

## THE FIRST PERSON IN LITERATURE

By Stephen Morrissey



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After I completed my B.A. in literature at Sir George Williams University, I went to McGill to do my M.A. I chose McGill because I wanted to study with Louis Dudek. I remember that first day, finding Dudek's office. It was a large spacious room with a window facing Sherbrooke Street, just above the main entrance to the Arts Building. Three years before, I had published my first chapbook, *Poems of a Period*. Sir George Williams (now Concordia University) had an active English Department that brought in poets from across North America and England to give readings. Visiting poets included Patrick Anderson, Alden Nowlan, Diane Wakowski, Robert Creeley, and Allen Ginsberg. I studied creative writing with the poet Richard Sommer. I took a course on British and American Literature with the writer Clarke Blaise. Walking up to Dudek's office that early fall day in 1974 was another part of a natural progression in finding my own voice as a poet.

The graduate seminar taught by Louis Dudek was entitled "The First Person in Literature." That same year Dudek had published *DK/ Some Letters of Ezra Pound*. This was a collection of letters Ezra Pound wrote to Louis Dudek over a twenty year period, with commentary Dudek wrote on each letter. In our graduate class, Louis was discussing the English novelist Ford Madox Ford; the topic was literary hoaxes in relation to Ford's autobiographical writing. Dudek felt that Ford Madox Ford was more concerned with self-mythologizing than with the truth.

Louis drew me into a practical joke he wanted to play on the class. In *DK/ Some Letters of Ezra Pound* there are reproductions of typewritten letters by Ezra Pound. When you entered Louis' office, there was a bookshelf behind the office door and on the top shelf was a portable typewriter. The joke Louis wanted me to help him play on the class was as follows: I was to claim that the typewritten letters from Ezra Pound were forgeries. I was to expose that they had been typed on the portable typewriter in Dudek's office.

Louis thought this joke would bring to life the concept of writers' falsifying the truth in their writing. Dudek was concerned with the whole notion of truth versus fiction in

autobiographical writing. Of course, the letters in Dudek's book are authentic letters from Ezra Pound, but Louis loved a joke almost as much as he loved honesty. Being shy by nature I didn't carry off this practical joke very well, but I do remember with fondness the minor conspiracy Louis brought me into that day. It helped me to know Louis Dudek the man, not only Dudek the professor or poet.

During that year-long seminar Louis also discussed in class Douglas O. Spettigue's *FPG, The European Years* (1973). This is a fascinating book that reveals the early life of the Canadian author Frederick Philip Grove. Spettigue discovered that Grove's real identity was completely at odds with the persona he created for himself in his autobiographical writing. Dudek was intensely interested in the connection between autobiography and fiction. Dudek believed autobiographical writing is best served by honesty and truth.

Dudek was a great supporter of John Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970). But Louis became critical of Glassco when it was later revealed that Glassco had fabricated parts of this famous book. Frederick Philip Grove's deception was part of a complex psychology. Grove had needed to divest himself of his old life in Germany in order to create a new life in Canada. Glassco's deception seemed much more self-serving and full of literary ambition. In his *Notebook, 1960 - 1994* (1994), Dudek discusses both Ford Madox Ford and John Glassco. He writes that "For some years now I have noticed that I cannot read any of the autobiographical writings of Ford Madox Ford; that is, ever since I realized that he was a habitual fabricator, utterly unreliable in his account of things." Dudek then goes on to write, "For the same reason I have been unable to reread any part of John Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, although I once praised it as 'The best book of prose written by a Canadian.'" I feel that this very strong statement by Dudek is significant, for it shows how deeply committed Louis was, as a man and a poet, to truth and honesty in writing.

Louis Dudek's many students as well as his fellow poets loved Louis. He could bring the world of the intellect and poetry to life. As a student in Dudek's graduate seminar he made me feel that the life of the poet was the only one worth living. Louis was dedicated to literature and he was a champion of poetry and poets.

Dudek served poetry and the literary community not only through his teaching at McGill and his influence on many younger poets, but he also served as a literary small press publisher. He initiated the McGill Poetry Series in the early 1950s, and published Leonard Cohen's first book of poems. From 1957 to 1966 he published *Delta*, a literary magazine. In 1967 he began a new press, Delta Canada. A few years later, Dudek and his wife Aileen Collins began DC Books, a literary small press that is still active, now owned by the Montreal poet Steve Luxton. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he was associated with several poetry magazines of importance in Montreal, including *First Statement* and *Northern Review*.

It might seem improbable that a moral conservative like Louis Dudek would praise Henry Miller whose books were banned as pornographic for many years. But I remember discussing Miller, whose work I had always admired, with Dudek once when we were together on a Montreal city bus. In an interview in *Quill and Quire* (August 1982) Louis talks about the odd combination of influences on his writing, ranging from Ezra Pound to Matthew Arnold and Henry Miller. Dudek comments in this interview that the voice in his work is a combination of Henry Miller's conversational style with Matthew Arnold's critical faculty. Robin Blaser, who edited *Infinite Worlds, The Poetry of Louis Dudek* (1988), a selection of Dudek's poems, writes in his preface: "The practise of his poetry, which fascinates from the first poems to the latest, has led him into a flowing, radiant form."

I am writing this memoir "The First Person in Literature" practically a year to the day after Louis died. I have beside me a collection of Dudek's prose books. Dudek's critical writing shows a lively and engaging intellect. Indeed, his critical and artistic contribution to Canadian literature is significant. His reviews and articles on Canadian poetry are written with an enthusiasm and perceptiveness that is immediately communicated to the reader. One time he wrote, "I am not an expert, just a compiler." Most of Louis' scholarly writing is in the form of collections of his critical essays and book reviews, commentaries or statements on poetry, a series of lectures delivered on CBC radio. These books include his *Epigrams* (1975), his *1941 Diary* (1996), his *Notebooks 1960-1994* (1994), and academic papers delivered to various conferences. His doctoral thesis was published in 1960 as *Literature and the Press*.

Louis Dudek was a poet, a teacher, a man of letters, and a supporter of literary small press publishing in Canada. But in the long run, Dudek the intellectual, teacher, and poetry publisher is secondary to Dudek the poet, Dudek the creative man. While Dudek was conservative in his lifestyle, he was always adventurous in his poetry. He was aligned with the Modernist tradition. In fact, Louis Dudek played a very important role in bringing Modernist poetry to Canada.

When the Vehicule Poets, a group of young poets with whom I was associated in the 1970s, were active, Dudek published a book with us, *A Real Good Goosin', Talking Poetics, Louis Dudek and the Vehicule Poets* (1981). Frank Davey dedicated an issue of his magazine *Open Letter* to Dudek (Spring and Summer 1981 issue) as well as writing a book-length study, *Louis Dudek & Raymond Souster* (1980). For Robin Blaser, "Dudek is Canada's most important--that is to say, consequential--modern voice."

My own favourite book by Louis is *Atlantis* (1967). The experience of reading Dudek's poems today is that they aren't in any way dated, they're as timely as when they were written. What Louis wanted was that his poems be read in the future. For Dudek and other poets, that is the only true test for poetry.

Although Dudek had a long and distinguished teaching career at McGill University he was never really a part of any establishment. When he was young he was isolated, partly by his intellectual interests but also because he was from a Roman Catholic, immigrant, working-class family. In the turbulent years of the late 1960s he was also an outsider, critical of the hippie movement and the radical social changes they represented. He seemed on the surface quite a reactionary, usually wearing a jacket and tie and highly critical of the changes society was undergoing.

I loved the weekly seminars at Louis' office above the main entrance of the Arts Building. You could see Sherbrooke Street from his office window. In the late afternoons of November and December there were office buildings with their lights on, visible across the McGill campus. If it was snowing the city seemed magical and distant. Usually, half way through the seminar, Louis would serve tea and biscuits to his students. Often visitors would drop by and sit slightly away from the table around which we sat; sometimes they participated, but often as not they just listened. They were there to listen to what Dudek had to say. There was Louis' wonderful teaching, his inquiring mind, his modest ability to listen with interest to the ideas of young people, his encouragement, his advice, and his obvious love for teaching and literature. I enjoyed sitting with him and listening to him talk; I enjoyed his physical presence and his kindness which was so reassuring.

Louis was part of an older generation whose poems we read in high school. He was the same generation as Irving Layton but there was also the generation before Dudek and Layton, such as Frank Scott, with whom Dudek was a great friend. We younger poets respected the older poets, not only for their work but because they were poets. The poets in Montreal created an environment

in which to be a poet was a possibility, not something alien and foreign. We didn't have to look to England or the United States for our example of what it meant to be a poet. Established poets lived among us, we saw them on the streets where we lived, we read their poems at school, and we read reviews of their books published in local newspapers.

I know that Louis did a lot for other people. As a poet, publisher, and university professor he was in the position where he could help people. He was always writing letters of recommendation for jobs and grants; publishing new poets; meeting people who wanted to talk with him. I remember showing Louis my poems in his office in early 1975. I remember how much it meant to me that he liked them. After that meeting he always treated me as a poet and not as a student. I left his office that day feeling on top of the world, knowing that the rest of my life as a poet was ahead of me. He wrote a short introduction to my first book, *The Trees of Unknowing* (1978) and offered to publish my second book. I participated in a group reading at McGill in 1990 that honoured Louis. In 1993, I nominated Louis for a life membership in the League of Canadian Poets, an organization he helped to found in the 1960s. Later, I introduced Dudek at the League's Annual General Meeting, held that year in Montreal, where he was presented with this honour.

During the early 1990s, Bruce Whiteman, who was head of Rare Books and Special Collections at the McLennan Library, McGill, organized a series of poetry readings. After the reading a group of us would walk down to Ben's, one of Dudek's favourite restaurants. I remember sitting in Ben's Restaurant in the Poet's Corner with Louis on those occasions, under photographs of Montreal poets he helped to have displayed. He devoted his long life to writing poems, to the literary community, to teaching, and to his family and friends. I have happy memories of him, he changed my life for the better, and it is an honour to have known Louis Dudek.

Susan Stromberg-Stein, a fellow student in my 1974 graduate seminar with Dudek, later wrote *Louis Dudek, A Biographical Introduction to his Poetry* (1983). Stromberg-Stein introduces her book with a quotation from Louis: "At the core of every work of literature stands the self, or the psyche of the author; it is the first and most readily available ground for interpretation, the meaning from which all universal meanings spring..."

I studied at McGill University only because I wanted Louis Dudek as one of my professors. He was the best teacher anyone could have. He acted out of love—he encouraged my writing, he wrote the preface to my first book of poems; he offered to publish my second book (*Divisions*, Coach House Press, 1983); he wrote letters of reference for me for grant applications; he wrote a letter of reference which helped secure the teaching position at Champlain College that I have held for twenty-six years now. It is with great fondness that I remember Louis Dudek and his long influence on my life.

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