

An “Architecture of Contradictions”: *Continuation* and the Late Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek

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While Louis Dudek celebrated and promoted Canadian poetry through teaching, public lectures, personal letters, active involvement in the publication of other poets' work, and the publication of an incessant fusillade of his own poems, epigrams, essays, and newspaper articles, few critics have commented at length on the significance of Dudek's late poetry. Although critics such as Brian Trehearne and Karis Shearer have begun to re-establish Dudek as a major, even canonical Canadian poet, Trehearne's discussion of Dudek's post-1970s poetry in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* does not include important collections such as *Zembla's Rocks* (1986) or *The Caged Tiger* (1997) in its purview; and Shearer's *All These Roads: The Poetry of Louis Dudek* does not contain any excerpts from *Atlantis* or from *Continuation*, an open-ended long poem that was published in instalments over a period of approximately thirty years.¹ In part, the latter omission may simply speak to the nature of the long poem or to the “violence” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 252) that editorial excisions would inflict on the body of what Dudek calls his “infinite” poem—a poem as replete with curmudgeonly outbursts and the banalities of everyday life as it is with epiphanic expressions of wide-eyed, childlike wonder. Of course, an isolated passage can only begin to illuminate the larger structure from which it has been excised, just as any study dedicated to a poet as prolific as Dudek can only begin to mine the depths of that poet's life, writings, or thought. This particular study will proceed, nevertheless, with the hope of “finding the gold in the dross” (Dudek, “The Breathless Adventure” 53), of continuing to unearth a poet whose words “challenge the reader by everywhere claiming the largest possible significance of poetry and the creative mind for human culture” (Hildebrand 88). More specifically, it will examine the significance of Dudek's late meta-poetry in relation to his final long poem, whose self-reflexive narration of the poet's struggle to negotiate the boundary between the real and the tran-

scendental, the visible and the invisible, and the known and the unknowable demonstrates a clear continuity between his early and late poetry.

In Dudek's "meta-poems" or poems about poems and the poetic process, the convergence of his poetry and poetics often reveals dramatic insights by highlighting the tensions and paradoxes that characterize much of his *oeuvre*. As I have argued elsewhere, an examination of Dudek's meta-poetry from the 1940s and 1950s foregrounds his struggles to bring his *First Statement* "poetics" and his own poetry into closer alignment, but it also provides readers with a rare foreshadowing of his later poetic achievements.² Similarly, an examination of meta-poetic fragments from his first three long poems, *Europe* (1954), *En México* (1958), and *Atlantis* (1967), or of his other meta-poems from the 1950s and 1960s, sheds light both on his present poetic concerns and on his future accomplishments as a "transcendental-realist" poet. In *Continuation I* (1981), *Continuation II* (1990), "Continuation III [Fragment]" (1997), "Bits and Pieces [A Recitation]" (1997), and "Sequence from 'Continuation III'" (2000)—which collectively comprise *Continuation*³—he explores the relationship between the categories of "the real" and the ideal, or reality and the imagination, with admirable results, and it is perhaps in these meta-poetic fragments that he is able to discuss this relationship in the most natural and effective manner. Jay Parini posits that, "[w]ith the help of poetry, we begin to fathom the relations between nature and mind, between matter and spirit" (41-42); in *Continuation*, Dudek's "infinite" poem, these relations are unmistakably clear, since the poem is meant as a metaphor for the mind's processes, thus serving as an interface between mind and matter, between objective and subjective realities, and between the real and the transcendental.

Translated onto the page, Dudek's mind becomes the "coordinating perceptive consciousness" (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 301) that his writing had lacked thus far, and it proves to be fully capable, like the mind of T.S. Eliot's ideal poet, of "constantly amalgamating disparate experience" and "forming new wholes" (273) out of the seemingly inchoate fragments of his poetic project. But it should be added that Dudek's "primary artistic purpose" was not, as Trehearne states, simply "the representation of consciousness" (*Montreal Forties* 283); to be more precise, Dudek was interested in representing the poet's representation of consciousness. In other words—and as an increasing number of meta-poetic fragments, standalone meta-poems, and essays from 1967 onwards attest—he concerned himself with the ways in which writing about the poetic process and the poet's mind, in particular, enabled him to meld the disparate and seemingly irrec-

oncilable elements of his earlier poetry. While Trehearne's masterful explication of these disparate styles and poetic forms in Dudek's early "apprenticeship decade" (*Montreal Forties* 243) contributes greatly to Dudek scholarship, his account of Dudek's "gradual withdrawal from an elaborate mimesis of the objective world" (283) fails to examine adequately the ways in which Dudek had already problematized straightforward definitions of or approaches to subjectivity, objectivity, and mimetic representation in his meta-poetry and poetics as early as 1941.⁴ Trehearne claims that "Dudek was a fundamentally subjective poet from the start" (304), and yet Trehearne's own comments on *Continuation*'s successful accommodation of "Imagist *and* personalist methods" (284; italics in original) rightly suggest that to talk either of Dudek's "fundamental" subjectivity or of his supposed "withdrawal from an elaborate mimesis of the objective world" is to tell only a part of the story of his late poetry and poetics. In *Continuation II* and *The Caged Tiger*—neither of which Trehearne includes in his discussion of *Continuation*—Dudek continues to acknowledge that reality consists of more than the "objective" or perceptible world,⁵ and he also continues to use that world as the "springboard" ("An Interview" 2) for his meditations on all that cannot be touched, tasted, smelled, seen, or heard.

To be sure, *Continuation* achieves an extraordinary—and perhaps surprising—synthesis of so-called subjective and objective realities. However, it does so not only by representing the mind, but, more specifically, by effectively mirroring the mind of the poet and the imaginative processes that inform the poem's own genesis. While *Continuation* is at times pedantic, caustic, and perhaps overly allusive, it skilfully distils the poet's life into a curious amalgam of "functional" prose-poetry, philosophical ruminations, Imagist lyrics, quotidian laundry lists, and Joycean epiphanies. Through his so-called transcendental-realist approach, Dudek accommodates the paradoxes that his earlier meta-poetry had introduced and that his late poetics—as evinced in publications such as *Ideas for Poetry* (1983), *Paradise: Essays on Myth, Art and Reality* (1992), and *Reality Games* (1998)—continued to address. Even as his physical body began to deteriorate, his remarkably cohesive body of writing reaffirmed poetry's ability to create order out of the "chaos" of reality, drawing ever closer to the paradisaical vision that had buoyed his imagination and given both meaning and purpose to his art.

Well before he published *Continuation I*, Dudek's efforts to balance the real and the ideal, the objective and the subjective, and various other ontological dichotomies led him to adopt a paradoxical transcendental-realist

poetics. Davey describes this transcendental-realist poetics by explaining how, in his later poetry, “Dudek has espoused an evolved modernism which seeks a transcendental vision expressed in temporal form and idiom and rooted in the here and now. [...] His modernism is humanist in its attachment to contemporary life but antihumanist in its belief in transcendent vision as the ultimate artistic goal” (162). Significantly, Davey’s explanation neatly summarizes the paradox at the heart of Dudek’s writing: on the one hand, Dudek is interested in “reality”—in tangible objects, observable phenomena, and the quotidian (Davey’s “contemporary life”)—which he refers to variously in his writing as “everyday life,” “the everyday,” “physicality reality,” and “objective reality”; on the other hand, Dudek is interested in the imagination, which poets wield in order to access “the unknown,” “the ideal,” or “the transcendental.” But Dudek also conflates “the imagination” with “the ideal,” for the poet is occasionally rewarded with glimpses of the ideal or “bits of Atlantis” (*Atlantis* 11), even if such “transcendent vision[s]” (Davey 162) can never be recreated perfectly on the page. Additionally, Dudek uses terms such as “order” and “chaos” in reference both to reality and to the imagination: sometimes the imagination pulls apart or distorts the order inherent “in man and in matter” (*En México* 71), sometimes that order is replicated successfully in the poem, and sometimes the “chaos” Dudek occasionally observes in nature is tamed by the poet and laid down in neat rows of verse. A transcendental-realist poetics therefore suggests a rather complex merger, a paradoxical and sometimes awkward union of two seemingly, but not actually—or at least always—antithetical categories. For Dudek, the transcendental is also part of the real or the everyday, even if it can only be experienced in glimpses. In this formulation (of which there are many variations in Dudek’s poetics), poetry serves as a means of approaching the transcendental by transforming reality through acts of the imagination.

But Dudek adopted this complex, paradoxical poetics long before he gave it a name. As Wynne Francis notes, Dudek “takes a serious view of life and poetry which embraces at once a shining idealism and a flat-footed realism” (7); Eva Seidner claims that he “is urged upward by his idea—the desire to know transcendent reality—but obliged to devote himself to things—the earthly realities available to experience. His poetry is an attempt to reach a viable human equilibrium” (23-24); and Dudek himself adds, more generally, that “the opposites are intricately related in my poetry” (“The Breathless Adventure” 43). His efforts to reconcile these opposites are especially evident in his meta-poetry, which, in *Atlantis*, her-

aces / (even if you fail)” (*Continuation II* 109). Although his parenthetical comment demonstrates an acute awareness of the possibilities of such a failure, his own brave—and repeated—attempts to construct an “architecture of contradictions” testify to his resolute belief in the value of “massive structures” and open forms in poetry. Steve Luxton applauds Dudek’s attempts by pointing out that “the best proof of Louis Dudek’s open-mindedness may have resided in his inconsistency” (104). Despite *Continuation*’s various flaws and supposed “inconsistencies,” Dudek’s open and “infinite” poem forms “a single body” in which manifestations of the real and the ideal effectively converge.

Dudek’s fascination with paradoxes is evident in his discussion of “eidolons,” which he defines in the 1991 preface to *Europe* as objects or events “distilled to their highest meaning” in “‘the image of an ideal conception’ (from the Greek *eidos*, shape or form)” (16).⁶ He adds further that eidolons “can be seen directly in the sea and in the winds, in the workings of nature” (16), just as conceptions of the ideal insinuate themselves into his poetic depictions of physical objects or locales, revealing themselves “in moments of illumination” as “the things we love” (*Atlantis* 11). As most Dudek scholars have dutifully observed—and as Dudek himself suggested on occasion—the sea seems to be his favourite muse and “eidolon” of choice, an incarnation of the ideal as well as a locus of historical, cultural, and scientific meaning. Nevertheless, his fascination with paradoxes leads him to reflect upon other eidolons and metaphors, such as the jungle in *En México* or the iceberg in *Atlantis*. Seidner explains, for example, that the jungle in *En México* “fulfills much the same function as the sea in *Europe*. Both are pastoral retreats which encourage meditation and both resolve conflicting forms of energy into a complex union” (27). It is important to note, however, that while such eidolons inspired some of Dudek’s best lyrical reflections as poetic subjects, they did not always provide him with the structural or coordinating metaphor he required in order to assimilate his everyday experiences into a balanced, personal, and convincing narrative. Even in *Europe*, a poem that celebrates the sea and its “immense imagination” (32), Dudek notes that it is a “destroyer of nations, of pantheons, / to whom Greece and Rome are only a row of white breakers” (32), and that it is “so easily bored” by, or “indifferent” to, human drama and suffering (33, 42). At the end of *Europe*, he admits that poets “are not really interested in the ocean, / which for all its variety / is an empty desolation” (143), and in *Zembla’s Rocks* (1986), his first major collection of lyric poems since *The Transparent Sea* (1956), he dismisses the sea and other

forms of water as being “incapable of a new creation” (“Snow Sequence” 47).

Because the sea is an impersonal, “empty” landscape that “is no place for cities” (*Europe* 137), it fails to offer Dudek the necessarily personal and subjective “coordinating perceptive consciousness” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 301) or poetic framework that he requires; as a result—and, more importantly—it fails as a meta-poetic metaphor through which he can embody and negotiate the tensions inherent in the poetic process itself. It is perhaps fitting, then, that in *Continuation II* he is resigned enough to remark, “I love the sea, as an image, / at a contemplative distance” (56). Similarly, the jungle serves as an excellent focal point for his poetic meditations, and he “finds in its paradoxes a subject for contemplation” (Davey 68), but the jungle is soon replaced by an iceberg and myriad other poetic subjects in *Atlantis*. Seidner contends that the iceberg, which “simultaneously extends far below and towers high above the sea’s surface,” is an effective image of balance between the real and the ideal or the visible and the invisible, not to mention “the most appropriate symbol for Atlantis” (33); as with the sea and the jungle, however, he maintains “a contemplative distance” between himself and the iceberg, an object which is equally impersonal and “incapable of a new creation.” In *Continuation*, Dudek abandons the sea, the jungle, and *Atlantis*’s iceberg, all of which fail to balance the objective and the subjective. Instead, he explores the mind not only as a personal “coordinating perceptive consciousness,” but as an all-encompassing, self-reflexive metaphor for the poetic processes by which such eidolons are formed and according to which the ideal becomes incarnate in the body of the poem.

Each of Dudek’s long poems contains personal or autobiographical elements. But in *Continuation*, Dudek paradoxically makes meta-poetry his primary focus by providing an approximation of “the structures of mentality” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 245). As Davey notes, Dudek attempts in his final long poem to make his ideas appear as if they are “actual unreflected-upon phenomena in his mind” (71), rather than carefully premeditated and polished statements—even though he was well aware that “there can be no poet’s voice, no mimesis of a man thinking, that can be the exact equivalent of a human voice, or an exact replica of someone thinking. We can only give an ever more convincing imitation of that kind of thing” (“Louis Dudek” 137; qtd. in Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 243). In an interview with Laurence Hutchman, Dudek thoughtfully describes the rationale of such an approach:

[LD:] What is poetry trying to do on the page? It's trying to represent the poet's thought. If that's what it's trying to do, then ultimately you have to create a fictitious form that is doing that. Not one that is spurious, but the actual thought with all its fragmentary wayward digressions. And yet, if you read *Continuation 1* and *2*, you find that it's really not digressing so very much. It's actually obsessively concerned with only one kind of subject.

LH: Essentially, the poem is concerned with process, getting closer to process.

LD: The process is the internal monologue, only that part of it in the mind, which deals with this question, which is poetry. But it's as if you were listening to me thinking as if it were recorded. (163)⁷

In his preface to *Continuation I*, Dudek announces his decision to embrace the mind of the poet as an ideal image or metaphor for exploring the poetic process as well as the tenuous balance between reality and the imagination, although in the poem itself he concedes that attempting to replicate the processes of thought in literature is not a new concept: "As one student put it, 'Yeats has said that his poems / reflect the ideas passing through his mind'" (42). Regardless, Dudek's new approach would help him to resolve a number of the formal issues for which his previous long poems had been critiqued. Perhaps most importantly, his use of poetic consciousness as an organizing principle helped him to unite his "fragmentary wayward digressions," or at least to provide some justification of their inclusion in his poems.

In a sense, the poet's mind is the perfect image of balance as the site of order in which the disparate fragments of perceptible reality continually, and inevitably, intersect the imagination. The poet successfully becomes "the link between transcendent and individual order" (Seidner 17) as fragments of reality are gathered "in the perfect O of the eye" to be refashioned by the subjective "I" of the poet (Dudek, "Theory of Art" 27). Dudek's focus not only on the mind, but on the process of "the mind making poems / hid in the texture of language" (*Continuation I* 11-12; qtd. in Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 252) enables him to accommodate paradoxes and achieve various kinds of balance without favouring too heavily the "centrifugal" forces that threaten to disrupt his poem's "narrative" or the "centripetal" forces that would stifle his imagination and superimpose traditional metrical patterns upon the absolute rhythms of his own verse.⁸ Michael Gnarowski sanctions Dudek's use of the poet's mind as an organizing principle by insisting that, "while the emotional and the intellectual

are in conflict in the mind of the poet, it is this very mind which resolves the conflict into a new harmony which becomes poetry.” While in *Atlantis* the reader encounters only an “implied” or “partial” representation of consciousness, as Davey has pointed out (71-72), in *Continuation I* Dudek’s mimetic representation of the poem as poetic process is made explicit, and the poem proclaims, “I am the imagination that creates / an image of itself” (21). Unlike the sea or other eidolons found in nature, the mind is capable of language; but it is the mind of the poet, in particular, in which the imagination and the ideal are transformed—through the medium of language—into poetry.

Whereas the poet’s presence or mediating role in *Europe*, *En México*, and *Atlantis* is often only implied, so that his observations are occasionally presented in a somewhat detached manner, the observations proceeding from the mind embodied in *Continuation* are necessarily personal, subjective, and emotional. Because the poem strives to present a complete picture of the poet’s mind, intellect and emotion co-exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship as reflections upon the phenomenal world keep the imagination firmly rooted in reality and as the imagination pushes against the boundaries of all that is known and reasonable; one cannot exist without the other. Despite the “academic” and “didactic” bent of poems such as *Europe* and *Atlantis*, Dudek was also keenly aware that “no poetry can be very good that is empty of feeling and emotional intensity” (“The Poetry of the City” 79). Antonio Ruiz Sánchez notes that “Dudek himself has promoted a poetry of reason that is intellectually demanding. Yet he has also warned us against the danger of lack of emotion in poetry” (70). In a poem such as *Continuation*, which purports to embrace mind as a constitutive and coordinating metaphor (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 250, 279), the presence of some emotion would seem inevitable. In 1972, Douglas Barbour wrote that “[w]hat one misses in so many of Dudek’s poems are the ‘passionate moments’ that would lift us out of ourselves. What we find, however, are qualities of meditative vision and intense ratiocination that are seldom to be found in any other Canadian poet” (23). But in *Continuation*, Dudek strikes an admirable balance between emotion and intellect by counterbalancing his “academic” or ratiocinative tendencies with what Trehearne calls “a subjectivist reliance on the shifting boundaries of selfhood” (*Montreal Forties* 240).

In a meta-poetic passage from “Sequence from ‘Continuation III,’” Dudek underscores the importance of emotion as he describes his mind’s careful search for order

amid the incomprehensible chaos,
 looking for bits and pieces
 of the amino acids
 out of which poems might come.

One moves with the feeling, from line to line,
 for poetry is feeling.

(77)

Even here, though, intellect and reason are both necessary counterparts to emotion, for poetry is also a means of making sense of “the incomprehensible chaos” of reality. Dudek might have argued that successful poetry offers a simulacrum of the poet’s mind and its processes, and is therefore highly personal, subjective, and even emotional; but he does distinguish between genuine emotion and “passion” or “middle-class emotion” (“Further Thoughts on the Long Poem” 93), which are neither tempered nor elevated by intelligent thought. In addition, his mention of “amino acids,” which might seem more appropriate in a scientific essay than in a poem, corresponds to his belief in the poetic potential of everyday subjects or objects. Sánchez alleges that *Continuation I*’s various fragments “hardly offer any sensuous appeal or personal drama, and are settled in an abstract and self-sufficient dimension in which everyday reality seems to have been superseded” (64). However, the poem, as a representation of the poet’s mind, can hardly be said to lack “personal drama,” regardless of how that term might be defined. *Continuation I* contains plenty of what might be referred to as “personal drama,” including a brief description of Dudek’s dreams (18) and an anecdote about how he “was so fascinated listening to Bartok / that [he] broke [his] egg in the garbage / while making an omelette” (37). In any case, Dudek acknowledges in his interview with Hutchman that human thought “jumps about a little differently in every head and in every age” (163), so that each person’s subjective or “everyday” reality is unique. In *Continuation*, in particular, he insists, “this is my voice, this is my true voice of poetry. It’s the personal voice that at the age of fifteen, or even earlier, I already had, and therefore I worked all my life to record on the page” (“The Breathless Adventure” 50). Dudek’s restatement of “this is my voice” as “this is my true voice of poetry” emphasizes the distinction between personal and poetic voice, although his subsequent claim also registers his feeling that the two are connected, that the development of his own poetic voice can be traced in relation to a “personal voice” that has remained relatively constant.

While Dudek's unique approach in *Continuation* is decidedly autobiographical, his focus on the mind as a point of intersection between external or objective reality and his own internal, subjective reality does not prevent the poem's "meaning and emotional impact" from being "transferred from the particulars of the author's life, for whom it serves as a generalization, an attempt at self-understanding, to the particulars of the reader's life" (*Ideas for Poetry* 24).⁹ Instead, Dudek repeatedly places meta-poetic *précis* of *Continuation*'s metaphorical premise in close proximity to fragments in which these and other paradoxes are explored. In the fourth section of *Continuation II*, for instance, he writes,

The real and the transcendental are one

The one laid on the other
As you said, 'A prolonged body orgasm for two'

All writing is a metaphor for someone talking[.]
(23)¹⁰

In the first fragment, Dudek affirms his transcendental-realist poetics while erasing difference between the two, supposedly incompatible, categories; in the second fragment, however, he recasts the first in more human terms, conflating an abstract ontological supposition with an image of supine lovers locked in an embrace. The coming together of the real and the transcendental is also recast as "[a] prolonged body orgasm for two," and in the third fragment, he again reminds his readers that a similar balance must be achieved, and such paradoxes must be continually resolved, in the mind of the poet. Elsewhere, he suggests that "the real life is the life of the mind" ("Louis Dudek" 130), but he judiciously qualifies this statement in *The First Person in Literature* (1967) by pointing out that neither the personal nor the universal alone "can really satisfy our conception of reality" (36-37). The poem mediates between the imaginative world within and the physical world without, and the poem-as-consciousness metaphor establishes the mind of the poet as an effective "interface"—to use Dudek's term¹¹—between the two forms of reality.

In fact, while *Continuation* is framed as a metaphor for the poet's mind and its processes, the whole poem functions as a kind of interface between reality and the imagination, the real and the ideal, the subjective and the objective, and particulars and universals. In "The Psychology of Literature" (1977), Dudek prepares readers for *Continuation I* by explaining that poetry "comes out of the tensions and dilemmas in the mind of the author,

and it is therefore a concrete symbolic representation of these tensions and dilemmas” (374-375). In his later lyric poems, too, he echoes *Continuation* as well as his earlier meta-poetry when he writes that “a poem tells us how a mind behaves like a mind” (“The Poem and the Crowd” 13). Like the mind, the poem is a site of various tensions and paradoxes in which reality and the imagination coalesce; nevertheless, as Dudek was well aware, the poem must also be a site of balance, a means of organizing and shaping one’s perceptions and experiences of reality into art. In “The Psychology of Literature,” he addresses both of these facts when he maintains that “[t]he right proportion between abstract ideas, or intentions, and the concrete presentation of realities is what we expect in any successful work” (373). Although the exact nature of this “right proportion” remains rather ambiguous, several critics have deemed Dudek’s autobiographical poetry “successful” for achieving a similar kind of balance: George Hildebrand observes, for example, that in Dudek’s later poetry, at least, “everywhere one finds the astute balance of logos, sounds, picture and voice—that concerned and intelligent human voice—true to the form demanded by the age, ‘disintegrated autobiography’ (*Paradise* 79)” (98).

Even in the pedestrian details of *Continuation*, Dudek’s “disintegrated autobiography,” the reader is given glimpses of the transcendental with the occasional “flash of lightning” in the midst of “[t]he actual, the factual” (*Continuation II* 22). According to Dudek, these epiphanies occur in the mind of the poet, which forms an interface between the real and transcendental, as a kind of revelatory experience. Nevertheless, his provisional definition of the term “epiphany” seems to refer both to the epiphany’s antecedent cause as well as to the epiphanic experience itself:

The fact is that the true epiphany is anywhere and everywhere—‘You can get it any day.’ It is not exclusively to be found in objects of beauty, or fine works of art, or people of exceptional talent. It is in the abundance and variety of faces and gestures, clothing and behaviour, constantly around us, in any public place or in common experience. It is there in the actual reality of things, when it all seems to be luminous...The epiphany is that moment of ecstasy when all reality, even in the midst of death and suffering, can suddenly appear miraculous. (*Notebooks: 1960-1994* 103)

Dudek locates the “luminous” or the transcendental in “all reality,” and he makes it clear that epiphanies, like interfaces, exist “anywhere and everywhere.” In the same way that eidolons bridge the gap between the real and the ideal, epiphanies link the phenomenal world to an unknown and ineffable world of transcendental order. Nevertheless, such eidolons or epiph-

anies are meaningless unless they are observed or experienced, because, as Maurice Beebe notes, “they take on meaning only when they are unified by the consciousness of the individual observer” (312)—and of course they can be shared with others only if that “individual observer” commits them to language.

In the poem “Atlantis” from *Zembla’s Rocks*, Dudek suggests that, without such epiphanies or glimpses of the transcendental,

life would be a vast train wreck,
with all its items of foolish baggage,
combs, nighties, make-up
scattered over the tracks—

and nothing in it.

(6-10)

Similarly, he believed that poetry without abstract thought was merely a “vast train wreck” or catalogue of empty, meaningless images. As he had observed in the introduction to *Poetry of Our Time*, “realism is obviously not an easy and natural way for poetry; the problem of poetry is to transform dross and despair and to raise them—or at least to contrast them—to something that the heart desires, the ideal that is equally true and necessary” (6). Like the eponymous protagonist of Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, Dudek also seemed to believe that epiphanies provided a welcome relief from commonplace reality, and “that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (211). The poet’s job, in particular, is to capture and attempt to recreate these epiphanic moments for the reader by making fragments of reality “immobile and imperishable / fixed and formed / in the dead matter of ink and paper” (“An Epiphany” 5-7). Dudek’s interest in this mysterious process and its connections to his own transcendental-realist poetics is evident in much of his later writing, including his discussions of Joyce and the epiphany in *The First Person in Literature* (55) and “In the Footsteps of Leopold Bloom” (94), as well as in poems such as “The Epiphanies” from *Cross-Section: Poems 1940-1980* (1980) or “Atlantis” and “An Epiphany” from *Zembla’s Rocks*, to name only a few.

In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja argues that an epiphany or “sudden manifestation” of the sort Joyce describes must be “out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (18). It follows, therefore, that a long poem such as

Continuation—which professes to imitate the ebb and flow of the poet’s mind—would naturally contain extraordinary manifestations as well as the ordinary moments, thoughts, or actions from which they arose. “It is simply not possible to sustain the intensity of poetry for long,” Parini writes, “just as in life one could never operate at full throttle on a day-to-day basis without burning out” (36). For this reason, a delicate balance or back-and-forth movement between the ordinary and the extraordinary, or between reality and the imagination, must be maintained constantly. As Dudek asserts, “[t]o concentrate only on the moments of vision is to become a trancelike enamored saint, a walking humourless sage, a pompous bore, an idiot of the absolute. The alternative is to be a fool or a clown amid the actual and the trivial” (*Notebooks: 1960-1994* 190). If Beja and Parini are correct, however, it would seem that Dudek’s long poems can be seen only in one of two ways: (1) as collections of individual poems, of which only a small number successfully and consistently “sustain the intensity of poetry,” or (2) as single poems that successfully re-enact the variously tedious and thrilling extremes of the human experience while failing to maintain throughout the high “pitch of expression” (Parini 36) that poetry supposedly requires. This bifurcation may explain, in part, the prevalence of what Terry Goldie calls “the ambivalent critic” in Dudek scholarship and in studies of Dudek’s long poems in particular (15). But because of *Continuation*’s unique formal and conceptual approach—which Dudek elucidates in his poetics, in his preface to *Continuation I*, and in the meta-poetic fragments of the poem itself—it demands to be assessed according to a different set of criteria.

On more than one occasion, Dudek explains that the collected fragments of his “infinite” poem are meant to be read, and judged, as parts of a cohesive whole: “you are now seeing the whole picture, I think, and you cannot talk about anything *but* the whole picture. You cannot talk about little pieces as if they stood by themselves here and there—you just can’t. It’s all one whole” (“The Breathless Adventure” 52). Even in 1966, Livesay had remarked of Dudek’s poetry that, “as in sculpture, the whole must be visible at a glance, but the detail must be exact, and highlighted where essential. [...] Quite frequently the poems seem to lack drama and dramatic tension, but they are a true rhythmic mirror of the poet’s intention” (80). Unlike his previous long poems, *Continuation* deliberately embraces an interface, and that interface’s concomitant processes, in which—and as a result of which—reflections upon reality and glimpses of some ideal reality or “Atlantis” are equally likely to occur. *Continuation*’s “failures”—its occasional tirades, vapidty, and esoteric allusions—are also,

paradoxically, tokens of its success with respect to the premises according to which it was written and according to which it repeatedly asks to be read. Furthermore, as Dudek wrote in *En México*, “[e]vil is in the weft of reality! / But the whole cloth is good, is good” (65). *Continuation* recreates the motion of the poet’s mind as it moves from personal details, from “the actual” or the everyday, to abstract revelations of an ideal, objective order—and then back again to reality, engaging in what Dudek playfully refers to as “[t]he perpetual coitus interruptus of poetry” (*Continuation II* 75). In *Continuation I*, he describes his constant search for epiphanic “patches of perfection” by borrowing a Yeatsian metaphor: he explains, “[s]ometimes I feel I’m really getting there / the words / little ladders” (*Continuation I* 37-38). Like Yeats, however, Dudek inevitably finds himself “where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (Yeats 39-40).

The same kind of tension between the real and the ideal that pervades *Continuation* is, according to Dudek, present in all good poetry: “good poetry is a mixture of the two,” he writes, “a mixture of the commonplace (the comic) and the redeeming idea of a possible perfection. The conflict between the two makes the poetry dance and sing” (*Notebooks: 1960-1994* 109). Paradoxically, he also argues that *Continuation*’s focus on the commonplace details of his own life allow him to deliver a kind of universal vision of “everyman’s life” (“The Breathless Adventure” 53), despite the fact that “everyman’s” mind does not contain polyglot displays of Latin, Polish, German, French, and Spanish, nor is the average mind acquainted with obscure references to “Kresge’s jewels” or “the eviscerated chickens of De Kooning” (*Continuation II* 55, 101). Even so, *Continuation* paints an authentic picture of the ideas and images that drift, and have drifted, through Dudek’s mind. Although Sánchez and other critics have commented on the potentially “repetitive and monotonous” (Sánchez 64) quality of such poetry, in *Zembla’s Rocks* Dudek anticipates such attacks when he writes that “[w]hat bores us in poetry is its untruthfulness. / Let poems be true, even if trivial, / like our dreary lives” (“Snow Sequence” 21-23).¹² Because he locates the transcendental in the reality of “our dreary lives,” Dudek displays a consistent interest in the “boring”—and even inane—details of his life for the deeper truths that they contain.

Continuation is a complex “architecture of contradictions” in which, as Trehearne notes, the centripetal principle of “continuation” and the centrifugal principle of “accumulation” (*Montreal Forties* 250) constantly threaten to disrupt the poem’s delicate balancing act between order and chaos. On one hand, the principle of continuation works to give an increas-

ingly accurate representation of the poet's mind and poetic processes in the body of the poem, as well as to create links between the "infinite" poem's diverse fragments. *Continuation I* opens in *medias res* with "[s]o let's continue" (11), inviting the reader, in Trehearne's words, "to contemplate projects or aesthetics of Dudek's past that are to be carried on here, as well as to consider the work to hand as premised somehow upon the whole idea of 'continuing'" (*Montreal Forties* 244). The lack of periods or other punctuation between the poem's fragments further reinforces the idea of continuation—as well as accumulation—by refusing to provide the same sense of formal closure as a poem whose various sections are clearly marked with full stops. On the other hand, the principle of accumulation seems to result in an indiscriminate recording of reality in unconnected clauses or poetic images, since "the true mimesis [is] / a poem without direction" (*Continuation I* 20), as Dudek announces early on in the first instalment of his "infinite" poem.

Because of this apparent lack of direction, and because of the poem's sense of cumulative energy and accretion, Trehearne seems justified in stating that *Continuation* is "the most highly fragmented and potentially incoherent of all Canadian long poems" (*Montreal Forties* 245);¹³ and yet, his remark that the principle of accumulation "quickly supersedes 'continuation' as the paradigm of poetic structure here" (*Montreal Forties* 244) does not account sufficiently for the meta-poetic passages through which Dudek establishes the principle of continuation as an equally integral part of a processual, paradoxical poetics, despite the doubts that such passages express about the poem's ability to contain and order reality.¹⁴ In one of the poem's many autobiographical asides, Dudek also frames his thoughts on the principle of accumulation in terms of the writing process specifically, not of the mind and thought processes in general: he admits, "I worry I write too much... / Like some motorists that go 'Pfirt! Pfirt-pfirt!' / (Can't hold it in)" (*Continuation I* 46). In other poems, too, Dudek endorses, or at least alludes to, this accumulative principle: in *Small Perfect Things* (1991), for example, he suggests that poetry "ought to be" like "a robin's nest, / full of skins, shells, mouths / and bits of worms" ("Poetry" 4, 1-3); and in *The Surface of Time* (2000), he describes the poem as "a little universe" that "wants to contain / everything" ("The Discovery" 4, 5-6).

Dudek is equally emphatic, though, about poetry's need to create some semblance of order out of reality, and in *Continuation* he posits the principle of continuation as a counterbalance to the chaos of accumulation. Trehearne acknowledges that "Dudek affirms constantly the boundary between a text of pure accumulation and a work of art" (*Montreal Forties*

261), and in a meta-poetic fragment from *Continuation I*, Dudek hints at the importance of balance between the two opposing principles in a pair of complementary rhetorical questions: “But to accumulate lines, is not that a pleasure? / To weave them into patterns, / is not that happiness?” (13; qtd. in Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 244). If poetry does not attempt to assimilate reality—which, according to Dudek, includes “everything observed and everything imagined” (“The Idea of Art” 31)—it risks failing in its depiction of human experience; but if poetry attempts to assimilate too much of reality, or, in the case of *Continuation*, if its representation of consciousness is too accurate, it risks failing as art.¹⁵ Goldie, for one, criticizes *Continuation I* for failing to provide the “continuation” it promises: “The lack of even a general focus makes it difficult to see the work as more than a series of sententious non sequiturs, but the Preface suggests that Dudek hopes the reader will be able to find more” (47). While Sánchez similarly maintains that the poem’s fragments “do not consolidate in any narrative or symbolic function” (63), *Continuation* makes no claims to be a “narrative” poem except to the extent that it embraces consciousness “as a principal of structural coherence” in order to provide balance, successfully “establishing singularity and *integritas*” without “imposing a reductive model of ‘unity’ on a long poem that very apparently wants to flout or at least go beyond established forms of modernist poetic unity” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 250). But again, *Continuation* is not just a poem about the mind’s processes, but about poetic consciousness and the poetic processes that engender them in writing. In other words, the poem’s narrative is a meta-narrative; above all else, perhaps, *Continuation* is a poem about poetry.

Although *Continuation*’s “constitutive metaphor” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 250) transforms the poem into a coherent whole, the poem’s individual fragments demonstrate Dudek’s continued interest in the poetic image as a fundamental means of engaging physical reality. In “The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry,” he discusses the etymology of “image” as well as that of “imagination,” and he concludes that “the literary tradition is correct in seeing imagery as standing at the heart of the poetic process. We may, in fact, say that the image—whatever it ultimately may be—is the molecular unit of poetry” (267).¹⁶ In his interview with Schrier, Dudek would add further that the long poem “is really made of very sharp, Imagistic, quintessential poetic elements,” with the result that “the short poem becomes the principle of the long poem in a paradoxical way” (43). Even so, he was also aware that these images or Imagistic units, as representations of physical reality, still need to be put together intelli-

gently by the poet, whose imagination uncovers the connections that exist between all things in order to create meaningful wholes.¹⁷ He declares that “the method of concrete presentation, once it has rejected the responsibility for coherent thinking, can only result in a poem without coherent meaning” (“The Theory of the Image” 273).¹⁸ In the poem “This Actual”—as in “Ars Poetica” almost fifty years earlier—Dudek writes about his ostensible preference for physical reality over ideas and the unknown, although he seems much more willing to admit that, paradoxically, reality is all the more significant because of the “great mystery” that it contains:

There is no idea as pleasant as this face.
No home in heaven as sure
as this world of snow.

If it is incomplete, imperfect,
that is a signature
of a higher possibility.

Accept the given
as an oracle of a great mystery—
the obscure, the unknown,
for its hidden message.

(1-10)

The poem’s exaltation of a “pleasant” face and of “this world of snow” is moderated by its implicit suggestion that reality has the potential to be “incomplete, imperfect”; moreover, “the given” is complemented, enlivened, and enriched by the ideal, since reality serves as a “signature / of a higher possibility,” or as “an oracle of a great mystery.” Instead of rejecting the intellect or the imagination, “This Actual” tacitly acknowledges its own value as part of an ongoing search for “the obscure, the unknown” in reflections upon everyday objects or images.

Although even Dudek’s earliest meta-poetry reveals a keen interest in the invisible, unknown, and ideal order that gives form and meaning to the phenomenal world, his later poetry is focused almost exclusively on the relationship between reality and the imagination and on the effects of this relationship on art. In “Continuation III [Fragment],” he remarks that, as a poet, his role is to “push into unknown infinite worlds” without severing his ties to reality: “I am an interloper,” he writes, “even now as I push my pencil in the dark / and write this poem” (76-77). In an essay entitled “The Idea of Art,” Dudek contends that this desire to “generate an expression

beyond the real and the actual” or to explore the unknown in art “is irrepressible in man, it was born with him at the dawn of time, and it will continue until the race expires, or man becomes something other” (29-30). He had no delusions about the imagination’s ability to attain a perfect knowledge of the self, or of the universe and its secrets; but his poetry and poetics make it abundantly clear that, although “the world within is just as much beyond us / as the world without has always been” (“Between Worlds” 1-2), it is nevertheless important to strive towards perfection and to refashion the real in terms of its ideal potential: he writes, “if you assume the ground of being is far greater than the actuality—that it is, but it is unimaginable—you heighten and ennoble the actual and the knowable, and you conceive an unimaginable perfection toward which you can strive” (“Questions [Some Answers]” 26). Dudek’s desire to “heighten and ennoble the actual and the knowable” and his emphasis on the role of reason in bringing about a new civilization seem to align him with a modern or secular form of humanism, but his fascination with the unknown or the ideal complicates his stance somewhat.

Bernhard Beutler contends that it is “perfectly appropriate to call [Dudek] a ‘humanist’ although he would have shunned such labels” (72). Because of Dudek’s interest in reason, justice, and the cause of civilization, Beutler is certainly not mistaken to identify him as a poet with humanist leanings. Once again, though, it is perhaps most appropriate to refer to Dudek as a transcendental-realist rather than a humanist, since only a transcendental-realist poetics explains his paradoxical, simultaneous interest in both the humanistic and the transcendental. Goldie writes that “Dudek himself presents the most clear working out of these conflicts in ‘The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry,’ in which he concludes, ‘A poem, of course, is partly about experience and existence as we know it. But its greatest power, if it is a true poem, derives from the faint hint or suggestion it gives of that other, unknown world of being’” (19). While Dudek’s emphasis on reason can also easily be interpreted as a kind of empiricist belief in the truths and primacy of the phenomenal world, he boldly proclaims that the imagination “forever outreaches the facts” (*Continuation I* 43) and that the imagination “has always been far more important than any exact or true perception of reality” (*Ideas for Poetry* 21)—although he mitigates such claims by observing that “the nature of imagination in its deeper levels is utterly unknown to us” (“The Theory of the Image” 267). Because the unknown can be understood only in terms of what is known, just as he claims that the “true invisible” or the ideal “can only be intuited in poetic images” (*Ideas for Poetry* 78), Dudek relies upon words such as

While Dudek would continue to celebrate the value of art and to explore the connections between reality and the imagination in the poems and essays that he published in the 1980s and 1990s, a number of meta-poetic fragments from texts such as *Continuation II* make it clear, as Blaser argues earlier and in a different context, that he “never confuses poetry with reality” (21). On paper, he dedicated his life to the cause of civilization not only by promoting the arts—including literature, music, film, and the visual arts—but by speaking out against Frye and other critics who, in Dudek’s opinion, believed literature to have little or no relation to “real life.” Although he is mindful of the differences between reality and art, and although he occasionally seems to champion “the real” or “the actual” at the expense of his own art, he affirms constantly the ways in which poetry creates order out of the chaos of reality:

If it were experience (Mr Leavis)
If plain living were the better poetry
 why make it of words

There is always the living

Why make the emotion out of words

Better the real thing

But the poem is not the real thing
is not made of the real
It is another thing

‘Variations and inflections of the naked self’

Like nature's doughnut machine
making the atoms

The key to identity and order[.]
(*Continuation II* 27-28)²⁰

Dudek draws a clear line of demarcation between art and reality by providing a comprehensive list of synonyms that establishes what the poem is not: it is not “experience,” “plain living,” “living,” “emotion,” “the real thing,” or “the real.” Instead, the poem is an enigma; it is “another thing,” a reflection “of the naked self,” and a new creation. Bolstered by the same kind of “confidence in the kinds of order implicit in the nature of things” of which he writes in the preface to *Continuation I* (7), Dudek asserts that the poem is ultimately “[t]he key to identity and order,” a means of offsetting the chaos of reality through an act of the imagination. In “Chaos,” a short poem published only one year after *Continuation II*, he would write again of his belief in art’s ability to make sense of a world teeming with people, plants, animals, and ideas: “In the collapse of all order, of all ‘values,’” he claims, the poet’s appropriate response is to pen “the first poem / with some order in it” (1-2, 4). Although Dudek was aware that not everyone would appreciate his poetic attempts to transform “this liquid life” into “a crystal / that preserves ‘The Forms of Water’” (*Continuation II* 76), he nevertheless invites his readers to join with him in the ongoing act of writing out one’s life in verse: “There are as many poems as there are days / Turn your days into poems, / witty and alive” (*Continuation II* 41).²¹ He believed that, by engaging continually in the dynamic process of writing, one could crystallize an epiphanic experience, arrest an emotion, or approach incrementally, through the intellect and the imagination, “that greater total existence of which we know only a small part” (“The Theory of the Image” 280-281).

In the first instalment of his “infinite” poem, Dudek identifies himself with all artists “who try but do not hope to achieve perfection,” and he notes that “[t]he ideal is only the touchstone, / it is not the goal” (*Continuation I* 32). Instead of claiming to present a complete and flawless picture of reality in a truly infinite poem, he readily admits in the preface of *Continuation I* that the “chances and opportunities” that have given shape to his poem “are by nature inexhaustible, as well as terminable” (7). In *Continuation II*, he reflects continuously on the past, and the poem’s lyric ending focuses on the epiphanies that have illuminated and enriched both his life and his art, rather than on the inevitable limits of his poetics:

But when it’s over, we know, don’t we
this life has been magical

that we were lifted once
 out of ourselves
writing those poems

and looking at people
 in distant places—
the magic of the voyage
 to other worlds[.]
 (114-115)

While Sánchez avers that “there is a formal closure in the final passages of this book” (68), the second instalment of Dudek’s “infinite” poem is ultimately concerned with “the magic of the voyage,” not with the poem’s—or the poet’s—apparent success in having achieved a kind of “closure.” As Dudek had remarked in *Continuation I*, “the poem is never finished / Death puts on the finishing touches” (30; qtd. in Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 252). Like *Atlantis*, *Continuation* documents an impossible journey towards infinity and objective truth, but in many respects the poem is successful—not because the poet reaches “Atlantis” or creates a truly “infinite” poem, but because his journey has enabled him to refine his poetics gradually and to address more fully the formal and thematic problems that his earlier poetry had introduced. Even in 1942, Dudek appears eager to embark on a protracted—and perhaps infinite—voyage towards the same kinds of ideals that he would later seek in his long poems when he observes that “truth is not a static thing but a search. It is a progress and a constant development of thought. The personality which has the quality to propel the process onward, to make truth, is the creative personality” (1941 *Diary* 41). Fifty-five years later, he would again accept the challenge of “the hunt, the chase / the trials and torment / of an infinite pursuit” as against “a settled truth” (“Bits and Pieces [A Recitation]” 104), relishing the opportunity simply to immerse himself in the poetic process.

In Dudek’s late poetry, he successfully reconciles his work to his transcendental-realist poetics, assimilates a tremendous range of possible materials into a surprisingly coherent “narrative,” and continues his meta-poetry’s earlier attempts to balance reality and the imagination. In *The Surface of Time*, his final collection of poems, he also carries on his mission of writing “functional” poetry by discussing a universal subject that was of particular interest to him at the time: human mortality and the prospect of death. In the 1980s, he had described himself as “a stumbling mortal / knocking about on feet of clay, / with a heart of amber” (“Love Words” 21-23), and he also began to write more frequently of “Death, interesting as a

postman, / ...walking down my street of days" ("The Retired Professor" 3-4). In *The Surface of Time* nearly every poem alludes to the process of aging or to the poet's inevitable death, but, with only a few morbid exceptions, the process is discussed primarily in positive terms. Tony Tremblay places Dudek's meditations upon the theme of death in the larger context of what he calls a "movement toward the luminous" ("Still Burning" 60), or what Dudek himself calls "a kind of groping through the semi-darkness toward luminosity" ("Ideogram" 140). Dudek's supposed "groping" results in collections of poetry such as *Continuation II* and *The Caged Tiger*, which Hildebrand calls "two of the strongest and most intelligent books published this decade," as well as *The Surface of Time*—all of which successfully "re-capitulate everything he has thought and understood" (97).

In *The Surface of Time*'s "Sequence from 'Continuation III,'" Dudek provides as much closure to *Continuation* as is possible, and the poem's final passage functions as a concise yet comprehensive record of the paradoxes with which the majority of his previous writings dealt:

Go out in the sun
 some Sunday morning
 when the clouds are melting
 over St. Joseph's,
 look down from Mount Royal
 to that other world.

It is far off and glorious—
 at the heart of creation—
 no tin-can world
 of savage modernity,
 but the everlasting
 world of a present
 where you stand
 in the pale light of allness.

Stand there and remember
 the paltriness of worldly claims,
 and the immensity
 that is always now.

(83-84)

In this single passage, Dudek accommodates an astonishing number of paradoxes: particulars such as "Sunday morning" or Montreal's St.

Joseph's Oratory melt into the universal "allness" of "that other world," which transcends both time and space; the transcendental is described as "far off and glorious" but also as being "at the heart of creation"; "allness" and "immensity" easily eclipse "the paltriness of worldly claims"; and eternity is located in the "always now." The passage's references to "Sunday," "clouds," and "St. Joseph's," in connection with its use of terms such as "glorious," "everlasting," and "allness," lend it an unmistakably religious or spiritual tone; as the transcendental reveals itself to Dudek, his sense of awe increases.²² Through its philosophical content, the passage also restores to poetry the "critical function" (Shearer x) which, in "Functional Poetry" (1959), Dudek claimed that it had lost to prose—and it does this without becoming prose itself.²³ Dudek artfully combines concrete images, wordplay, and metaphors such as "tin-can world," and his pun on "sun" and "Sunday" relates to the poem's larger themes by implicitly juxtaposing the light provided by the sun with the figurative "light" provided by one's imagination and intellect. Like the rest of *Continuation*, this passage also relies on what he calls an "essential music" ("A Note on Metrics" 17), not on a prescribed or artificially superimposed metrical pattern. The sibilance of "sun / some Sunday" mimics the hiss of scorching heat, and the spondee "[g]o out" adds emphasis to Dudek's imperative command for readers to immerse themselves in reality, which is reminiscent of his earlier call for the reader to "[g]o smell a genuine rose!" ("Ars Poetica" 12) and of his more revolutionary calls for poets to return to "the streets" ("Poets of Revolt" 5) or to "[w]alk out tomorrow, talk to the world and people" ("East of the City" 49). As Dudek draws *Continuation* to a provisional close for the final time, its coordinating metaphor disintegrates; Dudek addresses the reader directly, and the particulars of his mind give way to a series of universal maxims, allowing him to pass off his "infinite" poem to others before he dies.

In the end, Dudek is able to embrace the various paradoxes his poetics and earlier meta-poems introduce in a productive, meaningful manner, rather than allowing himself to be suspended between reality and his imagination in a state of paralysis. In poems such as *Continuation*, his fascination with the poetic process leads him to adopt a metaphor and meta-poetic mode through which he effectively accommodates the paradoxes that energize and inform his entire body of work. By adopting the poet's mind as an "interface" between the chaos of reality and an ideal, transcendental order, Dudek successfully begins to transform *Continuation* into what perhaps all poets desire their crowning achievement to be: a microcosmic record of all

that was, is, and will be; a condensed and compelling archive of all that one has ever known or written; a life in verse.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Killam Foundation at Dalhousie University for their generous support of my research and writing. I would also like to thank my referees for their insightful and constructive commentary, as well as Kevin Flynn, to whom I owe my interest in Dudek (and without whose encouragement this essay would not exist).

- 1 In *Montreal Forties*, Trehearne refers to Dudek's long poem as "*Continuations*" (243), as do Sánchez (71) and Shearer (xvii). In *Canadian Poetry*, however, Trehearne adopts the singular form of the title, which I have used here in order to be consistent with Dudek's own usage (see, e.g., *The Surface of Time* ["Preface" 11]).
- 2 See "Towards the 'Infinite Poem': Reality and the Imagination in the 1950s and 1960s Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek." In a sense, the current paper serves as a kind of sequel to this earlier study, providing one possible narrative of Dudek's post-*Europe* development while remaining invested primarily in Dudek's attempts to strike a balance between "the necessarily provisional categories of 'reality' and 'the imagination' in [his] poetry and poetics" (Jensen 45).
- 3 The first instalment of what would later be *Continuation I* appeared in Dudek's *Collected Poetry* (1971), and the second appeared in *Tamarack Review* in 1976. "Fragment of Continuum," which was first published in *Cross-Section: Poems 1940-1980* (1980), was republished in *Continuation II* with minor revisions. The first four sections of *Continuation III* were published as "Continuation III [Fragment]" in *The Caged Tiger* (1997) along with part five, "Bits and Pieces [A Recitation]." The sixth and final section of *Continuation III*, "Sequence from 'Continuation III,'" was published in *The Surface of Time* (2000).
- 4 See, e.g., Jensen 7-8. While Trehearne traces Dudek's development as far back as 1943, I would suggest—and my earlier paper explicitly argues—that narratives of Dudek's development and later poetic achievements should also consider his earliest writings, such as those contained in his *1941 Diary*.
- 5 In *Continuation II*, for example, Dudek, writing about "the real," emphasizes "that a great deal of it was, a certain amount is, / and much is still to be" (46). Similarly, he challenges his readers, remarking, "O yes, there is only one world, / but do you see all of it? / And do you think that what you see / is all there is?" (110); and on the same page, he asks, "[w]hy should all there is / be contained in what we see?" (110).
- 6 Elsewhere, Dudek explains that eidolons "are 'images of the ideal,' symbols of the higher thing, [. . .] a conscious allusion to Whitman, as well as to Socrates and the Greeks" ("In a Nutshell" 114).
- 7 Shortly after *Continuation I* was published, Dudek wrote in *Ideas for Poetry* that "[p]oetry has to do with invented or actual states of consciousness. By the selection and arrangement of words we create an image of a state of mind which we consider interesting, precious, or useful. It is the state of consciousness which is the chief value in poetry, and like all art it is a fiction" (9). See also Dudek's "The Breathless Adventure" 47 for similar remarks.
- 8 I rely here on Trehearne's adaptation of A. M. Klein's references to "centrifugal" and "centripetal" poetry, which factor into Trehearne's discussion of *Continuation I* (*Mon-*

trear Forties 250), although Mikhail Bakhtin's reflections on centrifugal and centripetal forces in culture and language are equally pertinent (see, e.g., Morson and Emerson 30).

- 9 See also Dudek's interview with Schrier, in which he states, "A poem is not a solipsistic experience. It's got to communicate, and in the revising, that is what you try to do—make it speak for others also" (50).
- 10 In *Continuation I*, Dudek foreshadows this later claim in an isolated fragment that reads, "The poem, a man talking to himself" (25).
- 11 In "Interface: Reality and Literature" (1978), Dudek contends that an "interface" consists of "points where elements of the actual world enter directly as such into the context of the 'imaginary world'" (238).
- 12 Commenting further on Dudek's belief in "the criterion of authenticity" as a standard by which poetry must be judged, Seidner indirectly validates the poet's approach in *Continuation* by positing that an "honest and lucid" depiction of one's experiences will necessarily "bring about the union of the personal and universal spheres" (21).
- 13 Indeed, Trehearne's characterization of *Continuation* in terms of what he calls a "forties period style" (33) hinges on the poem's attempts to contain the whole of reality within its covers: he maintains that "the 'infinite poem' can have only one main goal, in Ernest Buckler's phrase again, 'to get it all in'" (*Montreal Forties* 261).
- 14 In a similar vein, Trehearne writes of the accumulative nature of Dudek's "emphasis on a haphazard gathering up of fragments" (*Montreal Forties* 244). He does so, however, immediately after quoting a meta-poetic passage from *Continuation I* in which Dudek asserts the writing process as a counterbalance to mere "accumulation"—that is, as an intentional and organizing act that transforms "vast accumulations" into poetry that is "not without reason" (qtd. in Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 244). On the same page, Trehearne also quotes another meta-poetic passage in which Dudek explicitly describes how continuation is an inevitable part of the process by which he accumulates materials "not without reason" in order "[t]o weave them into patterns" (244).
- 15 Dudek comments on the distinction between true art and a mere accumulation of ideas, images, or observations in multiple texts, including "Où sont les jeunes?" (143), "A Brief Note on Poetry" (283), and the autobiographical "Louis Dudek" (140-141).
- 16 In "The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry," Dudek also discusses the etymology of "imagination" in relation to "image," and he notes that "[t]he very word *imagination* is formed on the same Latin root: *imaginari*, to picture to one's self. Imagination is clearly the power of forming images" (266).
- 17 In "A Defence of Poetry," Percy Bysshe Shelley remarks how, through metaphorical language, poets are able to mark the "unapprehended relations of things" (676); similarly, in *Why Poetry Matters*, Parini notes that poets such as Frost and Stevens believed that metaphor mediated the relationship between reality and the imagination (67).
- 18 Cf. "There must be abstract ideas and there must be ideas in things; it's the proportion between them that remains the real issue for poetry" (Dudek, "The Psychology of Literature" 372).
- 19 In the preface to the 1991 edition of *Europe*, Dudek similarly explains that he uses the concept of Atlantis in his poetry to represent a "never-realized ideal world, to which all reality must somehow be referred" (18).
- 20 This passage was published first in "Fragment of Continuum" (*Cross-Section* 90-93), but was published again in *Continuation II* with a few minor omissions and revisions.
- 21 In *Continuation I*, Dudek seemed to anticipate the same lack of positive critical feedback that he had received after the publication of *Atlantis*: for instance, he asks himself—or he imagines someone else asking—the following question: "Who cares, does anybody care / about your precious mind and what goes on in it?" (13).
- 22 This passage is reminiscent of earlier passages in *Continuation* in which Dudek invokes "God" or the "Lord" in a number of brief "prayers" and religious discussions. In *Continuation II*, for example, Dudek prays, "Lord, let me have wings / in my late years,

when baldness comes / Open my skull to heaven like a mirror" (13). As Dudek explains elsewhere, however, such passages are demonstrative of his belief in the transcendental—as part of his transcendental-realist poetics—rather than of his adherence to any particular religion or faith group. "The residue of religion in my work," says Dudek, "appears as a modified transcendentalism, and the positivist side of my thought appears as concreteness and realism. The effort to reconcile the two is at the core of all my poetry" (qtd. in Francis 6).

- 23 For more on Dudek's "Functional Poetry" as it relates to his cultural work, see Shearer's excellent introduction to *All These Roads: The Poetry of Louis Dudek* as well as Aileen Collins's impassioned defence of Dudek in her introduction to *In Defence of Art*.

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