27

"Resurrection in Adonis' Garden": The Life-Long Poems of Louis Dudek and bpNichol

by Medrie Purdham

> the i dies finally
> merges with the land's scape
> scope increases
> the folded page
> writes its way into
> the longed for
> beginning
> (bpNichol, *Martyrology 4*)

In a recent review of Ken Belford's *Decompositions* (2010), poet rob mclennan names Canadian poets who have charged themselves with writing a "poem as long as a life": a continually-composed poem that cannot be completed but for the poet's death. mclennan constellates Belford, Gerry Gilbert, Robin Blaser, bpNichol and Robert Kroetsch as poets engaged in similar, life-long projects (mclennan, "Ken Belford"). Elsewhere, in an introduction to a never-published long poem anthology, he considers many others, including Fred Wah, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Dennis Cooley and Lynn Crosbie ("Penultimate"). mclennan rightly puzzles over the question of whether continual compositions could be considered to have an "open" or a "closed" form: Kroetsch, for example, finished and republished his *Field Notes* as *Completed Field Notes* but Dennis Cooley, in mclennan's view, may be continually contributing to a "single, open-ended and unfinishable project" ("Penultimate"). What is the difference, mclennan asks, between a long poem that is simply unfinished and a long poem that is "open" by design? Is it possible to make a meaningful distinction between open and closed forms at all within the aesthetics of the life-long poem ("Penultimate")?

The life-long poems of bpNichol and Louis Dudek, each coloured by the poet's immediate awareness of his own mortality, illuminate the validity of mclennan's question by foregrounding, movingly, the paradox of "d[ying] finally" in and through poetry (Nichol *Martyrology* 4). They suggest that the openness of the poem is, if anything, a matter of continual clo-

sure. Dudek's *Continuation* series (1981-2000) and Nichol's *The Martyrology* (1967-1990) separately reveal that the structure of the overtly "continual" poem is, in fact, less continual than it is anticlimactic, demanding that the speaker make many intermittent gestures of synthesizing the representing self *as if* before the immediate prospect of death. The life-long poem's author, dying *continually*, makes totalizing and closural gestures that, for all that, do not close the poem. In its genuine pathology, the life-long poem also intensifies the poem's lyricism, at least in the sense that it projects, in the poet's death, a definite moment of identification between the biographical poet and the various iterative personae whose proliferation had been instrumental to keeping the poem "open" over the many years of its composition. The life-long poem (in which the speaker "dies" repeatedly as a projection of the poet's biographical end) reveals just how implicitly form-seeking, self-seeking, and closure-seeking an open poem may actually be.

Dudek and Nichol, despite their significant shared intention to write "a history of [the] present moment" (*Martyrology* 3) in an ongoing poem, are a literary odd couple who, despite a mutual respect for one another, might well have disagreed about the degree to which their projects were related. Dudek conceived his *Continuation* from the very outset as an open, polyvalent commentary on his own thought-process and resolved that the poem should not "stop" in his lifetime (Blaser 7). His *Continuation* spans several books, encompassing *Continuation I* (1981) and *Continuation II* (1990), as well as the fragments of "Continuation III" that are included in two volumes, *The Caged Tiger* (1997) and *The Surface of Time* (2000). Nichol, on the other hand, was already well immersed in his eclectic devotional poem to the "saints" of language (feeling as he did that words perform the saintly function of mediating between the self and the not-self: the other or the absolute) when he realized that his poem was destined to be as continual and spontaneous as his own desire for speech and connection: hence, a "life-long poem" (qtd. in Multineddu 9). Nichol's untimely death at the age of forty-four brought *The Martyrology* to a close at the end of the ninth volume of a projected twelve.

Their shared endeavour to *continue* in and through poetry notwithstanding, there have been few critical attempts to bring Dudek and Nichol into relationship, especially in light of their differing poetic styles and philosophies of writing. Nonetheless, Robin Blaser brands them "partners in poetic vitality" (8). Brian Trehearne identifies their common project of writing until death and observes that Dudek's promise of "continual" aleatory composition may be yet more random than Nichol's in *The Martyrol-*

ogy, insofar as Nichol's title at least betrays a "coordinating symbolism" (245). Frank Davey writes compellingly, in a 2009 tribute to bpNichol, about conversations he had had with Nichol in 1980 about Dudek's "infinite poem in progress," *Continuation*, and about Dudek's daring accommodation of chance, surprise and even poetic failure in his continual poetics ("Thanked" 56). Davey's discussion of the way Nichol structures the Book 6 Book of Hours around the notion of successive deaths might well be compared to the ironically anticlimactic structure of Dudek's own "continuations" in poetry (62); indeed, Davey's piece might be taken as the invitation to this paper. In his recent biography of Nichol, *aka bpNichol: a preliminary biography,* Davey deepens the connection between Dudek and Nichol in suggesting that Nichol had shown Davey a draft of *Martyrology 4* inscribed with a note asserting that "…the beginning [of *Martyrology* 4] grows out of a conversation back in time re Dudek" (*aka bpNichol* 177). For Davey, there are striking commonalities between the aesthetics of the two poets: Nichol's adoption of the poetic form of the Japanese travel diary or *utanikki* recalls the way in which Dudek's prior long poems (*Europe, Atlantis* and *En México*) use travel as a structural principle and the way in which *Atlantis,* in particular, takes the sea as its guiding metaphor. Davey comments as well on Nichol's admiration of Dudek's manifesto for "functional poetry," where the elder poet articulates a poetics reclaiming for poetry the "discursive" qualities of prose (*aka bpNichol* 179).

Dudek's and Nichol's works are often *indirectly* compared as part of a larger set of generalizations about the Canadian long poem. At the Long-Liners Conference of 1981, Ann Munton names both Dudek and Nichol in her survey of "poetic diarists" (96). Eli Mandel notes that Nichol, Dudek, and other practitioners of the long poem, especially in the (life-) long poem's premise of exhaustiveness, have something of an epic intention. Mandel considers that the traditional epic has been split ("since but not because of Milton" [14]) into separate "narrative" and "encyclopedic" strains (14). He argues that when a work appears randomly inclusive or even "encyclopedic" in its concerns (as the life-long poem, a poem of the living mind, invariably is), it implicitly asks to be reconciled with its lost narrative strain; or, rather, it searches for a *new* "structural principle to replace the heroic narrative of choice and action" (14). Perhaps the encounter with death in Dudek's and Nichol's poetry *is* this quasi-narrative principle, insofar as it charts a progress towards an end and provides the speaker with an impetus for choice. Death turns the poets' experience of lyric solitude into a *heroic* solitude demanding a kind of totalization of the

self, a confrontation with "the end." To meet this intractable challenge, the poet tends to resurrect himself repeatedly in poetry, to rehearse his death repeatedly as the poem's obsessive limit. Although such poems are often playfully regenerative, they are altogether oriented towards that moment when "we are our selves / finally" ("Chain 1," *Martyrology 5*).

Nichol on Dudek/ Dudek on Nichol

Nichol's and Dudek's comments on one another's work reveal a richly conflicting sense of whether or not they are engaged in a common project. Nichol, for his part, acknowledges Dudek by quoting Dudek's *Atlantis* in chain 5 of Book 5 of *The Martyrology*):

> I want to learn how we can take life seriously,
> without afflatus, without rhetoric;
> to see something like a natural ritual,
> maybe an epic mode unrevealed,
> in the everyday round of affairs
> (Dudek, qtd. in Nichol *Martyrology 5*)

Nichol also co-edited with Frank Davey a 1981 edition of *Open Letter* devoted to the poetry and criticism of Louis Dudek, in which Nichol asks Dudek about the above passage. Dudek replies that it is the poet's task to elucidate the *entire* realm of the real as a form of praise for creation. A missing detail would betray a lack of awareness of the "whole," a spiritual as well as a formal failure. Dudek remarks to Nichol, "It's a form of the ancient question: 'If God exists, why is there evil in the world?' If you have a total intuition of that kind, why do the details fail you?" ("Questions" 10). Dudek shares with Nichol, then, a sense of the spiritual *necessity* of a representation that does not stop, a representation that takes everything in. And Nichol, like Dudek, associates the poetic list with the religious litany; each is a paradoxically unexclusive "taking of priorities" that Nichol considers "the true and proper province of poetry and prayer" (*Martyrology* 3).

Nichol's sense of poetic commonality with Dudek was so strong that he wished for Dudek to contribute directly to the never completed tenth volume of *The Martyrology.* Frank Davey and Roy Miki separately recall that, although Nichol died before the creation of *Martyrology 10*, he conceived his future work as a collaborative "bard project" (Miki, "TI'ME" 109).The other contributors to *Martyrology 10*, as Nichol had envisioned it, would be other Canadian poets authoring "continuing" poems: Dudek, Robert Kroetsch (*Field Notes*) and Fred Wah (*The Music at the Heart of Thinking*) (Davey, "Remembering" 115). These poets all conceived of

"writing as notation for thinking and feeling" (Wah, "Introduction to *Music*" 33) and, in this, they shared a poetic kinship that fascinated Nichol.

Stylistic differences, however, overwhelmed Dudek's sense of commonality with Nichol. In the first place, the poetic authorities Nichol invokes in *The Martyrology* are invariably figures with whom Dudek has an intellectual quarrel. Gertrude Stein—*The Martyrology*'s St. Ein—inspires Nichol's playful, elliptical, concrete use of language. But to Dudek,"Gertrude Stein made experiments that went completely askew; they went into complete nonsense, I think, and became irritating failures in what was, at the beginning, a very real search for the essential rhythm that belongs to one's individuality and being […] [T]hat's what I find in Nichol and [bill] bissett, I don't find aesthetic success […]" (qtd. in Darling 6). Dudek eschews any use of language that "stress[es] the surface properties of art" (Davey, "Functional" 28), whereas Nichol's *Martyrology* uses language concretely and cryptically so as to introduce an element of "unreadability" into the poem that imitates the esotericism of sacred texts (McCaffery, qtd. in Billingham 100). Whereas *The Martyrology*'s concrete wordplay derives from dada and surrealism, Dudek impatiently brands surrealism "the stuff of subconscious regurgitation" ("Questions" 23), a view that reflects his general regard for poetry as a device of sense-making. Dudek complains that Nichol's poetry is so determined to find meaning in the simple physicality of words—their sounds and visual appearances—that one can't *read* his poetry aloud; one can only look at it ("Whatever Happened to Poetry" 234). Nichol and Steve McCaffery object, in an interview with Dudek, to Dudek's contention that their verse "follows a line of simplification and regression" away from meaning (a regression whose end stage, in Dudek's view, is barbarism) ("Questions" 12). Dudek responds, "Don't forget I want a *poem* to result. Poetry that merely investigates the nature of reality, or the human psyche, or the great mysteries of art—*at the expense of poetry*—is as bad as science that pursues genetic engineering, atomic power, chemical-food research or pure knowledge at the expense of life" ("Questions" 12). Dudek goes so far as to suggest a moral as well as an aesthetic shortcoming in an extremely self-conscious treatment of language, while Nichol affirms that "the surface is where the depth is" (qtd. in Miki, "Lang" 80).

Another poetic influence mitigating Dudek's sense of an artistic sympathy with Nichol is that of Charles Olson. Niechoda and Billingham both remark at some length on the influence of Olson on Nichol (*Sourcery* 10-11; *Language* 24). Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950) describes poetry as an extension of the body, in which the poet's own breath is both the ani-

mating force of the poem and the determinant of its line-arrangements. Dudek's rebuttal is unreserved:

> You can take a full breath and talk a whole paragraph with it. There is no more sense to writing with the breath, as form and rhythm, than in playing the accordion with the air you have pulled into it. Rhythm and phrasing, in poetry and music, are something else entirely; something to do with emotional impulses, pulsations of affect, not breath. Olson's notion that 'the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes exactly the breath, the pauses'—produced in Canada, rather oddly, a poetry of quick staccato fragmented lines, like a dog's breathing, rather than the long sustained lines of Walt Whitman or Allen Ginsberg. ("Black Mountain" 45)

Dudek's view of poetry as "pulsations of affect, *not* breath" clearly reflects the aesthetic of Ezra Pound, not of Olson. Pound's "absolute rhythm" refers to the intellect's *interpretation* of the life of the body. Pound's rhythm, like Dudek's, "corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed" (Pound, qtd. in Tallman 160) and not to the physical rhythms of the body.

Conversely, *The Martyrology*, in its premise of vitality and its life-in-poetry, moves as the poet draws breath, and is explicitly "no-tated" in terms of breath and voice: "what rules divide the line is / that way of breathing takes everything inside" (*sic*) (*Martyrology* 2). It is hard to miss the centrality of "breath" in *The Martyrology* as a formal and thematic principle. Part of *The Martyrology's* project of realizing the connectedness of everything is to link the physical pulsations of the body to the "vibratory axis of the universe" (Ondaatje, "Sons"). Thus, Nichol *is* "playing the accordion" with his body (Dudek, "Black Mountain" 45), as he strives to "become a master of as many systems of perception as possible" (Ondaatje, "Sons"), but he is also projecting "the larger reality in which the breath stops" (Rosenberg 17). Many commentators remark on Nichol's dedication of the poem to the Hopi figure Palongawhoya, whose job it was to draw breath and use his voice "in praise of the Creator," making "joyful sound" and uniting all creation (Niechoda, *Sourcery* 46). Poet Dennis Lee notes the ubiquity of Olson's theory and verse to Canadian writers of his (and Nichol's) entire generation, who "had to spend nights on Black Mountain" (xix). A note to *Further*, Nichol's abandoned book of saints (1970), reads: "today I heard Olson / had died late January to you MISTER Olson love" ("Scattered" 26).

Complementing Nichol's quotation of *Atlantis*, Dudek pays Nichol the fitting homage of a pun in *Continuation II*, seeming to imply that Nichol is

an undervalued presence in Canadian literature: "But in Canada's hot house literature, / who's to count Bowering's borrowings? / Or bp's nicklels?" (*Continuation II*, 44). And however Dudek's deployment of language differs from Nichol's, Dudek's conviction that "Language is the great saving poem, always being written" (qtd. in Livesay 28) accords with Nichol's portrayal of words as saints: exemplary, saving figures. Nichol peoples his *Martyrology* with saints punningly created out of words beginning with "st-": St. Orm, St. Rain, St. And, St. Rand, St. Rike, St. Ranglehold, St. Ress, St. Rych Nine, St. Alwart and so forth. As if answering Dudek's portrait of language as a single, ongoing, miraculously encompassing poem, Nichol quotes Jean Cocteau in the prefatory pages of *Martyrology 5*: "The greatest literary masterpiece is no more than an alphabet in disorder." This common emphasis on the redemptive possibility of language is especially potent within Dudek's and Nichol's shared poetic ambition of writing poetry as a response to the prospect of death.

"Last Night I Died, Today I Live": *Continuation*

"I am not what I was, and I never was what I am," writes Louis Dudek (postscript, *Infinite Worlds* n.p.). In this phrase, the poet gestures to the constant self-estrangement that belongs to the "endless differing and deferring of writing" (Eagleton, qtd. in Mandel 21). Dudek conceived of his *Continuation* series as a kind of music of the self, but although the continuity of the poem may descry or at least resonate with the continuity of being, the poem can never stop for a concerted act of self-recognition. Thus, the very fluidity of *Continuation* makes "[t]he mind a process and the self unreal" (*I,* 42) as the poem inevitably dislocates the speaker. Dudek's sense of the person as an entity that never stops diverging from itself is reflected in a poetics that is always in pursuit of a unity it cannot achieve but, crucially, cannot give up. Thus, the poem is shaped by a series of marked anticlimaxes where the poet's epiphanic insights cannot be sustained as an *achieved* self-portraiture:

> At the point of greatest awareness and primitive terror,
> the poem recommences
>
> Last night I died, today I live—
> the resurrection in Adonis' garden.
> (*Continuation I,* 18)

The "resurrection in Adonis' garden" is Dudek's constant rebirth in poetry. In Greek mythology, Venus promised her slain lover Adonis to perpetuate

"the spectacle of [his] death" and, with it, the immediacy of her grief. She transformed him into the (self-regenerating) anemone or wind-flower, named for "the cause which assists equally in its production and decay" (Bullfinch, "Age of Fable"). The allusion reveals the underlying paradox of the life-long poem, which is that it is every bit as much a self-renewing spectacle of death as a portrait of the living mind. The phrase "garden of Adonis" or "Adonis' garden" connotes "a very perishable good" and refers to the ancient Greek practice of commemorating Adonis' mortality by planting herbs in lettuce jars simply to throw them away in the morning (Brewer np). The allusion points to the poem's easy capacity to generate and dispense with new selves in order to guarantee its own persistence.

While reflecting on the mind's inherent problem of integrity, Dudek's *Continuation* also exposes the alienating forces of the external world. *Continuation* is a soup of Dudek's signature concerns: the moral dissolution of the world; the public's indifference to the humanities; the ubiquitous problem of evil; the banality of contemporary existence. The poem moves erratically from one theme and register to the next. Over the course of a double-sided page, it refers to "Messrs Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Pound etc."; "the Beats, the Beatles, the Activists, the McLunatics"; "Pop & Op & 'multiple media'"; and to "psychedelia & Flower Power, / the New Left, SDU, CEGEP, UGEQ & MAUT" (*I*, 42). After this impatient spate of references, the poem mentions the number of atoms in "a smallish universe" (10^{75}), speculates on our chromosomal resemblance to the urchin, quotes Santayana, praises Irving Berlin's weekly output and settles down for "eccles tea and cake" (*I*, 42-43). *Continuation*'s ganglion reach reflects Dudek's conviction of art's power to "redeem reality" in an absolute, all-encompassing way (*I,* 42), a way necessitating formal capaciousness and personal open-mindedness.

Despite *Continuation*'s formal indeterminacy and thematic randomness, it is precisely the task of *integration* which, for Dudek, is always the first duty of poetry. At McGill University, Dudek once reminded his students that "only poetry attempts the total integration of modern man, the criticism of religion, philosophy, manners, entertainments, politics, the arts, the analysis of our whole civilization and the dangers threatening it, the reconstruction of the very grounds of civilization" ("Introduction to a Course in Modern Poetry" 153). Accordingly, though Dudek's *Continuation* openly declares itself to be "a poem without direction" whose "vast accumulations / […] may have a use / or none" (*I*, 20; *I*, 11), the poem is unable to enact its own premise of completely random continuation. As Dudek himself acknowledges, *Continuation* "reveals a confidence in the

kinds of order implicit in all things" (*I,* preface, n.p) and relentlessly pursues that order, and, perhaps more to the point, that ordering personality.

Dudek's motivation for the discovery of *Continuation*'s implicit order is the prospect of death. The poet obsessively encounters a principle of poetic closure—his own biographical end —that is unsettlingly arbitrary. Since the poet has no control over when his encyclopedic poem will close, he must encounter the possibility of "stopping" at *all* times, and must *constantly* make the intuitive totalizing gestures that come with representing the mind in the face of death. Dudek writes that "[t]he imagination wants satisfaction as much as the body does" (*I,* 23) and he satisfies his imagination by peppering his poem with images of his body's demise. He equates death with aesthetic sufficiency ("[…] the poem is never finished / Death puts on the finishing touches" [*I,* 30]), and predicts the quiet and ultimate "containment" that death supplies: "Each man's reality a psychodrama / of excited crazy words // Then the quiet face, in the coffin, containing a life" (*I,* 33).

While Nichol's *Martyrology* is peopled with characters—martyrs—whose social and spiritual function it is to die meaningfully, *Continuation* lacks this specific narrative and this elaborate construction of personae. Even so, Dudek perceives himself as multiple, as a complex of voices. "All the archetypes" reside in "like a pack of cards"; he is "the sum of all desires" (*I,* 23). To allow himself "to be born again, to be born anew" in poetry (*I,* 60), he calls up adverse and dispensable alter-egos: a zealot ("'And He shall pu-ri-fy'" [*I,* 39]), a scholar/idolator ("'The Eliot papers!'" [*I,* 13]), a critic ("'I don't want your fake poems / I want a record of your mind'" [*I,* 33]), and other, less concretely personified declamatory voices that give spurs to the poem's movement towards single and final self-discovery. It is as if the poet is assuming the godly function of being "the imagination that creates / an image of itself" (*I,* 21) in different guises—specifically, at one point, to assume a externalized perspective on death: "'I'm dying and you're laughing' / 'So? We're making it a little easier for you'" (*I*, 58). The poet "dies" repeatedly throughout the poem as an expression of his submerged desire for aesthetic control over the poem's closure.

The frustrated closural impulse that produces perishable personae whose perspectives are to be extinguished and/or incorporated, also produces poetic anticlimaxes in the work. The second book of *Continuation* is unexpectedly definite in its units of composition, units determined by structural repetition, by the framing silences of Dudek's poetic notation, by an increasingly visible punctuation, and by a freighted imagery at the close

of its sections: autumn bonfires, the hands of ancient priests, natural decay. Dudek concludes a number of sections in a row with a common reference to leaves. After describing pleasures that are indifferent to the "external check[s]" of "politics, doctrine, [and] religion," section two ends with the line, "I sit here listening to the leaves grow" (*II*, 17). Section three denounces personal extremism and the evil of "imput[ing] malignity where it is not" (*II*, 20) in order to animate revolutions. It concludes:

> A dead leaf hit me in the face
> this morning
> Must you insist, o revolutionist
> on your fanatical concerns?
> Can we not live awhile in peace
> While the single leaves fall?
> (*II*, 20)

Section four describes how one is "actualized" through contact with the real, but also capable of transcending the real in thought (*II*, 24). Its final words, again evoking a leaf, are: "(A little boy, looking at the world through a leaf) // Thought about thought is the ultimate thought" (*II*, 25). Although *Continuation* is thoroughly interested in the mind's free play, such rhetorical repetitions impart a serial rather than a continual structure to the poem. And Dudek implies that the poet figuratively "dies" at the end of each rhetorical unit when he speaks of death itself as "the grand dissolution / for which small dissolutions prepare" (*II,* 60). The image of the leaf accompanying such "dissolutions" implies that each death is connected to that particular "leaf" of the book: Dudek's Adonis garden, his continual death in poetry.

Perhaps Dudek's heightened closural gestures are what lead Antonio Ruiz to the conclusion that *Continuation II* "deals with the *separate* thematic of old age and death" ("Between" 65, emphasis added), though the poem's death-orientation and structure of continual resurrection, as I suggest, are already well established in *Continuation I*. Dudek published *Continuation II* nine years after *Continuation I,* and thus undoubtedly felt the biographical "close" of his poem drawing nearer. The closural passion of *Continuation II* may also indicate that the second installment is simply more self-conscious than his first, so that Dudek is better able to exploit the fruitful tension of his "continual" poem's buried hunger for closure and integration. Thus, while the first book of *Continuation* is occupied with establishing its overt program of "continuing," *Continuation II* is more conscious of the always-implicit desire for closure, and provocatively

aware that the poem's refusal of closure may actually be indistinguishable from its failure to close.

The poet *must* die repeatedly throughout *Continuation* and its later, containing books, because no single, small, rhetorical death manages to bind the speaker to the "complete" subjectivity that he seeks, though the poem rehearses both formal completion and subjective satisfaction many times over. In "The Last Word"—which is, of course, *not* Dudek's last word—the writer proclaims:

> I am nearly finished now
> With what is probably my last word
> In possibly my last line—
> In this happy poem.
> ("The Last Word," *The Surface of Time* 33)

The next poem begins, "And yet it's spring again" and the poet is "reborn for awhile," just as he always is ("The Old Story," *Surface* 33). This surprise rebirth typically connotes both the opportunity to continue and the failure to conclude. The self never glimpses itself whole, except in the fleeting, private ecstasies that punctuate *Continuation*: "a happiness between the thighs" (*I,* 16), "an ecstasy in the throat" (*I,* 38), a "quiet mind" (*I,* 12). Even these cadences, or "patches of perfection" (*I*, 38), only succeed in driving Dudek to imagine the larger perfection of a "finished" self. In "The Last Word," he assumes a transcendent perspective on his own death—"It'll be so nice / to see me / gone from the world" (*Surface* 33)—and expresses, again, his formal and personal desire for entirety.

Continuation makes clear that part of Dudek's rationale for projecting his own death as his poem's finale is that it places a desirable control on the expansion of his ego. "I am not like Whitman, a pipe open at both ends," remarks Dudek ("Questions" 10). Dudek questions Whitman's mystical presentation of himself as a conduit, receiving and transmitting God's creation in all of its vastness. For Dudek, the catalogic quality of Whitman's work is inappropriately "omnific" ("Questions" 10), though Dudek obviously considers himself "temperamentally responsive to an open poetry" ("Black Mountain" 41). His criticism of many "open" poetic visions is that the poetic ego required for such a vision is so enlarged, or so transcendent, that the poet is not adequately involved with his materials. The open vision, as realized according to Dudek's poetic ideals, must not come from a panoramic, detached perspective or from a sweeping intuition of cosmic purpose, but must be an effort to "live it through" in the dailiness of physical and mental life ("Questions" 12), so that if the poem is cata-

logic, it is also everywhere implicitly limited by the poet's experiential perimeter and his own finitude.

In "Continuation III," whose compositional principle is still the catalogue, Dudek seems to represent things in the spirit of an extended *renunciation* of the world rather than as an accumulation of lived experiences and details. He describes to himself

> How you fumbled in class,
> How you failed in arithmetic,
> How you lost (or won) the prize,
> How your mittens got burned […]
> ("Continuation III," *The Surface of Time* 83)

Dudek recuperates these details into a recognition of their ultimate insignificance. It is he himself, rather than the world, that is ultimately glimpsed "whole," as if from a distant perspective: "Like a scene in a glass, / Like a view from afar off. // As we shall be in the end" (*Surface* 83). The poet's self-recognition, *in the end,* is a kind of hard-won objectification that reduces him to a dot, bringing him closer to an end that he will still never be able to represent, though he suggests a sense of satisfaction in its imminence, a sense of the felicity of living. Despite *Continuation*'s affirmation of life, spontaneity and chance, and despite its premise of absolute continuity, the poem truly illustrates how, in Frank Kermode's words, we "live from the End, even if the world shall be endless" (38).

Despite a programmatically "open" poetics, the poet has a submerged orientation towards totality that is often surprisingly potent and may even be connotatively sinister. Subtly—almost inconspicuously amidst the poem's billowing concerns—the poet actually presents his own life as an ultimatum to the world: "'[…] It's either me / or you,' I said, and the world gave in" (*I,* 42). The poet's prospective death evokes an apocalyptic terror, a sense not only of his own end but of the end of everything:

> Ai, ai, the dissolution of the world
> (I used to be concerned about death)—
> but the dissolution of the world!
>
> Life a Tunnel of Terror
> (I never talk to anyone
> about what really concerns me)
> The unreality of things

How everything vanishes
like a vapour

The evil predominant & the good that beckons

Inside the body, the bursting drains
Fat, hanging in flitches
Nodules of pus dry dust
(*Continuation 1,* 44)

While addressing familiar concerns (moral preoccupation, deteriorating physicality), this passage surprisingly links the decay of the poet's body to the apocalyptic destruction of "everything," perhaps expressing Dudek's ambivalence over a "finished" representation. *Continuation*, over its entire length, alternates between continuation and terrified fragmentation, between a forward-reaching rational positivism and an irruptive apocalypticism, between a temporally progressive thought like "Sometimes I feel I'm really getting there / the words / little ladders" and a sudden, desperate proclamation like "Are you ready for the destruction of the world?" (*I,* 36, 37). Such passages not only effectively *stop* the poem in places, but they also reveal the poet's reaction against his own intuitive pursuit of "total form" in the life-long poem, and the identification of the body of the poet with the world's body.

Continuation suggests Dudek's profound desire for a "synthesis" of arbitrary experience (Ruiz Sanchez, *Travelling* 151) while yet expressing the poet's ethical reservations about total form and even the "total self." Does plumbing one's mind mean subsuming the external world to one's thought? Does tracking the minute valences of one's own mental processes mean looking away from other minds? Dudek seems to realize that his minute self-portrait, in the sheer volume of its representation, threatens to project his carefully-realized individuality to a kind of ultimacy in a poem that is meanwhile preoccupied with fascism and ego. *Continuation I* denounces Hitler and Stalin, fanatical ideologies, "the executions, the purges" [*Continuation I,* 19, 38, 63]). Perhaps overreachingly, and despite his notorious personal modesty, Dudek suggests that there may be something consuming, even predatory, in the representing personality that wants to take everything in; he writes in his notebooks that the "technique of indirection" that is undoubtedly *Continuation's* technique is "the sublimated art of a beast of prey" (*Ideas For Poetry* 23).

Dudek's all-consuming poem has valences that seem provocatively beyond the poet's control. His fearful suggestions about the end of the

world and the spectre of the ultimate self testify to the sheer potency of the poem's latent end-drivenness. But if the poem undertakes a massive study of the poet's own mind, it is because Dudek still believes in the individual as a source of moral and aesthetic judgment and as an entity to which "the real" adheres. In other words, the poet realizes ambivalently that the sheer density of the representation may threaten to convert his portrait of his own individuality into a measure of universality; on the other hand, though, this very quality is also the source of the poem's humanism. Dudek finds subjective fulfillment in the contemplation of his own end and he extrapolates his own private satisfaction to a universal vision of love and joy ("As *we* shall be in the end" [*Surface* 83, emphasis added]).

"He Meaned a Lot / & Then He Died": bpNichol's *Martyrology*

bpNichol's *Martyrology* (1967-1990) attempts to fathom, over the course of its nine volumes, the depth of its speaker's solitude and the extent of his desire for connection. A long, melancholy articulation expressing the speaker's separateness from a sometimes sacral, sometimes sexual "other," *The Martyrology* is a work of inexhaustible longing. Like *Continuation*, *The Martyrology* appears to be aesthetically disposed towards openness while intuitively yearning for closure. Susan Billingham comments in some detail on Nichol's supposition that death closes the poem (123-25), though she concludes that Nichol writes to "*stav[e] off*" (125) death; it seems, rather, that the death-impulse in *The Martyrology* corresponds to the poet's almost formal desire to see his life entire. Though *The Martyrology* presents itself as a paean to the infinite play of meaning, the poet, in a way well worth emphasizing, fundamentally construes it as a "song to carry him thru / to the end" (*Martyrology 1*). "The end" remains outside the poem as the *Martyrology's* anticipated and obsessive limit. The poet's overwhelming desire to close his poem is revealed in statements such as, "I wish this poem would end" ("Clouds," *Martyrology 2*), and in the tormented phrase, "I am afraid of writing something that does not end" (*Martyrology 3*).

Dudek's salient reference to his "resurrection in Adonis' garden" is strikingly echoed in Nichol's own punning reflection on Adonis' inability to die *finally,* in a passage that deconstructs the name "Adonis" ("A.D. on / is"). Nichol's use of the first two letters of the huntsman's name connects Adonis to the dead and resurrected Christ (A.D.). The lines also pay tribute to H.D. –the poet Hilda Doolittle—whose work inspired them:

> A.D. on
> is dead

let the H
supplant the D
in your sweet poetry

adonis head
HE is the A.D.
HE is not dead.
("CODA: Mid-Initial Sequence," *Martyrology 3*)

Nichol's choice of the word "supplants" in the phrase, "let the H / supplant the D," suggests Adonis' rebirth *in the garden* and underlines the succession of personae in the leaves of Nichol's own poem. These regenerated selves help constitute the poet's perpetual "mid-initial" perspective (which is disjunctively yet descriptively matched with the term "CODA" here). Moreover, these indomitable selves seem to guarantee the overriding of "D" (Nichol's customary glyph for "death") by "H" (Nichol's glyph for home and homecoming, and therefore, perhaps, eternal return). Nichol, like Dudek, finds himself repeatedly resurrected in and by the "continual" poem. On one hand, this multiplicity produces the celebratory openness of the poem, but on the other hand, it makes the poet despair of his own final integrity as the poem's maker and subject.

The idea that his own death would be his poem's closure was presumably not Nichol's presumption when he published the first book of *The Martyrology* at twenty-three, though critics have noted his dedication of the poem to Lea Hindley-Smith, founder of the lay-therapy community that Nichol credits with saving him from suicide (Billingham 175). Davey's *aka bpNichol: a preliminary biography* makes clear the omnipresence of the threat of suicide to Nichol. Nonetheless, the poem treats death and "the end," in its early volumes, as important and frequently recurring *tropes* but, obviously, not as pressing biographical facts. Nichol only *eventually* had to confront the fact that *The Martyrology* had become a "lifelong poem" that "could end in any moment […] It could end either because I die, or it could just end because it ends" (Nichol, qtd. in Multineddu 9, 22). His frustrated desire to see "[…] the whole thing ended / as intended" ("Talking about Strawberries All of the Time," *gIFTS*) is by now a well-known part of the work's history (Scobie 106). In a doubly-punning phrase, Mandel brands the *Martyrology* a "life sentence with an ever-present chance of 'parole'" (qtd. in Kamboureli 147).

The Martyrology brims with premature announcements of its own completion. Book 2 includes an "Afterword." Book 4 ends with the phrase "that is all I have to say" (recalling Dudek's own "final word"). The line-

drawn self-portrait and date captions with which Nichol ends each book suggest "tombstone engravings" to commentator Irene Niechoda (*Sourcery* 186), and yet the books continue. Book 5 announces "THE END" in block capitals in its 8th "chain" of composition, which is unlikely to be "THE END" in any case, because Nichol intended the compositional "chains" of Book 5 to be read in any order, as a "shuffle-text." In *gIFTS: The Martyrology Book(s) 7&*, Nichol announces not only the death of his poem but the entire death of poetry: "NOW THIS IS THE DEATH OF POETRY. // no—I have already said the poem is dead—dead beyond hope beyond recall—dead dead dead" ("Scraptures 7th sequence," *gIFTS*). But the form of the poem overrides Nichol's desperately reiterative announcement; not only can Nichol not write of the death of poetry *in poetry*, he certainly cannot do it in a moment of self-quotation, which plainly reveals that the poem *has continued*, indeed years beyond its self-elegy. By *Martyrology 6*, Nichol finally began to consider the work a "life-long poem" (Davey, "Remembering" 113) and in the process of authoring *gIFTS: The Martyrology Book(s) 7&* he was in constant pain from a tumour in his sacrum whose removal required an exceedingly complex surgery from which the poet died (Davey, *aka bpNichol* 280-282). Despite Nichol's late realization that his own death could imminently end his poem, *The Martyrology*'s fascination with death is already well established in its first books, dovetailing with the poem's sustained themes of homecoming, ending, and the search for that other personal "limit," the moment and place of origin. Nichol gradually transforms the work's death-*thematic* into what might speculatively be called death-*consciousness*, particularly in *The Martyrology*'s seventh book (which incorporates the eighth book in randomly-placed "leaves" but excludes the ninth, which is a performance piece for choir).

Like Dudek, Nichol dramatizes his desire for control over the poem's closure by generating poetic personae who will "die" before the poem finishes. Nichol authors the death(s) of various textual/iterative "I"s in a way that anticipates the finality of his real end. It is not necessary to establish at length that *The Martyrology*'s saints are diffuse reflections of the authorial personality, for Nichol criticism has abundantly addressed the author's representation of himself in the guise of "various subjects" (Barbour, *Lyric* 119) in this "enunciator drama" (McCaffery 42). By the end of Book 2, all of *The Martyrology's* saints are emphatically "dead dead dead" but the poem continues, indeed cannot stop. After the death of the saints, the poet writes that "i only stop writing when i cease to flow" ("Friends as Footnotes," *Martyrology 2*) and so acknowledges that it is his own continuing

life that turns the death of the saints into failed aesthetic endings. Significantly, Book 3, resuming after the saints' deaths, features the first-person speaker driving to Barrie, Ontario, the city that happens to bear the poet's own first name. It is as if the poet is driven by the death of the saints further into the domain of the personal, and further into the necessity of being "at home" in the word, matching language and identity more absolutely.

As Miki points out, it is Nichol himself who is the work's titular martyr ("TI'ME" 100), and who suffers the writing of the work. When Nichol says, in quotation marks, as if eulogizing himself from a transcendent perspective, "'he meaned a lot / & then he died'" (*Martyrology 6*), he charges himself with the two essential functions of the martyr: to die and to mean, and to do both exemplarily. The achievement of a death charged with universal meaning is the "comprehensive artistry" of the saint (Lingis 78); a martyr's body is the very system of his heightened cosmological awareness, and the spectacle of his suffering and death as an example for others disseminates that abundance of meaning into the world. This dissemination of meaning is possibly the principal gift of *gIFTS*.

But, as a nuance upon Miki's characterization of Nichol, the martyr cannot martyr *himself;* he must *be* martyred. He must be the *object* of his martyrdom, not its author. The one thing a true martyr cannot do is commit suicide; thus, Nichol's death in and through the figures of the dead saints cannot be made adequate in its meaning. The poem's closural failure is a sort of "suicidal" failure for its implied author as well. When Nichol writes, "I wanted to end it," for example, he is referring to closing his poem, but he is also speaking in a suicidal cliché about his artificial "life" in poetry ("Book of Common Prayer," *Martyrology 2*). By the sacral terms of this text, Nichol cannot legitimately end his life in poetry. For the duration of the poem, Nichol is like the man hanged descriptively by his *ankles* in the graphic frames of *The Martyrology 2,* a sacrificial figure who, nonetheless, is not immediately poised to die, only to be suspended for a time and to see his "end" helplessly deferred. Only the death that is visited on the author finally from without—his natural death—can truly objectify him and consummate his identity as the poem's martyr.

Though it is St. Reat, questing for the source of breath and voice, who is the obvious artist figure among the saints, Nichol's identification of himself with St. And—"I've looked out your eyes years now Saint And"—particularly emphasizes the martyrdom of continuation, which is the special martyrdom of this text ("The Martyrology of Saint And," *Martyrology 1*). St. And, doomed to a measureless futurity by his own nominal conjunction "and," is, significantly, "better off dead," for he cannot stop performing,

and thus—like Nichol—cannot surmount his identity as a performer ("The Martyrology of Saint And," *Marytyrology 1*). St. And's name punningly combines "and" and "stand," expressing both the pain of continuation ("and") and the terror of groundless being ("stand"). St. And, a circus clown, is a figure of dogged continuation whose life is a kind of cruel, broken big top circuit. St. And's episodic life of "bad beginnings" reflects the nature of parataxis (…"and"…) itself. Like a thought that cannot conclude, Saint And cannot establish a sense of real presence; instead, he lives out a long, hapless elaboration of his own clownishness.

In his play on the word "stand" in the name of St. And, Nichol suggests a crisis of "standing," which amounts to a crisis of being. Martin Heidegger, explicating the etymology and grammar of our concept of "being" (thus revealing, like Nichol, a confidence in the hidden and forgotten meanings of words), notes the Greeks' fundamental derivation of the idea of *being* from the idea of *standing*:

> The words *ptosis* and *enklisis* mean falling, tipping, inclining. This implies a deviation from standing upright and straight. But this erect standing-there, coming up (*zum Stande kommen*, coming to stand) and enduring (*im Stand bleiben*, remaining in standing) is what the Greeks understood by being. Yet what thus comes up and becomes intrinsically stable (*ständig*) encounters, freely and spontaneously, the necessity of its limit […] ("On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word Being" 50)

The idea that being itself is a kind of *standing*—the achievement of a self-supporting self-consistency—is suggested throughout "The Martyrology of Saint And" and indeed, throughout *The Martyrology.* St. And's process of discovering his own limits and thus *coming-to-stand* is repeatedly marred by moments of "falling, tipping, inclining" (Heidegger, "Grammar" 50). Everywhere in "The Martyrology of Saint And," "centre poles fall," and Saint And "trips in a circle / on his head." The buffoonish saint repeatedly falls over, inclines, "cannot walk," "rests his head in his hands;" his tents fall down and are torn ("The Martyrology of Saint And," *Martyrology 1*). St. And's marked inability to stand and to "becom[e] intrinsically stable" (Heidegger, "Grammar" 50) reflects Nichol's own broader desire for presence and form, for *being* realized in the light of self-consistency and self-limitation: a life realized in the context of death, a poem that, though it continues, *could* close. St. And exemplifies the burden of interminable continuation in *The Martyrology's* early books, a source of distress that will be replaced, in *Books 7&,* by a noteworthy and painful *inability*, on the part of the implied author, to occupy the present tense. The

title of the volume is *gIFTS*, in which Nichol, dying, implies that he *gives* ("g") or signs the work absolutely over to the reader, if ("IF") he should die and become the "reversed man" who is, apparently, also a mirror-inverted saint ("TS") ("Scraptures: 17th Sequence," *gIFTS*).

Despite the text's profession of continued "openness" and despite its gesture of self-renewal and continuity in "giving" itself to the reader, the contribution of *gIFTS* to *The Martyrology* is its presentation of a finally *indispensable* "i" who, in his very nature, somehow supersedes the prior personae, and cannot be replaced. This is an 'i' who, unlike Adonis, must "die finally" (*Martyrology 4*). Finally, the poem presents an "end" that is so personal that the speaker, poignantly, meets it anxiously and without belief, "uncalm // prehending" (*gIFTS*). The long process of reaching out to the other that has animated *The Martyrology* as a whole now extends to that "other" who is Nichol himself. Nichol speaks from the perspective of a self who, caught up in the contemplation of his death, has *already* ended and is part of the work's fiction, finding himself pensively "caught in the pen's 'I've' mood" ("Assumptions," *gIFTS*). He now finds himself unable to write in the largely forward-reaching and projective manner of the rest of the *Martyrology* (articulated from the "mid-initial" perspective of the "and") and is instead bound to an often painful plane of self-reflection, the perspective of the "end."

Nichol anticipates this special, self-reflexive "i"—this final horizon where poet *meets* persona—in *Martyrology 1*, where he surmises that "all questions become rhetorical if the pose holds" (*Martryology 1*). *gIFTS* presents death, finally, as a "pose" that "holds"; death threatens to bind the poet to a finally fixed identity, and yet it is an identity that is so fundamentally unreal to the poet that he meets it incredulously, as if it were not his. The poet is confronting his own posterity, in which he will become finally rhetorical, *only* textual. In light of his impending death, the poet *meets* himself in every persona: "the real i ties into faces / and every one of them my own" ("Assumptions," *gIFTS*). The fact that such "faces" are now "realities" ("real i ties") illustrates the binding of the poet to his writing persona.

gIFTS looks different from the other volumes of *The Martyrology* in that its cover portrait of Nichol is a *full* portrait in which both halves of the poet's face are visible (Nichol looks outward to the reader and appears to blow a kiss). The previous books of *The Martyrology* all feature the same portrait of the author, in which Nichol is mostly hidden, surveying the reader coyly with one eye. The turning of the poet's full face is related to his obsession, throughout *gIFTS*, with "facing" himself:

it is the face
it is the realization of the face

it is the facing
it is the realization of the facing
("Scraptures: 17th Sequence," *gIFTS*)

This passage primarily manages to convey, in the striking transformation of the noun "face" into a verb, the urgency of the consummation of the poet's identity with the persona's. In the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, encountering a "face" is the prime instance of encountering otherness. The face of the other is the very sign of alterity and instantly requires the self to "[do] justice to [the other's] existence" (13). Nichol, "facing" himself in *gIFTS*, tries to reconcile himself with his objectified, "other" self and to do himself such justice.

Nichol's effort to meet himself in poetry is ultimately indefinite; it produces both a sense of personal wholeness and a sense of voided identity. This ambiguity is reflected in the (whole and empty) "O" twice articulated in the opening lines of "Scraptures: 17th Sequence," where the "omega" of ending is also a beginning ("the religious man practices reversals // O // O"). The "O" is ambiguously a "whole" and a "hole" (or, as Nichol would say, the "the w hole / into which the world disappears" [*Martyrology* 3]); it is all-encompassing whether it is interpreted as a presence or an absence. The poet is fulfilling himself in "signing off" on his work, but in doing so he is also completing himself disingenuously and anachronistically, as though from a transcendent perspective beyond his own death from which he is *already* a non-entity. Thus, the "o" could as well be an absence, as implied in the elisions of the phrase "say n't // n't ready // n't ready to die" ("bp: if," *gIFTS*). If the poet's "mid-initial" perpetual presence, or "and"-status, was, in the early books of *The Martyrology*, a helplessly generative state, then the poet's new and provocatively indefinite status in the text is an equally generative paradox of presence *and* absence. Notably, in this apparently personal statement of terror before death ("say n't // n't ready / / n't ready to die"), Nichol has still managed to insinuate himself as a *character* in the punning doubleness of "say n't" and "saint," as though Nichol were now "Saint Ready To Die."

Everywhere in *gIFTS*, Nichol makes his personal presence in the text both credible and incredible. Karlyn Koh comments on the title page of *gIFTS*, in which the poet writes his own name horizontally, and turns it into a tidy vertical anagram, as though entering his name into a ledger book (thus accounting for and addressing himself). Koh explains this name/

entry in terms of Derrida's *The Ear of the Other*, a work which takes the Nietzschean view that a "signature" is, during one's lifetime, only a kind of credit that one extends to the other, and whose meaning is ultimately deferred – at least until the signator's death, when it rests finally in the full interpretive possession of the other (Koh 77). Nichol certainly seems to bear out this suggestion that his identity is only a *hypothesis* for as long as he lives and writes, as he says to the reader, "it is my sense of self your selves deferred to a better judgement" ("Talking About Strawberries," *gIFTS*); this is one of many ways in which Nichol experiences himself as *both* real and unreal—and as both person and persona—in *gIFTS*.

Koh could have used *The Ear of the Other* also to consider Derrida's fascination with Nietzsche's insertion of a blank leaf into his autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*. The blank leaf implies, in Derrida's words, that "life [is] on the line" and that the autobiographer writes in expectation of his own death and posterity, and thus writes self-consciously from the "limit-position" of the "living dead" (Derrida 57-58). In *gIFTS*, that limit-position or blank state is immediately established as what Nichol calls the "elsewhere event." Nichol introduces *gIFTS* with an illustration borrowed from physicist Stephen Hawking, in which two cones, the point of one meeting the point of the other, describe the convergence of "absolute past" and "absolute future." The present, throughout *gIFTS*, simply seems to be a reflective pivot, a mirroring point. Thus, the "elsewhere event" or present time of *gIFTS*, seems to be empty of *new* experience, but infinitely full of reflection. It seems to be the moment beautifully predicted in *Martyrology* 4, where the folded, and thus reflexive, page is the new generative principle: "the folded page / writes its way / into the longed-for / beginning" (*Martyrology* 4). In other words, the principle of textual abundance in *gIFTS* is no longer the endless projection of the text into the future and towards some other, but the endless space of self-reflection where poet and persona infinitely and indefinitely meet.

The apparent purpose of *gIFTS* is to be a "mirroring" work. In one sense, it shows the poet his own face (finally establishing an "i" worthy of, in Theresa Smalec's phrase, "self-mourning" [17]). In another sense, *gIFTS* occasionally appears to be simply interested in generating aesthetic symmetries, as a mirror also does, as part of its ongoing commitment to developing the "surface" properties of language. From its first poem, "read, dear," *gIFTS* offers the reader "mirroring" structures. It exuberantly issues a profusion of palindromes ("ma I am / muse sum"; "em it is time emits i time" ["Assumptions: Mid-Initial Event: Two"]); instances of chiasmus ("[…] a wife took me, baby, / took me a wife" ["Assumptions"]),

strong caesurae ("bp: if"); and other structures that imply a forwards-backwards symmetry or a line organized in "halves." These *linguistic* "symmetries" reflect the opening illustration of the "elsewhere event," in which two cones meet at a vanishing point.

Faces and mirrors in *gIFTS* may show that the poet thinks of himself as existing on an unapproachable line of reflection and regress determined by his premature sense of having "ended," but faces in mirrors also suggest a proliferation of similitudes that reassure the poet and help to liberate him from his quest for identity. The middle term of the phrase "not thant that" captures the poet's sense of having internalized death—thanatos—despite the phrase's own effort to deny it ("St. Anzas," *gIFTS*), and bears out the claim Nichol makes in *Martyrology 2* that "you are the mirror of what you deny" ("Auguries"). But in *gIFTS*, unlike in *Martyrology 2,* the poet paradoxically *recognizes* himself in the mirror of his denials.

The pressure of time itself produces synthesis, form and identity even in this long, fraught, obsessively "continual" work. Just as Dudek comes to rest in the notion that however various and fragmented our experience is, we come to recognize ourselves "[a]s we shall be in the end" (*The Surface of Time* 83), Nichol comes to a similar awareness as he confronts the possibility of not being. In the last volume of *The Martyrology*, the saints are resurrected (in self-quotation and revisitations of old works) and the poet meets them as versions of himself. This identity between the poet and his saints seems to fulfill a promise that the poet made to himself in the midst of *Martyrology 2*, the book that most seems to despair of the prospect of an integrated self:

> St. Reat I will know you when I meet you again
> as I must know myself when this life ends.
> ("Sons and Divinations," *Martyrology 2*).

The desire for totality in the life-long poem

The life-long poem is not by any means a stream of consciousness but it seeks to correspond, artfully, to what Dudek calls "the great poem," which is the course of life. Death is a moment beyond representation, but in "The Great Poem," from Dudek's late collection *The Caged Tiger* (1997), the poet familiarly argues that our hunger for the "end" is insatiable, especially in the sense that the moment, when it comes, is "without witness," so that "[…]we can only speak now / of our smaller deaths" (29).

Though both poets embrace the experiment of aleatory composition, the desire for totality in both poems is painfully manifest. Both authors

compose their life-long poems not only in the conviction that the poem *should continue* but also in the anxiety that the poem *cannot stop.* The life-long poem is mimetic of the poet's subjectivity, and subjectivity requires self-boundedness; the poem anticipates death in the same sense that it craves form. The generation of personae in each poem helps keep the poem open, but also helps the poet dramatize the "smaller deaths" that satisfy the life-long poem's implicit drive towards closure. It is striking to note that the business of the "continual poem" in Dudek's and in Nichol's handling, is to stage these small deaths ceaselessly and to turn the poem, in their notable common trope, into an Adonis garden of poetic resurrection.

In both life-long poems, life and death constantly override each other in a poignant drama of credulity. The poet's "continuation" is often a matter of surprise to the poet: sometimes a matter of despair, sometimes a matter of serendipity. The formal impulse to construct "the end" of the poem is a reflection of the human impulse to control and overmaster death, which cannot be overmastered. Richard Neuse, commenting on Adonis gardens in Edmund Spenser, notes that the mystery of Adonis' life-in-death and continual resurrection are connected to all of the inexplicable ways in which the self finds itself *restored*: home in exile, self in other (9). All of these human concerns mark the life-long poems of Louis Dudek and bpNichol, where the poets die continually and aesthetically, in the common guise of the vegetative, dying god.

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