

Poetic mêlée drama

A Montreal poet reflects on how the local scene has picked up speed in the past 10 years

by Artie Gold

TO SAY ONCE AGAIN that Montreal is finally coming of age, a mothballed cliché of the 1940s and 1950s, is a little silly, even if it weren't coming from our own mouths. To say that things are beginning to happen in Montreal, that Montreal is now going through an interesting phase, would be more correct. The crying need for an indigenous English publishing industry has been met, and in some ways exceeded. Certainly in the 10 years I have lived, written, and published in Montreal, I can say that it and I have developed some sort of eccentric rapport. I have watched an older generation draw back from the local scene, seen a Dudek, a Layton, a Cohen even, who though never far away are somehow no longer integral to the pulse of English poetry in the late 1970s. They teach, are adored, stand as good and bad examples, but we are the ones now in the *mêlée*.

And who are we? Well, there always is, thank God, an I to look out from. There are my immediate peers, many of whom teach poetry at community colleges, brought out their first books in the 1960s, and now stand as minor constellations' brighter stars, acolytes just beginning to stir around them: Peter Van Toorn, David Solway, Michael Harris, Richard Sommer, André Farkas, Claudia Lapp, Ken Norris. And newer even than them, a subgeneration half beside the above poets and half stemmed from them: Stephen Morrissey, John McAuley, Tom Konyves, Guy Birchard, Ray Filip. Then, these many names named and so few more needed to bridge the spaces in the finite list, what a shame not to name those who have come, stayed, passed through, and still remain with this city in some context or other. A nostalgic Fraser Sutherland, now moved to Pictou County, N.S.; an Opal L. Nations, here for a year or two and now residing in Toronto.

It seems to me that what has happened here has been the limited sum of exactly and only what or who has been active here, by which I mean that poetry in Montreal is a continuing act, a struggle, a living organism. From the virtual vacuum of the late 1960s, a few poets meeting and reading their brave poetry at a certain Karma Coffeehouse, a very articulate thing began to happen. Poets began meeting, discussing

where they could secure a permanent reading space. Véhicule Art Gallery, then a pioneering artspace on Ste. Catherine Street, began to be used for readings, and a series was organized that in its first year (1970) comprised 32 readings — everybody, literally everybody, around with a poem in hand. Then a gradual articulation, a decision to venture into publishing taken by four poets with Véhicule owner Ian Burgess, the task of printing given to a press that would become Véhicule Editions, its first four Eldorado chapbooks carried in only a few book stores: Mansfield Book Mart, Argo, The Word (then selling only from Adrian and Luci King-Edwards' living room until miraculously, the Chinese laundryman next door, *next door*, moved). Even in the living room, however, The Word began a reading series, albeit a small one, and bent their policy of carrying only used books to include the local new poetry chapbooks. Then the arrival of Delta Press, edited by Glen Siebrasse alone. In the mid-1960s Delta had been a triumvirate ruled by an older Louis Dudek, a middle-aged (relatively) Michael Gnarowski, and a youngish (comparatively) Siebrasse. I remember being asked at an early Eldorado strategy meeting to submit a chapbook and realizing that I had already placed all my eggs (poems, *fig.*) in Delta's basket. What a delight, I thought at the time, for one's first book to have two people eager to publish it.

Of the triumvirate only Dudek and Siebrasse stayed in Montreal; Gnarowski has moved on to Carleton University. Dudek left Delta and started DC Press, a way of coming to the rescue of young and worthy poets; while Delta, left to Siebrasse, collected Richard Sommer and Michael Harris and became New Delta, which continues to be fairly active in local publishing. To their credit: books by Sommer and Harris, David Solway, Marc Plourde (*The Spark Plug Thief*), Bob McGee, Robert Allen, and Anne McLean. And much has risen with Delta. Bonsecours Editions has published four or five books by local (chiefly women) poets, who somehow have been only marginally represented by other houses: Carol Leckner, Joan Thornton-McLeod, Patricia Ewing, Carol Ten Brink.

Meanwhile, Véhicule Press seems to be

pulling ahead, somehow ending up with more interesting poets (perhaps only my bias, but expect it). It certainly is the oldest, most active press here for English poets. Its books are distributed far beyond the city walls and are actually reprinted when an edition is sold out. Its recent effort is an Island-wide anthology of 22 Montreal poets, edited by Farkas and Norris and conceived as an ambassador to other cities of Canada, the U.S., wherever. Things may now begin to move at the speed of written poetry here, an overly optimistic view of one's guns, perhaps, but any optimism must spend all the currency around, appearing just as flush as creditable. That's its job.

Magazines. *CrossCountry* has weathered a three-year trial period and seems here and healthy among us, able to draw funds from private pockets when needed to branch out into publishing chapbooks as well. Its editor is Ken Norris. It has most recently been joined by *Versus*, founded by Fred Louder, poet, and by Villeneuve Press, run by Fred Louder, editor. *Versus* now is into its sixth number, and Villeneuve has brought out books by August Kleinzahler, Jack Hannan, and others, always others.

Book stores. It is a strange observation that a town's best reconnaissance points for the poet are the stores selling second-hand books and poetry — the stores that *care*. They represent some sort of pool deeper and often more varied in yield than the city's best library. I've already mentioned The Word and its biweekly readings (to go with Véhicule and its Sunday afternoons), Argo with its very pleasant Mr. George (Fred Louder also works there), Mansfield Book Mart (ask for Jack). I am not forgetting our all-Canadian book store, The Double Hook, sure to carry any title you can print if you do it in Montreal. The trick seems merely to lie in keeping Montreal in Canada. Oh, and we must not forget the doyen of a gossip column of a now-on-strike Montreal *Star*. Its book page improved immensely during the past year or so under Sheila Fischman, who now has gone back to translating.

It seems one is or isn't here. I mean one can be here lethargically, but it is the putting in of energy, time, often money, that keeps Montreal and its poetry alive. A tidal pool,

perhaps, this small English community isolated from the rest of English Canada and the United States, but it has its field marshals, its heroes, its lovers, its intrigues; always the new alongside the continuing, the waning, and the ceasing to be. The individual is the important quantity here, not the press, the group, the movement. The poet who can write with power, astound at a reading, fulfil promise with a book. I don't see any true central rallying point, any sure place or area where a new, important-to-be, somehow critical-to-all-at-any-given-time poet will emerge except as an individual force. No trendy regionalism wherein poets writing here one day slowly or suddenly are doing something somehow manifestly fated to be. Not here, where new ripples suddenly catch old ones, stealing with the capture some of their energy. □

When Delta was a high mark

Selected Essays and Criticism, by Louis Dudek, The Tecumseh Press, 380 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 919 662 609).

By SHERRY SIMON

"THIS IS MAINLY to let the reader know that the book is out; not the least service one can perform in a country which for the most extensive tracts has no book stores at all, or book stores which do not supply the best contemporary literature except on special order. . . ." Thus begins Louis Dudek's 1953 review of the translations of Ezra Pound. Its evocation of Canada's cultural misery during the 1940s and 1950s points to one of the central interests of Dudek's *Selected Essays and Criticism*. The collection can be read as a contribution to a future cultural history of Canada.

Spanning three decades of critical activity, from 1950 to the present, the essays not only provide important studies of major Canadian poets; they also chronicle the



development of the role of poetry in Canadian society. As poet, editor, anthologist, teacher, journalist, and critic, Louis Dudek has been involved in every aspect of poetry-making. He was editor of *Delta* from 1957 to 1966 and collaborated with numerous other little magazines, where most of the essays in this collection were first published. *Literature and the Press*, based on Dudek's doctoral research, was published in 1960. Dudek's essays then, like the poetry he prefers, are grounded in experience and an awareness of the social context of poetic activity.

The early essays evoke images of a vast and empty land, a "conventional, narrow and materialistic society" whose few poets, united in struggle against the Philistine society, huddle around mimeographed little magazines. Poetry is an expression of revolt; the poet is James Dean. "The way to freedom and order in the future will be through art and poetry," Dudek asserts. Most of the studies of this period are devoted to the Montreal poets F. R. Scott, A. M. Klein, and Irving Layton.

The short, almost hortatory pieces of the 1950s give way to longer, more analytical treatments of Canadian poets and traditions. Dudek turns from his own previously unqualified championing of Layton and Klein to more rigorous analysis of their work. The fight for the very existence of serious Canadian poetry has not become the struggle for the very highest standards of poetry and criticism.

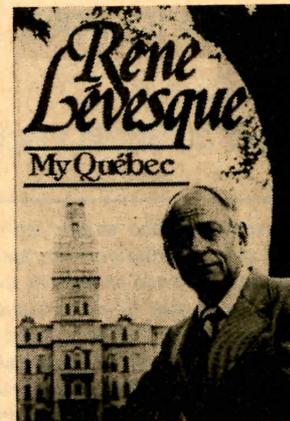
The values of his own poetic mission explain why Dudek did not exult in the burgeoning of poets and publications in the 1960s. The phenomenon of the "poet as popular hero" — Leonard Cohen, Al Purdy, Layton — for Dudek only obscured the work of less flamboyant but far superior poets such as Raymond Souster.

Dudek is remarkably consistent in his aims throughout the collection. Through analyses of the work of many of the major figures in Canadian poetry — including Lampman, Klein, Scott, Pratt, Souster, Mandel — Dudek argues for a Canadian poetry of value and of values. He maintains a long but evolving opposition to the mythopoetic theories of Northrop Frye: the initial uncompromising refusal becomes a more tempered response to formalism. Some of the more polemic pieces, however, come close to quibbling.

The essays are remarkable for their resistance to academic style. Such pieces as "The Role of the Little Magazine in Canada" and "The New Vancouver Poetry" make fascinating reading. And particularly interesting are Dudek's studies of French Canadian poets. Everywhere Dudek speaks with a conviction and a personal commitment that are as rare as they are admirable in a critical enterprise. The publication of this volume is a significant contribution to the tradition that Dudek himself has helped to build. The essays deserve the wide audience to which they are addressed. □

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