POET AS PHILOSOPHER

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LOUIS DUDEK, along with Irving Layton and Raymond Souster, was one of the prime movers of modern Canadian poetry in the 1940's. As members of John Sutherland's *First Statement* group, these writers brought a new excitement to the poetry of the time, a brash vulgarity which revealed their proletarian adventurousness. Layton and Souster are today very popular with the poetry reading public. Dudek has failed to attract a similarly wide readership, and during the poetry explosion of the past decade, has managed to publish only one book (*Atlantis*, 1967). To most younger readers and poets he is known less for his poetry than his élitist statements about recent Canadian poets, like those which fill his *Canadian Literature* 41 article on Poetry in English during the Sixties. The recent publication of his *Collected Poetry*[1] is thus a most welcome event, for it provides the needed opportunity to read and assess the whole body of his poetry.

For a reader not very familiar with Dudek's work, the overwhelming fact about *Collected Poetry* is the way in which it demonstrates how much of a piece his poetry is. Dorothy Livesay[2] has said that Dudek had not yet found his voice in the early poems of *Unit of Five* (1944), *East of the City* (1946), and *Cerberus* (1952). This is true, of course, as true as such a statement can be about any young, apprentice artist. What struck me, however, as I read through this book, was the way in which certain approaches to subject matter, certain ways of articulating what can only be called arguments, form a part of his poetic *content* right from the start. Although he doesn't find the proper form for his "statement" right away, he is always striving for an intellectually tough poetry. Even in the early poems, where his control of "voice" is weak, the philosophic tone that marks all his serious poetry is present.

ONE OF DUDEK'S CONTINUING INTERESTS has been the *process* of thought. His poems often provide paradigms of that process, or icons of the results of that process. They move from a formal, traditional metric towards a prose-like, argumentative, "open" metric, which often resolves (in the longer poems, and especially *Atlantis*), into a near-prose of short maxims which remind me of La Rochefoucauld. Dorothy Livesay, writing before the appearance of *Atlantis*, noted this tendency towards prose statement but concluded that his "prose content, like his prose syntax, is a kind of disguise."[3] But such an early poem as "On Poetry", for example, is full of abstractions and presents a definite argument; it is not merely a disguise of those things:

> The flame of a man's imagination should be organic with his body,
> coincident with an act, like an igniting spark.
> But mostly, he fails in the act
> and expels his bad humour in visions. A man curses,
> seeing the thing he hates in pain, cursed by his vision:
> this is poetry, action unrealized:
> what we want most we imagine most, like self-abusing boys.

Later in this poem, Dudek suggests Shakespeare "should have been all his monarchs", an argument closely analogous to Borges' in "Everything and Nothing". The point of this comparison is that Borges, too, is presenting a subtle, philosophical, aesthetic argument, and he does so in prose: the medium considered most proper for that kind of *intellectual* subtlety.

"On Poetry" is interesting partly because it is an early poem in which Dudek essays the open form. But he does not stick with it, and many of the poems of the next few years (I think they are from the forties and early fifties) are in traditional forms, like the quatrains of "Flower Bulbs". This very interesting poem, which is a love poem of sorts, is yet very reminiscent of metaphysical poetry in the way it uses an image from nature as a basis for a closely argued and witty proposition. The argument is just as important as the lovely image which informs it, if not more so.

The poems about the city, usually New York, from this period, relate to the social-consciousness poetry of the thirties, but once again reveal the philosophical interest with which Dudek approaches all his subjects. They are socio-political meditations, and would be entirely suitable to a book of essays by a left-wing historian. "Line and Form" is one of the most interesting of the pre-*Europe* poems, because it is so obviously an essay in the aesthetics of universal creation.

Aesthetics is one of the major areas of philosophy that interest Dudek, and the concerns of this poem will reappear throughout all his later poetry.

> Eternal forms.
> The single power, working alone
> rounds out a parabola
> that flies into the infinite;
> but the deflected particle
> out of that line, will fetch a frisk
> of sixes and eights
> before it vanishes:
> an ocean arrested
> by sudden solid
> ripples out in the sand.
>
> So this world of forms, having no scope for eternity,
> is created
> in the limitation of what would be complete and perfect,
> achieving virtue only
> by the justice of its compromises.

This is only the final third of the poem, but that last sentence, with its opening "So", the "Thus" or "Therefore" of this particular demonstration, perfectly illustrates the argumentative method Dudek is using.

Even in such an obviously philosophical poem, however, Dudek makes use of what is an obsessive image in his work, and that is the great Sea itself. Here the line, "an ocean arrested" is both a major link in his argument and a reference to the vast chaos of possibilities that the sea has always represented to man. It is a natural reference for Dudek to make, for he has always been possessed by the sea; it appears in all his work, from the early tone poem, "The Sea", through *Europe* and *En Mexico*, to *Atlantis* and beyond. Although his poetry tends to be intellectual and lacking in obvious emotionalism, the sea always provokes emotional outbursts from him. It is his true muse.

DUDEK WROTE A LOT OF SHORT POEMS in the Fifties, including the formal and philosophical love poems collected under the heading "Pure Science" and the various humorous poems and parodies that were published in *Laughing Stocks* (1958). Personally, I find few of Dudek's "humorous poems" funny, and I don't think his sense of humour is amenable to poetry. Too often

such poems telegraph their punchline and utterly fail to provide the "surprise" of a good joke. Arthur Koestler says that the "unexpected" climax to a good joke must be "both unexpected and perfectly logical — but of a logic not usually applied to this type of situation."[4] It is precisely this "logical unexpectedness" which is missing in Dudek's poems. His parodies of Canadian poets, however, especially those of A. J. M. Smith, A. M. Klein, and Irving Layton, are often dead on, and reveal an acute *critical* wit.

The Fifties are crucial years in Dudek's career, however, because during them he wrote the two long poems, *Europe* (1955), and *En Mexico* (1958). It was in these poems that he came into full command of his voice, and it was there that he truly became a philosophical poet. *Europe* is an extended personal essay, a travelogue by a philosopher with a gifted and far-ranging eye. The branches of philosophy which engage Dudek's mind — philosophy of history, politics, aesthetics (and art-history), and ethics — all appear in *Europe* and in *En Mexico*. All will reappear in *Atlantis*.

I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT to note that Dudek is a student of modern poetry and a follower of Ezra Pound. Unlike many of the younger practitioners of the popular poetry of primitivism he lashed out against in "Poetry in English", he is a highly educated student of poetic tradition, especially of twentieth-century modernism. To him the following point has the force of a prime-directive:

> Integrity, we should remember, has been the prime virtue of the great twentieth-century poets. The entire modern movement was a retreat from the idols of the marketplace to the private household gods of art and knowledge.[5]

I think there can be little doubt that Dudek has practiced that kind of integrity and faithfully served those gods. He is the only one of the three *Cerberus* poets even to attempt a truly long poem. He has walked the paths of his art alone. If he has not been completely successful in his poetic quest, surely one of the reasons is that he had to do it all by himself: he had no other poets in Canada to share his particular problems and efforts.

Europe is an oddly likeable piece of writing. Although I am not at all sure that it fully succeeds as poetry, I find myself completely won over by the man behind the work. This says a great deal for the poem, for I began the *Collected Poetry*

with a definite bias against him, based mostly on my disagreement with many of his criticisms of his fellow poets in "Poetry in English". In *Europe* the poet shows such a genuinely and engagingly interesting mind, uses that mind to deal with such interesting materials, and expresses his opinions with such a refreshing forthrightness, I found it impossible to dislike him. In this he is like Ruskin, another traveller in Europe, to whom he refers occasionally in the poem. As he continues to speak on various subjects during the poem's progress he wins our respect because his intellectual engagement with them is so clear and intelligent. He is also like Ruskin in creating a series of little personal essays, even if they appear to be parts of a poem. Although they contain many richly poetic images and metaphors, the very stuff of poetry, to bolster their various arguments, they are basically essays, as, for example, the lesson in art-history that is No. 50:

> The Greeks were fine, but French classicism
> using the Greek for its own purpose,
> smooth hypocrisy, conceit, & the display
> of that corruption, *le bon goût*,
> — the worst taste in manners or in art
> the world has ever seen —
> spoiled two centuries of European art,
> opened the arts to worse corruption still —
> the monstrous sugar teeth
> of 'money' and 'amusement': here you see
> in Chartres
> art is no entertainment, it does not amuse;
> money paid for it, but it paid for
> something that the sculptor really preferred;
> pride was satisfied, but it was pride
> in objects, the full scale
> of human performance — they worked for this, gladly.
> The wedge of ignorance entered Europe
> with a blind idolatry
> of Greece and Rome; you can see it
> as a straight line from the 15th century down,
> "art for art," copying the Greek forms,
> shape without sense, imitating
> imitations, dramatic motion, sensuality
> for the boudoir, decorativeness
> to make room for gold, for size.
> After this, there was no honesty
> whether in art or trade, to fight off the incisor

of the pure profiteer, the hog
with his snout in the mire, his belly in shit.
The Gothic tower had fallen,
the last craftsman
dropped his hammer; it has come
to all of us, poets, advertisers,
dance hall singers and all,
we make our pilgrimage to Chartres, without praying beads;
look at the Virgin helpless, and up to the great dome
where the light seems to rise and fall.

This is witty, and provocative of thought, but, despite its appearance, and the rhythmic control of certain parts, it would strike many readers as very different, at bottom, from what they know as poetry. This reaction may merely reveal their ignorance of certain aspects of modern poetry, as Dudek suggests, but the periodic sentences and the syntax of those grand periods, are surely qualities normally associated with scintillating prose. This is also true of the discussion of the true meaning of Greece in No. 70, and the marvellously allusive politico-historical commentary on the nature of evil in No. 78. I kept reading them for their prose values, despite their appearance on the page. It would appear that Dudek has carried Pound's dictum, "that poetry should be written at least as well as prose"[6] to its limit. Pound also said, "The prose artist has shown the triumph of his intellect and one knows that such triumph is not without its sufferings by the way, but by the verses one is brought upon the passionate moment. This moment has brought with it nothing that violates the prose simplicities. The intellect has not found it, but the intellect has been moved."[7] What 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.

In *En Mexico*, Dudek continues to work with the open form, the long discursive, essay-like "canto", and the philosophical voice he had developed in *Europe*. *En Mexico* displays a new mastery of rhythm, however, in many of its parts. In 1958, Dudek wrote a fascinating article for his magazine, *Delta*, entitled, "A Note on Metrics". It is an obvious development from the early essays by Pound on the subject, and reveals the depth of Dudek's concern with metrics. The Note is his major statement on the uselessness of traditional forms for the contemporary poet. Although he continued to use those forms in the fifties, he has not used them in any of his published work since 1958. It appears that the Note was the

final nail in the coffin of traditional verse, as far as Dudek was concerned, for in it he insists that if you write in one of the formal metres, especially iambic, you "thus neglect the essential music, which is that of your sounds, *as they fit the content of your poetry*, and you produce for the most part an empty rattle of sounds."[8] *En Mexico*, and all the poems following it, are written in the light of that statement. Dudek's rhythmic achievements in this poem have been pointed out by Dorothy Livesay in *Canadian Literature* 30. His achievements in *content* are every bit as important. *En Mexico* is a more successful whole than *Europe* because of Dudek's new mastery of rhythm, but the centre of interest in the poem remains the philosophizing that the trip to Mexico engenders.

No. 3 of *En Mexico* is a commentary on religion, full of the short maxims that I find so fascinating in his poems:

> Optimism is foolish. Life can only be
> tragic, no matter what its success . . .
>
> Knowledge is neither necessary nor possible
> to justify the turning
> of that huge design.

He achieves here a kind of juxtaposition of epigrams which is far more powerful than mere statement could be. The mixture of the maxims and the images of life in Mexico creates a powerful commentary on contemporary civilization, just as Dudek wants it to. Because the whole poem provides such a resonant context for them, these short aphoristic statements have a power and interest that is entirely lacking in Irving Layton's "Aphs" from *The Whole Bloody Bird*. There is a decorum to Dudek's epigrams which the boring and boorish statements of Layton lack, and that decorum is provided by the unity of tone of the whole poem. It is also interesting to see, as in so many philosophical works, the statement, again justified by the whole context, that "Knowledge is neither necessary nor possible".

No. 4 is a description of life in the people, of "America, the Continent, dancing". Here Dudek displays another technique, that of "borrowing" the voice of another poet to make a point. In a sequence climaxing with the lines:

> *now!* say the strings in singing consummation
> we have touched the life-giving current,
> making a relay!
> Take it from us, you swarming futures!
> Sing, as we now sing!

he uses the voice of Whitman to further the argument of his poem. These "vocal borrowings" serve the same purpose as quotations would in a literary or philosophical discussion. Finally, he reaches the philosophical climax of the poem, flowing in the way of logical discourse out of what came before:

> Form is the visible part of being.
> We know the logic of its adaptations,
> a signature of individuality, of integrity,
> the end of perfect resolution —
> but not the inner stir.
>
> Rest. Rest in that great affair.

The ending is a fitting one for such a poem, and it attains a powerful philosophical intensity. In many ways, *En Mexico* stands as Dudek's most successful poem: an organic, unified whole.

"Lac En Coeur", another fairly long poem of the time, is a quiet meditation full of questions about life. It is a lovely small personal poem, an essay from "the mind and heart of love" of the natural world around the poet. But it is a philosophical meditation, sharing, as do parts of *Atlantis*, the concerns of such poems as Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" and the later *Cantos*, but without their "passionate intensity" (which may be a good thing, but "passionate intensity" in "the best" is not the same as it is in "the worst").

DUDEK, THE POET, seemed to drop out of sight from 1958 until 1967 (although excerpts from *Atlantis* began appearing in *Yes* as early as 1965), the very years when Layton and others were reaping their first major popular successes. *Atlantis* (1967) showed that he had not retired from the field, but had engaged his muse in a lengthy and difficult struggle.

Atlantis is not the unqualified success that *En Mexico* was. It is Dudek's longest piece of sustained writing, gathering all his themes and ideas into a single massive argument. Yet, in the final analysis, it fails because he is unable to incorporate everything he wants in quite the manner he wants. Had he paid attention to W. C. Williams's *Paterson*, rather than just the *Cantos*, he might have learned an invaluable lesson: that if you do use actual prose, it can mix with your own poetry without much trouble, so long as you juxtapose with care, but 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.

The tone of *Atlantis*, from the very beginning, is that discursive tone that presents the personal essayist, once again *en voyage*, once again looking around and noting with great precision and wit what he sees, and then reflecting upon it. The casualness of the speech ("Speaking of coral, the white whirling wave/ behind the ship/is like a Japanese painting of a wave") does not mask, but subtly underlines the wide range of allusions and ideas the speaker commands. This tone, this manner of speaking, allows for a great breadth of material, but not for everything. In fact, it is a curious paradox of this poem that the sections of "pure poetry" are both the most powerful, and the most out-of-place, parts of it. Near the end of The Prologue, Dudek catches hold of the idea of Atlantis itself, and he is moved to write some lovely and evocative lines:

> Here nothing is real, only a few
> actions, or words,
> bits of Atlantis, are real . . .
>
> One day at sea, at sunset,
> when the long rays struck the water,
> it seemed to me the whole sea was living
> under the surface motion;
>
> the waves moved like a great cosmic animal
> twisting and turning its muscular body
> under the grey glistening skin.

Yet even here, in the midst of such writing, he feels the need to inject some moral reflections on the very next page. These lines contain the "voice" of the rest of the poem, the Ruskinian figure reflecting upon Nature ("it seemed to me"), but they soar above the prosaic philosophizing that is that figure's usual mode of address.

In the body of the poem, Dudek continues to reflect upon things; he discusses town planning, moral philosophy, aesthetic history, the concept of pity, the reasons for art, and much else. He even goes in for a very esoteric aquarium list, which he then transforms, through some very precise description, into a lyrical celebration of the many varieties of ocean-going life-forms. All these discussions are fascinating as discussions; some of them fall terribly flat as poetry. One need only compare his reflections on the nature of evil with Auden's "Musée de Beaux Arts", for example, to see this. The concentration of the Auden poem gives it a

force that is entirely lacking in Dudek's rather abstruse, though very interesting, discussion. Or take his comment,

> This voyage is almost over. I think
> how everything will go on here
> as before. As it must. And yet I know
> that somehow I am a part of it, in it
> for good — or I do not live at all.

and compare it with the sardonic and yet loving appreciation of the same fact in George Johnston's concentrated epics, "In It" and "O, Earth Turn!". This statement should be a "passionate moment" and yet it isn't, quite.

The Epilogue to *Atlantis* almost saves the whole poem. This is a poetry like that of the late *Cantos*: pristine, the language pure and magnificent as it apotheosizes "Atlantis", that region of the human/divine soul for which Dudek has quested through all his poems. The first two pages of the Epilogue shine with the very "Light" they celebrate, but the effort of such an ecstatic flight proves too great, and the poet returns to earth, except for a few leaps of a line or two, for the remaining five pages of the poem. Still, it is beautiful, it is a passionate moment, however brief, and yet it does seem somehow out of place in this particular poem. It is not that Dudek is wrong in his approach to poetry; he is following a major modern tradition, one whose value has been proven time and again. It is merely that in *this* poem he has failed to weld all his various elements into a harmonious sculpture of words.

Since the publication of *Atlantis*, Dudek has written a number of short "Jeux & Divertissements". They are all poems with a point to make, many of them about our sexual lives. "Erotic Tropes", for example, perhaps the best of the lot, is full of a wit reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's prose. Dudek obviously does not consider these poems important. The groups of longer poems, collected in the section, "Reflections After Atlantis" are important to him, I think.

Basically, they continue the approach worked out in *Europe*, *En Mexico*, and *Atlantis*. "The Demolitions", an elegy for destroyed architecture, is essentially a lyrical, autobiographical essay. "Canada: Interim Report" is a bitter, politically oriented, polemic. There are some rather neat juxtapositions, but the tone is too angry, the bitterness too diffuse; it all sounds like a variant on the poems Souster and Layton had in *The New Romans*, and that kind of poetry is something Dudek has always, until this poem, had the good sense to ignore. The philosopher ranting can provide little pleasure or stimulation, for he is using language in a

manner, for him, meretricious. "A Circle Tour of the Rockies" is a mistake from start to finish, but not for the same reasons as "Canada: Interim Report", and it is a mistake of major interest, which also differentiates it from that poem. It is another very good essay, and one could imagine Ruskin, or even Dr. Johnson, writing it in prose. But to even *think* that such language would work in a poem about mountains betrays the kind of one-sidedness Dudek's preoccupations have led him to. There is absolutely no sense of a response to the overwhelming (*emotionally* overwhelming!) *grandeur* of the Rockies.

> Clear it to the peneplane of un-being,
> an empty consciousness, space-time, a blank page,
> and something begins again. God knows
> maybe just a new area of suffering. Of experience.

Is this all he can say? These words are refractory in this context, they are not the right material for a poem. Compare Ralph Gustafson's "Rocky Mountain Poems" in *Ixion's Wheel*: by a variety of strategies they immerse the reader with the poet in the many experiences the mountains offer the sensitive observer. Where Dudek's poem discusses all kinds of things *around* the basic and absolute fact of the mountains, refusing to confront them in their being, almost as if they were unnecessary to the discussion, Gustafson takes us right into the experience of them with all the "visceral drive, committed passion"[9] Dudek has accused him of lacking. If the mountains were unnecessary, they should never have been invoked at all. The point is that Dudek failed to recognize the limitations of his poetic; he did not understand that it was not meant to deal with the kind of grandeur (the Awesomeness that the great Romantics felt in the presence of mountains) the Rocky Mountains are. His refusal to use image or metaphor to any extent in the poem is the measure of that failure of recognition.

The last poem in the book is the beginning of what may become another very long poem called "Continuation I". It is another attempt to use "only a language/to contain the essentials that matter, in all the flux of illusion" to construct an artifact of words. Once again, a man of rich philosophic experiences is reflecting upon all the things which interest him. I hope he will keep it going.

THERE IS A FASCINATING ASIDE on the poet in "Continuations I": "O the poet that incredible madman", says Dudek. "He is possessed with possibility." These are strong words, yet they have authority. Dudek has always,

like his mentors, especially Ezra Pound, been "possessed with possibility"; that is why his philosophizing has been so rewarding, to him, and to his readers. But he is no "incredible madman"; all too plainly the opposite. I see him as a product of the Enlightenment who has been forced to cope with certain aspects of humanity (the "Evil" of the twentieth century which he has written so many pages about) the eighteenth century did not have to face. But he seems somewhat out of place, really, in a world which is still living in the Romantic Age, for Romanticism has touched him only slightly, if at all. Perhaps that is an overstatement, but I think it helps to define him and his art. Pound was just such a madman, but Dudek pleases us most when he is rational, meditative, the philosopher to be listened to and argued with, but not possessed by.

We are overburdened these days with "possessed" and "incredible" madmen in poetry. But there is no one else to speak to us in the reasonable, honourable, voice of intellectual integrity that is Louis Dudek's. Too many younger writers have been ignorant of his work, and the possibilities for poetry that it represents.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Montreal: Delta, Canada, 1971. $5.00/$4.00.
[2] "The Sculpture of Poetry," *Canadian Literature* 30, Autumn 1966, pp. 26-35.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 30.
[4] *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books, 1969), pp. 33-4.
[5] "Poetry in English," *Canadian Literature* 41, Spring 1969, p. 114.
[6] "The Prose Tradition in Verse," *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 373.
[7] "The Serious Artist," *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[8] "A Note on Metrics," *Delta* 5, October 1958, p. 17.
[9] *Op. cit.*, p. 120.