

THE SCULPTURE OF POETRY

On Louis Dudek

Dorothy Livesay

NOW THAT THE FEUDS have died down it would no longer be appropriate for A. J. M. Smith to cry: "*Layton shall tingle in Canadian air / And echo answer Dudek everywhere.*" Omitting those polemics and parodies, salutary as they have been in stirring up the *potage canadien*, what is interesting today is a concern for the styles and techniques which have made each poet so differently "an intelligent, imaginative man."¹

Of the two it is Louis Dudek who has been most articulate about the poetic art and its relation to the spoken word. Recently he has written his own *Art Poétique*, in a poem called "Functional Poetry: a Proposal". Here he envisages poetry as "having the shape of clouds." And it is this sculptural, visual approach that aligns him with the early Imagist movement of the century and with its re-development under the aegis of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound.

But I go back always to the first three moderns
Lawrence, Aldington, Eliot (then), Pound (1915)
Lee Masters (yes! Sandburg too)
for the beginning of what we need: straight language
and relevance to our real concerns

.

i.e. some form of improvised rhythmized speech

This "manifesto" establishes Dudek as the contemporary Canadian poet most consciously concerned with shape, form and sound: the origins of rhythm. He feels that the widening scope of prose rhythm has set up an impasse for poetry which he would like to break through:

The problem, it seems to me, is simply
over the centuries

the loss of ground to prose
in the subject matter of poetry,

and the loss of freshness in method
as the residue of "poetic" substance
became fossilized in decadent metre and form
—and the coral reefs.

We want a renewal of substance, of technique
that goes to the origin and source:

His aim apparently is to invade the fortress where prose has taken hold and return it to the rightful owner, poetry:

to write it as they write prose
Lots of it, on all subjects that call
for communication

.
as poetry of exposition and discourse

Before he reached this eighteenth century critical position Dudek as man and poet went through many phases. His earliest poetry in *East of the City* is lyrical and imagist: concerned not with sound effects so much as with pictures in rhythmic arrangement. Already the clouds and the sea he is so fond of observing represent his objective correlative for the world of poetry: a world where recurrent rhythms subject to wind and weather, subject to sun and moon, are expressed through language:

The moon floated down
a river between two clouds
melted the stone banks and they
were gone.

In many of these short lyrical pieces the poet's "eye" is on the object but in the background is a subjective, emotional "I" responding to these objects. So we get a "double take" as in a poem called "Revolving Door";

Late, when near that waterwheel
the treaded doorway where
no man is, but momentary water
while outside the sun points
on hands, foreheads; and all fluid
sharp down spires and trees
skits the sun's lightning,
drawn an turned, I fall
loud down the sounding caves

of the watery wheel, out, and
the light blinds me,
cells burst in trillion and spill
my mind of its surprise and fear.

Dudek's search for "straight language and relevance" is certainly to be found in these early poems. Nonetheless he is not wholly free from the metrical bonds of the past. In the above lines, for instance, there is a movement outward, a loosening of the line:

while outside the sun points
on hands, foreheads,

but he quickly lapses into iambic metre in lines such as

drawn and turned, I fall

or

my mind of its surprise and fear

Also, when social criticism dominates a poem, as in "East of the City" itself, the rhythm is reminiscent of English poets of the thirties: Auden or Day Lewis:

So that someday we may go, and see the sun rise
Outside this world of rubble. Drive out
Through factories, and brick walls of buildings
To the east, to the fields sweet with clover
Where over the heads of trees, in a cup of the sky,
Laughing, the earth-warmer comes, making day warm for us.

There is a tentative groping here for an individual rhythm based on strong stresses, but the iambic or anapaestic metre takes hold firmly in the last two lines quoted. Dudek has not yet found his own voice. In a later collection, *Cerberus*, produced jointly with Layton and Souster, he is beginning to explore theories:

The way to freedom and order in the future will be through art and poetry. . . . Language is the great saving first poem, always being written; all others are made of it. We must prize it, protect it against the destroyers and perverters of our time. . . . Anyone who understands this is capable of assuming a responsibility, of becoming a citizen of the world. Anyone who, reads a good poem with understanding — a poem that bites into the evil — or retrieves a truth — creates an order in himself.

But as yet the poems do not match the theory. Stanzas like "Re-visiting Montreal" remind one of Whitman; poems on Greek themes recall the voice of Pound (as in

“For E.P.”, “For Christ’s sake, you didn’t invent sunlight”). Occasionally there are intimations that Dudek is experimenting with strong stress metre, caesura, and formal parallelism, as in “A Drunk on the Sidewalk”;

He has a history older than England
 and no doubt has a future, this Falstaff
 He rolled on the floor of a mead-hall
 tottered through Piers’ dreamland

Yet the poem ends, quite out of keeping, with a reminiscence of Sweeney:

now let us scatter, having seen
 Christ escorted to his limousine.

These overtones of the thirties, ironic in intent, abound in the *Cerberus* collection:

you’ll walk home to roses
 leaning on your trellis, open the lock of love
 with liberty in your pocket, Life under your arm

It is unkindness to Auden! But one brief poem seems to achieve authenticity, “Alba”;

As you lay on the bed pale with
 the humid breath of kisses
 still moist on your cheek, openly,
 like a leaf your water-lily limbs,
 the river, past the bed, to the sea
 below, to the city, dragged down our two
 selves, slowly, down, to the sound of
 cataracts in the street below, in
 humming early morning light.

Every line here carries three strong stresses, balanced by carefully controlled junctures:

As you lay/on the bed/pale with/
 the humid/breath/of kisses

Moreover the poet has emphasized his rhythms by a happy use of vowel and consonant repetition: *cheek, leaf; water-lily limbs; below, slowly; and down, sound*. Because the lines have simplicity, grace and movement, they are a preview of Dudek’s later style.

EVEN TWENTY YEARS AGO, then, Dudek had made his stand known. He was opposed to “musicality” à la Keats. He wanted poetry to reveal itself naked, without the props and embellishments of sound. His best poetry is unified, of a piece, and not discursive as is prose. It is “articulated music” in the sense that Suzanne Langer uses this term. Speaking of her views, a recent critic finds that “a poem is like a piece of music in that it articulates itself; and in thus establishing internal relations, establishes also relations of feeling”. For Mrs. Langer the central fact of poetry as of music is “the creation of syntax, of meaningful arrangements.” Similarly, in one of his own metaphors about poetry Dudek writes:

yes, yes, imagination, if you like
 but to steer the log boat, keep it level
 plumb with the real thing
 after all. . . .²

As soon as a poet makes “meaningful arrangements” his main concern he approaches the attitude of the essayist towards his material. Dudek’s recent collections, *Europe* and *En Mexico* are examples of this tendency. Again, however, this approach is justified by Suzanne Langer:

. . . all poetry is a creation of illusory events, even when it looks like a statement of opinions philosophical or political or æsthetic. The occurrence of a thought is an event in a thinker’s personal history, and has as distinct a qualitative character as an adventure, a sight, or a human contact; it is not a proposition, but the entertainment of one, which necessarily involves vital tensions, feelings, the imminence of other thoughts, and the echoes of past thinking. Poetic reflections, therefore, are not essentially trains of logical reasoning, though they may incorporate fragments, at least, of discursive argument. Essentially they create the *semblance* of reasoning . . .³

The key phrase in this excerpt is that poetry “is not a proposition, but an entertainment of one”. Thus Dudek’s apparent philosophizing, his didacticism, are in reality a consideration of possibilities. His prose content, like his prose syntax, is a kind of disguise. What then transmutes it into poetry? We can only come to some agreement on this if we examine examples. An early poem from *East of the City* called “Basement Workers” is relevant:

Let me give you reminders to keep the image clear,
 of roofs too near overhead,
 of air sharp with particles, like gravel in sand,

boxes, and tables with torn fringes of metal,
blocked doors, stacks

of coffined cribs ready for crouching mummies,
paper to wrap around our pale corpses:
so, these dispersed, hang in the air between floor and ceiling,
where we, darker than miners between the hours
filter the dust in our collapsing lungs —
and think how noon light up there is rocking buildings,
and winds fling skirts about, cooling ankles.

It would be a mistake to assume that this simple, straight-forward use of languages, which never falls into obscurantism or ellipsis and which is always syntactically complete, is necessarily the language of prose. Dudek's poems are rhythmic wholes. One might be able to say what he is saying here, in a few paragraphs or even sentences; but one would then become aware of his stricter limitations. Order and control are the keynotes to this poet's work: as in sculpture, the whole must be visible at a glance, but the detail must be exact, and highlighted where essential. Moreover, none of Dudek's poems can be accused of being too short or too long (for even his "epic" poems are a series of short apprehensions). Quite frequently the poems seem to lack drama and dramatic tension, but they are a true rhythmic mirror of the poet's intention. No word or phrase can be taken away; none can be added. There is, further, only the sparest use of adjectives; instead there is strong reliance on nouns, verbs, clauses.

In the poem cited above the poet begins with a consideration:

Let me give you reminders

He goes on to fortify this line with a parallel list of "objects", much in the manner of Whitman; six lines whose initial words are all prepositions or objects of prepositions:

of roofs
of air
boxes
blocked doors
of coffined cribs
paper

After this listing, which dispenses with articles and uses modifiers that are nearly all verbals (as *blocked*; *coffined*; *crouching*) he pulls the argument back into

perspective with his linking words: *so*; *where*; and *think how*. By such syntactical means is the rhythm established.

Further proof that Dudek is more concerned with musical articulation than with onomatopoeia — music as “cry” — is to be found in the texture of his vocabulary. Although he maintains a harmony of vowel sounds there is apparently no effort towards alliteration, assonance or half-rhymes (except in a few of the latest lyrics in *En Mexico*). It is as if the poet had an instinct for the right sounds without consciously working to make them so. A short poem from *Europe* will illustrate:

The sea loves to move
but it is in no hurry
flops over languidly like an easy animal
waiting for storms
never still

The first two lines play only on the vowel sounds /ij/, /a/ and /u/, /ow/. This pattern continues into *flops over* and then, as the sea turns over, a new vowel sound is heard: the /æ/ in *languidly* and *animal*. It is then followed through with reverberations and echoes of all the earlier vowels. The last line is weak and fading; so are its vowels. Note also that the poem comes to rest on the liquid sound of *still* which is an echo of *animal*. In addition to these inner harmonics, and supporting them, this brief poem takes its shape from the syntactic arrangement, the line lengths and the balance of primary, tertiary and weak stresses. In additional metrics the first line could be said to have as its pivot an ionic (*loves*) flanked by an iambic stress pattern. This pattern is reversed in line two: iambs are the pivot (*it ís/in nó*) with a trochee at the end (*húrry*). The rhythmic reversal exactly parallels the movement of the image: upward *to the séa loves to móve* and downward *to wáiting for stórms*. The total effect is not one of onomatopoeia, but a kinaesthetic identification with the object seen and its flow. One identifies with sculpture in much the same way; and the metaphor for sculpture is “frozen music”!

On a larger scale “Poem 19”, also from *Europe*, uses the same techniques. It is a pleasure to hear the poet reading this poem aloud because his grave voice emphasizes the necessity for giving every word its due stress and duration, and every juncture and end-line its due timing (besides internal junctures, juncture at the end of each line is an essential part of Dudek’s patterning). In “Poem 19” the frame has been widened to embrace the whole of the sea and the sky. The

small movements of the waves are seen as lives tossing against the fixed eternal laws of “gravity” (or death) and “just measure”:

The commotion of these waves
 however strong
 cannot disturb
 compass line of the horizon
 nor the plumbline of gravity

It is not practicable to “scan” these lines into prosodic feet; they must be scanned as syntactic units with strong stresses between junctures. To aid the rhythmic pattern there is, in addition, a nice parallelism in the imagery between the “compass line” and the “plumbline”. Later in the poem parallelism creates the same effect again: “the dead scattered on the stage in the fifth act” who show nature restored to order and just measure”.

Although this poem has several ancestors, from Nashe’s

Brightness falls from the air
 Queens have died young and fair

to Yeats’ *Lapis Lazuli*,

All perform their tragic play
 that’s Ophelia, that, Cordelia —
 Yet they
 Do not break up their lines to weep . . .

nonetheless Dudek masters the past and creates something new as he concludes:

The horizon is perfect,
 and nothing can be stricter
 than gravity; in relation to these
 the stage is rocked and tossed,
 kings fall with their crowns, poets sink with their laurels.

It is a most satisfying poem because the rhythm is so completely wedded to the thought. Although “objective” — the poet simply names objects, elements and avoids figurative language as assiduously as he avoids musicality — the poem cannot escape from net of metaphor: symbols take the place of similes. It is, indeed, a characteristic symbolist poem.

IF THE EVIDENCE already presented is not sufficient to prove that Dudek's rhythms are based on syntax, let us look at "Poem 46" from *En Mexico*. Here he describes

a magnanimous mother with children
 dancing towards the shore, in a nightdress
 her opulent ankles tapering
 down to her toes
 (behind her the children shrieking)
 poised, supremely graceful, gigantic —
 America, the continent, dancing.

The rhythmic effect is achieved by the use of verbals — "ing" words: dancing, tapering, shrieking, dancing — all of them trochaic in pattern and therefore in falling rhythm. In between these metrical (and syntactic) phrases are upward-rising anapaestic rhythms:

towards, the shore
 in a nightdress
 to her toes

Throughout there is a judicious use of what used to be called the "truncated" foot, but which may be more simply regarded as a strong stress with juncture on each side, placed initially in the line:

Poised . . .
 down . . .

This type of stressed unit is balanced by its opposite, the "outrider", where we find a series of unstressed syllables:

America the

The total impression is one of weight, balanced on light feet — Williams' "variable foot", perhaps; but certainly not a "foot" in the traditional metric sense. It is a phrasal foot, or unit, marked off by junctures; isochronic in its effect. The strong dancing movement arises from the syntactic incompleteness of the phrasal structures: they are all in a state of *being*, and make no use of the finite verb. The adjectives too, always sparsely used by Dudek, seem to be chosen because of their rhythmic pattern, as "magnanimous mother." Out of this unity of rhythm and syntax evolves the conceptual image of a "continent dancing." Symbolism once more!

“Poem 69” is a final example of the welding of rhythm (or “beat”) with syntax and concept:

Someday we shall come again to the poem
 as mysterious as these trees, of various texture
 leaves, bark, fruit
 (the razor teeth so neatly arranged
 so clean the weathered rent)

This is the art of formal repetition
 and the art of singular form — lines, lines
 like a wave-worn stone

This poem falls into three parts: first, three lines of three strong stresses each in a falling rhythm; followed by two lines of rising (or iambic) rhythm, also triple stresses; and ending with three lines which are dramatically broken up, divided so that line 7 pulls a spondee unto itself, from line 8. This pattern maintains the nine strong stresses but gives added “rhetorical” juncture and emphasis. Much care is evident here in the choice of sound harmonies. Consider for instance the line:

the razor teeth so neatly arranged

where the vowel repetition is made more forceful by the intervening fricative consonants.

Sound harmonies then, together with a beautifully balanced phrasal pattern, enhance the *conceptual* conclusion which is the theme of all Louis Dudek’s poetry: that harmony and order in nature towards which mankind strives. All his recent poetry of the fifties and sixties, with the exception of the satirical pieces of *Laughing Stalks*, repeats the same theme:

Beauty is ordered in nature
 as the wind and sea
 shape each other for pleasure; or the just
 know, who learn of happiness
 from the report of their own actions.

As a sculptor takes a lump of clay and fashions it into varying shapes he retains the essential element that makes it a work of art: rhythm. So in his cool, grave, lucent poems does Louis Dudek create and magnify his world.

¹ Louis Dudek: “Functional Poetry,” *Delta*, July 1959.

² *The Transparent Sea*. 1956.

³ *Feeling and Form*. p. 219