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## Pity the Nation (After Khalil Gibran)

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Pity the nation whose people are sheep  
And whose shepherds mislead them  
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars  
Whose sages are silenced  
and whose bigots haunt the airways  
Pity the nation that raises not its voice  
but aims to rule the world  
by force and by torture  
And knows  
No other language but its own  
Pity the nation whose breath is money  
and sleeps the sleep of the too well fed  
Pity the nation Oh pity the people of my country  
My country, tears of thee  
Sweet land of liberty!

Lawrence Ferlinghetti  
*Ferlinghetti's Greatest Poems*  
New Directions, New York, 2017

## PROTEST POETRY AND LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

Political protest, it seems, has recently taken on new and at times disturbing dimensions, but the genre is not new. Having come of age in the mid-1960s in the San Francisco Bay area and spending much time in “the City,” I had a front-row seat to the activism of the times—from the fight for civil rights to the Vietnam War. Though protest throughout history has vacillated in intensity, it has always been with us and always will. Protest doesn't always mean marches or sit-ins; indeed, the written word is often an intense and frequent form of dissent. Poetry has long been a profound venue for protest.

The Beat poets were particularly focused on protest. One of the most prominent Beat poets, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, passed away in February of this year, one month shy of his 102nd birthday. He had slowed but still wrote, and his poems frequently piqued controversy. His forte was simple observation of daily life in gritty environments that he translated into powerful protest poetry and literary works. His most recent work, a novel titled *Little Boy* (Double Day, New York, 2019), is an autobiography of sorts. It begins:

Little Boy was quite lost. He had no idea who he was or where he had come from. He was with Aunt Emily whom he loved very much. She had taken him in swaddling clothes from his mother who already had four sons and could not handle a fifth born a few months after his father died of a heart attack.

Ferlinghetti graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1941 and then served in the US Navy, seeing action during World War II. He subsequently earned a master's degree in English from Columbia University, thus beginning a long career in the arts. Arguably, his greatest contribution was opening (and nourishing to the end) the City Lights bookstore and publishing house in San Francisco.

The Beat generation was his friend. His first poetry collection was *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New Directions, New York, 1958) written in a classic Beat voice. Ferlinghetti also wrote protest poetry and, influenced by another Beat luminary, Kenneth Rexroth, called himself a “philosophical anarchist.” Ferlinghetti wrote “Pity the Nation” at age 88 in 2007, near the end of George W. Bush's presidency. He saw much to protest and had a loud voice amongst the literary far left. “Pity the Nation” was a creative and more contemporary play on Khalil Gibran's poem with the same title, form, and sentiments that was

published posthumously in *The Garden of the Prophet* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1933). Gibran, a Lebanese-American philosopher, writer, and artist, is best known for his much-loved work *The Prophet* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1923).

Protest poetry has a long history, and the poems often stir their readers years after they were written. For instance, while “Pity the Nation” seems just as relevant to today's political and protest climate as it did in 2007, we have seen Emma Lazarus' 1883 poem etched on our Statue of Liberty—with the famous quote “...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—take on new meaning, becoming “protest poetry” more than a century after those words were penned. We might not agree with much of it, but we should find value in the work as literature. Understanding the art is important. The main purpose of this genre is to give us an opportunity to consider different views of life and survival in a somewhat detached fashion; that is one of the wonders of poetry and literature in general.

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