To suggest that there are trends in Canadian poetry is a generality; therefore, I will speak in generalities.

I find the idea of trends a little suspect, an idea better suited to an article published in a lifestyle magazine that might punchily summarize twenty useful tips to writing cutting-edge poems that sell. Even if I tried, I could not come up with twenty themes or stylistic flourishes that could unarguably be more signature of today than of times past. Poets writing about Iraq have their antecedents in poets writing about Vietnam in 1960s and 1970s or Central America in the 1980s. They in turn have their precursors from the 1930s who wrote about Spain. Antecedents always have precursors. Wordsworth was inspired by the French Revolution when he wrote *The Prelude*.

As editor of *The Malahat Review* and the former co-editor of *Arc*, I do not necessarily consider myself to be ideally positioned to identify present trends in Canadian poetry. Editors simply read through more than their fair share of bad writing and are justifiably relieved to find something decent enough to publish. They don’t have time to notice something as chimeral or highfalutin as trends. Trends know no deadlines.
Nonetheless, I would have to say that there are two distinct poles in the poetry being written in Canada today, the language-centered writing practiced by writers like Lisa Robertson and Erín Moure, which is published more frequently by magazines like *West Coast Line*, *The Capilano Review*, and *Tessera*, in contrast to the so-called new formalism, a term also coined elsewhere, that seems to have its advocates across our own country and is more and more published in literary magazines nationwide.

*The Malahat* just published a lovely sonnet by Ross Leckie, for example, in its most recent issue (#146, Spring 2004) — and I am not often disposed to sonnets. Two recent and praised collections of poetry by Anne Simpson and Steven Heighton exemplify the renewed interest in set forms by our best poets. Both writers publish a number of formal poems alongside the free verse that has been the traditional fare in
poetry books over the past several decades.

Certainly, in my years as a magazine editor, I have noticed poets submitting a changing array of set forms with waxing and waning frequency, the ghazal and the glosa being the two formal imports that Canadian poets most constantly kick about. Lorna Crozier, for example, recently published a lovely book of ghazals, complete with a summary of the rules and history of the form. The haiku and tanka are also popular, but their authors tend to keep to themselves in their own associations, at least in this country.

I would not say we are as formally mad as the Americans, but *In Fine Form*, an anthology of formal poetry written by Canadians that is currently in preparation by Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve is, as far as I know, the first of its kind to be published in Canada. It stands alongside worthy foreign equivalents edited by Eavan Boland and Mark Strand, among others. Its imminent publication is perhaps the clearest indication that the Canadian poet’s interest in formalism needs to be recognized as something serious and not merely as warm-up calisthenics to keep the flabby creative muscles limber. Twenty years ago, poets would have been eager to publish in themed anthologies about pregnancy, families, or solidarity with El Salvador. But in an anthology of clerihews? Never.

Spoken Word seems to me to be the trend or vogue du jour, one so impossible to avoid that CBC Radio has actually noticed and for the last several years has held regional and national Poetry Face-Offs during National Poetry Month. Spoken Word’s advocates claim that it is bringing poetry into the mainstream, to the so-called non-poetry audience—in other words, to the beer-swilling callow young and the callow young at heart. Like Poetry Slams (another performance-oriented trend) Spoken Word events typically take place in bars. It seems to be an admixture of storytelling and any number of poetries that ten to twenty years ago would have fallen under the rubric of performance poetry. Spoken Word is poetry’s attempt to have “street cred.”

“Identity politics” is a label many apply to the approaches taken to content by a great number of poets who have been writing since the late eighties, including me. As a gay poet (not a poet who happens to be gay), I have spent fifteen bitter and ennobling years exploring homoerotic and homosocial terrain. Poets writing from an array of other positions—Asian, black, Hispanic, aboriginal, disabled, feminist, new formalist, goth—are found at work everywhere in the country, using any worthy technical means to write out of their experiences as entities with “identities,” however fluid or set. I have come to think of
21st-century identity politics as akin to a guide to fine or not-so-fine
dining in our increasingly diverse and urban society. We scan menus
all across town, but all everyone really wants to eat these days is
fusion—or Thai.

One particular identity whose primacy seems to be on the wane is
Robert Bly's *Iron John*, which, in the early 1990s, seemed to galvanize
men—male poets and their admirers as well as non-poetry-reading
males in general—who felt alienated by or, worse, criticized by
feminism. They began to doubt their role as top of the food chain and
needed to get back into touch with themselves for their own self-respect
or to think their way around the women in and out of their lives in
order to grub their way back to the head of the gravy train. Thankfully,
at least from my vantage, you don’t hear very much from Bly’s
starved-out followers these days. Still, if there are any of you guys out
there, don’t send your sensitive, drum-beating, fire-leaping,
straight-acting, male-bonding angst-eloquent poems to *The Malahat
Review*. Send them to Stephen Harper. A good poet knows his—I
repeat, his—audience.

Of course, the new is always a trend. Technological and social
innovation will always feed poetry with new vocabularies and new
subjects. Still, given the exponential growth in world knowledge, you
would think that poetry would be a very different object than it was
several years ago. But it is not. Unless you happen to be Christian Bök
or Anne Carson. Most of us are still twinkling on and on about stars. I
know I am.
And then, there are the new poets—or are they young poets or emerging poets or poets under 35? Under 30? Under 20? Under 12? Or are they in-vitro poets or genetically modified poets? In any case, if anything is a trend in our very contemporary society, it has got to be youth. As a result, shouldn’t the rest of us start to apply vanishing cream to our metaphors? Metaphors are so passé, don’t you know? Or are they retro?

Granting agencies are half crazed about new writers. They always want to be assured that the magazines they fund across the country are publishing newbies in sufficient numbers to justify their support. At Arc, I always found it amusing that no granting agency has ever once defined what it means by “new writer.” So, I came up with my own definitions:

- **Emerging:** One book or less
- **Established:** Two books or more

Nor has my amusement abated since I started editing *The Malahat Review*. To the above I now add:

- **Over the hill:** Three books
- **Ionic:** Four books or more
- **Divine:** A Collected

Three levels of government have never once contradicted me. They don’t even comment on the utility or futility of my categories, though their interest in new writers still borders on the fetishistic. If the *Body Politic* were publishing today, they could perhaps get a grant to publish men publishing boys publishing men.

Still, however you wish to describe them, new poets are perhaps the answer to this *bête noire* of trends, for their writing might tell us what is new in the world of poetry today—because they themselves are new. We should simply sit down and read them—or go to the bars and hear them above the din. (Thank heavens for the ever more common No Smoking bylaws across Canada—now there’s a trend worth trumpeting!)

But wait, aren’t the old a trend as well? We love to rediscover and
venerate them; we should rediscover and venerate them. Let’s make rediscovering them a trend and commit to venerating one old poet each per month for the next decade until the trend is no longer a trend but a habit.

Maybe trends are no more than marketing angles. Maybe the trend to finding one’s own voice as a poet should be more urgently pursued. But can a trend last a lifetime and still be a trend?

References


*It has been so successful that it is rumoured that the editors are considering publishing a second volume.

About the Author

**John Barton** has published eight books of poetry and five chapbooks, including *Designs from the Interior* (Anansi, 1994), *Sweet Ellipsis* (ECW, 1998), *Hypothesis* (Anansi, 2001) and *Asymmetries* (Frog Hollow, 2004). A bilingual edition (French and English) of *West of Darkness: a self-portrait of Emily Carr* was published by BuschekBooks in 2006. He is co-editor of *Seminal: The Anthology of Canadian Gay-Male Poetry*, which was published in April 2007 by Arsenal Pulp Press. Since 1980, he has won three Archibald Lampman Awards, a Patricia Hackett Prize (University of Western Australia), an Ottawa Book Award, and a CBC Literary Award. His poems have appeared in anthologies and magazines across Canada, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. He lives in Victoria, B.C., where he is editor of *The Malahat Review*. 