

## **Towards the “Infinite Poem”: Reality and the Imagination in the 1950s and 1960s Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek**

**By Graham H. Jensen**

On March 9, 2001, as he lay dying in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, Louis Dudek dictated what would be his final poem to Aileen Collins, his wife of over thirty years:

The cloud-filled heavens  
    crashed down on us  
But we cultivate  
    our greens and asparagus  
        as we did before.  
    (“Last Poem” 1-5)

In these five frugal lines, Dudek alludes to a theme that dominates his literary corpus: the interrelations between the reality of “greens and asparagus” and the ideal or transcendental reality of “cloud-filled heavens.” From his earliest “social-realist” and Romantic effusions to his later philosophical meditations and “academic” prose poems, Dudek displays a consistent interest in the creative process through which poets inexplicably transform the world around them into imaginative, intelligent, and coherent visions of universal significance. This essay seeks to elucidate the tensions between the necessarily provisional categories of “reality” and “the imagination” in Dudek’s poetry and poetics of the 1950s and 1960s in general, and in his self-reflexive, self-aware, and increasingly autobiographical poetry in particular.

Dudek was fascinated with the poetic process and the ways in which it was informed both by the poet’s encounters with physical reality and by the poet’s attempts to transform that reality through the imagination. As his 1940s polemics against *Preview* poets such as Patrick Anderson and P.K. Page demonstrate, he asserted that poetry should be accessible and intimately connected to everyday life; however, he also asserted its ability to convey complex philosophical truths, and he often shrouded his own

poetry in obscure terms or esoteric allusions, as *Europe* (1954) and his subsequent long poems demonstrate. Indeed, his poetics is one of paradoxes. Nevertheless, Dudek's self-proclaimed "transcendental-realist" approach would allow him to accommodate these and other paradoxes, as well as to achieve a hard-earned, if delicate, balance both in his poetry and in his life as a public intellectual. As Stewart Donovan writes, "[p]art of Louis Dudek's great critical achievement has been his ability to move between the campus and the street, between the classroom and the pressroom" (66). But in 1943, as Dudek became increasingly involved with John Sutherland and Irving Layton in the publication of *First Statement*, his polemics seemed to indicate that he was committed to a "social-realist" program according to which a new generation of Canadian poets worked to remedy what Sutherland called "the close air and the literary smell of our poetry—our sensation of being on the inside of a jar of preserves" (14). Dudek dutifully continued the work of first-wave Canadian modernists who had attempted to emulate their British and American contemporaries in order to "overthrow an effete and decadent diction, and to bring the subject matter of poetry out of the library and the afternoon-tea salon into the open air, dealing in the language of present-day speech with subjects of living interest" (Smith, "Contemporary Poetry" 29). However, as critics such as Frank Davey and Brian Trehearne have noted, Dudek's polemics against *Preview* and its "academic" poets read rather ironically in light of his most important contributions to Canadian poetry, indicating the extent to which his puerile machinations had been allowed to infect his "poetics." In "Geography, Politics and Poetry" (1943), for example, Dudek's warning against "a pedantic absorption in the second-hand universe of books, literature and erudition" (2-3) reveals as much about his desire to discuss the "real" world with intelligence and vigour as it does about his superficial, politically motivated repudiation of a generalized *Preview* aesthetic. Despite Dudek's purported desire to become a revolutionary poet of the people ("Poets of Revolt" 5) and to write only of "the real currents of life" ("Academic Literature" 106), his earliest self-reflexive poems and privately recorded musings reveal a much more nuanced understanding of the phenomenal world and the imagination's role in poetry than his earliest polemics suggest.

While Dudek's interest in poetry's relation to reality and the imagination was one of his lifelong obsessions, terms such as "reality" and "imagination" can be defined precisely only with great difficulty. In 1956, Vladimir Nabokov claimed that "reality" is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes" (312), and Dudek's own struggle to under-

stand “reality” and “the imagination” is immediately apparent when one considers that he offered numerous, sometimes contradictory definitions of both terms in his poetry and poetics. Nevertheless, this essay proceeds on the assumption that the tension between “reality” and “the imagination” can still be fruitfully explored in relation to aspects of Dudek’s poetry and poetics, including his didacticism, his discussion of the neo-Platonic concept of “Atlantis,” or his attempts to write an “infinite poem.” The first of these terms, “reality,” will be used here to refer to that which can be experienced or perceived through the senses. Obviously, such a definition is necessarily limited and provisional; the categories of reality and the imagination naturally overlap, intersect, and collide. For the purposes of this essay, then, “reality” will also be used interchangeably with the terms that Dudek himself employed most frequently in his writing, an array of synonyms that includes “the actual,” “actuality,” “physical reality,” “nature,” “the real,” “the everyday occurrence,” “everyday life,” and “objective reality.” Such terms are perhaps most closely affiliated with what Maurice Beebe refers to in *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* (1964) as the “Sacred Fount” tradition of art, but in the context of Canadian poetry they appear most commonly in reference to the “accessible” poetry of the “social-realist” movement that flourished in Montreal in the 1940s.

The second term, “imagination,” is equally difficult to define. Nevertheless, in “The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry” (1981), Dudek would discuss the etymological origins of “imagination” and conclude that “[i]magination is clearly the power of forming images” (266). Elsewhere, in both his poetry and poetics, he readily offers alternate definitions of the same term, as well as synonyms or related terms such as “the ideal,” “the unreal,” “the transcendental,” and “subjective reality.” Collectively, these definitions suggest that, in Dudek’s understanding, the imagination is neither an exclusively positive nor exclusively negative faculty. In *The First Person in Literature* (1967), for instance, he explicitly states that the imagination is capable of releasing “a great freedom” as well as “raging aspiration” (21), and in “Poetry as a Way of Life” (1968) he writes,

There are many poems, and many kinds of poems; but in general the imagination handles its materials with great subjective freedom; it exaggerates reality to make it correspond to emotional needs; it colours everything, transforms it with the tints of heaven or of hell, polarizes good and evil as fear and desire, accentuates the good and magnifies ugliness; it carries all possibilities, all appetencies and conceptions, to their most extravagant extremes. (13)

Like Stevens, who defined poetry as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” (34), Dudek believed that poetry could provide respite from, and even imaginatively transform, reality. But he was also mindful of the fact that, when misused, the imagination could transform poetry into an arcane or purely “academic” pursuit.

The tension between the concepts of reality and the imagination permeates all of Dudek’s poetry, and it is perhaps in Dudek’s poems about poems, or in his poems about the poetic process, that this tension is explored most productively. Indeed, these “meta-poems” provide critics with a valuable means of understanding his life’s work. Meta-poetry belongs to the broader categories of meta-fiction and *Ars Poetica*, but it has its own, long-established tradition ranging from the second section of Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), Keats’s “On the Grasshopper and the Cricket” (1816), and the fourteenth canto of Byron’s epic *Don Juan* (1823) to modernist meta-poems such as “The Uses of Poetry” by William Carlos Williams (1909), Marianne Moore’s “Poetry” (1919), Archibald MacLeish’s celebrated “Ars Poetica” (1926), and Wallace Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry” (1940). Among Canadian modernist poets, a meta-poetic tradition began in the late 1920s and early 1930s with poets such as A.M. Klein and A.J.M. Smith, but it continued to develop—and indeed, to find fuller expression—in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948 A.M. Klein published his canonical “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape,” and in 1959 Layton announced in the foreword to *A Red Carpet For the Sun* that “all poetry, in the final analysis, is about poetry itself” (176). Davey contends that each of Dudek’s long poems is “a chronicle and a record of its own composition” (“Louis Dudek” 48), and Dudek himself would later remark that “the subject of my poetry now, I would say, as always, is the process of poetry itself, to ask what it is that the mind is doing to experience and to reality, what we are, and what the whole context of life is between eternity and the present” (“An Interview” 42). Dudek’s interest in meta-poetry as a means of exploring the relationship of the imagination to reality is evident even in early poems such as “Ars Poetica” (1943) and “Making Poems” (1946), the latter of which opens *East of the City*, his first solo publication.

The way in which Dudek situates himself within and against Canadian modernism in the late 1940s and early 1950s is indicative of the complex and paradoxical nature of his poetics. Ken Norris asserts that Dudek, Layton, and Raymond Souster “began the second wave of Canadian Modernism,” and that these *First Statement* poets would collectively “point the way to the fifties and sixties” (41). But for Dudek, the 1950s and 1960s signal a dramatic shift in his poetics away from the tenets of an ill-defined

social-realist movement and towards an increasingly intellectual, introspective, and philosophical type of poetry. Dudek's meditative long poem *Europe* marked the advent of a new era in Canadian modernist poetry, and in many of his subsequent poems or meta-poems it would become clear not only that Dudek's reckoning of the phenomenal world was more complex than his *First Statement* polemics implied, but also that his earliest statements regarding the role of the intellect and imagination in poetry needed to be re-evaluated in order to explain how the author of *East of the City* (1946) could also be the author of a poem such as *Atlantis* (1967) or *Continuation I* (1981).

While most of Dudek's critics have been content to refer to his early poetry as "social-realist" in spirit if not in kind, any close examination of this poetry apart from his polemics of the same period makes it abundantly clear that such a label is unequal to the task of elucidating his complex position in relation to society or to "reality."<sup>1</sup> His earliest published poems, which appeared in *The McGill Daily* and in *First Statement*, fail to consistently articulate his true poetic concerns. Thus, a majority of these poems can be said to belong to what Trehearne repeatedly refers to in *The Montreal Forties* as a period of "apprenticeship." Even so, the importance of Dudek's meta-poems from this period cannot be overstated, since they look forward to a mature and unified poetic style which is hinted at only rarely in the rest of his early work. Despite his various experiments and derivative forays into Romantic, Imagist, and Aestheticist forms of expression in *East of the City*, *The Searching Image* (1952), *Cerberus* (1952), and *Twenty-Four Poems* (1952), Dudek's meta-poems from the same period display an acute awareness of the paradox that, apart from any political program, "realist" poetry requires intellect and imagination if it is to transform the natural, physical world into art of any kind.

In 1954, Dudek's period of "apprenticeship" seemed to come to a sudden end with the publication of *Europe*, despite the fact that his next two long poems, *En México* (1958) and *Atlantis*, would continue to wrestle with many of the formal and thematic issues that the first had merely introduced. Understandably, many critics have diligently discussed the ways in which *Europe*, with its unique form and its remarkable synthesis of philosophical thought, signals a new beginning, of sorts, in Dudek's poetic search for truth. But the division of his *oeuvre* into distinct and clearly delineated periods is an arbitrary—and potentially damaging—critical exercise. In the same way that his early poetry has been aligned too readily with an ill-defined "social-realist" tradition in Canadian poetry, his long travel poems of the 1950s and 1960s have been aligned too readily with

what is thought to be an arcane, didactic, and elitist tradition of “academic” poetry. An examination of Dudek’s meta-poetry from this later period reveals not only a continued interest in the transformational role of the imagination and the intellect in the poetic process, but also a more complex understanding of reality and the poet’s fundamental relation to the phenomenal world than his detractors have supposed. As in his earliest meta-poetry, his meta-poetry from the 1950s and 1960s again charts the course of his future work while addressing his deepest poetic concerns in the present. In *Europe*, *En México*, and *Atlantis*, for example, Dudek’s meta-poetic fragments focus his meditations and begin to unite the seemingly disparate elements of his poetic project into an increasingly cohesive structure. Indeed, it is in these fragments that he is able to explore most productively the points of intersection between reality and the imagination in his quest for “Atlantis,” the hidden reality beyond the known and knowable world.

Before he published his first collection of poetry, Dudek was well aware of the complex relation between reality and the imagination, and of the impossibility of approaching objective reality except through subjective experience. Writing about “the world of ultimate reality” in 1941, he remarks that “what we know about that world is what is manifested in terms of knowledge in the realm of experience” (1941 *Diary* 24). This same belief is echoed in an aphorism from *Europe* (“I suppose that what you see / depends on who you are” [70]) and described more fully in “Theory of Art.” In this meta-poem from *The Transparent Sea* (1956), “the physiological eye is part of a complex metaphor” for the poetic process (Stromberg-Stein 65), as well as a synecdochic representation of the poet’s mind, the site of intersection between reality and the imagination. As in Dudek’s “Line and Form,” the voice of the philosopher describes the process in which the poet perceives “the whole world” (25). In “Theory of Art,” however, it is the excited poet, rather than the detached philosopher, who provides the poem with its concluding metaphor. The world is “a silent landscape” (27) reconstituted in the mind of the poet and then refashioned in lines of verse. Yet Dudek’s poem, which is itself the result of a personal and subjective “vision” (22) of the world, is highly impersonal. Written in the language of a general “theory,” it explains how “an artist’s iron will” (6)—not his own iron will in particular—shapes the constituent elements of the poem into a unified whole. In addition, the poem’s nine tercets follow an identical, unchanging pattern of indentation, shaped and polished according to the philosopher-poet’s mathematically precise “*techné*” (7) instead of the ecstatic poet’s “vision.” Instead of attempting

to replicate the ebb and flow of the poet's mind, "Theory of Art" limits itself to an explanation of the physical processes involved in the transformation of the raw materials of art as natural and artificial objects alike are taken in and absorbed into the body of the poem "with unfailing unity" (4-5). Inspiration comes "from all quarters" (24), although the poem itself offers only a meagre catalogue of "windows and heads, a leaf and a cathedral" (4), a microcosm in lieu of the world "in compendium" (25). Dudek's interest in the poetic reconfiguration of "the whole world" in "all / its huge fragments" (25-26) forms the basis of what would later become an explicit "poetics of accumulation" in his "infinite poems," *Atlantis* and *Continuation* (Trehearne 244); but in "Theory of Art," the "infinite poem" is curtailed as "the poem condenses or compacts the world" (Stromberg-Stein 65) into a closed and finite structure.

The process of "perceptions and ideas flowing together" that Dudek identified in his Preface to the 1991 edition of *Europe* is recreated, in a rudimentary way, even in "Ars Poetica" and his earliest meta-poetry. In *The Transparent Sea's* meta-poetic cycle "Keewaydin Poems," however, the role of the imagination as a counterpoint and guide to the natural world is reinstated in increasingly unambiguous terms. Davey argues that "*The Transparent Sea* implies a shift in Dudek's sense of the poet's identity from one who *sees* more clearly than other people to one who dares to *think* more deeply and dangerously" (LD&RS 50), but in "Keewaydin Poems," the mind of the poet "comes to nature / to swell slowly among the trees" (99), forging a symbiotic relationship in which neither reality nor the imagination overwhelms the other. In other poems such as "Hot Time" (46), the voice of the ratiocinative and philosophical poet is absent. In the meta-poems from this collection, however, the poet is presented both as "one who *sees* more clearly" and as "one who dares to *think* more deeply and dangerously"; the two identities are inextricably linked, and Dudek is careful to emphasize the importance of perception as a function of subjectivity and of poetry's ineluctable ties to the phenomenal world:

The world I see (this poem)  
I make out of the fragments of my pain  
and out of the pleasures of my trembling senses.  
Not all have, or see the same.  
(*"Keewaydin Poems"* 102)

Dudek creates order in the poem by reassembling "the fragments of [his] pain" and "the pleasures of [his] trembling senses," balancing perception and ideas in order to transform his various *aperçus* into a coherent, mean-

ingful vision. As in his earlier meta-poems, Dudek attempts here to strike a balance between what Coleridge referred to as the “primary” and the “secondary” imagination. Jay Parini defines the former, which corresponds to Dudek’s understanding of “perception,” as “initial perception: how we assemble the world at a glance,” and he defines the latter, which corresponds to Dudek’s understanding of “ideas,” as a process in which “the poet takes what is given by the senses, dissolves it, then reconstitutes this reality to form a counterreality” (13). For Dudek, “The world I see (this poem)” results from the complex movement of “perceptions and ideas flowing together.” Fragments of the poet’s experiences coalesce in the poem as they are interpreted and organized by the creative imagination, a process which Parini describes as “an elaborate dialectic, an interplay of reality and the imagination” (13).

In Dudek’s second long poem, *En México*, the result of this balancing act—the poem itself—is a celebration of diverse perspectives and experiences, as well as a declaration of the order inherent in both “man” and nature. As in “Theory of Art,” the poet’s “centre of interest” in *En México* is one of several “point[s] of perspective” (53), a meeting point where fragments of experiences or images—which Dudek occasionally catalogues in lists denoted by anaphoric repetition of the definite article “the”—converge as “all roads come together.” Even so, the poem is also “a place of storm,” and the jungle depicted in *En México* represents the centrifugal forces that threaten to pull apart Dudek’s carefully ordered logic. Trehearne argues that “[a] world of such startling disorder...appears to have provoked his consideration, for the first time, of the kinds of coherence and meaningfulness that might inhere in a random structure” (271). Trehearne seems to be mistaken, however, for Dudek had already begun to consider, in *Europe* and perhaps in earlier poems as well, how “nature, uncultivated, precedes us / not without form” (54).<sup>2</sup> Davey acknowledges Dudek’s interest in natural forms and agrees that, in both *Europe* and *En México*, “Dudek challenges a landscape to reveal meaning” (*LD&RS* 66). In *En México*, order in the natural world can be measured empirically, since it is manifested in visible, tangible ways. Nevertheless, the order that exists in “man,” or in the mind of the poet, can also be detected. Dudek observes that “small leaves are perfect in detail,” but he then goes on to write, “[o]rder remains unimpaired / in man and in matter” (71). Drawing upon both imagination and intellect, he transforms the jungle, with “its inimical insects, flies, / and the chaos of growing / everything at once” (34), into an image of order—all without detaching himself from his physical surroundings.



Davey and Norris identify in *En México* a “proprioceptive method,” but a proprioceptive reading of this text does not accurately mirror Dudek’s own understanding of the mutually informing roles of reality and the imagination in the poetic process—nor does it offer any insights into his poetics that had not already been provided in his earlier meta-poetry. Norris explains how, in the 1960s, *Tish* poets such as George Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, and Daphne Marlatt followed the lead of Charles Olson and the proprioceptive Black Mountain poets by “concentrat[ing] on stimuli that were internal, inside the poet” (107). Norris also quotes Warren Tallman, who later maintained that poetry should begin not with perception of the outside world, but with the self, the true subject of proprioceptive poetry (107). Although Dudek would become increasingly interested in the role and representation of the self in his long poems, his philosophical meditations and poetic self-portraits were never purely solipsistic. Even in *Atlantis* and *Continuation*, his most “difficult” poems, such reflections continue to proceed from an emphatic interest in the phenomenal world. Significantly, Norris describes the average *Tish* poet as someone who “does not relate to language as an artisan or craftsman, but as a disciple or priest” (107). In *En México*, Dudek relates to language not as a priest in possession of deep and mysterious truths or divine revelations, but as a curious explorer mediating between an unknown, larger order and the order that is revealed to him through his senses. In a meta-poetic fragment that appears to support a proprioceptive reading of *En México*, Dudek actually affirms the role of the imagination in transforming perceptions of the physical world into polished, orderly visions of reality:

Imagination makes  
the organ cactus,  
the autocar,  
and a poem with six feet in every line.  
(32)

The poet’s imagination constitutes his reality as he reflects on the order that inheres in nature. But even here, where the imagination seems to take sole responsibility for recreating different objects in the poem, Dudek’s subjective vision relies on a knowledge of objective and physical realities—including an “organ cactus” and an “autocar,” two objects that Dudek was likely to have encountered during his trip to Mexico. Davey argues instead that, “[w]hile the images appear superficially to be from an objective world, the rhythm reveals them to be thoroughly internalized: the objective is located within the subjective. The process of apprehension is now as

much proprioceptive as perceptive; the poet attends to his own breath and mental rhythms as objective measures of the phenomenal world" (*LD&RS* 63-64). Davey's analysis is convincing, but in stating that "the objective is located within the subjective" he implies that, in Dudek's poetry, the subjective subsumes the objective entirely instead of merely influencing the poet's experience of objective forms of reality. In his *1941 Diary*, Dudek wrote that "what we know about [the world of ultimate reality] is what is manifested in terms of knowledge in the realm of experience" (24); in *Europe* he wrote, "I suppose that what you see / depends on who you are" (56); and in "Keewaydin Poems" he wrote, "Not all have, or see the same" (102). Furthermore, Davey's comment that "the poet attends to his own breath and mental rhythms as objective measures of the phenomenal world" implies that Dudek's own rendition of poetry composed "in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (Pound 3) borrowed heavily from Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950), both in its general tenor and in its emphasis on "the laws and possibilities of the breath" (3).

Whatever *En México*'s methods, and whatever its particular successes, Dudek's second long poem echoes *Europe* in expressing doubts about the power of the imagination to "fix" or transform reality into poetry with its own unique order and brilliance. He detects a sense of order even in the jungle, and it is an order that he claims is responsible for "the necessary magnificence of all reality" (35). This affirmation is then juxtaposed with what appears to be a renunciation of artists' creative and intellectual faculties: "(Where an artist is only a pipsqueak / in a forest of mocking birds.)" (35). Dudek's artist seems a much-diminished figure, and his art is that of "a forest of mocking birds," a parenthetical echo of the beauty and magnificence of "all reality." Yet this passage can also be read as a call for artists to open themselves to "the necessary magnificence of all reality" without failing to transform what they see, hear, taste, smell, and touch into an intelligent and imaginative vision. Eva Seidner testifies to Dudek's own creative powers as a poet, stating that "[h]e uses his own consciousness to demonstrate how the human being, mustering all of his intellectual and sensual powers, can penetrate chaotic appearances and perceive the essential order of reality" (26). Dudek's faith in the order that informs the natural world as well as the creative imagination is accompanied by what seems to be an incipient faith in the poet's ability to replicate, and even refashion, that order in art. "At Lac En Coeur" (1959) expresses similar doubts to those expressed in *Europe* and *En México*, but it also continues to affirm the order present both in the mind of the poet and in nature. While Dudek

that I wrote nothing  
I did not first think  
complete, as it stands.  
Not a poem, but a meditation—  
they make themselves, are also natural forms,

kernels that come whole to the hand.  
(1-12)

The process of “thinking the poem out” is presented as a kind of corrective to a process in which the poet was not “aware / of writing a poem” (2-3), and Dudek’s repeated use of the past tense in describing the latter, outmoded approach further emphasizes this difference. As he would later explain, “Lac En Coeur” is significant because “the process of writing the poem, thinking the poem out, is now the important fact—I’m not arguing with the world anymore” (qtd. in Stromberg-Stein 71). One might be surprised to read, then, that Stromberg-Stein believes that “Lac En Coeur” “marks the turning point where Dudek’s writing becomes a true meditation, and therefore something like an automatic process” (72). The very phrase “automatic process” denotes a poetic process fundamentally opposed to a process that involves “thinking the poem out” or consciously crafting a subjective vision into an intelligent, meaningful, and permanent piece of art. The poet’s “meditations” may indeed “come whole to the hand,” but Dudek does not fail to distinguish between a “meditation” that is “complete, as it stands,” and “a poem,” which he is able to create only when he is “aware / of writing a poem.” While the meaning of the awkwardly phrased adjectival clause “in this case anyhow” (5) remains elusive, and while Dudek does not identify his “real concern” (6), the poem is nevertheless important simply as a restatement of his belief in the importance of the imagination and intellect. Contrary to Stromberg-Stein, Davey observes that, in Dudek’s poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, he “came more and more to look upon poetry as a conscious, rational art that employed preconscious process merely as raw material” (*LD&RS* 33), and this increasingly self-conscious approach would lead to an increase in meta-poetry as well as a proliferation of manifestoes on the form, content, and function of poetry.

One of the most important of these manifestoes is “A Note on Metrics,” which Dudek published in the fifth issue of *Delta* in 1958. As Terry Goldie points out, the importance of documents such as “A Note on Metrics” and “Functional Poetry: A Proposal” stems largely from the fact that, through them, “Dudek established the mode which he has continued to support and within which he has continued to write until the present” (30-31). Concerning the publication of *Cerberus* in 1952, Dorothy Livesay would remark that “as yet the poems do not match the theory” (76). But in the pages of *Delta*, Dudek’s poetics would become increasingly aligned with his poetry as many of the ideas explored in his meta-poetry were formalized and explored in greater detail. In “A Note on Metrics,” for example, he borrows

from poems such as “Line and Form,” *Europe*, and *En México* in a discussion of rhythm and form. He insists that “the rhythms and forms of poetry are potentially unlimited, like the forms of leaves, driftwood, or animal bodies. They tend to become formalized and rigid: they decay with over-formalization. At their origin they are fluid, creative, and constantly changing—searching for new forms of beauty” (15).<sup>3</sup> The idea of “unlimited” and organic forms posited here is reminiscent of the “essential form” (20) or “Eternal forms” (24) mentioned in “Line and Form”; the “infinite variety” and “inexhaustible” forms of the sea in *Europe* (141); and “the poem / as mysterious as these trees, / of various texture” in *En México* (69). Dudek reaffirms his faith in the poetic process, as well as in the poet’s ability to transform the order that exists “in man and in matter” into an imaginative and unique reinterpretation of reality: “Just as forms are manifold, the ways to produce forms may be manifold.... A poem, after all, is not something poured into prepared muffin tins; each poem—each verse—should be carved as an individual sculpture” (“Metrics” 15-16). In regard to rhythm and metre, he describes a similar process in which the poet, imaginatively recreating “the essential music” of a poem, composes “an original piece of music, a form that cannot be borrowed or counterfeited” (17). Here he seems to rely heavily on Pound’s idea of an “absolute rhythm” that “corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed,” a rhythm that is “uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (9).<sup>4</sup> Like Pound’s “Retrospect,” Dudek’s “Note” calls for more than *vers libre*; it calls for poetry that conforms to an inimitable and invisible order, to metrical patterns and rhythms that constantly invent themselves in nature as well as in the mind of the poet. In *Europe*, Dudek had already reflected, “[i]t must be that the kinds of beauty are infinite; / though we have tried only a few” (100). In a meta-poetic fragment from *Atlantis*, however, he builds on this idea, as well as on similar ideas espoused in “A Note on Metrics,” when he claims that “it would be far more difficult, almost impossible, / to write a poem in the rhythm of another, earlier, poem / than to write a new one, in the rhythm of a new one” (7). Although even “Keewaydin Poems” and *En México* contain the occasional couplet or alternating rhyme, such features are almost entirely absent from *Atlantis*, which he began to write in 1961.<sup>5</sup> Dudek’s increasing interest in “absolute rhythm” and “essential music” in his long poems corresponds to an increasingly critical view of strictly regulated rhythmic or metrical patterns, and both of these general tendencies are reflected in the poetry he published after 1959.

Karis Shearer observes that Dudek felt metre “was stale and constraining, preventing poetry from adapting to effectively perform its cultural

work" (x). In doing so, she provides a concise summary of two of his overlapping concerns, addressed in "A Note on Metrics" and "Functional Poetry," respectively: the modern poet's creative struggle to bring rhythm and form together to create "a beautiful shape" ("Metrics" 17), and poetry's frequent inability to engage with reality or to address "our real concerns" ("Functional Poetry" 6). In "A Note on Metrics," Dudek championed the aesthetic importance of personal, unique forms of expression, but in "Functional Poetry," a provocative "poem-essay," he reminds poets and critics alike that poetry is called to perform a crucial public function as well.<sup>6</sup> Again, many of his poem-essay's salient points are adumbrated in fragments of earlier meta-poetry, such as those found in "Line and Form," *Europe*, and *En México*.<sup>7</sup> In section seventy-two of *Europe*, for instance, he writes that "[t]he arts have been important / because their fiction worked upon / the needs of people" (115). Nevertheless, Seidner quite accurately observes that "Functional Poetry" "represents a union of theory and practice" (20), since it gathers together the ideas expressed in Dudek's meta-poetry. Specifically, "Functional Poetry" concerns itself with two problems: "the loss of ground to prose over the centuries / in the subject matter of poetry" and "the loss of freshness in method / as the residue of 'poetic' substance / became fossilized in decadent metre and form" (1). Dudek had already begun to address the latter of these problems in "A Note on Metrics," but he had not yet discussed at length the problem of "the recapturing of the timely subject areas that were ceded to prose at the end of the last century" (Seidner 19). Although his early "poetics" called for a revolutionary return to "the actual" in poetry, his new poetry and writings emphasized the need for intelligent, imaginative, and "functional" poetry—not just philosophical treatises masquerading as poetry or abstract, intellectually challenging poetry. He bemoans poetry's lack of emotion and imagination (2), but he also celebrates at least two potential solutions to the present quandary: including "poetry of exposition and discourse" (6) and increasing one's focus on reality through "the senses," which offer "a good beginning / with which to breach the wall / of prose" (5). In order to "breach the wall / of prose" in his own poetry, Dudek would search for a structure that achieved a balance between form and function, emotion and intellect, and reality and the imagination. But in "Functional Poetry," he seems cognizant of the difficulties associated with writing poetry that strikes a balance in these areas and that is "as relevant and immediate as prose matter" without becoming too prosaic itself. Cleanth Brooks asserts that "[t]he successful use of prosaic or unpleasant materials and the union of the intellectual with the emotional are symptoms of imaginative

power—not...symptoms of the death of poetry” (53), and his assessment effectively underscores the connections between “Functional Poetry” and Dudek’s repeated attempts to produce balanced, relevant poetry as an “intelligent, imaginative man” (7).

In “Functional Poetry,” Dudek restates his belief in poetry’s necessary connections to reality, as well as its critical and cultural importance. He disagreed vehemently with Northrop Frye on this subject, since Frye “contended that literature exists as a self-enclosed medium, a frame in which it is continually relating to itself, and that it bears no relation to life” (Norris 75). Instead, Dudek believed, as Wynne Francis notes, that poetry “has a moral function to perform—moral in the Arnoldian sense of ‘a criticism of life’” (“A Critic of Life” 5).<sup>8</sup> Although he would continue to explore ways in which the order inherent both in the mind of the poet and in reality could illuminate his poetry and thus help him to share with the world a remarkable vision of civilization, he begins in “Functional Poetry” to delimit the means by which such goals could be accomplished. He writes, for example, that “what we need” is “straight language / and relevance to our real concerns” (6). He does not provide substantial or specific definitions of “straight language” or “real concerns,” however, and in the next issue of *Delta*, Eli Mandel would challenge Dudek to elucidate the poem-essay’s central arguments: “what matter do you offer, to what will you give permanent shape, what shape will it be, what ideas, what subject matter, what?” (“Functional Poetry Etc.” 13). Dudek had already begun to provide answers to these questions—in his meta-poetry as well as in “Functional Poetry” itself—and it is important to keep in mind that “Functional Poetry” was written as “A Proposal.” Even so, “Functional Poetry” affirms poetry’s importance as a “functional art,” and it addresses a number of questions, raised by Sutherland in *Other Canadians: An Anthology of New Poetry in Canada, 1940-46*, concerning poetry’s relevance and meaning “for the ordinary man” (14). Throughout Dudek’s meta-poetry, and increasingly in poems such as *Europe*, “Theory of Art,” and “Keewaydin Poems,” the process of “perceptions and ideas flowing together” simultaneously affirms the poet’s ability to “work upon” the reality of “everyday things” as well as to “extract” and imaginatively reassemble “their essence” in writing (Sutherland 14). Shearer argues that “Dudek’s is very much a poetry of ideas,” but she also explains that his body of work “reflects a consistent belief in purposeful art (as opposed to art for art’s sake) and a persistent inquiry into the conditions of contemporary culture” (ix). This idea of art’s purposefulness and “relevance to our real concerns” was not, perhaps, fully fleshed out in his poetry until the publication of *Atlantis*, although

claims such as “[a]rt is really the way of life” (*En México* 76), which pre-date “Functional Poetry,” would be repeated constantly by Dudek until his death in 2001. Unlike Frye, who took for granted the fact that “the poet is not only very seldom a person one would turn to for insight into the state of the world, but often seems even more gullible and simple-minded than the rest of us” (180), Dudek took poetry, and the responsibilities of the poet, very seriously. In an interview with Tony Tremblay, he stresses, “poetry for me is not just some delightful sentimental stuff on the side. It’s a great, central civilizing force” (134). His focus on “civilization instead of society” (Trehearne 305) would become increasingly apparent as he abandoned the rhetoric of “social realism” in favour of more comprehensive and philosophical forms of “functional” poetry.

Early critics of *Europe*, *En México*, and *Atlantis* often produced contradictory valuations of what would become three of Dudek’s most “popular” publications, and this ambivalence is especially evident in regard to his supposed status as an “academic” or “intellectual” poet whose work no longer resonated with the realities of “everyday life.” Those critics who disliked *Europe*, for example, were quick to establish affinities between Dudek’s poem and Pound’s *Cantos*; but few provided evidence of any kind to support the theory that Dudek was merely an imitator of Pound, and those who attacked *Europe* on other grounds rarely bothered to sustain a close or rigorous analysis worthy of critical consideration.<sup>9</sup> Adjectives such as “abstract,” “intellectual,” and “academic” were constantly applied to his poetry, despite the fact that none of these terms were defined—even by those who used them most disparagingly. According to Dudek, “intellectual” was hardly a pejorative label, and the “bohemian intellectuals” he identifies by name in “Academic Literature”—Pound, Aldington, and Lawrence—followed the lead of Whitman, Sandburg, and Frost, poets who “[came] out of, and returned again to the cave of common men” (105) after they had received their education. For him, the difference between the “intellectual” and “academic” poet is tantamount to “the difference between understanding through emotion and experience and through the book and the mind alone” (“Academic Literature” 106). Among his critics, the lack of such a definition is the source of much confusion. In reference to Dudek’s long poems of the 1950s and 1960s, at least, Goldie is mistaken when he writes that “[t]he lack of agreement among various critics of Dudek’s work reflects the often amorphous nature of that work” (20); instead, one might argue that this lack of agreement reflects a lack of clarity regarding the terms that critics have used both to celebrate and to censure his poetry.



In private letters sent to Dudek following *Europe*'s release, Layton light-heartedly praised the poem for its "intelligibility and passion"; E.J. Pratt admired the way it "combine[d] the cerebral and the visceral"; and William Carlos Williams said that "[t]he language of it is so simply put down, without pretence, that I am all admiration" (qtd. in Gnarowski, Afterword 151-153). As if preparing Dudek for the decades of critical neglect that would follow, Layton also provided him with a warning as well as some consolation: "The kind of concern you have isn't fashionable today; and since you're not an intellectual you take ideas seriously and they are good ideas, but not the kind the world just now wishes to hear about" (qtd. in Gnarowski, Afterword 152). In a much less diplomatic review, sent in a letter from Cid Corman to Layton in August of 1955, Corman dismisses *Europe* as "bad journalism, bad poetry, and bad thinking" (qtd. in Davey, *LD&RS* 34).<sup>10</sup> Soon after, and as Dudek's friendship with Layton began to deteriorate, Layton's opinion of Dudek's poetry changed drastically.<sup>11</sup> In 1960, Layton published "Mexico as Seen by Looie the Lip," a shameless parody of *En México*, and in 1962 he published his calumnious "Open Letter to Louis Dudek" in *Cataract*. Layton aligns Dudek with "intellectuals, cosy and buttock-padded, [who] are reluctant to engage in open argument" and he accuses him of being "too far gone with academic rot to recognize a real live issue" ("Open Letter"). Layton uses "intellectuals" interchangeably with "academics," and he criticizes both for failing to "recognize a real live issue"—although, like Dudek and other former "social-realist" propagandists, he fails to explain what constitutes "a real live issue," let alone how one might "recognize a real live issue" and thus avoid being labelled an "intellectual" or "academic." In *Atlantis*, Dudek seems to have anticipated a similarly cool reception from critics, and he attempts to prepare himself—and perhaps invite the sympathy of his readers—by writing his doubts into the poem itself: "Already I hear / the creatures are laughing at my words. No one understands. It does not interest them" (149). Such doubts were certainly warranted, as he was rejected both by those he had identified earlier in his polemics as "academic" critics and, more recently, by so-called "social-realist" or "proletarian" poets who recognized that his poetry had moved in what they deemed to be a radically new direction.

Even before his departure from New York in 1951 to accept what would quickly become a permanent teaching position at McGill University in Montreal, Dudek had reconciled himself to the idea of working within the academy. However, he never reconciled himself to the idea of becoming an "academic" poet, although he had found reason to admire—and

embrace—the life of the intellectual. Goldie writes, “while Dudek felt anti-academic in many ways, he was by no means anti-intellectual” (7). To Dudek, the “intellectual” poet was one who balanced intelligence and a supple imagination in an effort to make “the major integration of life,” whereas the “academic” poet was intelligent but ultimately favoured learning about the phenomenal world at a remove rather than through actual immersion in that world. Although he ridicules “intellectuals” in *Laughing Stalks*, he would eventually abandon the term in favour of “academics,” a term that captured more precisely his disdain for poets who leaned too heavily on the crutches of abstract thought or totalizing and dogmatic theories of literature. Even though Dudek himself was a professor at an educational institution and strove for “an intellectually tough poetry” (Barbour 18), he actively opposed those who sought to impose order on reality arbitrarily, as well as those who would turn the poet’s subjective visions into an esoteric “collection of dead shells” (“Symposium” 8). Ron Everson asserts that Dudek’s penchant for the intellectual element in poetry “reigns through all his books; even through the different styles” (qtd. in Stromberg-Stein 104). Yet, as Michael Gnarowski remarks, Dudek embraced the intellect and the imagination in order to get closer to reality and “to establish a meaningful connection with that which belongs to the order of universal culture. He has tried to prove the relevance of our own time, and of his presence in our environment, to the tradition and the artistry of man” (“Louis Dudek: A Note”). He wanted to effect change in the real world to cultivate civilization, and he envisioned “the university working in direct co-operation with the community to foster understanding and enjoyment of the arts” (Collins, *In Defence* 6). In his “Autobiographical Sketch,” Dudek would argue that “this work (teaching) is not necessarily antithetical to the writing of poetry; that under the best conditions, if teaching institutions were what they should be, the university is the most natural place for the literary artist as well as the literary scholar” (qtd. in Stromberg-Stein 43).<sup>12</sup> As a prolific poet and as a long-serving professor, he was well aware of the need for artists to strike a balance between immersion in and temporary detachment from “reality.” Because of the nature of the creative process, the poet’s withdrawal from the world is paradoxically both a necessary and inevitable step towards the reconstitution of reality in art. As he explains, “the aspect of contemplation means nothing more than a certain distancing perspective, a postponement for the individual, so that he or she can reach a superior integration with the reality of things” (“Interface” 238). Although Dudek physically inhabited the “Ivory Tower” of McGill for many years, he never allowed himself to become what Layton at one time

believed him to be: “an exhausted poet fallen among pedants, with all the fires gone out” (“Open Letter”).

“Functional Poetry” formalized many of Dudek’s concerns about poetry’s ability to make “the major integration of life,” but in *Europe*, *En México*, and *Atlantis*, these concerns occasionally manifest themselves in verse that is overbearing, elitist, or overly didactic.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, his most outspoken opponents attacked him for his “didacticism” in the same way that they had attacked him for being an “academic” poet—that is, with very little precision, and perhaps even less understanding of what he meant by the term when he embraced it so willingly in his prefatory note to *Europe*. Collins defends Dudek’s didacticism, claiming that “Dudek’s purpose as a critic of culture is overtly didactic in the highest and most positive sense of the word: to present the central and crucial issues of art, literature, and civilization to the general public in such a way that the issues are made important and that the public understands how these issues touch our lives” (*In Defence* 5). While Collins’s definition usefully illuminates points of intersection between Dudek’s poetics and poetry, Dudek was quite aware that his detractors used “didacticism” in a different sense: “to trumpet too explicitly the given truth and wisdom of a society” (“Beyond Autobiography” 85).<sup>14</sup> Although he attempted in “Functional Poetry” to fuse the utilitarian aspects of prose with the pleasing and natural rhythms of poetry’s “essential music,” he still struggled to incorporate didacticism—in its “highest and most positive sense”—into his long poems without irritating or alienating his readers. As Stromberg-Stein observes, “[Dudek] fluctuates between a personal purpose and a highly didactic one” (88), and this fluctuation may explain why Blaser would have reason to conclude that *Europe* “is, by turns, irritating, expedient, and strangely moving” (17). By comparison, *En México*’s overall approach is much less didactic than *Europe*’s, and this sense of humility and openness is indicated by references to “a groping fallible mind” (33) and “advances / toward humility” (25). Following the publication of *En México*, Dudek’s disappointment with his poetry’s reception—and critics’ misunderstanding of his didactic project—turned to a bitterness that is reflected in *Laughing Stalks* in poems such as “To the Reader” (3), “The Layman Turned Critic” (5), and “To Beat the Racket” (6). His bitterness and frustration culminate in “Canada: Interim Report” (1971), but the poem’s tone is less didactic than it is dejected, haughty, and cantankerous. In 1965, he claimed, “I ceased to be didactic when I realized I couldn’t even convince myself” (“Jottings”), but *Atlantis*, published only two years later, is still highly didactic according to the definition given by Collins, if not according to the exclusively pejora-

tive definition levelled at Dudek by his harshest critics. Whatever the case, his struggle to balance form and content as part of his overarching desire to effect real change through art is enacted in each of his long poems. As Barbour remarks, “[t]he philosopher ranting can provide little pleasure or stimulation, for he is using language in a manner, for him, meretricious” (27-28); and Dudek is at his best when he is “searching for new forms of beauty,” not when he closes his eyes to the “infinite variety” and “inexhaustible forms” of reality that he explores so effectively in his meta-poetry.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Dudek’s search for new, balanced forms of poetry commensurate with his ambitious cultural and literary goals resulted in an increasingly epigrammatic or prosaic style of “functional” verse. Critics such as Munroe Beattie, Barbour, and Davey argue that this kind of epigrammatic poetry is deficient not only because it is excessively didactic, but also because it is lacking in emotional force. Dudek himself concedes that *Europe* is “somewhat oratorical and overdidactic in style,” but he believes, nevertheless, that it is “lifted by the rhythms of the sea running through it and the great scope of its subject” (“Louis Dudek” 137). In the Preface to the 1991 edition of *Europe*, he also declares that “what [he] discovered in writing *Europe* was the great wave of emotion, the cumulative energy of a sea-like rhythm, that gathers in a long poem” (17).<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Davey posits that *Europe*’s “first fifty pages lack either intellectual profundity or passionate feeling” (*LD&RS* 57), although he does not provide a set of criteria according to which such a contentious claim can be ratified or refuted. One might argue that Dudek’s emotions overflow in vivid descriptions of the phenomenal world at numerous points in each of his long poems, as a brief example from *En México* demonstrates. Following his meta-poetic portrait of the poet as “a pipsqueak / in a forest of mocking birds” (35), he seems speechless, once again, when confronted with “the necessary magnificence of all reality” in its various guises:

All the green blanketing the hills,  
the braided streams,  
and the brown sands bleaching;  
horses with heads akimbo,  
small lambs that leap,  
children with huge eyes,  
and lovers shy in their look:  
praise these to the bewildering heavens,  
knowing no other tongue  
but praise.

(37)

Although Dudek professes “no other tongue / but praise,” his enumeration of people, animals, and features of the landscape is itself an awe-filled—as well as exquisitely poetic—reflection upon the phenomenal world reminiscent of Hopkins’s “Pied Beauty.” The poet’s instinctive response is one of profound joy, and his words tumble out in an alliterative stream of images set in motion to the jaunty rhythms of “horses with heads akimbo” or “small lambs that leap.”

A number of critics contend that, in *Atlantis*, such displays of emotion seem out of place, since Dudek juxtaposes lyric, Imagist fragments with long strings of epigrams or sections of “functional” prose-poetry. Barbour explains that “if you merely make your own poetry too prosaic in places, the obviously ‘poetic’ parts of your poem will clash with the rest. This is what happens in *Atlantis*, and it is a definite fault in the poem” (25-26). Because Barbour’s statement places the “obviously poetic” in direct opposition to the “too prosaic,” however, it seems to imply that comparatively “prosaic” forms of poetry—such as “functional” poetry or the epigram—cannot, in fact, be “poetic” to the same extent as a Villanelle, a Petrarchan sonnet, or haiku. Nevertheless, as Stromberg-Stein notes, “Dudek’s fascination with ‘irreconcilable ideas’ [resulted] in an epigrammatic quality in his poetry that becomes apparent from *En Mexico*, 1958, and culminates in *Epigrams*, 1975” (20). He embraced epigrams as a kind of “functional” poetry in which he could explore his philosophical and intellectual concerns, although his epigrams rarely engage with reality at the same personal, subjective, and emotional level as his meta-poetry.<sup>16</sup> Instead, his epigrams often lack concrete images of any kind, so that the poetic process becomes an exercise in wit or pedantry rather than an exploration of reality and of details pertaining to the poet’s life. Davey writes that “the consistent use of epigrams limits the scope of a poem; the poem becomes ‘functional’ only in terms of the achievement of a small objective: the presentation of an idea in a clever or arresting manner” (*LD&RS* 69-70). Yet, “although the language may sometimes be flat and the ideas banal,” as Beattie contends, “we are listening to the voice of a poet who can be depended on to sound always like a decent and honest human being” (“Poetry: 1935-1950” 778). Despite his poetry’s flaws, then, Dudek’s poetic vision remains, overall, one of authenticity, openness, and curiosity. This sense of openness and warmth spills over from the pages of *En México* to *Atlantis*, where he quietly urges his readers “[a]lways everywhere / to treat everyone as a person / worthy and serious, and vulnerable to love” (17). If *Atlantis* is truly meant to be an “infinite poem” (*Atlantis* 5), one should hardly be surprised if it contains disparate fragments and poetic forms or styles. Even so, Dudek

In *Atlantis*, he attempts to address the formal as well as thematic issues introduced in his earlier poetry by pursuing more comprehensive, imaginative, and intelligent modes of expression, and by consciously returning to discussions of reality and its role in the poetic process. Three years before *Atlantis* was published, Francis commented on Dudek's seemingly incongruent poetic styles and interests by observing that he was "still seeking a way to successfully relate the diaphanous wings of his lyric gift to the clay feet of his empirical philosophy" ("A Critic of Life" 7). Dudek seemed well aware of this need for balance, and indeed, much of *Atlantis's* "intellectual" poetry speaks directly to the poet's dependence on reality as a source for inspiration and for the raw materials of art. In his poetics, too, he continually reminds himself and his readers that "the way things are, in a sense—the common ground of experience—is the context from which we have to begin, and to which in the end we return" ("Educating the Critics" 297).<sup>17</sup> What Davey calls "lapses into commonplace" (*LD&RS* 68) are really part of a constant dialectic between perception and reflection, or reality and the imagination. Some of these "lapses" may be more or less "poetic," or more or less "successful" as poetry, but they are nevertheless part of the fabric of Dudek's poem, and without them the evanescent moments of ineffable joy and insight would somehow appear less remarkable. Near the beginning of his voyage in *Atlantis*, Dudek notes,

That nature is the prime artist does not mean that all nature is art. The means are wasteful, but the occasional fragment may be a masterpiece, a poem, or even a man.

(7)

Although nature may be “the prime artist,” the poet is a kind of secondary artist who borrows from the first for inspiration. Moreover, in the same way that not all nature constitutes a “masterpiece,” not every line of a long poem can be expected to operate at the same level of intensity. Davey opines that *Atlantis* “consciously risks boring the reader in order that the writer’s portrait of the self and the world will have the greatest possible accuracy and integrity” (*LD&RS* 80), and Trehearne similarly asserts that “if authenticity of self-portraiture is a good, then the inclusion of common-places—authentic to Dudek’s mind as to anyone’s—must be a good as well” (277). Regardless of whether Dudek’s attempts to accommodate reality result in “boring” or “flat” or “banal” verse, the poem’s frequent

shifts from impressionist travel narrative to interior monologue to philosophical exposition reflect the poet's fascination not only with ideas, but with the people, places, and things that regularly flood his vision. Dudek himself writes, "land is delightful / After an interval of dreaming, of vertigo, / of suspension" (13). Without renouncing the importance of the imagination, and without denying the possibility that he will find himself in a state "of dreaming, of vertigo, / of suspension" in the future, he willingly cuts his reverie short in order "to walk again on soil" and to enjoy "[t]he touch of land, solid under sea-legs" (13).

Despite Dudek's firm attachment to the shores of reality, he clearly recognized the importance of the imagination in art as an instrument of transformative power. Building on Plato's theory of Forms and on several of the ideas he had introduced in his earlier meta-poetry, Dudek begins in *Atlantis* to embody his belief that the imagination provides the poet with a means of reaching beyond the visible or known world to an ideal or "hidden" reality. In "Line and Form," which attempts to bridge the gap between the "complete and / perfect" realm of the imagination (37-38) and "this world of forms" (35), Plato's influence on Dudek was already clear, and the idea of compromise, of attempting to capture the "perfect poem" of one's imagination in poetic language even when "perfection" can never be attained, is present in each of his long poems.<sup>18</sup> As he would later explain in *Reality Games* (1998), "[r]ealism or naturalism falter when they descend simply to depict what is there, or what they think is there. The imagined reality is always something more; it is what we instill of the human spirit, of hope and desire, into the reality that turns it into art" ("A Final Definition" 82). In several meta-poetic fragments from *Atlantis*, Dudek cogently discusses the imagination's effect on reality while introducing the neo-Platonic concept of Atlantis as a metaphor for the ideal in civilization, in art, and in nature. He describes Atlantis as "our true home," contrasting it with our current home, "Here," which contains "only a few / actions, or words, bits of Atlantis" (10-11).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, he later places the poet's subjective reality or "private truth" in direct opposition to an objective reality that he calls "the open garden of God" and that he understands to belong equally to an all-encompassing category of reality:

Reality is mostly what you like. Each man clings to his own  
like a gimlet-eyed poet, seeing his private truth.

But there is also the open garden of God  
(a very great man)  
in which all things grow.

(118)

Dudek further contrasts the categories of the subjective and the objective, which he also refers to as “the imagined real” and “the real” (“Fallacy” 183), through his use of language. On one hand, the poet’s subjective reality is described colloquially as being “mostly what you like,” and neither of these two lines seems to contain any of the “essential music” necessary to break open the poet’s self-contained, “private” vision, whose scope and power is diminished significantly by the adverb “mostly” in the preceding line. On the other hand, however, the stanza that describes objective reality is strung together in a comparatively loose assemblage of alliteration, assonance, and metaphor. The poet’s subjective vision is not allowed to subsume objective reality, and in this way Dudek avoids, in Nietzsche’s words, “[drinking] up the sea” or “[wiping] away the whole horizon” (167).<sup>20</sup> Even so, his refusal to champion the imagination at the expense of reality in no way weakens his belief in the ability of the poet; instead, he simply posits objective reality—in the form of Atlantis, God, or any other concept of the ideal—as a necessary and desirable counterpoint to the “private truth” of the individual.

In his autobiographical essay “Louis Dudek,” Dudek recalls the circumstances in which, as a professor at McGill, he was driven to write about “Atlantis”:

I became convinced that there must be another side to the Nothingness (so-called *le Néant*) and the existential absurdism in which modern literature was embroiled; and that this missing element was perhaps the source of the grandeur and the glory of all past literature and art. It could not be wiped out by the skeptical tradition that had taken hold of western man. For the moment, in my long poem, I called this idea ‘Atlantis.’ (139)<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, his intensely private and philosophical musings would lead to a search for an objective, rather than a purely subjective, vision of “truth,” order, and meaning. The concept of Atlantis is prefigured in earlier meta-poems such as “On Poetry,” with its portrait of a poet who is “cursed by his vision” of perfection (5) and who fervently desires “something he does not have” (34), or “Line and Form,” which enacts the poet’s neo-Platonic struggle to replicate nature’s “essential” or “eternal” forms. In his interview with Michael Darling, Dudek would ask, “[w]hat is the reality that is



buried under reality?” (13), and this question is repeated incessantly in all of his writing. After experimenting with various poetic forms in the 1940s and early 1950s, he eagerly adopted the long poem in order to provide more detailed and satisfying answers to the issues his earlier poetry introduced. He explains to Darling that *Atlantis* “is such a meticulous, ongoing, and perhaps boring poem, because it’s constantly testing and seeking and trying to justify, and document, this particular kind of search” (14). As Davey also notes, “the principal focus of the poem seems to be a quest for the underlying principle of life which would explain its vagaries, joys and brutalities. The poet becomes increasingly insistent that this principle can be found, like beauty, in the commonplace and in the present moment” (*LD&RS* 75). In many ways, Dudek’s quest for “the underlying principle of life” begins in his earliest meta-poetry, but it is in *Atlantis* that he first gives this principle a name and thereby begins to consolidate all of his earlier, varied attempts “to understand what it is that has value and meaning, to rebuild the other half of possible existence” (“An Interview” 14).

Dudek’s search for Atlantis coincides with, and was perhaps partly the result of, his search for more permanent, meaningful, and “universal” poetic forms. In *The First Person in Literature*, he outlines the theory behind his own attempts to follow a “transcendental-realist” tradition that balances three things: (1) the subjective and the objective; (2) the noumenal and the phenomenal; and (3) ontological dichotomies, such as universals and particulars or abstract and concrete objects. He explains that transcendental realism “is realism, with all its reductive and negative descent into the particulars of life, but at the same time eternalized by flashes of transcendent experience” (45). Given this definition, Dudek’s attraction to this literary approach is quite understandable, for he was constantly searching for enduring forms for a poetry that could persuade others to join him as “citizens of Atlantis” (*Atlantis* 10). *The First Person in Literature* serves as a kind of poetics in this regard, since it details the paradoxical process by which “the subjective transforms itself into the universal” and by which the artist must share his “private truths” in order to convey “the universal truth of life” (41). In his meta-poetry, too, this desire for balance and for a kind of “universal” literature can be seen quite clearly. In *Atlantis*, which was published in the same year as *The First Person in Literature*, he writes,

The great place of art  
is halfway between this world, and some other:  
.....  
This is our gift, to extricate joy

from earthly things,  
 what is distilled of transcendence  
 out of the visible.  
 (135)

Although it is unclear whether the possessive pronoun “our” is meant to refer to poets, artists, or to all human beings, his repeated references to Canaletto, Giotto, Turner, and a host of other painters in the surrounding lines indicate that he is, in fact, describing a process common to artists of various kinds. In all great art—including his own poetry, presumably—artists employ their imaginative gifts in order to distil transcendence out of, and “extricate joy” from, the world of “earthly things.” His search for the ideal or for universal truths does not completely supersede his fascination with subjectivity and mere “things”; physical reality is necessary but also desirable, if only because it contains “joy” and “bits of Atlantis.”

In *Atlantis*, Dudek’s need for what Trehearne calls a “coordinating perceptive consciousness” (301) becomes increasingly obvious, and in *The First Person in Literature* he usefully restates this need in terms of his need to focus on the mind the poet as the locus of balance and artistic process. He expresses his desire to become “a writer whose consciousness of self is the key to the universe,” and, drawing on the ideas of Merleau-Ponty and Montaigne, he adds that this “search for the self, which is identified with the search for truth about the world, is the crux of the matter” (6). Seen in this context, his supposed “academicism” or withdrawal from the world can be interpreted, instead, as part of a much larger quest for truths about “the forms we know” in nature and the “full body” of the human mind (*Atlantis* 13). Throughout *Atlantis*, Dudek makes noticeable attempts at what Trehearne calls a “mimesis of consciousness” (275), but in the end, its various fragments—many of which constitute hauntingly beautiful and profound poems—often read as fragments, not as parts of a coherent or harmonious whole. Within the poem, Dudek even calls himself a “failed traducer,” a “vain idealizing peacock,” and an “empty realist” (83). His struggles to reconcile his faith in an ideal order with his awareness of humankind’s imperfections results in a poem that vacillates between highly personal and highly impersonal forms of expression. Because it contains what Trehearne calls “an efflorescence of intellectual material” (279), *Atlantis* may seem to deserve many of the labels it has been given. However, few critics point out the presence of highly personal and autobiographical passages in the poem, such as those found mid-way through Section II, and even fewer critics ground discussions of his “academicism,” “elitism,” or “didacticism” in the context of his search for balance

between reality and the imagination. Whatever his actual results, Dudek's objectives are stated quite clearly in his meta-poetry and in publications such as *The First Person in Literature*, where he reaffirms his view that the result of an increased focus on the "unseen dimension" of mind (*Atlantis* 13) is "the discovery of 'our real selves', and beyond that of a universal reality in experience that transcends the personal and subjective" (41).

As in *Europe*, Dudek's challenge in *Atlantis* was to find a new form or method of presentation that could combine the disparate fragments of his poetry into the same kind of unified and "deeply personal view of reality" (Goldie 41) that he admired in the work of writers such as Whitman, Joyce, and Proust. Despite the remarkable convergence of his poetics and poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, he still required a "coordinating perceptive consciousness" that would help him to achieve—or at least achieve more consistently—a balance between competing transcendentalist and realist urges. Nevertheless, in "Theory of Art," in "Keewaydin Poems," and in each of his long poems from this period, Dudek remains focused on "the forms we know" in reality even as he reaches beyond to the "full body" of the imagination, plumbing the depths of *Atlantis* to discover new forms, new ways of resolving the various tensions that his writings introduce, and new ways to write poetry that could be both "functional" and "poetic."

## Notes

- 1 In Wynne Francis's "Montreal Poets of the Forties" (1962), for example, "social realism" is used rather indiscriminately to describe "the poetry of 'proletarian' poets like Dudek, Layton and Souster" (30), although no attempt is made to differentiate between the three poets or to define "social realism" with specific references to their poetry. Poems such as "A Factory on Sunday," "Garcia Lorca," and "East of the City" are among the few Dudek poems from *East of the City* that are clearly "social-realist," if one agrees with Trehearne's provisional definition of social realism as "a primarily aesthetic orientation, in which the description of a particular kind of urban scene (or, less commonly, action) is arranged around an accumulation of visual details in an attempt to evoke class-poignancy in the reader" (289). An exclusively social-realist interpretation of Dudek's early poetry makes little sense, despite Dudek's grandiloquent claims in "Poets of Revolt: Or Reaction?" that "a revolution is being accomplished, in which all white shirts are soiled" and in which "real poets of the people" are willingly "dragged into the streets" (5). In *Unit of Five* (1944) and *East of the City*, at least, Dudek seems just as likely to soil his shirt fornicating or having a nap at the base of a tree than to lead any kind of social revolution.
- 2 Writing in retrospect in the 1991 Preface to *Europe*, Dudek also attempts to explain the organization of the poem into some kind of "abstract order" by remarking that *Europe* is, in fact, "a search for the order that really inheres in things" (15).
- 3 For similar remarks by Dudek, see also "The Breathless Adventure" 47 and "Interview

with Louis Dudek" 160.

- 4 Dudek's "essential music" and Pound's "absolute rhythm" correspond, and are perhaps synonymous, with what Beattie calls "fidelity to the essential rhythm of the poem" ("Poetry: 1920-1935" 727), as well as with what Harriet Monroe referred to as "an individual, unstereotyped rhythm" in her Introduction to *The New Poetry: An Anthology* (1917).
- 5 According to Dudek, the first draft of *Atlantis* was written in 1961, although the poem was not published until 1967 ("Questions [Some Answers]" 10; "Beyond Autobiography" 81; "Louis Dudek" 139).
- 6 In the Afterword to *All These Roads*, Davey discusses Dudek's preoccupation with poetry's ability to effect change in both the private and public spheres: "Poetry for Dudek should be a genre in which the major issues of the time are engaged, a genre that encourages reflection among influential readers, and has determinative effect on both private life and public policy. He worked to increase both the intellectual focus of poetry and its public circulation" (57). Although Davey's comments are intended as a general summary of Dudek's poetic concerns and core beliefs, they also function as a helpful *précis* of "Functional Poetry."
- 7 Shearer also provides evidence to support the claim that the ideas behind "Functional Poetry" had been expressed elsewhere prior to 1958. She writes, "[w]hile critics have attributed Dudek's 'functional poetry' thesis to the late fifties (Blaser 22; Goldie 31), when it was published, evidence from his correspondence with the American poet Ezra Pound shows that, in fact, the concerns that inform the essay 'Functional Poetry' were expressed on paper nearly a decade earlier" (xi). The evidence to which Shearer refers is a personal letter Dudek wrote to Pound on November 12, 1952—the same year that "Line and Form" was published in *The Searching Image*.
- 8 Similarly, Seidner writes that "[t]he 'powerful application of ideas to Life' which Arnold saw as fundamental to the greatness of a poet is one of Dudek's basic preoccupations" (17); and Davey observes, "Dudek's conviction that poetry must have a cultural role, that it must participate effectively in the intellectual and cultural issues of its time, also became dominant in his poetry and criticism from the 1950s onward" ("Louis Dudek" 47).
- 9 For examples and analyses of these kinds of claims, see Smith's introduction to Dudek's poems in the third edition of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (478); Dudek's Preface to the 1991 edition of *Europe* (17); Gnarowski's Afterword to the 1991 edition of *Europe* (153-155); and Dudek's autobiographical "Louis Dudek" (131).
- 10 As Davey notes, "Corman's remarks about Dudek's work occur mainly in the context of his struggle with Dudek for influence over Souster and to some extent over Layton" (*LD&RS* 34).
- 11 For further information about Dudek's well-documented feud with Layton, see Trehearn 238-239; Norris 155; or Elspeth Cameron's comprehensive study, *Irving Layton: A Portrait* (1985).
- 12 In "Louis Dudek—A Radical Reformer," Collins quotes from one of Dudek's unpublished notebook entries, dated from November 9, 1988, which reveals more of Dudek's thoughts on the subject of the university and his relation to it: he writes, "I am a poet who at one time infiltrated the university—to see if I could somehow transform the teaching profession. To make it relevant to the concerns of life and of living poetry. And then, perhaps, I infiltrated the newspapers, for the same reasons. I have been a radical reformer in this way—but the radicalism is not destructive, it is to bring back the values of our civilization" (245).
- 13 Although a discussion of Dudek's elitism falls outside of the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that, as with the term "intellectual," Dudek's understanding of what it means to be an "elitist" seems to differ greatly from that of his detractors. While Dudek admits that he is an elitist ("An Interview" 12; *LD&RS* 167; Dudek, "Louis

Dudek” 124; Trehearne 239), he explains, “I’m elitist in the same way that all serious thinkers in the past, who had to make distinctions between what is better and worse, were elitists” (“Ideogram” 147). See also “Questions (Some Answers)” (17), Dudek’s *Notebooks: 1960-1994* (143), and Blaser (8).

- 14 Like his critics, Dudek rejected this second kind of didacticism. In “The Psychology of Literature” (1977), for example, he states that “didacticism is poor stuff in literature” (375). However, even in 1991, Dudek did not find any fault with *Europe* on this, or on any other, account: he writes, “I stand behind every word of it, behind every line, as I read what that young man has written—despite the arrogance and vehemence which were then reproved as ‘didacticism’” (Preface 9).
- 15 Dudek defends *Europe* on similar grounds in his interview with Schrier: “*Europe* is a serial poem, made essentially of short lyrical poems, the big wind of prose-meaning running through it. You see, that’s what makes it so good—the big wind” (45).
- 16 In *Epigrams*, Dudek insists that “[e]pigrams are one-line poems. A lot of them together are like a long poem” (38). However, most of Dudek’s epigrams seem to fail as poems, or at least as the kind of poems he wants to produce: poems that balance reality and the imagination. Instead, many of his epigrams seem to be mere display-pieces of his wit and intellect, a fact which begins to explain—if not excuse—his detractors’ attempts to label him an “academic” or Ivory Tower poet.
- 17 Eighteen years later, Dudek would return once again to “the question of why poetry must turn away from the world, only to come back to it with a vision of a higher kind—to a world renewed” (“Ken Norris on the Twentieth Century” 35).
- 18 In “Poetry as a Way of Life,” as in his prefatory note to *Europe*, Dudek openly acknowledges his indebtedness to Plato (17). However, it is important to note that, despite Plato’s obvious influence on Dudek’s writing, Dudek was not drawn to the idea of perfection merely as an “escape from the demands of the material world into a realm of Platonic form” (*LD&RS* 41), since he celebrated both the reality of “the material world” and the imaginary “realm of Platonic form” throughout his poetic career.
- 19 In “Questions (Some Answers),” Dudek adds, “the only way that we can know Atlantis is through the fragments and the appearances that lie before us, one sample of which is a piece of art” (25).
- 20 J. Hillis Miller, alluding to this same passage from Nietzsche, provides a useful gloss on the importance of maintaining a line of demarcation between the subjective and the objective: “When everything exists only as reflected in the ego, then man has drunk up the sea. This includes God, who now becomes merely the highest object of man’s knowledge. God, once the creative sun, the power establishing the horizon where heaven and earth come together, becomes an object of thought like any other. When man drinks up the sea he also drinks up God, the creator of the sea” (3).
- 21 See also Dudek’s “Ideogram” 152 and “Questions (Some Answers)” 25.

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