

## Poets Against Authorship:

*A 5 minute Manifesto in 20 parts, 15 seconds each*

1. Look me in the eye and tell me that poets have authority in this culture. If a novel skids away from plot, we call it poetic, not authoritative. “Fictitious” is a synonym for poetic, and “sham” is a synonym for fictitious. Get real,
2. we say when somebody gets poetic. And this is because poets have claimed and conquered the realm of superfluosness. Poetry exists in the rich excess of language. People sigh when they encounter poetic triumphs, shocked and jealous at the enormous time spent outside meaning.
3. The idea of authorship, in contrast to the idea of poetry, is predicated on the idea of authority, of mastery, of precision. If we trace the word back to its Latin root, *auctorem*, it means to cause to grow or to lead society forward.
4. Consequently, many writers fall for the romance of leading society forward through writing. Confused poets thought this included them, but every would-be revolutionary poet has failed. *Rimbaud sobered up and stopped writing when he realized.*
5. The problem begins with the legal fact that authorship is inextricably bound up in the idea of ownership and the use of language as intellectual property. Language and ideas flow freely between people, however, despite the law.
6. The authority that enables authorship has nothing to do with leading society forward or changing society. The authority of authorship, in fact, comes from intellectual property laws that seek to limit the free flow of language and ideas.
7. This legal system contradicts the nature of language, and though it was a system put in place by the state purportedly to protect authors, ultimately it protects the state. In others words, authors work inside the existing legal system rather than seek to change it.
8. But doesn't this legal framework protect poets as well? Not exactly. The legal framework surrounding writing came into existence after the invention of the printing press suddenly allowed writers wide distribution of their work and ideas.
9. McLuhan argues that the Gutenberg printing press dramatically altered the nature of identity from a collective consciousness to isolated individualism. The press allowed anybody to publish and disseminate radical ideas, thereby opening up a widespread competition of ideas.
10. The government and the church needed to control the dissemination of those radical ideas, and thus developed the beginnings of our copyright system. It was during this period that the word “author” began to be used in its modern sense.
11. The author was the person who had been authorized by the state to print their work. They were the ones to be held accountable for the ideas. The first laws on authorship were used to censor and persecute the writers who dared publish radical ideas.

12. The next wave of laws, from the Statute of Anne in 1710 and on, transformed authorship into a commercial venture by making words and ideas property. While this launched an enormous creative output, writing had been swallowed by the marketplace.
13. It also transformed the writer into just another worker inside the system. Authorship signifies a writer's position within the system. The problem with the system is that it permits no dissent, and neutralizes any attempt at change.
14. Poetry flounders in this system. The marketplace reduces everything to equivalence, to cash, and in a milieu where financial success determines success, poetry looks pathetic. The market rewards existing tastes and standards, not challenging those standards.
15. But poetry only lives outside of the marketplace. How far outside? Consider that a good book takes at least a year to write and publish, a good contract gets \$2 a book, a best-selling book of Canadian poetry sells 500 copies. That's a thousand dollars for a year's work.
16. The all-time best-selling book of Canadian poetry has sold roughly 25,000 copies. But that was over nine years, or roughly 2,500 copies a year. The previous Canadian poet to sell so well was Robert Service with his Yukon Klondike poems.
17. Authorship, with false claims of cultural authority, and with links to anti-intellectual oppression, is the wrong model for poets. Poetry is fundamentally different than authorship: legally, economically, and politically.
18. Poets against authorship insist that poetry is a space in which to test and rethink and to challenge the existing legal, economic, and political frameworks of our society. Poetry, by its irrelevance, has earned this radical freedom.
19. Consequently, the poetry of poets against authorship looks different too. We use plagiarism, appropriation, plunderverse, collage, cut-ups, and found poetry to challenge ourselves as much our worlds. There are other models of writing than authorship.
20. Poetry has the enormous privilege of existing outside the political, economic, and legal constraints of authorship. It is a space of radical freedom, radical for its rejection of easy to please consumer culture, radical for its lack of authority.

*An Insight Toronto lecture delivered at the Drake Hotel, 3 September 2010.*

---

**Gregory Betts** is a poet, editor, and professor at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. He is the author of four books of poetry and the editor of four books of experimental Canadian writing. He received the 2010 Jean-Michel Lacroix Award for the best essay on a Canadian subject by the *International Journal of Canadian Studies* and his book *The Others Raised*

*in Me* was a shortlisted finalist for the 2010 ReLit Award. He recently completed a history of early Canadian avant-gardism that will be published by the University of Toronto Press in 2011.



Gregory Betts