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# Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

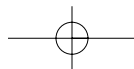
BENEDICT TAYLOR

**I**n her authoritative biography of Samuel Barber, Barbara Heyman notes the almost uncanny sense of personal identification several prominent interpreters of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* seemed to have with his music. Both Eleanor Steber, the singer who commissioned the work, and Leontyne Price, another soprano tied to Barber, strongly associated *Knoxville* with their own childhoods. “That was *exactly* my childhood!” declared Steber in an interview, whereas Price felt that “as a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father . . . my home town. . . . You can *smell* the South in it.”<sup>1</sup> This sense of unique personal empathy has been shared by successive generations of performers and listeners, *Knoxville* becoming one of this composer’s most beloved works and an indelible distillation of a peculiarly American childhood that many feel they have—or would have wished to have—experienced. Yet why should this piece strike such a chord with diverse figures, all of whose childhoods must surely have been marked as much by dissimilarity as by affinity? Was the

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I would like to express my gratitude especially to Elizabeth Bergman for her initial enthusiasm for this subject and kind advice throughout the various stages of this paper, and Barbara B. Heyman who has been generous in offering her wealth of knowledge of Barber. In addition I wish to thank Leanne Wood and the anonymous reviewers for this journal for their helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and his Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 293.



experience of Leontyne Price growing up in a black neighborhood of Laurel, Mississippi really the same as Steber's white middle-class childhood in Wheeling, West Virginia, or for that matter, Barber's own well-to-do upbringing in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia?

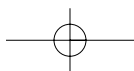
Written in 1947 and first performed the following spring under that great champion of American music, Serge Koussevitzky, Samuel Barber's "lyric rhapsody" for soprano and orchestra, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, is at once a celebrated and confounding piece. An ostensibly nostalgic work by a neoromantic composer, *Knoxville* is yet atypical of Barber in that by most accounts it is the most "American" piece in an oeuvre otherwise rarely seen as strongly touched by a national flavor. Composed in the wake of the second world war in almost as many decades and arriving at the dawn of the atomic age, *Knoxville* might be seen as conjuring up a gentler time and place—a state of lost innocence, which, as its subsequent reception has showed, has proved an enduring site of cultural memory. At the same time, what appeals to so many as an embodiment of collective national identity is wrapped up in a highly personal response by Barber to a text of James Agee with deeply autobiographical meaning for the composer. Barber's *Knoxville* offers a rich source of insight into his music and aesthetics, in its constructions of memory and nostalgia at once personal and autobiographical as well as national and cultural. Excavating these layers reveals a fuller picture of the composer and what his music has been taken to mean, exposing the relationship between Barber's private world and wider cultural movements and his often understated politics.

*Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is permeated with the signs and sounds of nostalgia. James Agee's prose poem of that name, first published in 1938, describes his impressions of a long summer evening as a child growing up in Tennessee. Only the last third of Agee's text was set by Barber, with the poem's opening line serving as an epithet that establishes the scene:

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.

Though recounted in the present tense, the poem is situated in the underlying reality of spiritual adulthood, a split perspective that casts a shadow over the familiar surroundings. The child is ever aware of the frail nature of this domestic bliss and the ephemerality of the human life around him; the innocence of Agee's poem is a mediated one.

By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night.



The nostalgia and wistful tone of Agee's poem is translated in Barber's music by several markers for childhood, past time and musical nostalgia. The recurring refrain assimilates a lullaby *topos* in its  $\frac{12}{8}$  time signature and rocking accompaniment into the simple, folksong-like pentatonic idiom of its vocal line; the very introductory measures, which return later recontextualized, seem to allude to a pastoral idiom in the plain woodwind scoring (the oboe and cor anglais featured prominently), rocking melodic contour, and arabesque-like motivic repetitions. This homely tone is also reflected in the musical structure, which approximates a five-part rondo form. The primary theme, with its lullaby figuration and harmonic oscillation between A and F# minor, returns twice following two episodes that both threaten to destabilize the domestic security of this opening theme (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

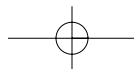
FIGURE 1. Formal design of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

Intro.	A	B	C	A	D	Intro.	A – Coda
mm. 1–5	6–40	41–93	94–113	114–127	128–201	202–230	231– 263

The quasi-musical lyricism of Agee's syntax is further reflected in the atmospheric mood-picture of Barber's setting. Agee's poem is notable for its synaesthetic qualities, something consciously intended by the author, mixing freely the senses of sight, taste, touch, and—more than any other—sound, to transform the banality of everyday noises into music. "I want[ed] to write *symphonies*," wrote Agee, "to do the whole so that it flows naturally, and yet . . . has a discernable symmetry and a very definite musical quality. . . . [A] sort of amphibious style—prose that would run into poetry."<sup>3</sup> Horses break their "hollow iron music on the asphalt"; the taste "of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk" hover above couples promenading down the warm evening roads; the "dry and exalted noise" of locusts enchants the child's eardrums, lying "on the rough wet grass"; and stars, "each like a smile of great sweetness, . . . seem very near." Barber's music takes up this synaesthetic quality in its word-painting and musical onomatopoeia, reversing Agee's transfiguration of noise to music by continually hinting

<sup>2</sup> This underlying rondo structure has been read by most commentators on this work; see, for instance, Russell Friedewald, "A Formal and Stylistic Analysis of the Published Music of Samuel Barber" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1957), 62; Jean Louise Kreiling, "The Songs of Samuel Barber: A Study in Literary Taste and Text-Setting" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1986), 182; and Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 280. I have largely followed Kreiling's example in the above diagram.

<sup>3</sup> Agee, letter to Father Flye, November 19, 1930, in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York: George Braziller, 1962), 47–48.



at turning music back into musical noise. The first contrasting episode (B, m. 41) breaks in shrilly in its sudden description of “A streetcar raising its iron moan, stopping, belling and starting, stertorous,” the words “moan,” “crackling and cursing,” and “rises” subjected to word-painting. More generally, the undulating accompaniment of the primary theme conjures up the physical sensation of the “people sit[ting] on their porches, rocking gently.”

These themes of childhood, memory, going to sleep irresistibly summon up the literary paternity of Marcel Proust. Agee himself in fact later admitted that his work came out of an intense period studying Proust, Freud, and the Jungian psychoanalyst Frances Wickes.<sup>4</sup> As he explained,

I was sketching around, vaguely, on a possible autobiographical novel . . . and was so much involved and interested in early childhood memories. I was greatly interested in improvisatory writing.<sup>5</sup>

Through the memory of “the way water from garden hoses looked and sounded at twilight,” Agee found “nostalgia for much that I remembered very accurately; all I had to do was write it. The writing was easier than most I have managed.”<sup>6</sup>

Here we have the typical features of Proustian remembrance: involuntary or unconscious memory, prompted by the rediscovered sensory experience of an everyday object or event, as a wellspring for artistic creativity. Like Proust, Agee focuses on the verisimilitude of memory as source of creativity and its highly synaesthetic quality. And as with Proust, memory is given a vital role in the construction of identity.

The last lines of the text, “not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am,” speak of the search for personal identity outside the familiarity of the child’s domestic circle. In Barber’s view, “it expresses a child’s feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep,” emphasizing the poem’s darker qualities in place of an ostensibly benign nostalgia.<sup>7</sup> The poem expresses the author’s desire to find his own identity through the recall of what he once was—a search for identity in the past, through memory. This Lockean model of subjective identity (found prominently in Proust) is a standard conceit of the modern era;<sup>8</sup> as Michael Roth has argued, in

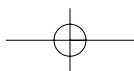
<sup>4</sup> Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 153.

<sup>5</sup> Program notes for the Boston Symphony Orchestra premiere, April 9, 1948, 1244, quoted by Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 279.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Interview with James Fassett for CBS broadcast of *Knoxville*, June 19, 1949, quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 279.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Jeffrey Andrew Barash, “The Sources of Memory,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 713–14.



modernity “memory is the key to personal and collective identity . . . the core of the psychological self.”<sup>9</sup>

In this context, the composer’s decision to set Agee’s poem in 1947 is hardly surprising, given that, as many commentators point out, Barber wrote the song at a time when his father was seriously ill (Roy Barber died on August 12, four months after completion of the score, which was subsequently dedicated to him), and his aunt, the famous contralto Louise Homer (wife of Barber’s compositional mentor, Sidney Homer), was dying. “It reminded me so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it,” Barber wrote to Sidney Homer.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the correspondence between the characters of Agee’s text and Barber’s own family circumstances must have been astonishingly close: the four figures in the child’s family surroundings are “[his] mother, [his] father, [his] uncle, [his] aunt,” and the latter two are described as “an artist” and “a musician” respectively—an uncanny match with Barber’s own family.

Such associations are paralleled by the circumstances in which James Agee originally wrote his text. Agee’s poem was appended posthumously as a prologue to his loosely autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family*, which the author had been working on for many years without ever being able to complete. Barber did not meet Agee until he had just finished his setting of *Knoxville*. Thus he may not have known that Agee’s poem, originating from this autobiographical literary project that would later find fruition in his novel, was bound up with the death of the author’s own father in 1916 when he was just six.<sup>11</sup>

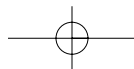
Agee’s *A Death in the Family* is set across three-and-a-half days in 1916, dealing with events surrounding the untimely death of the writer’s father, viewed from multiple perspectives of the family members involved and the differing ways in which this sudden loss affected them. Though this novel was not published until 1957, ten years after Barber set *Knoxville*, the wider context of Agee’s related autobiographical work is nevertheless instructive for several important facets of *Knoxville* and the similarities and inevitable differences between Agee’s and Barber’s works.<sup>12</sup> Not only did *Knoxville* and *A Death in the Family* arise out of the

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist’s Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 8–9.

<sup>10</sup> Barber, letter of April 15, 1947, in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 279.

<sup>11</sup> See Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 278–86, for a thorough account of the circumstances in which Barber encountered Agee’s text and the changes made by the composer. Barber had first read Agee’s poem in William Phillips and Philip Rahv, eds., *The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of Partisan Review, 1934–44: An Anthology* (New York: Dial Press, 1946).

<sup>12</sup> Michael A. Lofaro’s new version of the novel restores much material cut in 1957, contending that David McDowell’s revision misrepresents Agee’s text as left by the author. *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author’s Text*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).



authors' creative response to the same childhood experience, but Barber's later statements reveal how close a kinship he felt with Agee's aesthetic and spiritual world; it is thus not surprising if latent themes of Agee's work should appear in Barber's setting.

A major theme of Agee's novel is the idea of presence: the physical, tangible existence of human life and the enigma of its apparent extinction. Through the extreme distension of the events of a relatively short time-span into a 300-page novel and the accounting of these events from multiple viewpoints, we are almost given the same point in time from different perspectives, a quasi-spatializing of time, stretching out this period for an eternity. In the wealth of detail and its concomitant sensual synaesthesia—Jay, the father, seen alive from many different angles, before he is gone—Agee seems to be striving to encapsulate a physical sense of his presence, his living being, before us. This extreme, distilled sense of being only adds to the sense of loss when Jay is killed in a car crash – an almost tangible “non-presence,” after all, one of the paradoxes of loss, its “not-there-ness.” Jay is felt as *being-there*, alive, and then is taken away.

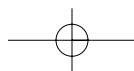
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Agee's multi-perspective, montage construction has a parallel in Barber's rondo structure in its seeming attempt to spatialize and solidify the passing of time, which further works in conjunction with the synaesthetic quality common to both authors in *Knoxville*. This distillation of the sights, sounds, taste, smell and touch of a summer evening, through its very intensity of sensory perception, one might say, momentarily situates the work outside the vagaries of passing time, encapsulating a moment of lived experience, pure Being.<sup>13</sup> For Barber, such artistic enterprise might even be thought of as in some sense bringing a person's being to life. “It is through intensity of feeling that one attains true existence,” wrote Barber in notes found with his sketches to his *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, op. 30 (1954): “The existing individual is one who possesses that intensity of feelings caused by the fact that he is in contact with something outside of himself.”<sup>14</sup> If the remembered past can be brought back with such intensity through its artistic expression, perhaps it almost takes on a life of its own.

This need on the composer's part to search for his identity by returning to that of a child, around the time of the encroaching death of his father, obviously harbors potential Freudian implications. “Memory

<sup>13</sup> This aspect is reminiscent of the novelistic technique of Sartre in its attempt to capture and convey the sense of *being* through quasi-poetic immediacy of sensory experience (see, for instance, some of the opening sections of *La Mort dans l'âme*). Heyman notes Barber's response to his exposure to existentialist philosophy around the time of the composer's *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, op. 30 (1954).

<sup>14</sup> Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 350.





is of course a substitute, surrogate, or consolation for something that is missing,” argue Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn in the introduction to a notable symposium on memory and culture.<sup>15</sup> A retreat back into the familial surroundings of Barber’s childhood might therefore be considered a suitable surrogate for a personal identity threatened by the imminent loss of a regulatory father-figure (Samuel LeRoy Barber, father of Samuel Osborne Barber II). Thus the artistic enterprise in *Knoxville* might be read as an exercise in conserving the past, attempting through art to construct a site of memory, to keep an aspect of this fugitive childhood permanent, bearing out Allan Megill’s proposition that if identity grows problematic, memory will become in turn increasingly important.<sup>16</sup> As Svetlana Boym writes, such nostalgia is a form of

rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into a private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.<sup>17</sup>

The music’s rondo structure is noteworthy here in its attempted mastery of the inevitable parting, analogous perhaps to Freud’s observation of the infant’s game of *Fort und Da*.<sup>18</sup> Just as in the latter—the activity of his eighteen-month-old grandson in throwing away a wooden reel attached to a piece of string and drawing it back, interpreted by Freud as standing for the infant’s desire to control his mother’s absences—the music attempts to control the absence of a parental figure associated with the domesticity of the opening theme by continually articulating the expectation of its return. This process of successive remove and return ultimately offers comfort, cradling the listener into the folds of the reassuring regularity of these thematic recurrences.

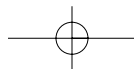
This consoling quality is particularly empathic in the last return of the theme in the coda. The rondo theme returns for the final section of the text, “After a little I am taken in and put to bed” (m. 231), a brief

<sup>15</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, introduction to *Representations* 26 (1989): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Megill, “History, Memory, Identity,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11 no. 3 (1998): 37–62. An alternative Freudian reading might claim that by “cathecting” the lost object into art (here the father figure and the associated childhood experience), Barber is undertaking a typical process of mourning that avoids a descent into melancholia (in which the lost other would become internalized as part of a displaced ego). Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 22 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974), 14:243–58.

<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

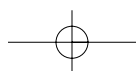
<sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920), *Standard Edition*, 18:7–64.



passage that culminates in an anguished realization of “but will not ever tell me who I am.” This return rounds off the musical setting neatly, and following the subsequent reintroduction of the rondo theme’s characteristic lullaby accompaniment (m. 257) the music could easily have led straight into the final chord, an added-note tonic (plus  $\hat{2}$  and  $\hat{7}$ ) that arises out of one of the prominent motives in this accompaniment. This would have emphasized the bittersweet, unresolved potential of this close; the accompaniment recurs, but the subject it supports is finally gone, and can no longer return. Barber instead gives us yet another statement of the primary theme, this time in the oboe, preceding the A major added-note tonic. Obviously such a musical return is hardly unusual, but one would have expected such a consummate craftsman with a predilection for formal concision as Barber to tighten this design by fragmenting the main theme in the coda in place of yet another statement. This would have rubbed in the physical “truth” of the disappearance, the non-presence of the childhood world or departed figure; return is no longer possible, but is broken, present only in memory. Instead, the theme returns yet again—will always return, complete. The effect of Barber’s decision is consoling, reassuring; there is a healing quality to these final measures that is less bitter than religious in its faith. The manner in which the opening refrain continually recurs vouchsafes to the listener the eternal possibility of this return to what once was, ruining the onward irreversibility of time by suggesting a constant cyclical recurrence and therefore permanent accessibility of a past idyllic state.

This quasi-religious aspect finds its most explicit expression in the role afforded to prayer in *Knoxville*. The second episode (D, m. 128), drawing openly on the constituent motives of the rondo theme and initially just as homely in tone, darkened for the anguished setting of “and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth,” before bringing back the introductory measures (m. 202) in an unexpected reinterpretation of the beginning. These opening measures, intensified, are heard now transfigured as a prayer offered for the child’s parents and family, forming the emotional and rhetorical climax of the work. The words of this passage, “May God bless my people . . . in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away,” were clearly meaningful for Barber at the time of composition.

In Agee’s book this religious aspect finds its articulation in the figure of Mary, the mother of the child Rufus. Mary’s is the voice of religious faith sorely tried by the inexplicable and seemingly needless tragedy of her husband’s death, one of many voices that range from belief through the various shades of agnosticism of her siblings to the full-on atheism of her father. In the stunned aftermath following the news



of Jay's death, Mary intermittently senses her husband's presence in the room:

When she came through the door of the children's room she could feel his presence as strongly throughout the room as if she had opened a furnace door: the presence of strength, of virility, of helplessness, and of pure calm. . . .  
 . . . And even while she whispered, his presence became faint, and in a moment of terrible dread she cried out "Jay!" . . . "Stay with me one minute" . . . and in some force he did return; she felt him with her, watching his child. . .  
 . . . but she could realize only that he was fading, and that it was indeed good-bye. . . . And now he was gone entirely from the room, from the house, and from this world. "Soon, Jay. Soon, dear," she whispered; but she knew that it would not be soon. She knew that a long life lay ahead of her . . . before they met once more.<sup>19</sup>

The other members of the family variously believe or disbelieve Mary's experience, as is their disposition, Agee not committing himself to any one view. Barber's music, while incapable of the same semantic definition of contrasting viewpoints, can nonetheless be read from differing perspectives. But to make the (anachronistic) comparison with the novel later published alongside Agee's poem, Barber's *Knoxville* strongly suggests the reality of such return, of the existence of this spiritual presence and the continual possibility of its repetition.

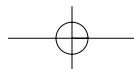
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Repetition: one of the most intensely argued considerations of temporality, suffering, and religious faith was offered by Søren Kierkegaard in his work of the same name from 1843. For Kierkegaard, repetition is a religious category, transcending the material reality of the aesthetic, ethical, and dogmatic: "repetition is and remains a transcendence."<sup>20</sup> Barber would set words of the Danish philosopher-theologian a few years later in his *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, whose first movement opens "O Thou who art unchangeable, whom nothing changes!" While on the face of it, as Kierkegaard's principal pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius discovers, repetition is impossible in life, his "nameless friend" transcends Constantin's earthbound immanence by finding through faith the possibility of such return. "Here only repetition of the spirit is possible," Kierkegaard writes "even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition."<sup>21</sup> The sympathy with

<sup>19</sup> James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 174–75.

<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 186; see also 210.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 221. One might further draw the analogy between the two with the idea that Barber's thematic returns are never exact, "perfect," but intimate this transcendent possibility.



Kierkegaard's thought six years later is hardly surprising. Such, it would appear, is already the religious content of Barber's *Knoxville*.

This idea of return, and its capacity to overcome loss, non-presence, and transience, is both a recurrent religious theme and (in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis) fulfils a deep-seated psychological need. The ubiquitous cultural trope of vanished childhood innocence, the desire to recover a lost Arcadian or Edenic state, might explain in part the curious process of successive resonance with the subject from Agee, via Barber, to performers and audiences. For listeners, this connection might owe to a mapping of their own childhood, loss, or unfulfilled wishes onto the piece. The understandable need for spiritual consolation when faced with the impermanence of human existence is satisfied by the latent religious content of Barber's work. But beyond such personal, potentially autobiographical meanings, Barber's work can also be read from a wider perspective as forming a site of collective, cultural memory.

"[N]ostalgia," Boym explains, "is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."<sup>22</sup> She continues: "Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. [It] is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but . . . also a romance with one's own fantasy."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the boundary between these two types of memory—singular and collective, personal and cultural—is not so clearly delimited for a start, since in setting Agee's initial text, Barber identifies his own childhood experiences with those of Agee (which obviously cannot actually be precisely the same). In other words, the memory formed by the musical setting of *Knoxville* here is already becoming "collective"—or at least "collected," in Wulf Kansteiner's sense.<sup>24</sup> Barber himself speaks of this composite identity, claiming a twinship with Agee after having discovered they were born the same year:

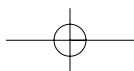
The summer evening he describes in his native southern town reminded me so much of similar evenings when I was a child at home. I found out, after setting this, that Mr. Agee and I are the same age, and the year he described was 1915 when we were both five.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>24</sup> On the distinction, see Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41 (2002): 186.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with James Fassett, in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 279. Heyman further quotes the composer from a later account given to Phillip Ramey: "We both had back yards where our families used to lie in the long summer evenings, we each had an aunt who was a musician. I remember well my parents sitting on the porch, talking quietly as



*Knoxville*, as mentioned, has been typically seen as the most “American” of Barber’s works—not a quality normally associated with this composer, who if anything had been criticized more often than not for his perceived *lack* of national sympathy. For David Diamond, for instance, in his early review of the song, Barber’s piece was as “American as anything yet written . . . the pinnacle beyond which many a composer will find it impossible to go.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed Barber himself, perhaps rather uncharacteristically, touched a note of national chauvinism when he criticized Koussevitzky, the first conductor of the score, for his inability as a native Russian to understand the nature of the piece: “With *Knoxville* you *have* to know the words, and even so, I’m not sure that they would mean to a foreigner what they mean to an American.”<sup>27</sup>

While Barber’s private criticism voiced here might be interpreted as ungenerous, given how much Koussevitzky did to promote the music of his adopted land, such comments might more constructively be seen as an attempt to emphasize the uniqueness of this childhood experience, clearly of deep importance for the composer. Hence Barber’s insistence on similarities he perceived between himself and Agee that verges on the tautological: “I found out . . . that Mr. Agee and I are the same age, and the year he described was 1915 when we were both five.” Such insistence on similarity, the unnecessary duplication of one point as two, bespeaks the composer’s desire to find as total an identification as possible between his and Agee’s worlds. Identity inevitably entails the exclusion of what it is not: as recent commentators have claimed, “In defining the discourses of inclusion and exclusion that constitute identity, people call upon an affinity with places or, at least, with representations of places, which, in turn, are used to legitimate their claim to those places.”<sup>28</sup> According to Barber’s defensive reaction, those from a different cultural background may not be able to empathize so fully with the experience of growing up in the suburban America of the early twentieth century.

Crises in identity prompt the construction of sites of memory, argues Pierre Nora, such crises resulting from ruptures in the history of people or nations: “The moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears.”<sup>29</sup> This

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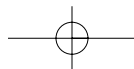
they rocked. And there was a trolley car with straw seats and a clanging bell called ‘The Dinky’ that traveled up and down the main street.”

<sup>26</sup> David Diamond, review of vocal score, *Notes* 7 (1950): 309.

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Ramey, “Samuel Barber at Seventy: The Composer Talks About His Vocal Music,” *Ovation* (March 1980), 20.

<sup>28</sup> G. J. Ashworth and Brian Graham, eds., *Senses of Place: Senses of Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 11–12.



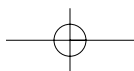
wider view of *Knoxville* can of course be related to the increasing industrial and social modernization of the twentieth century and more specifically to the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> Although America suffered modestly compared with many European countries (and it must be remembered that Barber's own time in the U.S. Army and Air Corps was limited to domestic service, which, in his view, did little more harm than merely waste his time), there is no doubt that even to a large public without first-hand experience of the conflict, the new atomic age spelled a further loss of innocence. What this second worldwide conflagration of hostilities marked more than ever was the unparalleled advance of scientific and technological capability, enabling unprecedented destruction of towns, cities, peoples, and races, of which Hiroshima and Auschwitz stand as only the most potent symbols. The date appended to his work by Agee is 1915—two years *before* the First World War commenced, for American observers at least, and perhaps an allusion to this quasi-symbolic childhood, now lost. (To complete the symmetry, in turn Barber set the piece two years *after* the cessation of the Second World War). Ostensibly, the post-war years in America are recounted as those of prosperity and economic progress, but the story told by *Knoxville* forms a counternarrative to those public/official narratives of victory, military might, and national confidence, which points up Werner Sollors contention that “what is called ‘memory’ (and Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*) may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary ‘History.’”<sup>31</sup>

Even apart from the specific crises of the world war and its aftermath, the twentieth century witnessed an acceleration of the technological and social change associated with modernity, which could be viewed as a threat and destabilizing force on an old, trusted way of life. Jean Kreiling, in her valuable dissertation on Barber's songs, fastens on this aspect of *Knoxville*, asserting that “As urbanization and mechanization brought progress and development to much of early twentieth-century America, Barber and Agee both empathized with a gentler undercurrent of the American psyche: the rural and suburban adherence to quiet, old-fashioned traditions—and the sense that this way of life was waning, that such traditions might soon be lost.”<sup>32</sup> The juxtaposition of idyllic mood-picture and rude intrusion of the external urban

<sup>30</sup> See Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory,” 183: “For Nora, the fall from memory grace occurred in the nineteenth century with the acceleration of everyday life through industrial and social modernization.”

<sup>31</sup> Werner Sollors, quoted in Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., introduction to *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>32</sup> Kreiling, “The Songs of Samuel Barber,” 176.



world of the “streetcar raising its iron moan,” as articulated in Barber’s song between the primary A theme and first contrasting episode (B), functions in Kreiling’s analysis as the primary site of this tension between man and machine, traditionalism and modernity.

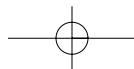
Thus the Arcadian music of section A is twice threatened by the contrasting episodes. First in section B by the forces of modernity, industrialization and urban development, and second in D by the homely episode “On the rough wet grass of the back yard”—the inevitable fate that is mortality and the ephemerality of all that is human. The thematic construction suggests a yet subtler interpretation here, in that the two threats actually arise out of the same source as the pastoral opening: a motive of a third followed by second, or [0-3-5 / 0-4-5] cell, subject to inversion and permutation. This motive is heard prominently in the introductory bars in the bass, again in the vocal line of section A and reconfigured in the related D section.<sup>33</sup> The jagged phrases of section B invert this figure into a falling third and seventh; the subsequent lyric soliloquy, “Now is the night one blue dew” (C), takes up this construction by stacking up triadic thirds into seventh chords that clash with the ensuing collection—what Friedewald has described as Barber’s penchant for creating melodic lines from chordal material.<sup>34</sup> This particular construction—an A-major chord with an added-seventh, which adds an piquant frisson to the overriding diatonicism—returns in the coda, which symmetrically adds the second scale-degree to the tonic (cf. m. 183). Thus in Barber’s conception the seeds of urban encroachment and human mortality are intrinsically contained in and inextricable from the childhood bliss.

In this respect, Barber and Agee may be seen to respond to a growing tendency in the middle years of the twentieth century, namely regionalism—the portrayal of an unspoiled, “innocent” rural America, seen as the bedrock and wellspring of national identity. Such regionalism is closely allied with the South, but can also be equated with the West, essentially emphasizing anything that it not urban East Coast, New York City; the natural, unspoiled, rural Other.<sup>35</sup> Often this is associated with an upsurge in local creativity sometimes termed the “Southern Renaissance” and/or a broadly left-wing, socially humanitarian agenda, relatable to (though not exhaustible by) the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash and the liberal policies of the Roosevelt New

<sup>33</sup> See on this point, Eugene Lickey, “An Analysis of Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*” (DMA diss., Indiana University, 1969), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Friedewald, “A Formal and Stylistic Analysis,” 69.

<sup>35</sup> For an overview of the regionalism of the American West or South, see Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), 124–61.

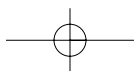


Deal.<sup>36</sup> The “American” aspect of Barber’s music can be most clearly related to this more specific idea of rural regionalism.<sup>37</sup> Beyond the straightforward extramusical semantic dimension provided by the association with Agee’s text, the positing of a distinctive American character to *Knoxville* has commonly pointed to the apparent influence of that personification of musical Americana, Aaron Copland. Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* was staged in 1944 and transferred to the concert hall the following year; it has not been hard for listeners to perceive something of that quintessential distillation of a rural, unspoiled new land in *Knoxville*.<sup>38</sup> Barber’s closing measures, ending on a soft A major chord with added second and seventh scale-degrees, recall irresistibly the so-called American pandiatonicism of Copland’s work, which ends on a nearly identical added-note sonority—an aggregation of tonic and dominant harmony (though as shown Barber’s ending is simultaneously the result of a verticalization of an essential constituent motivic figure running throughout his song).

<sup>36</sup> See most prominently, Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997). In music, this movement is articulated most strongly by the folksong movement seen in such figures as Charles Seeger, the collections of John A. and Alan Lomax as well as Lawrence Gellert, and the new “imposed simplicity” of Aaron Copland’s music from *El Salón México* onwards. See respectively Charles Seeger, “Grass Roots for American Composers,” *Modern Music* 16 (1939): 143–49; Richard A. Reuss, “The Roots of American Left-Wing Interest in Folksong,” *Labor History* 12 (1971): 259–79; Kenneth Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996); and Elizabeth Bergman Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> The specific musical attributes that contribute towards making a work “national” are of course debatable, and many scholars of Barber’s music, while reluctant to dismiss outright the (undeniable) national flavor of this piece, nevertheless feel the need to express their reservations over quite how far Barber’s work can really be shown in idiom to form a type of musical Americanism (see for instance Jean Kreiling’s well-balanced evaluation in “The Songs of Samuel Barber,” 172–76 and 197–201; also Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 293–94). Indeed, *Knoxville* forms revealing parallels with Vaughan Williams’s contemporaneous *An Oxford Elegy* (1947–49) both in details of its pastoral wind scoring and general mood of wistful nostalgia and loss—a work from a composer whose music provides numerous examples of pandiatonicism predating Copland’s and Barber’s similar use. There are, of course, some musical markers of qualities seen as American—beyond the setting of Agee’s text, the use of pentatonic lines, the occasional blues feel. As several commentators have noted, however, it is hard to claim that these features, potentially multiplicitous in their signifying potential, are peculiarly American. The ostensible Americanness of *Knoxville* bears out Carl Dahlhaus’s view of nationalism as more a product of a work’s reception than an intrinsic attribute of its sounding substance.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Neil Lerner, “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood,” *Musical Quarterly* 85 (2001): 479–90, which makes a convincing case for the link between *Appalachian Spring* and Hollywood representations of the American Pastoral. On the myth of the rural West in relation to Copland’s scores from the early 1940s onwards, see Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, chap. 4, esp. 113 ff.





The sense of place intrinsic to such a conception is a potent carrier of meaning as a site of nostalgia. Obviously a movement back to a childhood “home,” whether literal or mythical, has powerful psychological implications, a return in both time and space back to a spiritual origin. This place becomes a site of memory.<sup>39</sup> Attendant with this notion of a rural heart of America is the idea that “real” human nature is to be found there unspoiled. Much of the work of this Southern Renaissance is characterized by a particular social humanitarianism and compassion, seen in *A Death in the Family* through the sensitive exploration of the impact of Jay’s death on those around him, in such notable works as Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and perhaps most prominently in Agee’s earlier documentary work, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Barber himself admired the latter, describing it as “a wonderful book on Southern share-croppers, with whom [Agee had] lived in a spirit of humility and compassion (not the usual spirit of ‘social investigator’).”<sup>40</sup> In such a discourse the relationship between humanity and the forces of modernity are seen in a critical light.<sup>41</sup> William Faulkner, responding to the new threat of nuclear annihilation in his Nobel Prize speech, saw the “universal” themes of human relationships he found in chronicling the life of the South as the only way to perpetuate humanity in the inhuman face of modernity.<sup>42</sup> That which threatens the site will inevitably give rise to a stronger need for its perpetuation through memory.

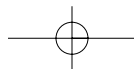
This regionalist aspect places *Knoxville* within a body of literary and artistic work stemming from a general movement seen in leftist artists and intellectuals in the 1930s and 40s. Such a feature is important for

<sup>39</sup> See Jerrold Hirsch, “Modernity, Nostalgia and Southern Folklore Studies: The Case of John Lomax,” *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 183–207, more generally, Kenneth J. Bindas, *Remembering the Great Depression in the Rural South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), or further in relation to the potential for cultural change to be embodied in the American landscape, John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 278. Barber’s enthusiasm is even more noteworthy given that Agee’s documentary novel was not at all successful on publication in 1941 and little known at the time. Barber had earlier set another poem of Agee’s as one of his most celebrated songs, “Sure on this shining night” (op. 13, no. 3, 1938).

<sup>41</sup> See particularly Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920–60* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), or more broadly, Michael O’Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear. . . . There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.” William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Speech, December 10, 1950, in *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 119.



understanding Barber and his music politically.<sup>43</sup> It is not clear how political, in the strong sense, Barber was, either as a man or as a composer, although his politics appear to tend toward a humanistic liberalism. As his reaction to Agee's earlier socially-orientated work bears witness, Barber's attitude was marked by a "non-ideological" humanitarianism, a feature further testified by his friend and editor at Schirmer, Paul Wittke, who left the following account of the composer:

Barber was free-thinking, curious, tolerant, and intellectually thorough. He was so cultivated that shock for its own sake did not amuse him. He believed in good manners and outward convention, but he had the courage to break the rules when he wished. At a time when most of the United States was still segregated he helped launch the careers of two young black singers: Martina Arroyo and Leontyne Price. When Girard Bank and the Philadelphia Orchestra board became nervous that Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet of *The Lovers*, wrote with graphic sensuality and was a Communist, Sam stood his ground and won the day.<sup>44</sup>

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Within this liberalism was a sentiment opposed to ideologues and those with self-consciously political motives (including the archetypal "social investigator" he scornfully contrasts with Agee). Whereas Barber was perhaps sympathetic to the plight of the less fortunate and downtrodden (a tendency possibly aided by his own sexual "otherness"), he was hardly a paid-up leftist nor even politically engaged. Rather, his aesthetic and (broadly) political views were characterized by a belief in the autonomy of the individual and a somewhat Romantic subjectivity. As he wrote approvingly of Kierkegaard in the notes to the premiere of his op. 30 *Prayers*, "The truth he [Kierkegaard] sought after was a 'truth which is true for me,' one which demanded sacrifice and personal response."<sup>45</sup> Wittke again reveals Barber's private ethic in his statement that the composer's Presbyterian faith "was a private matter" that he "kept to himself, like most things he cared about deeply."<sup>46</sup>

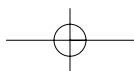
In this light, it is unsurprising that this product of a well-to-do family and friend of high figures, who had obtained worldly success

<sup>43</sup> Barber is slowly becoming better served in scholarship but there is still a particularly conspicuous lack of research into him from explicitly political perspectives. For instance, the principal work in this field, Barbara Heyman's fine biography, is invaluable as a source of reference for scholars investigating Barber's life and work, although it leaves unanswered many questions of Barber's religious and political views as well as his sexual orientation. In fairness, Heyman had less documentation available at the time of writing her biography and plans to include new material on these aspects in a forthcoming edition.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in John Browning's liner notes to *Barber: The Complete Songs*, Deutsche Grammophon 459 506-2 (2002), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 350.

<sup>46</sup> Browning, *Barber: The Complete Songs*, 8.



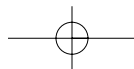
through such paragons of middlebrow society as Toscanini, and who remained aloof from overt political activism, would incur in his time the wrath of some on the progressive left.<sup>47</sup> And Barber's regionalism differs from, say, Copland's, insofar as Barber's turn to "the people" is more personal, subjective, and Romantic than progressive or political.<sup>48</sup>

This aspect can (and has) easily been viewed as reactionary by some. Through his quite conscious desire to tread a path that ran counter to the prevailing modernism and overt nationalism, Barber has been read politically as a conservative, backward-looking composer. This has obviously had significant impact on Barber's critical reception. Conservatism, while often favoring popular comprehension, is a liability in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics and their dominant ideology of progressivism in art. Thus a long-standing narrative of American music is that the truly national art is either modernist-experimental in the line of Ives, Cowell, Cage, and Babbitt, or else regional-rural *a la* Copland of the 1940s. Barber, with the exception of a handful of works such as *Knoxville* that come close to the second category, fits with neither. Seen as maybe too traditional in style and idiom, Barber has also been routinely (and perhaps unfairly) criticized, whether openly or implicitly—being passed over in silence—as somehow not American enough. Copland in his "Americana" vein is more distinctive in the long tale of history than the quasi-European Romanticism of Barber, or indeed other American neoromantic composers such as Howard Hanson or William Schuman.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See the response of a leftist such as Ashley Pettis (Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 171). Significantly enough, Barber's name was not among a list of 103 American composers proudly cited by Pettis whose works had been performed by the WPA Composers' Forum-Laboratory initiative in New York. Ashley Pettis, "The WPA and the American Composer," *Musical Quarterly* 26 (1940): 103–4.

<sup>48</sup> On Copland's politics, see Elizabeth B. Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56 (2003): 409–65.

<sup>49</sup> The habitual opposition between progressive/modernist and reactionary/Romanticist labels adumbrated above is of course excessively binary and does not do justice to the complexities of Barber's music and aesthetics. A fresh and more nuanced perspective might be provided by Svetlana Boym's category of "off-modernism" to describe the oblique relation modern (if not necessarily modernist) art concerned with nostalgia forms with progressive modernity. "The adverb off confuses our sense of direction" writes Boym. "It makes us explore sideshadows and back alleys rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narrative of twentieth-century history. Off-modernism offered a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and no less modern reinvention of tradition. In the off-modern tradition, reflection and longing, estrangement and affection go together. Moreover, for some twentieth-century off-modernists . . . creative rethinking of nostalgia was not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming" (*The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi–xvii). This formulation perfectly encapsulates the constructive tension between nostalgia, conservation and the modern in Barber's music, and hence also its complex relation to American music historiography.

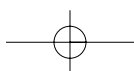


Hence while Barber's public success has been assured, he has tended to be marginalized in accounts of the development of twentieth-century American music. Notwithstanding his interpreted aloofness from musical politics and cultural nationalism, Barber's aesthetic of music as expression and communication, not aimed at a musical elite or snobbish radical intelligentsia but at anyone who would listen, succeeded in creating a work which has spoken to many as the embodiment of an American childhood. And even a work such as the celebrated *Adagio for Strings*, which in its long, archaic, melismatic lines and quasi-modal harmonic world is hardly distinguished as American by most common musical signifiers for this term, has become *ex post facto* accepted as a national expression of the American psyche and collective mourning, even if this hardly how Barber himself must have considered it.

*Knoxville* is both personal and national, at once a private memorial to Barber's own childhood and a collective monument to the age it attempts to preserve. Ultimately there might be a final sense in which this work can be heard as a memorial: as a leave-taking within Barber's own oeuvre, away from the more expansive lyricism of earlier works such as *Dover Beach*, *Adagio for Strings*, and the Violin Concerto, to an increasingly dry, brittle, even acerbic sound-world glimpsed in the *Capricorn Concerto* (1944) and ever more prominent in the late 1940s and '50s. Certainly there is something in *Medea*, the Piano Sonata, and Piano Concerto that pits Barber's characteristic lyricism against a sparer, more rhythmically angular idiom. Ned Rorem, in holding that "if Barber later aimed higher, he never reached deeper into the heart" than in the *Adagio*, argued that Barber "is still held most dearly for works composed before his fortieth birthday."<sup>50</sup> For the present-day listener it is often the youthful works of the 1930s and '40s that seem the most quintessential distillation of Barber's art. It is not the case that his later works are worse or reveal a falling-off from what came before (indeed, in the 1950s and early '60s Barber was probably at the height of his critical and public success), but rather that he was becoming, both in his time and especially in ideological retrospect, evermore seen as out-of-step with the times. One might ask if the unabashed lyricism of the Violin Concerto would not have been heard as out-of-place in the colder, post-war, post-Hiroshima climate.<sup>51</sup> By the 1970s and '80s, Barber had become for most an irrelevance, sinking deeper into depression and alcoholism.

<sup>50</sup> Ned Rorem, "Looking for Sam," *Stagebill-Carnegie* (February 1983), 7, quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 173.

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Heyman notes that the original third movement of the Cello Concerto, written towards the end of the war, was claimed to have been discarded and subsequently rewritten by the composer on the day following Hiroshima (*Samuel Barber*, 256).



The cultural monument that is *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* has served to articulate an ineradicable image of the backward-looking Romantic composer at perhaps the last moment when such nostalgia was critically permissible. The innocent but never naïve lyricism enshrined in *Knoxville* would become increasingly rarely glimpsed in his later music. A work such as the *Third Essay for Orchestra* (1978) seems perfectly indicative of this setting: a lone, lyrical voice ebbs and flows against a sparser, percussive background—just like (and the analogy seems irresistible) Barber himself, left behind in an age that had forgotten, or had chosen to forget, this Romantic aesthetic.

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### ABSTRACT

Samuel Barber's "lyric rhapsody" for soprano and orchestra, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947), is one of his most celebrated and complicated pieces. The most ostensibly backward-looking, nostalgic work of this "conservative," neoromantic composer, *Knoxville* is yet atypical of Barber in that by most accounts it is the most American piece in an oeuvre otherwise rarely seen as touched by national flavor. Dating from an era just recovering from the cataclysm of World War II, *Knoxville* can be seen as conjuring a gentler age, a state of lost innocence, which as its subsequent reception has showed proved an enduring site of cultural memory. And this work that appeals to so many as an embodiment of collective national identity is simultaneously wrapped up in a highly personal response by Barber to a text of James Agee with a deeply autobiographical meaning for author and composer. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* offers a rich source of insight into Barber's music and aesthetics, in its constructions of memory and nostalgia at both a personal, autobiographical level and broader cultural one. Excavating these layers reveals a fuller picture of the composer and what his music has been taken to mean, exposing the relationship between Barber's private world and wider cultural movements and his often understated politics.

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Keywords: James Agee, Samuel Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, memory, nostalgia

