

REVIEWS**Desert Words: Eli Mandel's Poetry**

Andrew Stubbs and Judy Chapman, eds. *The Other Harmony: the Collected Poetry of Eli Mandel*. 2 Vols. Regina: University of Regina Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2000. xxviii + 752 pp.

In 1992, Canadian literature lost one of its most distinctive voices—academic, savvy, alienated, complex—when Eli Mandel passed away at the age of 70. In 1984 and 1992, Eli and Anne Mandel donated the poet's papers to the University of Manitoba, and on the turn of the millennium, having mined this material, editors Stubbs and Chapman brought out this impressive two-volume compilation of Mandel's verse. And it is impressive. The first volume contains in their entirety all six of Mandel's books of poetry—*Fuseli Poems* (1960), *Black and Secret Man* (1964), *An Idiot Joy* (1967), *Stony Plain* (1973), and *Out of Place* (1977)—as well as the early poems published with Gael Turnbull and Phyllis Webb in *Trio* (1954), the final version of "Mary Midnight," an "oratory" based on Christopher Smart (1979), the travel journal *Life Sentence* and its accompanying poems (1981), and endnotes referring to "handwritten notes on a number of manuscript pages that cast light on images, symbols, and allusions in Mandel's poetry" (1: xiv). The second volume contains Mandel's two selected volumes *Crusoe* (1973) and *Dreaming Backwards* (1981) as well as the poems Mandel collected as a student for the unpublished *Third Person Singular* (with Esther Gudjonson and Antony Thorne), eighty-two uncollected and unpublished poems, and further notes. Volume Two also contains cumulative indexes of first lines and of titles as well as a number of black and white photographs, some of which were originally printed in *Out of Place* while Anne Mandel, whose insight and guidance generally the editors have acknowledged, has supplied others.

The editors have done a serviceable job in presenting this material in a form that, as stated in the Foreword, takes as its "overall purpose" a desire to "make Mandel's work available to a wide contemporary audience" (1: xiv). One could quibble with some of the prefatory material—the editors do not explain where the student material in *Third Person Singular* comes from or give dates for it, for example—but on the whole, the edition is carefully prepared. To the

uninitiated, it may seem somewhat maladroit for the editors to publish a second volume that is mainly comprised of poems Mandel reprinted in his two volumes of selected poems—that is, poems that can be found in Volume One. It is a little unusual to lump together juvenilia, unpublished works, and the texts of selected volumes. Another solution to the problem might have been to arrange the poems in chronological order beginning with the poems in *Trio*, and then select the best copy text in each case while recording all significant variants in footnotes or in an appendix. It must be said, however, that the editors' decision to include the texts of the selected volumes is in keeping with the poet's long-standing fascination with doubles, doppelgangers, and repetition in both his life and his art. The editors acknowledge that their commentary "in the 'Notes' section . . . aims to be neither exhaustive nor formal" (1: xv), yet one would wish that there were considerably more explanatory material available here. As it is, there are nine pages of notes referencing some seven hundred pages of text. Mandel's is a 'difficult, lonely music,' and a more compendious referential apparatus would, I should think, only serve to help secure a wider audience. This would have been in keeping with the poet's decision in his later books to embrace the contingent, the raw facts of life, as opposed to the cooked books of universalist Literature. Isn't this why the travel journals in *Life Sentence* have been included in an edition of collected poetry?

Andrew Stubbs and his colleague at the University of Regina Judy Chapman are well suited as editors for this project: professor Stubbs in particular insofar as he is the author of a book on Mandel's writing, *Myth, Origins, Magic: A Study of Form in Eli Mandel's Writing* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1993). Stubbs was also one of the three or four theory-oriented, language-and-rhetoric critics who achieved a breakthrough in Mandel's critical reputation in the 1991-92 Eli Mandel Issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*. The studies published in this special issue together with an older essay by Peter Stevens, another by Smaro Kamboureli, the monograph on Mandel in *Canadian Writers and Their Works* by Dennis Cooley, and a close reading of a poem in *Life Sentence* by Mandel's erstwhile travel companion W.H. New, comprise the main critical horizon against which his collected poems must be read. Reading through this material, the key terms are readily apparent: locality, psychoanalysis, post-modernism, and an unresolved debate between, as it were, the uni-

versal (the British tradition; Northrop Frye) and the particular (the American tradition; Charles Olson) as constitutive values in the creation of meaningful art. In a sometimes bewildering panoply of speculative thinking, the poems, the attendant criticism, and Mandel's own criticism and published interviews present the reader with a body of work that seems less an *oeuvre* than an over-charged energy-field or perhaps a battlefield. As Stubbs says, "The sense of patterns repeating, therefore, in Mandel's writing, creates a special kind of uncertainty, or even anxiety, as the reader is compelled to respond not in a critical so much as clinical way to the text" ("A Study" 214). Earlier criticism—not able or willing to be "clinical"—often had to confess its bafflement with Mandel's poetics. Thus it is in the criticism of those who have learned most from rhetoric, linguistics, and psychoanalysis that the breakthrough has come. This is a poet best appreciated with haemostat, forceps and scalpel.

Born in 1922, raised as a Jew in small-town Saskatchewan, a job working for a pharmacist landed him a stint in the Army Medical Corps during World War Two. It would appear that Mandel came home from the war a permanently scarred man—a man destined to become for the rest of his life what was then called (derogatively) a "D.P.," a Displaced Person. Neither in childhood nor in adult life would he ever be able to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of living at home among neighbours in a community. This helps to explain the profound alienation one finds everywhere in his writings. Mandel excelled in graduate school at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Toronto. His particular kind of intelligence found its fit subject in the eccentric but vatic eighteenth-century British poet Christopher Smart for both M.A. and Ph.D. theses. Gregarious, he became an intimate of the Toronto literary circles of the time. Later, through his work on Irving Layton, whom he greatly admired, Mandel also made important contacts in the Montreal literary scene. Mandel's post-college gypsy-scholar years were spent in transit between Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta. He finally settled down at York University in Toronto in 1967, where he remained until retirement. All of the "prairie poems" of the 1970s represent visits back home, rather than any long-term experience of the life and culture of the region.

His first published poems in *Trio* (1954) at the age of 32 are academic and derivative; they are also mythological in the manner of Jay Macpherson and James Reaney, poets, like Mandel, who were

very much influenced by Northrop Frye. Yet the structure of this book (a reprise of the student effort in *Third Person Singular*) reveals Mandel's genius for organizing the writers of his generation into collaborative units focused on the production of volumes of poetry and criticism. In this vein (reminiscent of A.J.M. Smith), Mandel became one of the gate-keepers and power-brokers of the Canadian Literature Establishment beginning with early essays on Frye's "Cultural Revolution" (in the very first issue of *Canadian Literature*) and "Recent Canadian Poetry" and the publication of his first (dilettantish) book *Fuseli Poems* in 1959 and 1960. In *Black and Secret Man* (1964), his next book of poems (not well received), Mandel struck a "black romantic" pose reminiscent of Layton, and in 1966 brought out his first volume of criticism. Several influential anthologies and editions of criticism (his own and his peers') were to follow. The Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1967 for *An Idiot Joy* consolidated his position.

An Idiot Joy is the key chapter in *The Other Harmony*. In this text, Mandel came under the influence of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and the Black Mountain school of poetry—especially Robert Creeley. Yet his earlier allegiances to Yeats, Eliot, Auden, and Frye's mythological thinking were still with him. In many ways the two currents of influence are at odds if not at war within the textuality of his poems. "The Moon in All Her Phases" is but one example of this ultimately enervating tension:

I'd say, in the old manner:
she imagines our existence,
its changes, illusions

well, luminous times are gone
most of my friends quarrel
drink
 are not, though satyrs,
lordly,
 recently one in rage
told me he loved the first war
because they sang such songs

we grope toward each other
hands fumble among clothes

I can't remember:

did your eyes
your body grow?
I can't remember
the difficult lovely words.

It is not only literary influences that are tearing at each other here, but Mandel's personal relationship with his Jewish culture, too, is being worn down. As Cooley says, "Mandel relinquishes his literary past and its high modernism, yes, but he at the same time casts aside his cultural ancestry" (235). Indeed, all moorings to either the High World of Literature or the low world of life are being cut away. As Baudrillard has been quoted in the popular movie, 'Welcome to the desert of the real!' Thus, in the last journal entry in *Life Sentence* (Mandel's last book, published at the age of only 55), he is tragically and not at all ironically merely at the beginning of the process that may finally lend him a sense of belonging, a sense of place such as that which others have:

March. Regina.

I've come here to write a book. As writer-in-residence in a library. When did I begin writing this story? Here, in Regina, books around me, the library that contains the library. And outside, the plains, and myself looking at myself walking past the house in which I lived/live. And Suknaski brings a poem to my apartment, "Betrayal Beginning in Dreams."

We are writing each other's poems.

Dark Ukrainian boy, I know your home, your young years, lost.

We write ourselves into existence

On the plains.

Invisible.

Ukrainians.

Jews.

For Mandel, the contact with authenticity will always be a betrayal that began in dreams, in childhood (in a prairie experience that never existed). "Place is evasive" (Frey 164). Experiential contact is displaced. Belonging will always belong to someone else. Mandel's poetry realizes itself through collaboration with the other, or through duplicity to use Mandel's famously favourite word. His pose as the "violated visionary . . . the black and secret man" whose doppelgangers signify the "onset of prophetic powers" (Cooley 228, 262)—a 'Smart' of twentieth-century contingency and silence

(the silence of a psychoanalytic oceanic state)—is undermined throughout the oeuvre by his inability simply to be himself.

The poem "Desert Words" in *Story Plain* (1973) painfully records this sense of a writer who finds it impossible to speak without deferring to another, the sense of being ensnared by one's own knowledge and intelligence within the aporia between difference and deference, or to put it another way, between the culture-doyens and the marginalized. In this text, Mandel tells us outright that he really has "nothing to say except / Williams' words." Mandel quotes Williams' poem "The Desert Music": "I am a poet! I / am, I am, I am a poet. I / reaffirmed, ashamed." The remainder of the poem is comprised of a small jumble of phrases and the (Coleridgean) "place echoes" of the words "I am"—"lost words" that can sometimes record "this voice" (180). The poet as a lost soul is a recurrent motif in Mandel. "And so it goes," says Cooley. "Mandel goes in search of himself, a lost self, an other self, ventriloquist" (266) seeking an/other voice, a voice that may not suffer so from alienation. Yet even the malaise and despair one senses from this broken poem is dissipated in the reader's response by the knowledge that this is Creeley's emotional forte. In 1978, Mandel published a then widely read *Saturday Night* article on Leonard Cohen in which he praised what he saw in Cohen as a "Brilliant Con Game." An imprecise assessment perhaps, but *The Other Harmony: the Collected Poetry of Eli Mandel* should make it easier for future readers to determine whether or not that article revealed more about its author than it did its subject.

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