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

by Graham H. Jensen

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

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

Translated onto the page, Dudek’s mind becomes the “coordinating
perceptive consciousness” (Trehearne, Montreal Forties 301) that his writ-
ing had lacked thus far, and it proves to be fully capable, like the mind of
T.S. Eliot’s ideal poet, of “constantly amalgamating disparate experience”
and “forming new wholes” (273) out of the seemingly inchoate fragments
of his poetic project. But it should be added that Dudek’s “primary artistic
purpose” was not, as Trehearne states, simply “the representation of con-
sciousness” (Montreal Forties 283); to be more precise, Dudek was inter-
ested in representing the poet’s representation of consciousness. In other
words—and as an increasing number of meta-poetic fragments, standalone
meta-poems, and essays from 1967 onwards attest—he concerned himself
with the ways in which writing about the poetic process and the poet’s
mind, in particular, enabled him to meld the disparate and seemingly irrec-
oncillable elements of his earlier poetry. While Trehearne’s masterful explication of these disparate styles and poetic forms in Dudek’s early “apprenticeship decade” (Montreal Forties 243) contributes greatly to Dudek scholarship, his account of Dudek’s “gradual withdrawal from an elaborate mimesis of the objective world” (283) fails to examine adequately the ways in which Dudek had already problematized straightforward definitions of or approaches to subjectivity, objectivity, and mimetic representation in his meta-poetry and poetics as early as 1941. Trehearne claims that “Dudek was a fundamentally subjective poet from the start” (304), and yet Trehearne’s own comments on Continuation’s successful accommodation of “Imagist and personalist methods” (284; italics in original) rightly suggest that to talk either of Dudek’s “fundamental” subjectivity or of his supposed “withdrawal from an elaborate mimesis of the objective world” is to tell only a part of the story of his late poetry and poetics. In Continuation II and The Caged Tiger—neither of which Trehearne includes in his discussion of Continuation—Dudek continues to acknowledge that reality consists of more than the “objective” or perceivable world, and he also continues to use that world as the “springboard” (“An Interview” 2) for his meditations on all that cannot be touched, tasted, smelled, seen, or heard.

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

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

But Dudek adopted this complex, paradoxical poetics long before he gave it a name. As Wynne Francis notes, Dudek “takes a serious view of life and poetry which embraces at once a shining idealism and a flat-footed realism” (7); Eva Seidner claims that he “is urged upward by his idea—the desire to know transcendent reality—but obliged to devote himself to things—the earthly realities available to experience. His poetry is an attempt to reach a viable human equilibrium” (23-24); and Důček himself adds, more generally, that “the opposites are intricately related in my poetry” (“The Breathless Adventure” 43). His efforts to reconcile these opposites are especially evident in his meta-poetry, which, in Atlantis, her-
alds a gradual shift towards the prospect of an “infinite poem” (*Atlantis 5*), with its “architecture of contradictions”:

There, somewhere, at the horizon
you cannot tell the sea from the sky,
where the white cloud glimmers,
the only reality, in a sea of unreality,
out of that cloud come palaces, and domes,
and marble capitals,
and carvings of ivory and gold—

*Atlantis*
shines invisible, in that eternal cloud.

An architecture of contradictions and inexorable chances
reconciled at last,
in a single body.

(148)

In the same vein as the metaphysical poet whom Cleanth Brooks describes “constantly remaking his world by relating into an organic whole the amorphous and heterogeneous and contradictory” (43), Dudek attempts to reconcile a series of contradictory images and paradoxes in “a single body,” the large and complex body of the “infinite” poem. The horizon serves as the meeting point between “the sea” and “the sky,” between the surface of visible reality and the “unreality” of an ideal and celestial realm that paradoxically “shines invisible” from an “eternal cloud.”

In the introduction to *Poetry of our Time* (1965), Dudek had claimed that “some of the truest successes of modernism happen when the real and ideal meet in harmony and fusion” (17), and in *Atlantis*, he once again combined the real and the ideal by courting a poetics of paradox according to which the long poem was transformed into what Dorothy Livesay calls “a consideration of possibilities” (79), rather than an embarrassing record of the poet’s capricious or inconsistent nature. In the same poem, Dudek tentatively remarks that “[p]erhaps the reason why we contradict ourselves / is that we want to be open to every truth” (*Atlantis 121*); in *Continuation I*—which he subtitled “An Infinite Poem in Progress”—he reaffirms the value of paradoxes while admitting that his new poetry nevertheless constitutes “an experiment in poetic process” (7). In his second “experiment,” he challenges future poets to adopt a similar poetics of paradox in their own quests for “greater knowledge,” urging them to “[b]uild bigger pal-
aces / (even if you fail)” (Continuation II 109). Although his parenthetical comment demonstrates an acute awareness of the possibilities of such a failure, his own brave—and repeated—attempts to construct an “architecture of contradictions” testify to his resolute belief in the value of “massive structures” and open forms in poetry. Steve Luxton applauds Dudek’s attempts by pointing out that “the best proof of Louis Dudek’s open-mindedness may have resided in his inconsistency” (104). Despite Continuation’s various flaws and supposed “inconsistencies,” Dudek’s open and “infinite” poem forms “a single body” in which manifestations of the real and the ideal effectively converge.

Dudek’s fascination with paradoxes is evident in his discussion of “eidos,” which he defines in the 1991 preface to Europe as objects or events “distilled to their highest meaning” in “‘the image of an ideal conception’ (from the Greek eidos, shape or form)” (16). He adds further that eidos “can be seen directly in the sea and in the winds, in the workings of nature” (16), just as conceptions of the ideal insinuate themselves into his poetic depictions of physical objects or locales, revealing themselves “in moments of illumination” as “the things we love” (Atlantis 11). As most Dudek scholars have dutifully observed—and as Dudek himself suggested on occasion—the sea seems to be his favourite muse and “eidolon” of choice, an incarnation of the ideal as well as a locus of historical, cultural, and scientific meaning. Nevertheless, his fascination with paradoxes leads him to reflect upon other eidos and metaphors, such as the jungle in En México or the iceberg in Atlantis. Seidner explains, for example, that the jungle in En México “fulfills much the same function as the sea in Europe. Both are pastoral retreats which encourage meditation and both resolve conflicting forms of energy into a complex union” (27). It is important to note, however, that while such eidos inspired some of Dudek’s best lyrical reflections as poetic subjects, they did not always provide him with the structural or coordinating metaphor he required in order to assimilate his everyday experiences into a balanced, personal, and convincing narrative. Even in Europe, a poem that celebrates the sea and its “immense imagination” (32), Dudek notes that it is a “destroyer of nations, of pantheons, / to whom Greece and Rome are only a row of white breakers” (32), and that it is “so easily bored” by, or “indifferent” to, human drama and suffering (33, 42). At the end of Europe, he admits that poets “are not really interested in the ocean, / which for all its variety / is an empty desolation” (143), and in Zembla’s Rocks (1986), his first major collection of lyric poems since The Transparent Sea (1956), he dismisses the sea and other
forms of water as being “incapable of a new creation” (“Snow Sequence” 47).

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

Each of Dudek’s long poems contains personal or autobiographical elements. But in Continuation, Dudek paradoxically makes meta-poetry his primary focus by providing an approximation of “the structures of mentality” (Trehearne, Montreal Forties 245). As Davey notes, Dudek attempts in his final long poem to make his ideas appear as if they are “actual unreflected-upon phenomena in his mind” (71), rather than carefully premeditated and polished statements—even though he was well aware that “there can be no poet’s voice, no mimesis of a man thinking, that can be the exact equivalent of a human voice, or an exact replica of someone thinking. We can only give an ever more convincing imitation of that kind of thing” (“Louis Dudek” 137; qtd. in Trehearne, Montreal Forties 243). In an interview with Laurence Hutchman, Dudek thoughtfully describes the rationale of such an approach:
What is poetry trying to do on the page? It’s trying to represent the poet’s thought. If that’s what it’s trying to do, then ultimately you have to create a fictitious form that is doing that. Not one that is spurious, but the actual thought with all its fragmentary wayward digressions. And yet, if you read Continuation 1 and 2, you find that it’s really not digressing so very much. It’s actually obsessively concerned with only one kind of subject.

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

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

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

In a sense, the poet’s mind is the perfect image of balance as the site of order in which the disparate fragments of perceptible reality continually, and inevitably, intersect the imagination. The poet successfully becomes “the link between transcendent and individual order” (Seidner 17) as fragments of reality are gathered “in the perfect O of the eye” to be refashioned by the subjective “I” of the poet (Dudek, “Theory of Art” 27). Dudek’s focus not only on the mind, but on the process of “the mind making poems / hid in the texture of language” (Continuation I 11-12; qtd. in Trehearne, Montreal Forties 252) enables him to accommodate paradoxes and achieve various kinds of balance without favouring too heavily the “centrifugal” forces that threaten to disrupt his poem’s “narrative” or the “centripetal” forces that would stifle his imagination and superimpose traditional metrical patterns upon the absolute rhythms of his own verse.⁸ Michael Gnarowski sanctions Dudek’s use of the poet’s mind as an organizing principle by insisting that, “while the emotional and the intellectual
are in conflict in the mind of the poet, it is this very mind which resolves the conflict into a new harmony which becomes poetry.” While in *Atlantis* the reader encounters only an “implied” or “partial” representation of consciousness, as Davey has pointed out (71-72), in *Continuation I* Dudek’s mimetic representation of the poem as poetic process is made explicit, and the poem proclaims, “I am the imagination that creates / an image of itself” (21). Unlike the sea or other eidolons found in nature, the mind is capable of language; but it is the mind of the poet, in particular, in which the imagination and the ideal are transformed—through the medium of language—into poetry.

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

In a meta-poetic passage from “Sequence from ‘Continuation III,’” Dudek underscores the importance of emotion as he describes his mind’s careful search for order.
amid the incomprehensible chaos,
looking for bits and pieces
of the amino acids
out of which poems might come.

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

Even here, though, intellect and reason are both necessary counterparts to
emotion, for poetry is also a means of making sense of “the incomprehensible
chaos” of reality. Dudek might have argued that successful poetry
offers a simulacrum of the poet’s mind and its processes, and is therefore
highly personal, subjective, and even emotional; but he does distinguish
between genuine emotion and “passion” or “middle-class emotion” (“Fur-
ther Thoughts on the Long Poem” 93), which are neither tempered nor elev-
ated by intelligent thought. In addition, his mention of “amino acids,”
which might seem more appropriate in a scientific essay than in a poem,
corresponds to his belief in the poetic potential of everyday subjects or
objects. Sánchez alleges that Continuation I’s various fragments “hardly
offer any sensuous appeal or personal drama, and are settled in an abstract
and self-sufficient dimension in which everyday reality seems to have been
superseded” (64). However, the poem, as a representation of the poet’s
mind, can hardly be said to lack “personal drama,” regardless of how that
term might be defined. Continuation I contains plenty of what might be
referred to as “personal drama,” including a brief description of Dudek’s
dreams (18) and an anecdote about how he “was so fascinated listening to
Bartok / that [he] broke [his] egg in the garbage / while making an
omelette” (37). In any case, Dudek acknowledges in his interview with
Hutchman that human thought “jumps about a little differently in every
head and in every age” (163), so that each person’s subjective or “every-
day” reality is unique. In Continuation, in particular, he insists, “this is my
voice, this is my true voice of poetry. It’s the personal voice that at the age
of fifteen, or even earlier, I already had, and therefore I worked all my life
to record on the page” (“The Breathless Adventure” 50). Dudek’s restate-
ment of “this is my voice” as “this is my true voice of poetry” emphasizes
the distinction between personal and poetic voice, although his subsequent
claim also registers his feeling that the two are connected, that the de-
velopment of his own poetic voice can be traced in relation to a “personal
voice” that has remained relatively constant.
While Dudek’s unique approach in Continuation is decidedly autobiographical, his focus on the mind as a point of intersection between external or objective reality and his own internal, subjective reality does not prevent the poem’s “meaning and emotional impact” from being “transferred from the particulars of the author’s life, for whom it serves as a generalization, an attempt at self-understanding, to the particulars of the reader’s life” (Ideas for Poetry 24). Instead, Dudek repeatedly places meta-poetic précis of Continuation’s metaphorical premise in close proximity to fragments in which these and other paradoxes are explored. In the fourth section of Continuation II, for instance, he writes,

The real and the transcendental are one

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

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

In the first fragment, Dudek affirms his transcendental-realist poetics while erasing difference between the two, supposedly incompatible, categories; in the second fragment, however, he recasts the first in more human terms, conflating an abstract ontological supposition with an image of supine lovers locked in an embrace. The coming together of the real and the transcendental is also recast as “[a] prolonged body orgasm for two,” and in the third fragment, he again reminds his readers that a similar balance must be achieved, and such paradoxes must be continually resolved, in the mind of the poet. Elsewhere, he suggests that “the real life is the life of the mind” (“Louis Dudek” 130), but he judiciously qualifies this statement in The First Person in Literature (1967) by pointing out that neither the personal nor the universal alone “can really satisfy our conception of reality” (36-37). The poem mediates between the imaginative world within and the physical world without, and the poem-as-consciousness metaphor establishes the mind of the poet as an effective “interface”—to use Dudek’s term 11—between the two forms of reality.

In fact, while Continuation is framed as a metaphor for the poet’s mind and its processes, the whole poem functions as a kind of interface between reality and the imagination, the real and the ideal, the subjective and the objective, and particulars and universals. In “The Psychology of Literature” (1977), Dudek prepares readers for Continuation I by explaining that poetry “comes out of the tensions and dilemmas in the mind of the author,
and it is therefore a concrete symbolic representation of these tensions and dilemmas” (374-375). In his later lyric poems, too, he echoes Continuation as well as his earlier meta-poetry when he writes that “a poem tells us how a mind behaves like a mind” (“The Poem and the Crowd” 13). Like the mind, the poem is a site of various tensions and paradoxes in which reality and the imagination coalesce; nevertheless, as Dudek was well aware, the poem must also be a site of balance, a means of organizing and shaping one’s perceptions and experiences of reality into art. In “The Psychology of Literature,” he addresses both of these facts when he maintains that “[t]he right proportion between abstract ideas, or intentions, and the concrete presentation of realities is what we expect in any successful work” (373). Although the exact nature of this “right proportion” remains rather ambiguous, several critics have deemed Dudek’s autobiographical poetry “successful” for achieving a similar kind of balance: George Hildebrand observes, for example, that in Dudek’s later poetry, at least, “everywhere one finds the astute balance of logos, sounds, picture and voice—that concerned and intelligent human voice—true to the form demanded by the age, ‘disintegrated autobiography’ (Paradise 79)” (98).

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

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

Dudek locates the “luminous” or the transcendental in “all reality,” and he makes it clear that epiphanies, like interfaces, exist “anywhere and everywhere.” In the same way that eidolons bridge the gap between the real and the ideal, epiphanies link the phenomenal world to an unknown and ineffable world of transcendental order. Nevertheless, such eidolons or epiph-
anies are meaningless unless they are observed or experienced, because, as Maurice Beebe notes, “they take on meaning only when they are unified by the consciousness of the individual observer” (312)—and of course they can be shared with others only if that “individual observer” commits them to language.

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

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life would be a vast train wreck,
with all its items of foolish baggage,
combs, nighties, make-up
scattered over the tracks—
and nothing in it.
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(6-10)

Similarly, he believed that poetry without abstract thought was merely a “vast train wreck” or catalogue of empty, meaningless images. As he had observed in the introduction to Poetry of Our Time, “realism is obviously not an easy and natural way for poetry; the problem of poetry is to transform dross and despair and to raise them—or at least to contrast them—to something that the heart desires, the ideal that is equally true and necessary” (6). Like the eponymous protagonist of Joyce’s Stephen Hero, Dudek also seemed to believe that epiphanies provided a welcome relief from commonplace reality, and “that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (211). The poet’s job, in particular, is to capture and attempt to recreate these epiphanic moments for the reader by making fragments of reality “immobile and imperishable / fixed and formed / in the dead matter of ink and paper” (“An Epiphany” 5-7).

Dudek’s interest in this mysterious process and its connections to his own transcendental-realist poetics is evident in much of his later writing, including his discussions of Joyce and the epiphany in The First Person in Literature (55) and “In the Footsteps of Leopold Bloom” (94), as well as in poems such as “The Epiphanies” from Cross-Section: Poems 1940-1980 (1980) or “Atlantis” and “An Epiphany” from Zembla’s Rocks, to name only a few.

In Epiphany in the Modern Novel, Morris Beja argues that an epiphany or “sudden manifestation” of the sort Joyce describes must be “out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (18). It follows, therefore, that a long poem such as
Continuation—which professes to imitate the ebb and flow of the poet’s mind—would naturally contain extraordinary manifestations as well as the ordinary moments, thoughts, or actions from which they arose. “It is simply not possible to sustain the intensity of poetry for long,” Parini writes, “just as in life one could never operate at full throttle on a day-to-day basis without burning out” (36). For this reason, a delicate balance or back-and-forth movement between the ordinary and the extraordinary, or between reality and the imagination, must be maintained constantly. As Dudek asserts, “[t]o concentrate only on the moments of vision is to become a trancelike enamored saint, a walking humourless sage, a pompous bore, an idiot of the absolute. The alternative is to be a fool or a clown amid the actual and the trivial” (Notebooks: 1960-1994 190). If Beja and Parini are correct, however, it would seem that Dudek’s long poems can be seen only in one of two ways: (1) as collections of individual poems, of which only a small number successfully and consistently “sustain the intensity of poetry,” or (2) as single poems that successfully re-enact the variously tedious and thrilling extremes of the human experience while failing to maintain throughout the high “pitch of expression” (Parini 36) that poetry supposedly requires. This bifurcation may explain, in part, the prevalence of what Terry Goldie calls “the ambivalent critic” in Dudek scholarship and in studies of Dudek’s long poems in particular (15). But because of Continuation’s unique formal and conceptual approach—which Dudek elucidates in his poetics, in his preface to Continuation I, and in the metapoetic fragments of the poem itself—it demands to be assessed according to a different set of criteria.

On more than one occasion, Dudek explains that the collected fragments of his “infinite” poem are meant to be read, and judged, as parts of a cohesive whole: “you are now seeing the whole picture, I think, and you cannot talk about anything but the whole picture. You cannot talk about little pieces as if they stood by themselves here and there—you just can’t. It’s all one whole” (“The Breathless Adventure” 52). Even in 1966, Livesay had remarked of Dudek’s poetry that, “as in sculpture, the whole must be visible at a glance, but the detail must be exact, and highlighted where essential. […] Quite frequently the poems seem to lack drama and dramatic tension, but they are a true rhythmic mirror of the poet’s intention” (80). Unlike his previous long poems, Continuation deliberately embraces an interface, and that interface’s concomitant processes, in which—and as a result of which—reflections upon reality and glimpses of some ideal reality or “Atlantis” are equally likely to occur. Continuation’s “failures”—its occasional tirades, vapidity, and esoteric allusions—are also,
paradoxically, tokens of its success with respect to the premises according to which it was written and according to which it repeatedly asks to be read. Furthermore, as Dudek wrote in *En México*, “[e]vil is in the weft of reality! / But the whole cloth is good, is good” (65). *Continuation* recreates the motion of the poet’s mind as it moves from personal details, from “the actual” or the everyday, to abstract revelations of an ideal, objective order—and then back again to reality, engaging in what Dudek playfully refers to as “[t]he perpetual coitus interruptus of poetry” (*Continuation* II 75). In *Continuation I*, he describes his constant search for epiphanic “patches of perfection” by borrowing a Yeatsian metaphor: he explains, “[s]ometimes I feel I’m really getting there / the words / little ladders” (*Continuation I* 137-38). Like Yeats, however, Dudek inevitably finds himself “where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (Yeats 39-40).

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

*Continuation* is a complex “architecture of contradictions” in which, as Trehearne notes, the centripetal principle of “continuation” and the centrifugal principle of “accumulation” (*Montreal Forties* 250) constantly threaten to disrupt the poem’s delicate balancing act between order and chaos. On one hand, the principle of continuation works to give an increas-
ingly accurate representation of the poet’s mind and poetic processes in the body of the poem, as well as to create links between the “infinite” poem’s diverse fragments. Continuation I opens in medias res with “[s]o let’s continue” (11), inviting the reader, in Trehearne’s words, “to contemplate projects or aesthetics of Dudek’s past that are to be carried on here, as well as to consider the work to hand as premised somehow upon the whole idea of ‘continuing’” (Montreal Forties 244). The lack of periods or other punctuation between the poem’s fragments further reinforces the idea of continuation—as well as accumulation—by refusing to provide the same sense of formal closure as a poem whose various sections are clearly marked with full stops. On the other hand, the principle of accumulation seems to result in an indiscriminate recording of reality in unconnected clauses or poetic images, since “the true mimesis [is] / a poem without direction” (Continuation I 20), as Dudek announces early on in the first instalment of his “infinite” poem.

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

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

Although Continuation’s “constitutive metaphor” (Trehearne, Montreal Forties 250) transforms the poem into a coherent whole, the poem’s individual fragments demonstrate Dudek’s continued interest in the poetic image as a fundamental means of engaging physical reality. In “The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry,” he discusses the etymology of “image” as well as that of “imagination,” and he concludes that “the literary tradition is correct in seeing imagery as standing at the heart of the poetic process. We may, in fact, say that the image—whatever it ultimately may be—is the molecular unit of poetry” (267). In his interview with Schrier, Dudek would add further that the long poem “is really made of very sharp, Imagistic, quintessential poetic elements,” with the result that “the short poem becomes the principle of the long poem in a paradoxical way” (43). Even so, he was also aware that these images or Imagistic units, as representations of physical reality, still need to be put together intelli-
gently by the poet, whose imagination uncovers the connections that exist between all things in order to create meaningful wholes.\textsuperscript{17} He declares that “the method of concrete presentation, once it has rejected the responsibility for coherent thinking, can only result in a poem without coherent meaning” (“The Theory of the Image” 273).\textsuperscript{18} In the poem “This Actual”—as in “Ars Poetica” almost fifty years earlier—Dudek writes about his ostensible preference for physical reality over ideas and the unknown, although he seems much more willing to admit that, paradoxically, reality is all the more significant because of the “great mystery” that it contains:

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

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

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

(1-10)

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

Although even Dudek’s earliest meta-poetry reveals a keen interest in the invisible, unknown, and ideal order that gives form and meaning to the phenomenal world, his later poetry is focused almost exclusively on the relationship between reality and the imagination and on the effects of this relationship on art. In “Continuation III [Fragment],” he remarks that, as a poet, his role is to “push into unknown infinite worlds” without severing his ties to reality: “I am an interloper,” he writes, “even now as I push my pencil in the dark / and write this poem” (76-77). In an essay entitled “The Idea of Art,” Dudek contends that this desire to “generate an expression
beyond the real and the actual” or to explore the unknown in art “is irrepressible in man, it was born with him at the dawn of time, and it will continue until the race expires, or man becomes something other” (29-30). He had no delusions about the imagination’s ability to attain a perfect knowledge of the self, or of the universe and its secrets; but his poetry and poetics make it abundantly clear that, although “the world within is just as much beyond us / as the world without has always been” (“Between Worlds” 1-2), it is nevertheless important to strive towards perfection and to refashion the real in terms of its ideal potential: he writes, “if you assume the ground of being is far greater than the actuality—that it is, but it is unimaginable—you heighten and ennable the actual and the knowable, and you conceive an unimaginable perfection toward which you can strive” (“Questions [Some Answers]” 26). Dudek’s desire to “heighten and ennable the actual and the knowable” and his emphasis on the role of reason in bringing about a new civilization seem to align him with a modern or secular form of humanism, but his fascination with the unknown or the ideal complicates his stance somewhat.

Bernhard Beutler contends that it is “perfectly appropriate to call [Dudek] a ‘humanist’ although he would have shunned such labels” (72). Because of Dudek’s interest in reason, justice, and the cause of civilization, Beutler is certainly not mistaken to identify him as a poet with humanist leanings. Once again, though, it is perhaps most appropriate to refer to Dudek as a transcendental-realist rather than a humanist, since only a transcendental-realist poetics explains his paradoxical, simultaneous interest in both the humanistic and the transcendental. Goldie writes that “Dudek himself presents the most clear working out of these conflicts in ‘The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry,’ in which he concludes, ‘A poem, of course, is partly about experience and existence as we know it. But its greatest power, if it is a true poem, derives from the faint hint or suggestion it gives of that other, unknown world of being’” (19). While Dudek’s emphasis on reason can also easily be interpreted as a kind of empiricist belief in the truths and primacy of the phenomenal world, he boldly proclaims that the imagination “forever outreaches the facts” (Continuation I 43) and that the imagination “has always been far more important than any exact or true perception of reality” (Ideas for Poetry 21)—although he mitigates such claims by observing that “the nature of imagination in its deeper levels is utterly unknown to us” (“The Theory of the Image” 267). Because the unknown can be understood only in terms of what is known, just as he claims that the “true invisible” or the ideal “can only be intuited in poetic images” (Ideas for Poetry 78), Dudek relies upon words such as
“Atlantis,” “the sea,” and “God” in order to discuss the notion of an ideal order. In his poetics he refers to these words as “searchlights scanning for a definition of the eternal” (“In a Nutshell” 117). As in earlier meta-poems such as “Pure Science,” Dudek’s search for an ideal vision or “Atlantis” in Continuation and in other poems of the same period is ultimately grounded in reality, since “God’s glory was built into the molecules” (Continuation II 21); the real contains the transcendental, and it furnishes the imagination with the “poetic images” it requires in order to manifest itself in art.

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

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

There is always the living

Why make the emotion out of words

Better the real thing

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

It is another thing

‘Variations and inflections of the naked self’

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

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

But when it’s over, we know, don’t we
this life has been magical
that we were lifted once
out of ourselves
writing those poems

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

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

In Dudek’s late poetry, he successfully reconciles his work to his transcendental-realist poetics, assimilates a tremendous range of possible materials into a surprisingly coherent “narrative,” and continues his metapoetry’s earlier attempts to balance reality and the imagination. In The Surface of Time, his final collection of poems, he also carries on his mission of writing “functional” poetry by discussing a universal subject that was of particular interest to him at the time: human mortality and the prospect of death. In the 1980s, he had described himself as “a stumbling mortal / knocking about on feet of clay, / with a heart of amber” (“Love Words” 21-23), and he also began to write more frequently of “Death, interesting as a
postman, / ...walking down my street of days” (“The Retired Professor” 3-4). In *The Surface of Time* nearly every poem alludes to the process of aging or to the poet’s inevitable death, but, with only a few morbid exceptions, the process is discussed primarily in positive terms. Tony Tremblay places Dudek’s meditations upon the theme of death in the larger context of what he calls a “movement toward the luminous” (“Still Burning” 60), or what Dudek himself calls “a kind of groping through the semi-darkness toward luminosity” (“Ideogram” 140). Dudek’s supposed “groping” results in collections of poetry such as *Continuation II* and *The Caged Tiger*, which Hildebrand calls “two of the strongest and most intelligent books published this decade,” as well as *The Surface of Time*—all of which successfully “re-capitulate everything he has thought and understood” (97).

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

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

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

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

(83-84)

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

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

Notes

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1 In Montreal Forties, Trehearne refers to Dudek’s long poem as “Continuations” (243), as do Sánchez (71) and Shearer (xvii). In Canadian Poetry, however, Trehearne adopts the singular form of the title, which I have used here in order to be consistent with Dudek’s own usage (see, e.g., The Surface of Time (“Preface” 11)).

2 See “Towards the ‘Infinite Poem’: Reality and the Imagination in the 1950s and 1960s Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek.” In a sense, the current paper serves as a kind of sequel to this earlier study, providing one possible narrative of Dudek’s post-Europe development while remaining invested primarily in Dudek’s attempts to strike a balance between “the necessarily provisional categories of ‘reality’ and ‘the imagination’ in [his] poetry and poetics” (Jensen 45).


4 See, e.g., Jensen 7-8. While Trehearne traces Dudek’s development as far back as 1943, I would suggest—and my earlier paper explicitly argues—that narratives of Dudek’s development and later poetic achievements should also consider his earliest writings, such as those contained in his 1941 Diary.

5 In Continuation II, for example, Dudek, writing about “the real,” emphasizes “that a great deal of it was, a certain amount is, / and much is still to be” (46). Similarly, he challenges his readers, remarking, “O yes, there is only one world, / but do you see all of it? / And do you think that what you see / is all there is?” (110); and on the same page, he asks, “[w]hy should all there is / be contained in what we see?” (110).

6 Elsewhere, Dudek explains that eidolons “are ‘images of the ideal,’ symbols of the higher thing, [. . .] a conscious allusion to Whitman, as well as to Socrates and the Greeks” (“In a Nutshell” 114).

7 Shortly after Continuation I was published, Dudek wrote in Ideas for Poetry that “[p]oetry has to do with invented or actual states of consciousness. By the selection and arrangement of words we create an image of a state of mind which we consider interesting, precious, or useful. It is the state of consciousness which is the chief value in poetry, and like all art it is a fiction” (9). See also Dudek’s “The Breathless Adventure” 47 for similar remarks.

8 I rely here on Trehearne’s adaptation of A. M. Klein’s references to “centrifugal” and “centripetal” poetry, which factor into Trehearne’s discussion of Continuation I (Mon-
treat Forties 250), although Mikhail Bakhtin’s reflections on centrifugal and centripetal forces in culture and language are equally pertinent (see, e.g., Morson and Emerson 30). See also Dudek’s interview with Schriber, in which he states, “A poem is not a solipsistic experience. It’s got to communicate, and in the revising, that is what you try to do—make it speak for others also” (50).

In Continuation I, Dudek foreshadows this later claim in an isolated fragment that reads, “The poem, a man talking to himself” (25).

In “Interface: Reality and Literature” (1978), Dudek contends that an “interface” consists of “points where elements of the actual world enter directly as such into the context of the ‘imaginary world’” (238).

Commenting further on Dudek’s belief in “the criterion of authenticity” as a standard by which poetry must be judged, Seidner indirectly validates the poet’s approach in Continuation by positing that an “honest and lucid” depiction of one’s experiences will necessarily “bring about the union of the personal and universal spheres” (21).

Indeed, Treharne characterization of Continuation in terms of what he calls a “forties period style” (33) hinges on the poem’s attempts to contain the whole of reality within its covers: he maintains that “the ‘infinite poem’ can have only one main goal, in Ernest Buckler’s phrase again, ‘to get it all in’” (Montreal Forties 261).

In a similar vein, Treharne writes of the accumulative nature of Dudek’s “emphasis on a haphazard gathering up of fragments” (Montreal Forties 244). He does so, however, immediately after quoting a meta-poetic passage from Continuation I in which Dudek asserts the writing process as a counterbalance to mere “accumulation”—that is, as an intentional and organizing act that transforms “vast accumulations” into poetry that is “not without reason” (qtd. in Treharne, Montreal Forties 244). On the same page, Treharne also quotes another meta-poetic passage in which Dudek explicitly describes how continuation is an inevitable part of the process by which he accumulates materials “not without reason” in order “[t]o weave them into patterns” (244).

Dudek comments on the distinction between true art and a mere accumulation of ideas, images, or observations in multiple texts, including “Où sont les jeunes?” (143), “A Brief Note on Poetry” (283), and the autobiographical “Louis Dudek” (140-141).

In “The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry,” Dudek also discusses the etymology of “imagination” in relation to “image,” and he notes that “[t]he very word imagination is formed on the same Latin root: imaginari, to picture to one’s self. Imagination is clearly the power of forming images” (266).

In “A Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley remarks how, through metaphorical language, poets are able to mark the “unapprehended relations of things” (676); similarly, in Why Poetry Matters, Parini notes that poets such as Frost and Stevens believed that metaphor mediated the relationship between reality and the imagination (67).

Cf. “There must be abstract ideas and there must be ideas in things; it’s the proportion between them that remains the real issue for poetry” (Dudek, “The Psychology of Literature” 372).

In the preface to the 1991 edition of Europe, Dudek similarly explains that he uses the concept of Atlantis in his poetry to represent a “never-realized ideal world, to which all reality must somehow be referred” (18).

This passage was published first in “Fragment of Continuum” (Cross-Section 90-93), but was published again in Continuation II with a few minor omissions and revisions.

In Continuation I, Dudek seemed to anticipate the same lack of positive critical feedback that he had received after the publication of Atlantis: for instance, he asks himself—or he imagines someone else asking—the following question: “Who cares, does anybody care / about your precious mind and what goes on in it?” (13).

This passage is reminiscent of earlier passages in Continuation in which Dudek invokes “God” or the “Lord” in a number of brief “prayers” and religious discussions. In Continuation II, for example, Dudek prays, “Lord, let me have wings / in my late years,
when baldness comes / Open my skull to heaven like a mirror” (13). As Dudek explains elsewhere, however, such passages are demonstrative of his belief in the transcendental—as part of his transcendental-realist poetics—rather than of his adherence to any particular religion or faith group. “The residue of religion in my work,” says Dudek, “appears as a modified transcendentalism, and the positivist side of my thought appears as concreteness and realism. The effort to reconcile the two is at the core of all my poetry” (qtd. in Francis 6).

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

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