



Peace Review

A Journal of Social Justice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cper20>

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To cite this article: Sofia Skavdahl (2020) The Poetics of Peace, Peace Review, 32:3, 357-366, DOI: [10.1080/10402659.2020.1867353](https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2020.1867353)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2020.1867353>



Published online: 17 Mar 2021.



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The Poetics of Peace

SOFIA SKAVDAHL

Although poetry has been used as a method of peacemaking since Homer's *Iliad*, little research, theory, or analysis has been done evaluating precisely what role poetry holds in the realms of peacemaking and conflict resolution. Poetry, along with other arts-based practices of peacemaking, is beneficial because of its ability to encourage personal autonomy and emotional communication, while offering an open and creative space to heal from violent conflict. In terms of the arts, poetry is especially unique because it holds the ability to transform relationships between adversaries and the relationship with the self. This essay seeks to analyze both the historical and contemporary role of poetry in personal, communal, and international conflicts, including where it is being utilized and determining its effectiveness in addressing genocide, state violence, and processes of reconciliation.

While my analysis begins with the exploration of traditional poetic aspects: diction, tone, imagery, syntax, and structure, each study is not solely a literary review, but a social scientific one as well. It's important to determine the area of peacemaking to which a poem corresponds: waging conflict nonviolently, transforming relationships, building capacity, and/or reducing direct violence. It's necessary to evaluate to whom the speaker is writing and the poem's subsequent effect on its immediate and long-term surroundings. Certain consistencies characterize these incredibly varying poems, which span over 100 years and include writers from Italy, Spain, the United States, and Syria. By exhibiting the variations of poetry's uses in the midst of conflict and highlighting its abundant practice, it will show that poetry has a significant role in peacemaking.

The most well-known writer who survived the Holocaust, Primo Levi (1919–1987), was sent in 1944 to Buna-Monowitz, where he remained until the camp was liberated in January 1945. Referring to Levi's suicide in 1987, Jewish writer Elie Wiesel proclaimed "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later." In "For Adolf Eichmann" Levi writes of the infamous Eichmann Nazi trial in Jerusalem, and seeks to answer the question: what proper justice can be brought to actors of evil?

“For Adolf Eichmann”

The wind runs free across our plains,
 The live sea beats forever at our beaches.
 Man makes earth fertile, earth gives him flowers and fruits.
 He lives in toil and joy; he hopes, fears, begets sweet offspring.

... And you have come, our precious enemy,
 Forsaken creature, man ringed by death.
 What can you say now, before our assembly?
 Will you swear by a god? What god?
 Will you leap happily into the grave?
 Or will you at the end, like the industrious man
 Whose life was too brief for his long art,
 Lament your sorry work unfinished,
 The thirteen million still alive?

Oh son of death, we do not wish you death.
 May you live longer than anyone ever lived.
 May you live sleepless five million nights,
 And may you be visited each night by the suffering of everyone
 who saw,
 Shutting behind him, the door that blocked the way back,
 Saw it grow dark around him, the air fill with death.

20 July 1960

Translation: Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann

Immediately presenting a stark contrast to the assumptions of the poem's title, the speaker of Levi's poem begins with a quatrain detailing a scene of paradise. The reader is introduced to a Mediterranean climate, one that is fruitful, fertile, and long-awaited. When continuing to the second stanza, wherein Levi writes "... And you have come, our precious enemy/Forsaken creature," we can assume this is evidence, along with the title and dating of the poem, that the speaker is referring to Eichmann's capture and arrival in Israel in the summer of 1960. The remainder of the poem moves away from Israel's allure and abundance; instead, but instead zeroes in on the poem's tribute, Adolf Eichmann.

The poem takes a vindictive stance and the second stanza's syntax is structured with question after question, as if the speaker is addressing

Eichmann on the stand: “What can you say now, before our assembly?/ Will you swear by a god? What god?” By its spiteful and unapologetic tone, the speaker is making reference to the mockery s/he regards this trial—highlighting the ridiculousness of having a man who is accused of perpetrating genocide swear by a god and accusing the subject of [lamenting his] “sorry work unfinished/the thirteen million still alive?”

Yet despite the poem’s early candor, in the last stanza Levi demonstrates his skill at articulating Holocaust imagery. Within a dozen lines, the speaker has figuratively left the Garden of Eden and arrived in Auschwitz, wherein Levi describes the infamous gas chambers: “may you be visited each night by the suffering of everyone who/saw,/Shutting behind him, the door that blocked the way back,/Saw it grow dark around him, the air fill with death.” Here, the speaker takes the writer by surprise, and without reserve reveals s/he does not wish Eichmann death but rather immortality, and that he be haunted each night by the millions of lives he took.

Although his poem is far from forgiving, Levi’s wish that Eichmann not be put to death is an effort to reduce direct violence and transform the relationship between the Jewish survivor and the perpetrator. To accept this, it is important to understand that the initial steps of healing and moreover peacemaking are not always all-embracing, optimistic, or forgiving. Furthermore, Levi’s poem suggests that just because a poem calls for peace, does not necessarily mean the call is answered. While writing the poem may have served as the initial steps of reducing direct violence and transforming relationships, Levi’s poetry and life exemplifies the emotional and institutional support needed to make peace after trauma. His life also suggests that transforming the relationship with oneself, post-violence, parallels in importance to transforming the relationship between perpetrator and victim.

Federico García Lorca used his talents in poetry, theater performance, and music to respond to the early stages of the Spanish Civil War. He was considered an enemy of the state for his socialist views and his homosexuality. In August 1936, he was abducted by right-wing nationalist forces and executed “on the orders of one of [Francisco] Franco’s generals” at the age of 38. “Casida of Sobbing” was among his last poems, and was published posthumously.

“Casida of Sobbing”

I have shut my balcony door
because I don’t want to hear the sobbing,
but from behind the grayish walls
nothing else comes out but sobbing.

Very few angels are singing,
 very few dogs are barking,
 a thousand violins fit into the palm of my hand.

But the sobbing is a gigantic dog,
 the sobbing is a gigantic angel,
 the sobbing is a gigantic violin,
 tears close the wind's jaws,
 all there is to hear is sobbing.

Translated by Robert Bly

In “Casida of Sobbing,” Lorca experiments with the *qaṣīda*, a poetic form of Arab origins. Aside from the poem’s restraints in meter and end rhyme, the *qaṣīda* traditionally takes on elegiac qualities. In Lorca’s case, the elegy is not necessarily clear. In the opening lines, when Lorca writes “I have shut my balcony door/because I don’t want to hear the sobbing,” the speaker is obviously in agony. This sentiment carries the rest of the poem and within the first stanza we can recognize the apparent guilt in the speaker’s tone and the distinguished dread s/he feels. By shutting the door, it attempts to turn inward from the violence existing beyond the place in which the poem permits us to enter. This action, although subtle, provides the reader the first indication of what will unfold.

One can then infer that “Casida of Sobbing” is an elegy for what will be lost, without knowing exactly what has been lost. We know the sobbing is all consuming and that it possesses a dual role throughout the poem: In the second stanza, it blurs visions of angels, silences the barking of dogs, music is nonexistent. Yet in the third stanza Lorca presents a contrasting image; the sobbing takes on the configuration of a “gigantic dog,” “gigantic angel,” and “gigantic violin.” This image validates the notion that the speaker’s lamenting looms larger than life and cannot be disregarded. Lorca’s description asks the reader to imagine a scenario where a consequence of violence breeds further violence. By no means is this reference a stretch, since state violence often imposes physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering on a population despite knowing its actions will not lead to conflict resolution nor make way for a peace process.

Lorca writes poetry as the backdrop of a civil war that devastates his country. He and his people are in mourning, and he rightfully predicts the Republic will not prevail. This is consistent with the message of other poetry written under state violence. Poets of peace do not authorize their emotions and subsequent expressions to be diminished by state forces. “Casida of

Sobbing” is therefore an ideal poem of peace. In a dozen lines, Lorca attempts to wage the Spanish Civil War nonviolently, reduce direct violence by doing so, reinforce his own sense of capacity within his final days, and transform the relationship between him and his perpetrators of violence.

A son of freed slaves, Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in Kentucky in 1872. His poem “Sympathy” coined the famous line “I know why the caged bird sings,” which would be popularized by poet Maya Angelou and become a symbol of African-American resistance. In *A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Nikki Giovanni writes of Dunbar: “there is no poet, black or nonblack, who measures his achievement.”

“Sympathy”

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
 When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
 And the river flows like a stream of glass;
 When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,
 And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
 I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
 For he must fly back to his perch and cling
 When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
 And they pulse again with a keener sting—
 I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
 When he beats his bars and he would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
 I know why the caged bird sings!

In “Sympathy” both the speaker and the subject are in captivity. The two cannot free themselves, both physically and spiritually, and for now

act as spectators withheld from the natural, unbridled world that surrounds them. In the opening stanza, when Dunbar writes, “When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,/And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—I know what the caged bird feels!” it becomes apparent that “Sympathy” is a poem of profound empathy. The speaker’s position, although never clarified, is assumed to represent what it means to be a Black person in America at the start of the twentieth century. The poem, written in 1899, speaks to the incredible structural violence Black Americans were enduring and still face into the twenty-first century.

Interpreting the speaker’s position as representing this struggle thus makes the imagery of the caged bird even more sincere. Its cries are for true deliverance—not solely the abolishment of slavery, but the abolishment of hatred, racism, and the laws that fuel these sentiments. The speaker’s knowledge of the caged bird’s condition stems from the limitations placed on Black Americans both physically and spiritually. The song the caged bird is singing appears as a lamenting for the oppressed everywhere, who no matter the reasoning, can empathize with the imprisoned: “I know why the caged bird beats his wing/Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;/For he must fly back to his perch and cling.”

Again Dunbar’s imagery evokes visions of such tension: the wings are bloodied, feathers matted, the caged bird allowed a brief taste of flight but never freedom in whole. This image asks the reader to consider the experiences of Black Americans at the time: what was it like to be granted legal freedom and yet not feel free? What was it like for Dunbar to be born into the first generation of emancipated Black Americans, and still feel limited in mobility? “Sympathy” highlights the belief that the peace process is insufficient if it neglects the feelings of the individual. Peace is as much personal as it is institutional.

Dunbar’s attempt to reconcile with what it means to be a Black man in the United States through poetry reiterates this belief and forces us to remember the necessity of the peace of the spirit. The speaker knows why the caged bird sings because he also fulfills that role. Dunbar’s poem is a trial to increase his capacity despite the pervading inequality. It’s an attempt to transform the relationship he has with his identity. Line after line, we are reminded that sound carries: how walls and bars do not prevent speech but amplify it, how our ability to speak to one another and ourselves stays with us until our final moments.

Joy Harjo was appointed the United States Poet Laureate in 2019. According to João de Mancelos, Harjo’s poetry “seeks historical responsibility for the expropriation, removal, genocide, and cultural annihilation of Native Americans.”

“Sunrise”

Sunrise, as you enter the houses of everyone here, find us.
 We’ve been crashing for days, or has it been years.
 Find us, beneath the shadow of this yearning mountain crying here.
 We have been sick with our sour longings, and the jangling of fears.
 Our spirits rise up in the dark, because they hear,
 Doves in cottonwoods calling forth the sun.
 We struggled with a monster and lost.
 Our bodies were tossed in the pile of kill. We rotted there.
 We were ashamed and we told ourselves for a thousand years,
 We didn’t deserve anything but this—
 And one day, in relentless eternity, our spirits discerned movement
 of prayers.
 Carried toward the sun.
 And this morning we are able to stand with all the rest
 And welcome you here.
 We move with the lightness of being, and we will go
 Where there’s a place for us.

Harjo’s poem explores an endeavor the peace process often neglects: forgiveness. “Sunrise” is an ode to new beginnings, community, and light. The poem encourages the reader to unpack the heavy burden of the past and move on into the unknown. Still, it does not deny the pain or the tragedy that took place. The poem simply resists the pull of history and embraces the possibility of a fresh start. Harjo manages this by bringing forth the voice of the land. She calls on the sun to find the speaker, “Find us, beneath the shadow of this yearning mountain/crying here./We have been sick with our sour longings, and the jangling of/fears.”

The speaker, recognizing the pain that has been inflicted upon him/her, asks only for the sun’s assistance. Not only does this symbolize a common Indigenous ritual, but it also allows the reader to witness the intersection of the natural world and man-made fear. Harjo’s diction makes way for the evocation of guilt and shame, which manifests as an infliction of violence. The violence the speaker faces is direct and structural: “Our bodies were tossed in the pile of kill. We rotted there./We were ashamed and we told ourselves for a thousand/years,/We didn’t deserve anything but this.”

The speaker's creation of these images, along with the poem's spiritual undertones, suggest that s/he sees his/her existence as a mark of triumph. In tasks relating to conflict resolution, "Sunrise" asks that both survivors and perpetrators accept that acts of hatred, violence, and irrefutable harms have taken place. Perhaps her poetic skill makes it look easy, but Harjo manages a feat that most governments and institutions are afraid to pursue. Peace is sustainable only if it is pursued honestly. To look toward one's adversary without hostility, and forgive them even when they have not expressed remorse, requires awe-inspiring courage. In doing so, Harjo transforms a relationship without forcing the other party to behave a certain way. In the end, her speaker asks: where can we go from here? After the chaos and destruction of violence, Harjo reminds us how each day the sun rises and we are free to begin again.

Poetry holds incredible potential and the peace process has already welcomed it as such. It's important to further analyze its effects, understanding why certain communities have particularly embraced arts-based peacemaking and others have ignored it. For example, scholars might attempt to discover whether negligence by the international system might influence what sort of peacemaking practices are prioritized.

Social scientists should begin to study the issue of subjectivity in processes of peacemaking. In the current socio-political domain, conflict resolution specialists generally prefer objectivity. By evaluating international affairs solely from what is objective or can be literally measured, we neglect the reality that individuals address violence in many different ways and often pursue their own, unique processes of personal healing. We also wrongly assume that the state always seeks an effective peace process. Even if proponents of top-down peacebuilding consider these actions imperfect or incomplete, this research suggests that they are nevertheless utilized and should be taken seriously.

Specialists in conflict resolution should encourage local communities and states to explore more creative methods. A conscious effort must be made to prioritize the importance of the creative act in a world that is becoming more technologically and scientifically dependent. This could lead to a refined definition of peace, one that emphasizes the more emotional and psychological well-being of individuals, as opposed to solely the security of nations. Fundamentally, this begins by focusing on broader, socio economic issues, such as access to education and funding for the arts. Simply put, one is not going to practice nonviolent peacemaking if they do not know it exists.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of additional poets could be invoked to illustrate poetry as peace work: Siamanto, Fadwa Tuqan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Seamus Heaney, Langston Hughes, Heberto Padilla, Tadeusz

Borowski, Karenne Wood, Jericho Brown, Jan Henry-Gray, Kim Addonizio, Carolyn Forché, Khalil Gibran, Audre Lorde, Shara Lessley, Louise Glück, Bruce Snider, among many others. This piece, in particular, was inspired by the Syrian poet Ibrahim Qashoush.

During the Arab Spring protests of 2011, Qashoush rose to popularity and was nicknamed the “nightingale of the revolution” for writing both poetry and music criticizing the Bashar al-Assad regime. One of his poems, “Syria is Longing for Freedom” became a common chant at protests:

[...] When we demanded freedom
 They called us terrorists
 When we demanded our rights back
 They called us fundamentalists ...
 It is written on our national flag that
 Bashar has betrayed the nation
 [...] Our aim is bring the regime down [...]
 Syria is looking for freedom!
 Translated by Ghias Aljundi

Shortly after he began receiving national recognition, Qashoush was murdered, presumably by the state, by way of removing his vocal chords. Qashoush's death reminds us how in many places around the world, poetry is a political act with quite literally the severest of consequences. Despite the advancement of modern weaponry and the disturbing practices of twenty-first century violence, writing still maintains its place as one of the strongest forces for promoting peace and social change. Poetry like Qashoush's not only brings awareness to the individual's reality during deeply turbulent times, but begs the collective to not put off the peace process any longer. It was in fact a single poem that rattled a dictator, and there remain many still left to write.

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