided pictures and anecdotal histories of victims who had died on September 11.¹⁶ In addition, Adams started collaborating with his friend Barbara Haws, a historian and archivist at the New York Philharmonic. She showed him photographs taken around Ground Zero in the days immediately after the attacks. Most of them were of, in Adams's own words, 'hand-lettered missing-persons signs placed on the walls by the desperate families of those who had disappeared when the towers collapsed' (2008:264). He continues:

16. For a year after September 11, the column offered *in toto* 2 400 capsule portraits.

The little signs were unbearably poignant, usually no more than a photocopied picture, a name, physical characteristics, date last seen, a contact number, and then frequently a little tag-end phrase like ‘We love you Chick’. (2008:264)

Adams also visited a video exhibition at the New York Historical Society that featured amateur footage taken during the moments when the planes struck the towers. This is how Adams describes his experiences at the actual Historical Society:

The videos were silent, eerily disturbing, pervaded by an air of uncertainty and confusion. Pedestrians in the street all were looking up, and the sky slowly rained down a floating blizzard of paper. Millions of pieces of what looked almost like confetti drifted gently amid the clouds of dust and smoke. People on the ground could not have been certain of what had happened, but their faces registered anxiety and unease. (2008:266)

It was with experiences like these that Adams’s search, as he describes, ‘took on its own emotional core’ (Colvard, 2006:201). He now decided that ‘the piece’ would not be ‘about the towers falling, or politics, or who did it, or the violence’ (Colvard, 2006:201). The piece is ‘really just about loss’ (Colvard, 2006:201) and the need of a shared mourning process. This was how Adams deepened the basic idea that came to inform the artistic process, that is, ‘the interpretative process’, to reiterate Zabala’s quote on Payeson’s hermeneutics, ‘through which the artist has formed the work by pursuing his initial idea’ that at first was ‘unformed and hence indefinite’ (2008: xviii). Adams’s search for artistic possibilities, then, can be seen as a *multifaceted process of amalgamation*, in which he finds the emotional core of the work and the meaning-bearing elements – that is, anecdotes, stories, names, hand-lettered missing-persons signs, tag-end phrases, sounds of the streets, and silent footages of floating blizzards of papers et cetera – that would merge into the piece of music. And thus emerged ‘the Transmigration’ so thickly described in the prologue. Nevertheless, one promised how-answer remains to be dealt with. Hence, we will now turn to the musical spirit of ‘the Transmigration’. At the same time, we will sketch the American historical meaning-bearing context of that framing. This move will also take us closer to the issues of cultural trauma and social criticism.

Finding the musical spirit

You need to know your repertoire. You need to know where this comes from. You need to be able to recognize the fact that *The Unanswered Question* of Charles Ives keeps poking out through the surface of the music. You can appreciate it without knowing these things, but obviously it helps to know them.

John Adams (on radio 2008)¹⁷

On May 7, 1915, the ocean liner *Lusitania* sank after being torpedoed by a German submarine. Nearly 1,200 people lost their lives. The tragic event stirred the American public. On the very same day, American composer, Charles Ives (1874–1954) witnessed an episode of spontaneous communal mourning at a train station in New York. He saw how people waiting for the train to arrive gradually began to whistle, hum, and sing along with a barrel organ¹⁸ playing the old hymn ‘In the Sweet Bye and Bye’ (Kirkpatrick, 1991:92; Schiff, 2006:193). This is how Ives himself writes about the occasion in *Memos*:

A workman with a shovel over his shoulder came on the platform and joined in the chorus, and the next man, a Wall Street banker with white spats and a cane, joined in it, and finally it seemed to me that everybody was singing this tune, and they didn’t seem to be singing for fun, but as a natural outlet for what their feelings had been going through all day long. There was a feeling of dignity all through this. (1991:92–93)

Moved by the deeply emotional event, Ives transformed this experience into a piece of music of his own and named it *From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of People Again Rose*. This work, Schiff asseverates, is ‘a great [...] vision of a spiritualized democracy, a community brought together by music at a time of tragedy’ (Schiff, 2006:193). To Ives, as scholar, composer, and writer Jan Swafford describes, ‘music was something people did for people’ (1998: 238). Music, Ives himself stated, ‘comes directly out of the heart of experience of life and thinking about life and living life’ (Swafford, 1998:238). Thereby, ‘music attained the spiritual by expressing the highest vision of the human’ (Swafford, 1998:238).

When composing ‘the Transmigration’, Adams came to see Ives as ‘some kind of *guardian angel*’ (Schiff, 2006:197). His relation to Ives is profound and strongly related to his upbringing. Owing to his music-loving father, Adams was exposed to Ives music at an early stage in life (Magee, 2008:172).¹⁹ As a composer, Adams had, to a great extent, come to identify his own music with that of Ives’s (Magee, 2008:172). This is explicitly acknowledged in *My Father Knew Charles Ives*, an orchestral piece that Adams depicts as a ‘musical autobiography, an homage and encomium to a composer whose influence on me has been huge’ (2006).²⁰ This is how Adams reflects upon Ives’s music:

17. This quote is taken from a radio interview with WGUC (2008) (www.wguc.org/content/display.asp?id=48).

18. There is no agreement whether the instrument used was a barrel organ or a hurdy-gurdy. This is how Ives himself puts it in *Memos* (ed. by Kirkpatrick: ‘[...] while waiting there, a hand-organ, or hurdy-gurdy was playing on a street below’. (1991, p. 92)

19. It is important to point out that even if Adams’s interest for Ives came from his father, Adams ascribes his musical talent to his mother. This is how it puts it in the liner notes to the CD *The Dharma at Big Sur/My Father New Charles Ives*: ‘[...]it was surely from my singing actress mother that I inherited most of my talent’.

[...] for all its daring experiments in rhythm and polyphony, always mixed the sublime with the vulgar and sentimental, and he did so with a freedom and insouciance that could only be done by an American. This has always been a model for me [...]. (2006)²¹

However, the piece of music by Ives that came to directly inform Adams's work on 'the Transmigration' was *The Unanswered Question*,²² a piece originally done in a rough draft in 1906 and then spruced up for the public in the 1930s (Swaford, 1998:461). Musicologist Wayne Shirley suggests that Ives, while writing *The Unanswered Question*, was inspired by American philosopher, essayist, and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's seminal poem *The Sphinx* in which the phrase 'the unanswered question' appears.²³ Emerson's own explanation of his poem, composer Ingram Marshall claims, 'may help us to understand Ives's music' (1991).²⁴

If the mind lives only in particulars and sees only the differences (wanting the power to see the whole – all in each), then the world addresses to this mind a question it cannot answer, and each new fact tears it in pieces, and it is vanquished by the distracting variety.²⁵

What, then, about *The Unanswered Question* as music? Tim Page, professor of journalism and music, finds it to be a 'great piece of music': 'It is both consonant (the soft bedding of the string chorale) and abrasively dissonant (the "questions" and "answers" are naked and awkward)' (Page 1998)²⁶. It also 'creates its own form, perfects it, then breaks the mold' (Page 1998). 'There was nothing', Page asserts, 'like *The Unanswered Question* before it was written and, by its very nature, it can never have a legitimate sequel' (1998). However, 'the Transmigration, we would like to suggest, though we cannot claim to be musicologists, might very well qualify.

The use of *The Unanswered Question* came to Adams's mind through the memory of a televised 25th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, yet another American cultural trauma. In the liner notes to John Adams's

20. See John Adams's 2006 Nonesuch Records CD, *The Dharma at Big Sur/My Father New Charles Ives*, in which he describes his music in relation to Charles Ives.

21. See John Adams's 2006 Nonesuch Records CD, *The Dharma at Big Sur/My Father New Charles Ives*.

22. *The Unanswered Question* can be heard on Bernstein's *Bernstein Century – Ives: The Unanswered Question* (1998[1964]) and Adams's *American Elegies* (1991).

23. This is how Emerson himself puts forward his question in the poem *The Sphinx*: 'Thou art the unanswered question; Couldst see thy proper eye, Always it asketh, asketh; And each answer is a lie'. See *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2008, p. 24).

24. This quote is taken from 'Notes on The Program' from the liner notes to John Adams's CD, *American Elegies* (1991).

25. Emerson is here quoted from Ingram Marshall liner notes from Adams's CD, *American Elegies* (1991).

26. This quote is taken from the inner sleeve notes from the CD *The Unanswered Question* conducted by Leonard Bernstein, Sony Music.

compact disc *American Elegies* – which contains Adams’s own version of *The Unanswered Question* – musical theorist Robert Hurwitz tells the story of how he and Adams were ‘deeply affected by the images of Americans mourning the death of their young President’ (Hurwitz, 1991).²⁷ They were both struck by how the film director had used *The Unanswered Question* in order to create what Hurwitz describes as an ‘intense quiet and inward emotion’ (1991). Hurwitz also states how he and Adams ‘remarked on the unmistakably American quality of the ‘elegiac strain’, and the extent to which our musical heritage is described by it (1991).

Furthermore, a central feature of *The Unanswered Question* is a trumpet, which, according to Swafford, ‘repeatedly poses the perennial question of existence’ (1998:180). It thus reverberates a reoccurring American theme, that is, the lone trumpet calling. This elegiac and meditative trumpet is found in Walt Whitman’s (1819–1892) poem, ‘The Mystic Trumpeter’, from *Leaves of Grass*.

Hark, some wild trumpeter, some strange musician,
Hovering unseen in air, vibrates capricious tunes to-night.

I hear thee trumpeter, listening alert I catch thy notes,
Now pouring, whirling like a tempest round me,
Now low, subdued, now in the distance lost. (1993:577)

It is this mystic trumpet we find in Ives’s *The Unanswered Question*. According to music critic Renaud Machart, it ‘hovers above an almost static layer of strings, overshadowed by an increasingly agitated interruption from a quartet of flutes’ (2006:387). As such, he claims, it has become ‘the obvious archetype’ (2006:387) and, hence, an echo throughout twentieth-century American music.²⁸ When Colvard asks Adams if the featured trumpet solo in ‘The Transmigration’ alludes directly to Ives, he answers: ‘Absolutely. And actually, *The Unanswered Question* is in the piece’ (Colvard, 2006:198).

It’s there. It’s a ghost in the background, and every once in a while it peeks through this screen of activity. All the voices, and the traffic noise, and the orchestra and the chorus and the children’s chorus, and then every once in a while these clouds of event will kind of disperse for a second and you’ll just get a glimpse of the Ives *Unanswered Question* as if it’s just playing all the way through this piece. (Colvard, 2006:198)

27. Hurwitz is quoted from the liner notes of the John Adams’s CD, *American Elegies* (1991).

28. Another composer who used the idea of the lone trumpet is Aaron Copland, in the musical score to the Irwin Shaw play *Quiet City* from 1939. However, Copland himself rejected the connection to Whitman and Ives and ascribed other meanings to the lone trumpet (see Machart, 2006, p. 387). In *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*, biographer Howard Pollack argues that the trumpet represents ‘fear and restlessness’ as well as ‘militant hopefulness’ (2000, p. 331).

Adams also states that ‘9/11 and all the loss of those people and the loss of any people, anywhere in the world, from a sudden violent act *is* an unanswered question’ (Colvard, 2006:198).

Adams’s finding of his musical spirit – especially so in Ives’s *The Unanswered Question* and its meaningful lone trumpet – provided him with *an intertextual musical frame of reference* – that was not only attuned to his basic beliefs – the two-way dual process of particularization and incorporation – and in his search for artistic possibility – the multifaceted process of amalgamation – but also rooted in concrete American historical events such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. And both concerned traumatic events and shared experiences of mourning represented in music as meaning making. It also makes clear how ‘the art’, to re-quote Robson from our introduction, ‘illuminates the world and the place of the writer within’. Finally, it lays bare how Adams handled his artistic dilemma by being enacted by American history, art, and cultural meaning.

On ‘the Transmigration’ as a memory space

Is it a requiem? No. Is it a choral symphony? No. Is it an oratorium? No. I came up with a word, ‘memory space’.
John Adams (in radio 2008) ²⁹

Having found himself at a junction with a seemingly unsolvable artistic dilemma, Adams, informed by his artistic vision, a basic idea, significant artistic elements, and a musical framework, started to compose, with care and thought, a piece of music drenched in meaning. In doing so he also wanted to serve a higher purpose. Here, reconnecting with Geertz, we are asking ourselves to what end Adams thought he was composing ‘the Transmigration’. The answer is that he came to epitomize this purpose, or end, in terms of a memory space. Explaining the meaning of such a space in a radio interview, Adams recalls while visiting Europe his visits to French cathedrals:

Occasionally when I’m in Europe I go into those great gothic cathedrals. Like Notre Dame, or Chartres in France, and you go into this very vast religious space and people are very quiet and you realize you’re in the presence of, not only the living people that are there, but the ghosts, the souls of all the people that had been there in the past – this kind of spiritual memory space, and I wanted to create a musical analogy of that. (Adams 2008, radio interview)³⁰

We identify four *layers of meaning* that frame the purpose of this cathedral-like memory space. First, Adams wanted a space that helped individual family members, friends, and others to cope with their personal grief. In such a space,

29. Radio interview with WGUC (2008) (www.wguc.org/content/display.asp?id=48).

30. Radio interview with WGUC (2008) (www.wguc.org/content/display.asp?id=48).

‘you feel’, he says in the Philharmonic interview, ‘very much alone with your thoughts and you find them focused in a most extraordinary and spiritual way.’³¹ Second, he hoped for a space in which people could find comfort beyond horror and revenge. ‘There is always’, Adams states in the same interview, ‘this desire to transcend horror and look for something comforting, and I think that’s the sense you get at this enormous orchestral and choral climax of the piece’.³² Third, he sought a space that could help the mourners to share their vulnerability with others, and thereby contribute to a more universal and global understanding of tragedy and grief. This is how Adams expressed his hopes: ‘You feel you are in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them, and you sense their collected energy as if they were all congregated or clustered in that one spot’.³³ He also wanted to write a piece that would ‘summon human experience that goes beyond this particular event’.³⁴ The fourth layer thus involved the desire for a space that would offer possibilities for individual and collective remembrance. To sum up: the core meaning of ‘the Transmigration’ is to tender a space where people could go to meet themselves and others, share feelings, sense their collected energy, find comfort, and remember through music.

In the light of these four layers of meaning, we can also understand Adams’s use of the concept of transmigration. This is how he explain it in the Philharmonic interview:

I mean it to imply the movement of the soul from one state to another. And I don’t just mean the transition from living to dead, but also the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss and then themselves come away from that experience transformed’. (Adams’s Homepage)³⁵

Clearly, there is a ‘dual meaning’ at work. Adams is not only concerned with the transmigration of the dead. He also cares about how the event might transform those who are alive and in need of handling suffering and pain.

Is music, then, really a language in which such a high road can be taken? Yes, that is a possibility that we hopefully have made clear. ‘Language is’, as poet and essayist Robert Bringhurst formulates it, ‘what something becomes when you think in it’ (2008:165), and to think ‘in it’ is exactly what Adams did while writing his deeply meaning-bearing piece of music. It is through the language of this piece of music – *On the Transmigration of Souls* – that Adams found his self-reliance in the Emersonian sense, the belief that Adams’s own thoughts

31. This quote from Adams was initially to be found on the homepage of the New York Philharmonic. It is now available only on Adams’s own homepage (www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html).

32. See Adams’s own homepage (www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html).

33. www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html

34. See note 33 above.

35. As above (note 34)

and feelings, what became true for him, could also become true in the minds and hearts of others (Harrison, 2010:25). It is this thoughtful and caring outcome of the artistic process that we now, lastly, as our second order of interpretation, shall understand as a process contributing to a cultural trauma.

COMPOSING AN AMERICAN CULTURAL TRAUMA

As we developed it here, cultural trauma is first of all an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions.

Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004:1)

Cultural trauma theory revisited

In the introduction to this paper, we quoted Alexander's initial definition of cultural trauma.³⁶ It states that such a trauma occurs when 'members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event'. The event must leave 'indelible marks upon their group consciousness', and result in 'marking their memories forever'. It must also have deep implications for their 'future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways'. Furthermore, it is crucial that these shared traumatic experiences are recognized by a wider collectivity. Accordingly, it seems to us self-evident to approach September 11 in terms of a cultural trauma (see Smelser, 2004:264; Alexander, 2006:91–114).³⁷ However, Alexander's trauma theory argues that the event is 'one thing' and 'the representation', that is, the 'meaning making' of it, is 'quite another' (2004:10). A cultural trauma, then, is not a given outcome when a collectivity experiences suffering and pain. Rather, it is, as Alexander puts it, 'the result of this acute discomforting entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity' (2004:10). Actors, then, need to take action and make claims 'to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go' (Alexander 2004:10). Consequently, there is a need to bridge the gap between concrete events and the way they are being represented through ongoing processes of meaning making. It is the bridging of this gap that Alexander conceives of as the *trauma process* (2004:10). Such a process, to be effective, requires successful meaning making work. Against the background of this theoretical understanding, we will conclude by turning to our over-arching aim, that is, to understand Adams's *artistic process* as composing an American cultural trauma. We will, thus, focus on his contribution to the bridging of the gap

36. The initial definition is quoted from Alexander (2004, p. 1). He refers to cultural trauma theory as a 'middle range theory' that has been developed in relation to empirical cases such as 'the legacies of annihilated Jews, enslaved African-Americans, defeated German nationals, and dominated and impoverished Poles', and, hence, it can also be extended to other cases, that, in turn, can enrich the theory. (Alexander 2004, p. 24)

37. See Smelser, who argues that September 11 can be seen as 'a quintessential cultural trauma' (2004, p. 264). See also Alexander 2006b, p. 91–114.

between the event and its represented meanings. Or how, in our second order of interpretation, Adams's artistic process can be understood as a taking part in the trauma process by writing music as a memory space for transmigration.

Composing as trauma process

'The Transmigration', we will argue, is coevally an example par excellence of meaning making through artistic practice within an aesthetic arena³⁸ and a contribution to a trauma process, that is, a contesting intervention in the bridging of the gap between event and representation. This is the very meaning of composing as a trauma process. We need, then, to 'puzzle out' why and how Adams's composing of 'the Transmigration' can be understood as a possible contribution to an American cultural trauma, at least within a particular art world of classical music. Doing so is, to a great extent, to summarize the answers to the how- and why-questions connected to our first theoretical approach concerning the artistic process but through the lens of the cultural trauma theory. Hence, we are thereby laying the needed foundation to answer the question connected to our second theoretical approach, that is, how 'the Transmigration' can be interpreted as a contribution to an emergent cultural trauma.

In order to accept the commission and thereby be able to contribute to the trauma process, Adams had to resolve issues profoundly connected with his artistic vision and civic hopes. In short, he faced a threefold problem that informed his initial rejection. He needed to find a way to represent and express the tortured emotions following September 11 in an artistic form that would not feed into a politics of revenge, and, hence, not be misinterpreted and misused within the American public. How, then, did Adams resolve these issues? He needed to stay true to his artistic vision – that is, to his beliefs that music is an art form in the service of the public, informed by an emotional rhetoric, and, hence, communicative in longing and spirit. He also needed to find an aesthetic solution to how September 11 could be commemorated in a piece of music. It was the search for this solution, in other words, Adams's artistic process, or meaning making, that we tried to conceptualize in our three theoretically constructed how-answers.

First, there was the two-way dual process in which we combined the dual process of particularization – an artistic integrity combined with the respect for the particularity of personal grief – with the dual process of incorporation – an artist in search for an audience open to an art experience and individual mourners, who could experience and recognize a shared mourning process. Second, we elaborated the multifaceted process of amalgamation, in which Adams found the emotional core of the work – taking the most intimate experience of the people involved as his starting point – and the meaning-bearing elements – the

38. According to Alexander's formulation of the cultural trauma theory, actions – or representational processes – are mediated through institutional arenas such as the religious, legal, scientific, mass media, state bureaucracy, and aesthetic. (2004, p. 15–21)

anecdotes, stories, names, hand-lettered missing-persons signs, tag-end phrases, sounds of the streets, and silent footages – that would merge into the particular piece of music – its meanings making sounds. Third, there was the intertextual musical frame of reference in which Adams found his musical spirit, which was not only attuned to the processes of particularization, incorporation, and amalgamation, but also deeply rooted in concrete historical events, ideas, poetry, and, specifically, in a musical tradition that gives the trauma process and its artistic outcome, that is, ‘the Transmigration’, its profound American meaning. ‘Insofar as meaning work takes place in the aesthetic realm it will’, Alexander states, ‘be channeled by specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis (2004:15).

Now, it is to this end, as we now interpret it, that Adams came to compose what he himself understood and named a memory space. And it is this space that we understand as the bridging of the gap – art as a trauma process – between the event and its representation. Basically, this is how ‘the Transmigration’ – through our second-order interpretation – aesthetically expresses Adams’s artistic vision as a possible contribution not only to personal grief and psychological trauma but to a wider trauma process in the American society, at least so among those who came in contact with it and the meaning making that came to surround it. Accordingly, ‘the Transmigration’ is, incontestably so, an art form with a mission: to provide the mourners with a memory space that, in the best of worlds, would, to repeat our four layers of meaning, create a space in which people could cope with personal grief, find comfort beyond horror and revenge, share their vulnerability with others in a more universalistic and global way, and recognize possibilities for individual and collective remembrances. And this, of course, is Adams’s discernable meaning of transmigration. It is, in his own words, ‘for the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss’³⁹, who could recognize their vulnerable bodies, and through the trauma process be enacted towards democratic integration, solidarity, and feelings for others.

At the same time as Adams’s work was carried by a vision of reaching out to others, he did write the piece of music that he wanted to write. ‘The Transmigration’ was thus his way to reconcile artistic integrity with creating art for a public purpose. Accordingly, we have learned that ‘art for art’s sake’ – as an internal logic within the art world – can go hand in hand with deep respect for and the need to reach out – as an external logic – to the need of others. As such – as art as a memory space – it could also be understood as a possible contribution to a cultural trauma process within a wider public realm in which feelings and politics of revenge needed to be canalized and transformed. On the Transmigration of Souls was also made to fit that emotional, rational, and political longing.

39. See Adams’s own homepage (www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html).

Adams did, we would like to argue, compose a piece of music that could feed into a version of an American cultural trauma that he would like to be part of. Not only for emotional reasons but also for, even if somewhat implicit, normative and political ones, that is, to return to Morrison's poetry: not to 'speak' to 'the dead of September' by claiming 'false intimacy' 'in time for the camera' and with 'a mouth full of blood' but to speak 'directly' to the 'September dead': 'those children of ancestors born in every continent of the planet: Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas...' (2003:1), or, to revisit Adams's own formulation: 'What had begun as a genuine chock and trauma developed into an orgy of narcissism and collective victimization' (2008:264). In our choice of words, the artistic process came to inform the trauma process, and the trauma process came to inform the artistic process. In that sense, to quote Greenblatt, 'texts are not merely cultural by virtue of reference to the world beyond themselves; they are cultural by virtue of social values that they have themselves successfully absorbed' (2005:12). It was undoubtedly Adams's hope that his composing of a cultural trauma as a piece of art not only contained his own vision but could reach out to be part of and, hence, even enact an emergent cultural trauma (Trondman 2008a).

It is this cultural analysis that is our answer to the question on how Adams's artistic process and its outcome, that is, 'the Transmigration', can be comprehended in relation to the cultural trauma theory. And thereby we have also, we think, fulfilled our over-arching aim. However, as the reader knows, we are not really done yet.

Social criticism and cultural trauma: contributing to the understanding of the cultural trauma process

The future of music may not lie entirely with music itself, but rather in the way it makes itself a part with – in the way it encourages and extends, rather than limits, the aspirations and ideals of the people – the finer things that humanity does and dream of.

Charles Ives (quoted from Swaford, 1998: 364)

For, if social actors orient themselves, at least some of the time, to ideals, then, since social researcher and social theorists are social actors, they too must orient their actions to ideals in some sense, some of the time.

Isaac Ariel Reed (2011: 67)

Adams's composing, understood as a contribution to an American cultural trauma, is not in complete harmony with Alexander's systematized version of the trauma theory. A compelling narrative, the actual theory states, must produce public answers to four interrelated representations, or, questions. It needs to make strong claims about what happened, who was affected, how the relation of the victim to the wider audiences is to be understood, and who is to be made responsible (Alexander, 2004: 12–15). Without such a successful 'master

narrative', Alexander argues, there will be no thriving trauma process giving meaning to the event, and, consequently, no cultural trauma will emerge (2004:12).

Now, the remarkable thing about Adams's composing is the fact that he does not, at least not explicitly, present any answers to the questions that determine the 'master narrative' in the actual artwork, besides the one's affected, and, to some extent, the victims' relationships to the wider audiences, that is the wider American society. Rather, he avoids speaking out on the demanded issues. 'The Transmigration', then, does not make strong, manifest claims about the event and its outcomes. Why, we ask ourselves, this seemingly evasiveness concerning the questions that determine the 'master narrative'? The answer, we think, is that Adams chose this pathway – without, of course, being in critical dialogue with the trauma theory – to be able to reach out to those who suffer the loss of families and friends. He also did it to be able to reach out to a wider audience. To make that possible he purposively, that is, in his piece of music, avoided the public and political face of the event.

'The Transmigration', then, took seriously the effects of September 11 at the most intimate and personal level – this is how it got its emotional core. It was all about loss. This omission, or bracketing out, of political statements on the event and those involved became decisive for Adams's artistic resolving of the threefold problem. By circumventing explicit political answers to the questions that determine the 'master narrative', Adams managed to find his possible solution. This *logic of bypassing*, we would like to argue, is best understood as a specific form of *social criticism*. As Walzer puts it in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*: 'Now we have to imagine not a marginal critic but a critic detached from his [her] own marginality' (1993:37). This is exactly what Adams did, because, following Walzer, 'the outsider can become a social critic only if he [she] manages to get himself [herself] inside, enters imaginatively into the local practices and arrangements' (1993:39). What the Adams case does elucidate, then, is that an artistic process guided by the meaning of social criticism can contribute to the trauma process by more or less bypassing the four political representations that are supposed to constitute the master narrative. Thus, the analytic point is that it *can* – under certain circumstances – be possible to play a prominent part in a trauma process without participating in the creation of an artistically explicit master narrative. Adams understood that there was no other way to go but through the emotions of those who suffered. To do otherwise at that particular moment in history would have been to move against the grain. It would have been to challenge the tortured emotions, the saturated consciousness, and the demand for a politics of revenge in a way that would have only led to marginalization and defeat. Again, there was no other way than to work through the most intimate and personal level. It was, at that very moment in time, and Adams knew and felt it, all about loss and primordial feelings about revenge. He needed to enter emotionally and imaginatively into the world and the experiences of those who suffered. Therefore, to contribute

to an emergent American cultural trauma in musical form, as we framed it, he could not do anything else but to practice the logic of bypassing.

This bypassing, we think, is a deeply cultural sociological insight. Or as Alexander himself puts it: 'If the world is itself based on collective understandings, then changing the world always involves, in some large part, changing these understandings in turn' (2003:193). We believe that Adams's artistic process was informed by a truthful and authentic identification with the suffering and pain of the mourners. We also believe that he sought to find an artistic expression in tune with his artistic vision and aesthetic integrity, and that his chosen pathway was carried by that sort of wise insight that is present in the meaning that Walzer, as laid out above, ascribes to interpretation and social criticism. It is also in tune with Walzer's critique of the guilt-ridden critics of September 11. 'Someone who cannot acknowledge the suffering of the victims', he stated earlier, 'will have nothing to contribute', since 'the absence of compassion is more dangerous than the distortion of guilt' (2002:xvi). Consequently, only by practicing the logic of bypassing could Adams still be an artist with a critical mission. Yes, seemingly paradoxical, he needed to bypass significant demands of the cultural trauma theory to reach out to the vernacular, and thus contribute to an emergent cultural trauma. Indeed, through his composing he wanted to create a memory space that would not only help people to cope with personal grief but also reach beyond demands for revenge and thereby making it possible to share vulnerability with others. Not only within the American diversity but also with suffering others in other parts of the world. Or, as Alexander puts it in *Remembering the Holocaust*: 'East and West, North and South must learn to share the experiences of one another's traumas and to take vicarious responsibility for the other's afflictions' (2009:70).

'Music', then, as professor of music Nicholas Cook formulates it, 'isn't just something nice to listen to' (2000:2–3). Rather, it is, he adds, 'suffused with human values, with our sense of what is good and bad, right or wrong' (2000:2–3). And also, 'music doesn't just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make *of* it' (2000:2–3). Yes, 'people *think* through music, decide who they are through it, expresses themselves through it' (Cook, 2000:2–3). So, of course, did John Adams, and so did we. Music, indeed, can be understood and, hence, operate, as a longed for 'agent of meaning' (Cook, 2000:2). 'There was', as Charles Ives once sensed at Hanover Square in New York at the end of a tragic day, 'a feeling of dignity all through this'.

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