

## GREGORY BETTS / Rise Above History: A Manifesto for More Manifestos

I want to put aside the supposed natural modesty (call it colonial irony or veiled conservatism or habitual prudery or, as by one punk musician, the bullshit hypocrisy) of Canadians and advocate for an alternative spirit to our public discourse: a spirit of openness, of political self-examination, of aesthetical interrogation, of formal experimentation, and of increased artistic generosity. I believe Canadian authors should write more manifestos and openly offer their aesthetical insights, clearly articulated, and honed to a point of diamond precision. Let me put that another way:

### **1. Write a manifesto to confront the aesthetical and ideological implications of your writing.**

Why write a manifesto? Why not write literature and let the literature speak for itself? There have only been a handful of moments in the history of Canadian writing when authors here en masse have turned to political polemical forms in defence of their work. These moments, particularly with the turn to modernism and the turn to postmodernism, were marked by significant shifts in literary techniques and styles that were reflective of broader political transformations and contests. As the radical poet F.R. Scott wrote, “This is an hour / Of new beginnings, concepts warring for power, / Decay of systems—the tissue of art is torn / With overtures of an era being born.”

Our current era is not one in which concepts are openly warring for power, though a more muted contest of ideas continues apace. That writers are not turning to political polemical forms such as the manifesto to make their ideas overt might suggest that this is not a period of significant shifts in literary techniques and styles, but such a claim is simply not an accurate reflection of current writing in Canada. Writers here—from Sandra Alland to Rachel Zolf—are actively and aggressively experimenting with and even inventing deeply political forms; furthermore, writers here are participating in and providing templates for the international avant-garde

of current writers. The reasons for the dearth of manifestos are inevitably various —perhaps writers have become inured to or complacent with the broader political implications of their literary techniques and styles, perhaps writers have developed new ways to communicate and promote their aesthetical and ideological positions, perhaps authors are more interested in discovering their difference, their individual voice, rather than their affiliation in a shared aesthetic initiative, perhaps the manifesto simply feels anachronistic and out-dated or crass and self-promoting—but the need to clarify the need to reimagine and reinvent writing habits remains strong and pressing. I would like to address and contest some of these commonplace claims against the manifesto as part of a defence on its behalf. I believe that a manifesto is precisely the generic space in which to outline a new aesthetic and to confront and develop its fullest possible significance.

## **2. Face up to your times. Face up to your manifesto.**

Miriam Nichols writes, “any serious art faces up to its times in one fashion or another” (146). She does not suggest that literary subjects need to be exclusively about or even set in the present, or dominated by the tastes and fashions of the present, but rather that they must raise themselves above the glut of established literary modes and be marked by the constant vitality of the present moment. The present is always moving (which is not to say that it is necessarily improving or moving in a specific direction), and there is a direct correlation between a writer’s consciousness of that null point called now, its flash of life, and their own future relevance. Old forms like old jeans have and will always have a time and place, including in the present, but anachronisms are only ever good for parody. A manifesto articulates how you understand the difference.

If, as the vitality of contemporary writing suggests, Canadian authors believe that new forms or old forms made new are particularly relevant and ripe with potential for the present moment, they ought to be forthright and public about those ideas. If nothing else, such an act, a gesture into the play of minds and bodies that is writing, will help create a space for the writing being hailed. Archives in this country are rife with experimental texts from the past, lost and silenced because Canada’s literati were not receptive enough or ready for new modes at the time. The false myth that

we had no modernist moment here spread in part because the most aggressively experimental work by early writers such as Bertram Brooker, Sol Allen, and Herman Voaden were marginalized or even censored. This cost us a generation of avant-garde precedent from which to work. With very few exceptions, new works inevitably respond to available aesthetics (which is not to suggest that art is entirely socially determined or, for that matter, entirely autonomous; writers need a community to cause a shift in writing; Canadians have not always been the passive recipients of the forces that precipitate such changes) as only literature can create and define what passes as literature.

Showing receptivity helps make innovative writing more permissible (knowing that something truly new will always provoke a negative reaction from the keepers of the status quo). Being open about and to ideas is an essential part of the process of introducing change into a system. In the words of experimental poet and publisher derek beaulieu, “If you don’t share, you don’t exist.” Tell us, as Sheila Watson did, what you are going to do. Significantly, this act of articulation of form and intent will also expose both the decadence and the potential of an aesthetic practice to an honest self-critic.

### **3. Rise above history to become contemporary.**

A manifesto is not a justification of one’s work. It is a coded document that maps out a specific method (or specific consciousness) by which new works—new kinds of work—can be made manifest. The death of literature, or art more broadly, is the passive/decadent repetition of previous work. Artists only bring art to life from its constant tango with Death by consciously outstepping (or, as it were, blasting) the arrested past and the strangulated present. Smaro Kamboureli turned to the manifesto as a means of escaping what Vico theorized as history’s cycle of repetition. As she writes, “A manifesto is supposed to rise above history. It is intended to take us beyond the cultural predicament of historical repetition, to defy determinism. Its historical value is posthumous, for a manifesto wants to be judged by the future it announces” (7). By this definition, rather than work to validate or authorize past work, or even existing values, a manifesto can only be recognized as such to the extent to which it enables new work marked with new aesthetics to appear.

Kamboureli cautions her readers against the messianic impulse inherent to the act of manifesto writing, including the utopian temptation to try and provoke sociopolitical change through literary innovation. These impulses and temptations can be adequately tempered by keeping in mind the long history of avant-garde failures. But while the Surrealists failed to unleash the psychological revolution that would redeem Western culture, and the Futurists and Dadaists failed to bring down even Italian or German art institutions and museums, thus failing to fulfill stated ambitions, their manifestos articulated a perspective unfettered from the ideological shortcomings of the status quo. It was through this however momentarily liberated perspective, built from a healthy and sustained disdain for and distance from the present, that they were able to rise above history and redefine what it meant to be contemporary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, “Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands” (40).

#### **4. Open a space and flood it with thinking.**

Instead of thinking of the manifesto as an arrogant or aggressive act, or minimizing its potential impact to self-promotion, think of it instead as an opportunity to invite an audience of (future) authors to embark on a moment outside of themselves as presently constituted. It is also an invitation for you to step outside yourself and, together, to look upon yourselves, collectively, as history will see you. How comfortable are you? How comfortable are you with the function of your or all or any writing in its relation to your time? Agamben proceeds to diagnose the citizen of the contemporary moment as one who “perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny” (53). A manifesto is precisely that elusive act of grasping, of struggling to provoke a rupture with the disquieting world and to unleash something pure and countervailing. I agree that any manifesto that attempts no more than to advance an agenda that is already in the world dulls itself from this potential and elusive light of futurity. Similarly, messianic manifestos or attempts to empower the self of the author (or authors) fail to fulfill the provocative, eruptive opportunity and are ultimately no different than any other bit of advertising copy text. These kinds of documents seek little more than self-flattery; a barely veiled

narcissism. They do not open a new space for new work. I prefer to think of the manifesto as a rare public gesture in which the author (or authors) breaks from the singular pressures of the self, to break into an untimely space, and to offer the best idea he/she/they can imagine to best illuminate that open space. In that moment, in that illumination, there are no selves and there are no limitations. To quote Bertram Brooker, Canada's first avant-gardist, who in 1927 after having visited an enormous exhibition of European avant-garde arts works in Toronto, wrote: "where I have been was not created [...] what have I to do with creating / I am come back only to destroy." The manifesto is precisely the historical chance to destroy the continuum of history.

## Works Cited

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