

## **Narrating the horrors of civil war: Laurie Lee's *A Moment of War*, Picasso's *Guernica* and Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines Laurie Lee's *A Moment of War* (written in 1991 about the writer's experience in the Spanish Civil War), *Guernica* which embodies Picasso's shock at the fierce bombing of the defenseless citizens of Guernica, and Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936). Though the latter musical composition was written and performed on another funerary occasion one year before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, it is, indeed, a true dirge for the tragic loss of lives ensuing from war; in Thomas Larson's words, "the saddest music ever written". The three artistic oeuvres in question, though belonging to different media, could well be seen as profound "evidence of the wound". They may have been produced during the third decade of the last century. However, their timeless, universal appeal lies in their surprising relevance to their expression, albeit through three different artistic vehicles, of insurmountable grief at the devastation and loss of innocent lives caused by wars in general, and civil wars in particular. In fact, it suffices to look around us at Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lybia and, indeed innumerable parts of the world to realize the repetitive pattern of senseless victimization of innocent peoples to fulfill wicked political ambition; a pattern that has persisted since the beginning of history, through the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), World Wars I and II, and up till the very present day. How powerful and how pertinent these three works emerge as reminders that address the human conscience by raising issues that are very much alive in the morose reality we are living nowadays.

The paper will basically deal with the above-mentioned works in view of Roland Barthe's discussion of image, music and text, and Carolyn Forché's notion of the "poetry of witness," though expanding the term to include art and music of witness.

## Introduction

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) between the Nationalists, led by General Franco, aided by Hitler and Mussolini, on the one hand, and the army supporting the elected Republican government, on the other, is one of those tragedies that have left their mark on the human conscience all over the world. One of the most definitive and painful moments in this tragic war was the bombing of the defenseless, holy, Basque town of Guernica. Air raids of German aircraft trying out a new kind of bomb, brutally wiped out the whole city. Though other cities were bombed before Guernica, until World War II, "it was the most notorious bombing of the century." (Rhodes 20) The extent of the death and devastation has been described by Austrian journalist, Noel Monks, as "charred bodies," "soldiers sobbing," "the smell of burning flesh, houses collapsing into the inferno, "aeroplanes, bullets, bombs, fire" everywhere. (21) Besides, as if the bombs wouldn't suffice, "The Condor Legion fighters machine-gunned the people trying to escape along the roads and even the sheep grazing in the fields outside of the town." (21)

On contemplating the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lybia and many corners of the world, one wonders at the repetitive pattern of political vulnerability, chaos, dividedness, fanaticism internally, and the willing intervention of external super powers. The result is an infinite loss of innocent lives, insurmountable grief, and an unanswerable question: When will this madness ever stop? A relevant question inevitably arises: how does the writer, artist or musician narrate such a tragedy? In Martinez-Caro's words (2016), "Should he continue to live in his ivory tower and forget the social reality he is going through? Should he be in the service of the people's cause and forget his role as creator and artist? (324) In the case of Spain, many writers and artists saw their Romantic and political ideas embodied in the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War. Among them were Auden, Lorca, Picasso, George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway and Laurie Lee. Their works have significantly illuminated minds and served as memorable records of the Spanish Civil War. (325) While this paper examines Laurie Lee's autobiography besides his poem bearing the same title; *A Moment of War* (1937) and Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica* (1937) as "narratives" of the Spanish Civil War, it also attempts to explore the timeless, "musical narration" of human sorrow embodied in Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. (1936) Thus, the paper seeks to make a textual and artistic comparison of the inter-medial representations of this tragic historical event across three modes of expression; the textual (Lee's autobiography and poem), the visual (Picasso's painting) and the aural (Barber's music).

### **Literature of Witness, Art of Witness, Music of Witness**

It has to be pointed out that it is not the purpose of this paper to establish the hierarchy of various media of narration, as much as it is an attempt to show how painting and music, together with literature composed at a certain moment of history, revolve around a particular event, striving painstakingly to come to terms with it. Joe Moran belittles the fight of trying to establish the superiority of one form of art to another. (*Interdisciplinarity 2*) Yet, he acknowledges that “the very notion of the term [discipline] as a recognized mode implies the establishment of a hierarchy and the operation of power.” Moran alludes to Leavis’ notion of “English as necessarily interdisciplinary, since the work of the great writers which forms its syllabus inevitably encompasses a much broader interest in life, society, civilization and thought.” (qtd 29) Leavis states that “One of the virtues of literary studies is that they lead constantly outside themselves, and..., while it is necessary that they should be controlled by a concern for the essential discipline, such a concern, if it is adequate, counts on associated work in other fields.” (29) Moreover, it is relevant to keep in mind Raymond Williams’s argument expressed in *Culture and Society* (1958):

The ways in which we can draw on other experience are more various than literature alone. For experience that is formally recorded we go not only to the rich source of literature, but also to history, building, painting, music, philosophy, theology, political and social theory, the physical and natural sciences, anthropology, and indeed the whole body of learning. (57)

Thus, the ultimate aim of culture is to “reveal unexpected identities in hitherto separately considered activities.” (58) Hence, this study places Laurie Lee’s work alongside Picasso’s *Guernica* and Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* as three important works that reflect “the structure of feeling of a particular period;” namely the troubled era around the Spanish Civil War; a precursor of World War II.

### **A Moment of War as Literature of Witness**

In the Introduction to her poetry anthology entitled *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, (1993), Carolyn Forché disapproves of the traditional distinction between “personal” and “political” poems, (32) stating that “We need a third term, one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal.” (17) Defining witness poets as “Those who have suffered wars, imprisonment, military occupation, house arrest, forced exile and political repression, Forché views their work as “evidence of the wound.” She writes that “atrocities have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the last one hundred years. Such monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering – a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality, a heard-headed

acceptance of 'reality' ". Hence, the importance of reviving these poems of witness which "will not permit us diseased complacency."

Among the many British men of letters whose lives were touched by the Spanish Civil War, is English poet, novelist and screenwriter, Laurie Lee (1914 – 1997). Fondly remembered for his three autobiographies; *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* (1969), *Cider With Rosie* (1976) and *A Moment of War* (1991), Peter Cash draws attention to Lee's three volumes of poetry through which he first became a published writer. (*The Lyrics of Laurie Lee* 2) In fact, obituaries of Lee tell of his astonishment at being excluded by Philip Larkin from *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse* published in 1974 despite the fact that Lee "was initially a poet who made a distinctive contribution to the lyrical tradition of English verse."

Laurie Lee's involvement in the Spanish Civil War is narrated in his poetry and his last autobiography, *A Moment of War*. His first encounter with Spain had resulted in his earlier autobiography, *As I Walked Out One Summer Morning* (1969). Though he was picked up from Gibraltar by the British authorities at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936, and was supposed to study art, he insisted on returning to Spain in 1937 as a member of the International Brigade, a group of international volunteers who sympathized with the Republican cause. Despite his short participation in the war owing to his epilepsy which interrupted that experience, and despite the claims after his death that he never really took part in the actual fighting, claims that were ridiculed by his widow, his poems and autobiography certainly include some of the most touching narrative accounts of the devastation, atrocities and futility of war.

In his poem entitled *A Moment of War*, Lee summarizes the horrors of war through highly descriptive, concentrated imagery and figurative language:

the blood is stuttering with fear.  
*O praise the country of worms*  
in cool crumbs of soil  
flatter the hidden sap  
and the lost unfertilized spawn of fish!  
The hands melt with weakness  
into the gun's hot iron  
the body melts with pity  
the face is braced for wounds  
the odour and the kiss of final pain.  
...  
The mouth chatters with pale curses  
the bowels struggle like a nest of rats  
the feet wish they were grass spaced quietly

*O Christ and Mother!*

But darkness opens like a knife for you  
And you are marked down by your pulsing brain  
and isolated  
and your breathing,

and the final sky.

(Spanish Frontier, 1937)

Here, the repetitive use of the conjunction “and” and the enumeration of the different parts of the frail, tortured, ravished, human body are attempts “to pile up sense-impressions that suggest a hive of organic activity;...” (Cash 1,2) Indeed, in Lee’s terrifying, dense description, night becomes a bloody, blinding “rag.” Human flesh is tortured by the expectation of peril. Blood, a metonymy for the frightened soldier/victim, is “stuttering with fear.” Spain has become a mass grave, “a country of worms”. One is reminded of Eliot’s “handful of dust,” as death is concretized in “the country of worms,” and “the odour and kiss of final pain,” “the gun’s hot iron.” In addition, fear is concretized in “the stuttering” of blood, the mouth’s “chattering,” the struggling bowels, and the melting of tired, weak, frightened hands. Moreover, the terror and isolation of the fighter/victim is concretized as his/her breathing becomes a blast, a bullet, leading to the final death.

In *The Armoured Valley*, Lee masterfully contrasts the supposedly joyful coming of spring to the wretchedness of the death-infested scene of the Spanish Civil War. Juxtaposing war and spring, the poet resorts to a series of substitutions:

No festival of love will turn our bones  
to flutes of frolic in this month of May,  
but tools of hate shall make them into guns  
and bore them for the piercing bullet’s shout  
and through their pipes drain all our blood away.

Finally, Nature, represented by Spring, is depicted as an indifferent, tantalizing agent: “... yet Spring, repeat/your annual attack, pour through the break/of some new heart your future victories.”

In *Music in a Spanish Town*, composed in Cordoba in 1936, Laurie Lee, emerges not just as a poet and a painter, but also as a skillful violinist who defies war with his unique weapon; music:

In the street I take my stand  
with my fiddle like a gun against my shoulder,  
and the hot strings under my trigger hand  
shooting an old dance at the evening walls.

Indeed, here, all the verbs associated with the beauty of music are substituted by the violent vocabulary of war.

Lee's poem entitled *The Long War* is a true reflection of the senselessness and the futility of war. As in Byron's conclusion to *The Eve of Waterloo*, where the witness cannot distinguish enemy from ally, Lee laments the tragic loss of lives, and provides what Carolyn Forché terms "evidence of the wound":

Caught in one grief, we share one wound,  
And cry one dialect of pain.  
We have forgot who fired house,  
Whose easy mischief spilt first blood,  
Under one raging roof we lie  
The fault no longer understood.  
But as our twisted arms embrace  
The desert where our cities stood,  
Death's family likeness in each face  
Must show, at last, our brotherhood.

The poet is not gasping for breath anymore, but contemplating the whole scene in a philosophical afterthought, using a rather stable meter of iambic tetrameter, where we get some composed, rhyming lines.

On the other hand, Lee's last autobiography entitled *A Moment of War* is a well-known work in which the poet/witness recollects his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. In his introduction to the volume, Jan Morris regards the autobiography as "a classic evocation of the vacuous miseries of warfare." (6) The twenty-three year-old Laurie Lee found himself enmeshed in international brigades of volunteers from several countries. The British Battalion which he joined included "anti-Fascist volunteers of all sorts ... , idealist writers and artists ... dogmatic trade unionists ... led for the most part by Communists." Criticizing the Republican army, and ridiculing its lack of organization, Lee is impatient with "the endless hanging about, the cancellation of orders, the long, long train journeys through the night, the false alarms, the rotten food, the homesickness, ... the monotony, boredom, lovelessness, the occasional farce..." (8) However, Lee's firsthand experience of the atrocities of war actually materialized in 1938, when he witnessed the bombing of Valencia and Madrid. In *A Moment of War*, he depicts frozen images of the devastation of war: "It was as if a paralyzing pestilence had visited the place, as I was to notice on a number of occasions in the weeks to come. It was simply the stupefying numbness of war. (14)

Laurie Lee's touching, poetic prose narrates the pitiful scene where fierce bombing is likened to a plague:

The landscape was plagued, stained and mottled, and all humanity seemed to have been banished from it. The normal drive of life had come to a halt - nobody stirred, even the trees looked blighted; one

saw no dogs or children, horses or girls, no smoking fires or washing on lines, no one talking in doorways or walking by the river, leaning out of windows or watching the train go by – only a lifeless smear over roof and field, like something cancelled, or in a coma; and here and there, at the windswept crossroads, a few soldiers huddled in dripping capes. Worse than a country at war, this one was at war with itself – an ultimate, more permanent wastage. (38, 39)

In fact, when one observes the foreign role in fuelling sectarian war amongst the innumerable factions fighting in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lybia and many kinds of civil strife all over the world, one certainly understands Laurie Lee's condemnation of General Franco who allowed the massacres committed during the Spanish Civil War:

Few acknowledged at the time that it was General Franco, the Supreme Patriot and Defender of the Christian Faith, who allowed these first trial-runs to be inflicted on the bodies of his countrymen, and who delivered up vast areas of Spain to be the living testing-grounds for Hitler's new bomber-squadrons, culminating in the annihilation of the ancient city of Guernica. (40, 41)

Summarizing the horrors of war, where human lives are fiercely exposed, Lee writes:

We'd already seen posters and photographs of what bombs could do to a city, slicing down through apartment blocks, leaving all their intimacies exposed – the wedding portrait on the wall, the cheap little crucifix, the broken bed hanging bare to the street – the feeling of whole families, huddled together in their private caves, being suddenly blasted to death in one breath.

However, the devastation experienced by the writer seems to be unprecedented. It appears to shatter all his idealistic hopes as he realizes the utter wastefulness and futility of war. He witnesses new "images of outrage which Spain was the first to show us, and which in some idiot way I was impatient to share." Narrating the brutality, the confusion and the guilt associated with war, Lee's moment of war becomes a moment of defeat: "There was the sudden bungled confrontation, the breathless hand-to-hand, the awkward pushing, jabbing, grunting, swearing death a moment's weakness or slip of the foot away. Then we broke and raced off, each man going alone, each the gasping centre of his own survival." (99,100) After this confusion comes the guilt of having killed a man in the battle. "I lay in a state of sick paralysis. I had killed a man, and remembered his shocked, angry eyes. There was nothing I could say to him now."

Lamenting the thwarted hopes of making a difference by participating in such foreign disputes, Lee observes, "No gold path of glory in this, for youth to go to war, but a grey path of intense disquiet." (42) Echoing Wilfred Owen, the great First World War poet who refers to the soldiers as "those who die as cattle," (*Anthem for Doomed Youth* 1917), Lee writes,

“We were not warriors any more but lumps of merchandise being carried to a dumping-ground.” (43) Expressing a universal despair, Lee writes, “We had yet to learn that sheer idealism never stopped a tank.” (61) Moreover, contemplating the pointlessness of his whole endeavor, he wonders, “Was this then what I’d come for, and all my journey had meant – to smudge out the life of an unknown young man in a blur of panic which in no way could affect victory or defeat?” (101) Enumerating the diverse victims of war, the “war heroes,” Lee includes some realistic information of the records of the Spanish Civil War: “Here were the names of dead heroes, piled into little cardboard boxes, never to be inscribed late in official Halls of Remembrance. Without recognition, often ridiculed, they saw what was coming, jumped the gun, and went into battle too soon.” (108,109)

The question of why Laurie Lee had waited so long to publish his last autobiography (1991), more than a century after the Spanish Civil War, is an intriguing one. Referring to his interview with Laurie Lee (published in 2014), David Baird states that Lee had lost some of his war diaries and notebooks. Among the critics who claimed the book was more imagination than fact, Valerie Grove suggests that “it must rest in the no man’s land between history and invention.” However, she did assert that the book did give “an almost cinematically vivid impression” of Spain at war.

It is my firm belief that autobiography has always raised the question of truth versus fantasy, or in Goethe’s words, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. It is a lesson we learn from Rousseau’s *Confessions*. As for Laurie Lee’s *A Moment of War*, it seems to me that the mixed feelings experienced by the writer of witness, or the poet of witness, the guilt, the thwarted idealism of the young poet/amateur soldier may have delayed his assimilation of such a complex experience till he was able to put it down on paper, let alone, publish it to the world. In this context, Carolyn Forché insists that “A poem that calls us from the other side of a situation of extremity cannot be judged by simplistic notions of ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth to life.’ It will have to be judged, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said of confession, ‘by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth.’ ” (17) The consequences of reading Lee’s verse and prose testimonies about the Spanish Civil War undoubtedly leave the reader with feelings of disgust with war, in general, and civil war, in particular. They seem to remind us of the reality we would very much wish to forget; the vertigo of an unending cycle of war and loss.

### **Picasso’s *Guernica***

In his book, entitled *Image Music Text*, Roland Barthes states that “in every society various techniques are developed intended *to fix* the floating chain of signifieds [horrors of war] in such a way as to counter the horror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is [only] one of these techniques.”

(39) According to Barthes, a written text “helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself – it is a matter of a denoted description of the image ... by recourse to nomenclature.” Conversely, “the execution of a drawing itself constitutes a connotation. ...the relation between the two messages (the denotational and the connotational) is profoundly modified: it is no longer the relation between nature and a culture...but that between two cultures; [that of the scene and the reception of it]. (43) Hence, drawing becomes a coded message. Indeed, Picasso’s *Guernica* certainly emerges as one of the most complex works of art produced in response to the bombing of Guernica. Its messages defy any single linguistic interpretation. Ever since its composition, it has been a symbol of human brutality and the burden of guilt citizens of all countries will forever bear.

In this context, Akos Kopper’s article on Picasso’s masterpiece (2014) opposes the neglect of visual rhetoric as opposed to linguistic rhetoric, stating that “visual acts are a somewhat neglected field of study.” (444) Kopper refers to “the symbolic qualities of images that enable them to make inferences, allude to past events, and thereby contextualize political acts in a wider narrative. (444)

Still highlighting the universal, “narrative” potential of *Guernica*, Kopper adds that, “by showing *Guernica* at protests, or using it as a template for pieces of art, it connects otherwise distinct events of protest into a grand narrative.” Thus, the painting is “linked up with general discourses about injustices, about authorities abusing their power, and inflicting horrors on innocent others. Thus, *Guernica* becomes “an icon ... that refers less and less to atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and invokes instead more and more a universal normative call.”

Kopper’s view that images “speak” to us “despite the polysemy of the meanings they carry,” amounts to the conclusion that *Guernica* has “such a powerful rhetoric” that it pulls its spectators into “an unambiguous subject position.” Such images as *Guernica* “reject the polarization of the social universe and particularly emergency politics by calling out for upholding universal moral standards.” In fact, *Guernica*’s significance lies in suggesting that “nothing could justify such pain and suffering on others as it happened in Guernica.”



There can be no doubt that Picasso's *Guernica* is one of the most famous artistic works composed in response to the Spanish Civil War. On hearing accounts of the bombing of Guernica, Picasso, who had not decided upon the subject of the painting he had been commissioned to compose for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris World Fair of 1937, immediately started work on this gigantic mural. Little did he know that it was to become a universal icon of protest against war.

Like Laurie Lee, the case of Picasso demonstrates how the artist wished to "narrate" that tragic moment despite the fact that the latter was not directly involved in the Spanish Civil War. In an interview with Pol Gaillard, quoted by Patricia Leighton in her article, "Artists in Times of War" (2009), Picasso highlights the artist's role saying, "I have never considered painting as an art of simple pleasure, of diversion; I have wanted through drawing and through colour, since these were my weapons, to penetrate always more deeply into knowledge of the world and of humanity, in order that this knowledge liberate us all..." (2)

In this context, Laurie Lee's poem entitled *Music in a Spanish Town*, written in Cordoba, in 1936, seems relevant, as it expresses the power of both poetry and music in condemning war.

Besides, in a March 1945 interview with Simone Téry, Picasso asks:

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if a painter, ears if a musician, or a lyre at every level of the heart of a

poet...? On the contrary, he's at the same time a political being, constantly awake to harrowing, impassioned or favorable world events, shaping himself entirely in their image. No painting is made in order to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of offensive and defensive war against the enemy."

Though Picasso's politics "did not follow any strict ideological line," his activist support for the legally elected Republican government of Spain was obvious. (8) Therefore, expressing his moral obligation as an artist, Picasso writes, "I have always believed, and still believe, that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at stake."

On viewing the awe-inspiring painting by Picasso, one is at once overwhelmed by the scale of the mural, shocked at the pathetic depiction of suffering and, mesmerized by the ambiguity of its crowded structure. Referring to the enigmatic quality of the painting, Richard Rhodes summarizes its components. He states that "Part of the power of Picasso's great painting is its ambiguity. Its events take place simultaneously inside and outside of the interior space it seems at first to define; its foreground and background overlap [influenced by surrealism and cubism]" The bombing and massacre of the innocent citizens of the Basque town "have penetrated and overwhelmed its fragile security, leaving behind a dead infant, a mother screaming in grief, a decapitated dead soldier, a spear-pierced dying horse, and a woman falling terrified from a burning roof." (24)

Instead of recording the battlefield, the artist opts for a complex scene which focuses on the victims of the shelling. In his article entitled "Picasso's 'Guernica' in Its Historical Context" (1983), Werner Hofmann places Picasso in a line of artists who chose to depict human suffering, stating that this "is one of the great themes of modern painting ... the period which starts with Goya." (141) Before the eighteenth century, history painting had dealt with the depiction of battles, portraying the victory of one party over another, but the victims' suffering was not the intended theme. (142) Since Goya, however, "the vanquished takes the place of the vanquisher, the defeated speak more convincingly than the defeater." This trend was expanded by Delacroix, Géricault among others, leading to the anonymous heroes and heroines of Guernica. Thus, through his visual rhetoric, Picasso "gives prominence to the weak and the defenseless. The victimizers are absent." (147) *Guernica*, writes Kopper, "touches the spectators deeply, by invoking their engrained abhorrence against aggression towards defenselessness,...hailing spectators into subject position where they cannot but feel outraged and think that there can be no reason whatever to justify such aggression and cruelty." (452) Thus, "images like *Guernica* offer a narrative more powerful than thousands of

words ... Images captivate observers by offering holistic sensations via their immediacy." (446) Spectators "do not have the option of stopping to turn the pages and stopping to follow how the narrative unfolds."

As for the ambiguity and complexity that characterize a gigantic work of art like *Guernica*, it is important to remember Stacey Guill's statement (2004) that "Picasso himself steadfastly refused to explain the images in his painting saying, "It's up to the public to see what it wants to see." (15) In her general analysis of *Guernica*, Guill describes the scene as

a nightmarish scene in which it is impossible to discern whether it is day or night, or whether the figures in the painting are inside or outside: an incandescent light bulb hanging from an unseen beam illuminates a jumble of animals and human beings amidst a chaotically arranged assembly of floor (or roof) tiles, bricks, splintered wood, a staircase engulfed in fire, a window and even a door complete with a doorknob. This disorientation of time and place leaves the viewer with the perception that, for man or beast, there is no safety to be found in either the exterior or the interior of the space, nor in the light of day or cover of night. (16)

Referring to war as "a destruction of privacy," T.J. Clark holds that, contrary to the cubist tradition of focusing on the inside, in *Guernica*, "the room must give way to the street, distorting and isolating citizens." Picasso shocks the spectator with images of "fire, agony, dismemberment," as he feels "the imperative to make pain public," and to make it "incarnate."

As literary narration may call forth different interpretations, *Guernica* is far from being explicit. As Hofmann points out, "its formal density makes the painting susceptible to multiple interpretations." (162) Referring to the different positioning of the horse in the various stages of the painting's execution, Hofmann sees it as a sign of hesitation on the artist's part. Does it personify the suffering Spanish people, or is the fury of the horse in the final version an ambivalent conflation of victim and victimizer? (168) Is the bull "a symbol of dark powers or ... a symbol of the unbroken resistance of the Spanish people?" (169) Is it a "symbol of male power, the image of the painter himself who is a torturer ... whose creations transfer the fight between victims and oppressors from reality into the realm of fiction into the two-dimensional fighting place of the canvas?" What is the significance of the sun, with a pupil that is actually a light bulb? Does Picasso insert it to illuminate the massacre, and confront terror with light and naked truth? (24) At any rate, "Picasso...does not juxtapose fighting parties, and none of his protagonists is a messenger of hope, none is a clear-cut symbol of survival....These people are imprisoned ... They are all in uproar and agitation except the bull." In addition, Picasso's choice of color; merely

white, grey and black also narrates a grim message of utter despair. (Fink 183)

It is significant that the techniques of photomontage, and assemblage were often used in reaction to the Spanish War. This may have contributed to the complexity of Picasso's composition. Stacey Guill rightly views *Guernica* as "a montage of emotions, frozen in time, in the aftermath of a bombing – fear, panic, shock, despair, anxiety, and pain." (27)

Finally, one has to wonder with Kopper whether "the image is superior to the word as it invokes narratives of much greater depth than verbal communications via ... [its] semiotic capacity." (445) Referring to Wittgenstein's conclusion that "richness of the meaning of images – a richness that may also be regarded as blurring or ambiguity – may actually have its merits," one can't help gazing at the utter shock, pain and incomprehensibility of the frozen moment after *Guernica*'s brutal and senseless bombing. *Guernica* is undoubtedly a powerful, timeless "evidence of the wound."

Referring to *Guernica* as a rhetorical tool, and a universal icon of protest, Kopper concludes, "When artists invoke *Guernica* in their artwork or citizens protest on the street using *Guernica*, they use it as a rhetorical tool to underline their claim by buying into the established narrative of *Guernica*; whereas at the same time, they also add additional layers to what it signifies for us." (448) Hence, protesters have used *Guernica* as a template in Syria, Thailand, all around the Western world during the invasion of Iraq, in New York, San Francisco, Rome, London and many other capitals without any coordination amongst them to "voice" the message of protest. (450) Thus, *Guernica* has proved to be "a vision not only of the present but also of the future." (Rhodes 24)

#### **Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*: A Requiem of War**

Barber's *Adagio* is undoubtedly one of the most powerful artistic expressions of grief. Originally the second movement of Barber's *String Quartet* Opus 11, composed in 1936, a new version for string orchestra was arranged by the composer to become "probably his best known work." (Classiccat.net) It was first performed on the radio at Franklin D. Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945. Mourners were "enthralled" by its "aching darkness." (Larson 12) Since then, the piece has been played to mourn the deaths of many figures such as Albert Einstein (1955), President John Kennedy (1963), Princess Grace of Monaco (1982). (14) It has been used in several films including *The Elephant Man* (1980), to commemorate the Challenger Astronauts and the victims of 9/11. (15) Barber, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1958 and 1963, and Charles Ives are regarded by Larson as "the most authentic personalities in American Classical music." (17) Though Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* was composed one year before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, its utter sadness, to my mind, represents what Williams defines as "the structure of feeling of a particular

period,” and “the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.”(Interdisciplinarity 58) As pure music is the most abstract of the three media in question, it is an unfettered, emotional form of expression.

In his article entitled “The Saddest Music Ever Written,” Thomas Larson (2010) quotes Vänskä’s statement that “music can speak. Music goes deeper than any words. When all the words are completed and finished, then it is time for the music to start. It really takes care of the spirit.” (16) Pertinent to this statement is Rupert Wood’s assertion (1996) that

Music in its absolute sovereignty, is independent of either image or concept...The poet cannot tell us anything that was not already contained with a most universal validity in such music as prompted him to his figurative discourse. The cosmic symbolism of music resists any adequate treatment of language, for the simple reason that music, in referring to primordial contradiction and pain, symbolizes a sphere that is both earlier than appearance and beyond it. ...no amount of poetic eloquence will carry us a step closer to the essential secret of that art. (46)

In fact, Barber’s masterpiece seems to me to be a timeless sigh of grief at the general human condition, and the senseless reiteration of violent monstrosities all over the world. Perhaps, this could explain the *BBC Today* 2004 listeners’ vote that Barber’s *Adagio* was “the world’s saddest music.” (Larson 12)

Barber’s *Adagio* is a highly melodic piece where the element of rhythm is secondary. The circular, horizontal melody enhances the overflow of sorrow characterizing the piece. The absence of a regular, recognizable rhythm or equal musical bars, the overlapping of the similar melodic lines performed by different groups of string instruments with some variation: all create the effect of vertigo, a whirlpool out of which there is no escape. On the other hand, the grief expressed in the piece is largely created by the minor scale which dominates it (B flat minor), minor keys being traditionally associated with sadness. Besides, the melody is characterized by a depressing, repetitive pattern of its main motive, moving in an interval of a minor third. The piece thus uses “an arch form, employing and then inverting, expanding, and varying a stepwise ascending melody.” (Classiccat.net) Besides, it is in 4/2 time, which allows for the slow flow of the melody, though the meter varies throughout.

Though composed one year before the Spanish Civil War, this masterpiece possesses such a desperate quality of lamentation that it could easily be described as a requiem for the innocent victims of World War I, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and all the ensuing wars. In fact, the *Adagio* seems to be revolving in circles, expressing the same emotional

devastation, offering the listener no real repose, no breath, no resolution, no reassuring cadences or glimpses of hope:

The long, flowing melodic line moves ... between the voices in the string choir ... the principal melodic cell [is] played first by first violins, but ends with its restatement by violas, transposed down a fifth. Violas continue with a variation on the melodic cell in the second section; the basses are silent ... The expansive middle section begins with cellos playing the principal melodic cell in mezzo-soprano range; as the section builds, the string choir moves up the scale to their highest registers culminating in a fortissimo – forte climax followed by sudden silence.

In the middle section, it is as if the crescendo amounts to the climax in a scream, a cry of agony marked by *sforzando*, followed by a silence, perhaps a realization of human loss. Perhaps the mournful chords that follow the silence emphasize the unbearable grief at the aftermath of the battle, shrieks similar to those uttered by the frozen victims of *Guernica*. Besides, there is a total absence of variety of colour, as is the case with Picasso's painting. After the mournful chords, there is a return to the tonic, the original key, and the last section is a mere agonizing restatement of the original theme "with an inversion of the second piece of the melodic cell, played by first violins and violas in unison; the piece ends with first violins slowly restating the first five notes of the melody, holding the last note over a brief silence and a fading accompaniment."

On observing the composer's musical directions, we find that the piece moves within *molto adagio*, a very slow tempo in keeping with the tragic "narration" embodied in his piece. Besides, he uses *espressivo cantando*, an expressive singing. Towards the climax, he uses the phrase "with increasing intensity," and finally, *molto espressivo*, ending with *morendo* as the piece fades away. It is as if the music were expiring with the last breath of the victims.

An important question that always arises when discussing pure music; music that is not accompanied by lyrics like Schubert's Lieder, or programme music like that of Wagner or Liszt, is: what capacity does pure music have for expressing emotions, for "narrating" a story? Why does Barber's *Adagio* touch the listeners so much that they keep resorting to it at moments of crisis, loss and lamentation? In their interesting article entitled "Emotions in Music," (2012) Jenefer Robinson and Robert Hatten provide a plausible theory. They state that

sometimes music can appropriately be heard as containing a 'persona', a fictional or virtual agent whose emotions are expressed in the music, and ... this persona can be experienced as expressing more *complex* emotions, such as hopefulness and resignation, as well as *blends* of emotions that *develop and change* over time. (71)

The writers refer to a “musical plot”, a psychological journey of the imagined persona. Listeners “may be invited not only to *recognize* the emotions expressed ...but also to *experience those emotions themselves*, either actually or in imagination, by empathizing with the musical persona.” Besides, “just as a Romantic lyric poem ... can and should be experienced as an expression of emotion in an imagined or virtual persona, conceived as the protagonist or dramatic speaker of the poem or song – who may or may not be a persona of the poet himself – so a Romantic lyric piece of ‘pure music’ ... can and should be experienced as an expression of emotion in an imagined persona, whose emotional journey the piece embodies. (78)

Likening the “plot” of pure music to that of a play, Robinson and Hatten quote a statement by Fred Maus (1997):

(1)A play presents a series of actions; (2) the actions are performed by fictional characters ..., (3) for the audience it is as though the actions are performed at the same time as the audience’s perception of the actions; and (4) the series of actions forms a *plot* that holds the actions together in a unified structure. (81)

In this context, it is essential to observe that Barber’s *Adagio* cannot be said to provide us with an “expressive trajectory,” a “psychological development” (86) or a denouement. The piece revolves around the agonizing narration of deplorable “events.” Thus, “it is the *emotional character* of the theme that is largely responsible for our emotional responses to it ...listeners who pay careful attention to the expressive music they hear are often profoundly moved not only by the beauty or the ingenuity of the music but by the expressed emotions they hear in the music as well, and different expressed emotions move us differently.” (77)

Why then is one moved on listening to Barber’s *Adagio*? We have been witnessing so many atrocities of civil wars all over the world that our psychological baggage causes us to project our own grief, whether personal or general, onto that touching piece of pure music. “Listeners may bring with them their own related experiences that can enrich their listening experience, or they may learn shades of emotions which are new to them.” (82) Thus, the appreciation of Barber’s *Adagio* is not one of the music *per se*, but rather, “we can postulate of the musical persona or protagonist that he or she is experiencing an emotional ‘narrative’ ... and ... for many listeners the music is experienced as more valuable when they are emotionally caught up in the story.” (88) Though listening to the music of another culture is often hard to appreciate in terms of structure or beauty, there can be no doubt that Barber’s *Adagio* is universally moving. As Robinson and Hatten conclude, “If the expressive meaning of a piece induces emotions and emotional feelings in comprehending [and I add

sensitive] listeners, then it would seem to follow that having one's emotions aroused appropriately in listening to music can play a role in detecting what the expressive meaning of a piece is." (89)

Summing up the greatness of Barber's *Adagio* as the Pietà of music, Larson ascertains its surviving appeal:

Today, Barber's *Adagio* has come to embody the enormity of sorrow – yours, mine and ours, individual and collective. Sorrow's enormity in the moment is what's unbearable about grief. Not just a broken heart but a breaking heart (17)... it is about our alienation from ourselves ...: the shattering sound of our fallen dreams, ... the equally shattering remorse we feel when we realize we are not and never will be that big ... We continue to be imprisoned by our fear of the other, identifying the enemy outside and never within: ... the *Adagio* expresses this defect in our character more deeply than anything I know. (18)

### Conclusion

Finally, in a statement that is certainly true of Laurie Lee's work about the Spanish Civil War, Picasso's *Guernica* and Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Robinson and Hatten detect

a circular process ... characteristic of all interpretation [not only of music, but also art and literature of witness]: ... we interpret what matters to us in terms of what matters to us; we give meaning to that which gives us meaning in return, and the interaction is mutually reinforcing. Works of art teach us new emotions, even as we bring our previous experience to bear in interpreting them. And musical works can take on added value to the degree that we invest them with meaning. (104)

If poetry, art and music of witness seem to resort to paradox and equivocation, this is due to the fragmentation we are still experiencing in the Arab World and, indeed, everywhere. In such troubled times, as Carolyn Forché asserts, "traditional modes of thought ... no longer make sense." (40) Our age "lacks the structure of a story ... narrative implies progress and completion ... the age repeats the same story over and over again, marking an infernal return of the same ... The situation the poem [or painting or piece of music] describes can happen anywhere ... [Like Barber's *Adagio*] the tale of our time is one of infinite [tragic] repetition." (43)

Hence, the timeless, universal appeal of the three works in question. The grim reality of civil war has haunted our lives long before the Spanish Civil War, and it seems to me that we are far from approaching the end of the tunnel.

## الملخص

سرد ويلات الحرب الأهلية: ((لحظة حرب)) للكاتب ((لوري لي))، ولوحة ((جرنيكا)) للفنان بيكاسو، ومقطوعة ((أدادجيو للوتريات)) للمؤلف ((صموئيل باربر))  
إيمان فاروق البقري

يتناول هذا البحث بالدراسة كلا من رواية السيرة الذاتية ((لحظة حرب)) والقصيدة التي تحمل نفس العنوان للكاتب الإنجليزي ((لوري لي)) والتي كتبها في عام ١٩٩١ عن تجربته في الحرب الأهلية الإسبانية (١٩٣٦-١٩٣٩)، ولوحة ((جرنيكا)) التي تجسد إحساس الفنان الإسباني بالصدمة إزاء القصف الوحشي لأهالي جرنیکا العزل، ومقطوعة ((أدادجيو للوتريات)) والتي ألفها ((باربر)) في عام ١٩٣٦. وبالرغم من أن تلك المقطوعة كان قد تم تأليفها وتقديمها في مناسبة جنائزية أخرى قبل الحرب الإسبانية بعام، إلا أنه يمكن اعتبارها بمثابة قداس جنائزي ينعي ضحايا أية حروب. فالأعمال الثلاثة موضوع البحث قد أنتجت في العقد الثالث من القرن الماضي، لكنها تعبر عن مشاعر إنسانية تتعدى الزمان والمكان- من خلال وسائط متعددة - عن نفس الحزن الدفين تجاه الدمار الشامل الذي تخلفه الحروب، وفناء الملايين من الأبرياء نتيجة سلسلة من الأطماع السياسية والصراعات ما بين الشعوب، بل وبين أبناء الشعب الواحد منذ بدء الخليقة وحتى يومنا هذا. ويحلل البحث الأعمال الثلاثة من خلال وجهة نظر ((رولاند بارت)) عن العلاقة ما بين الصورة و الموسيقى والنص الأدبي من ناحية، ومفهوم شعر الشهادة عند ((كارولين فورشيه)) من ناحية أخرى، وإن كان البحث يوسع مفهوم شعر الشهادة ليشمل فنّي التصوير والموسيقى .

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