

What's the Use?

Jared Price

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“So what is the use of poetry these days

What use is it What good is it

these days and nights in the Age of Autogeddon

in which poetry is what has been paved over

to make a freeway for armies of the night...”

“Uses of Poetry,” Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Like countless other poets, Ferlinghetti asks my own question in words that are so much more effective than my feeble attempts. I’ve considered this greatly over the years, and the answer is a difficult one to come by. Why do we pursue the pristine metaphor, the striking juxtaposition, the whirling twist and perfect landing of a poetic turn?

Our poetic inclinations are rooted deep. The [earliest written lines reach back at least 4000 years](#) and the oral tradition reaches back to time immemorial. It makes sense that we continue charging forward with poetry into our technological era. To write poetry is to become human—a concept of particular importance in Ferlinghetti’s “Age of Autogeddon.”

To take a page from the father of modern linguistic theory, [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), language is not simply a name-giving system or reflection of our reality. Language *is* our reality. Without language there is no thought. Language divides an amorphous and unspecific reality into building blocks with which we can construct ideas, formulate concepts, and, at the risk of sounding hyperbolic, attempt to process our oftentimes confusing existence.

To my sensibilities, therein lies the “use” of poetry. All art grapples with the human condition, but poetry wrestles reality. Through visceral, savage entanglement with language, poetry challenges our preconceived notions of what constitutes this physical existence. When we grasp the world around us through a heightened sense and mastery of language, we are able to alter directly the very matter of our thoughts and, by extension, the world around us. To create poetry is to take charge of our linguistic experience and mold our world.

In his brilliant essay [“Belief and Technique for Modern Prose”](#) (which I feel can be extrapolated very effectively to poetry), Jack Kerouac stated that one of the essential aspects of writing well is the inclusion of the “unspeakable visions of the individual.” Kerouac’s oxymoron outlines just what we need to do as poets: speak our unspeakables.

The unique visions each of us garner from our individual lives often fall outside of conventional linguistic scope. Creativity and audacity are the substances that fill these gaps. If this seems paradoxical, that’s because most pure attempts at art are. We are using imperfect systems to reach for perfection—telling fundamental lies to arrive at truth. It’s a beautiful and uniquely human struggle. To take from Kerouac again, the best we can do is “Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea.”

At *Touchstones*, we have the surreal and humbling task of working with our writer’s constructions of reality. Every poem we encounter contains the staggering weight of a new paradigm of thinking—each a unique vehicle racing toward Truth or some semblance of it. It’s an experience I’ll never forget nor take for granted.

Thanks for letting us in on your unspeakable visions. Keep them coming.

Jared Price

Poetry Editor