

Eli Mandel: Insensitivity becomes trivia

...lama sabachtani?

Mandel man delicate
poet man delusional
dreamer go to hellenism
for your awful orphic laughter
hell is not in the holocaust
you're only red about. Hel
is in the reading of
the listening to
the hearing of the
hell of self-annihilation
you are reading in hell
Mandel laughing at the death of self while
searching for the self
selfish pursuit of the
self-centred place which
is out of place know your
place in Saskatchewan
wan smiles one does
at the Sask watch
lumbering through literature
and feeling no feeling in
the pages of his red skin
your poems are a soo to
pierce my side

by
Rosaleen Moran

Last week the U of A hosted the celebrated Canadian poet Eli Mandel. Mandel spoke on the subject of 'Literacy and Culture' on Wednesday evening, and gave a reading of his poetry the following day. I did not manage to attend the lecture on Wednesday evening and I confess to remaining for only a portion of the reading on Thursday. It was sufficient.

The reading began with Mandel's humorous 'instruction sheet' on "How to write a Suicide Note," "27 Ways of Committing Suicide," and a reading from his set of poems entitled "Doubles," from his latest book *Out of Place*.

The poems entitled "Doubles" explore the theme of duplicity, and provide a sensitive look at the dichotomies of vision, substance and form which exist in peoples, places and things. In everything Mandel sees, he sees double. He sees the black and the white, the past and the present, the innocence as well as the wickedness and says that nothing is ever only what it seems to be. I agree, for his poems are both good and bad enough to allow me to see the duplicity of his own posture as a sensitive and dedicated poet.

In Mandel's 'search for identity' (*out of place*, 1977), he examines his Jewish heritage, and time and time again he refers to 'Jewish rural historical nostalgia', 'Jewishness', 'the Jewish holocaust' etcetera, etcetera, in an attempt to elicit a sympathetic response to the centuries of problems which have beset those of the Jewish race.

"...the search for the self"

Apart from the fact that both the theme of the 'search for the self', as well as 'the cry of the impassioned Zionist' have been greatly overdone, both themes are useless as poetic material regardless of the psychological pull of the former and the political 'necessity' of the latter. The constant 'search for the self' is, at best, an act of psychological masturbation which provides nothing of universal import or interest. Articles, books and poems which refer to problems of the Jewish people, written by Jewish writers, are fast coming to be regarded as the 'Psychiatric Couch of Israel', and are as predictable as snow in January. The fact that their everlasting, cathartic bitterness no longer holds anyone's interest except their own, causes even this subject to become another form of in-group psychological masturbation. Worse—it amounts to a boring, masochistic wringing of the newly-circumcised penis. Is there nothing more than this?

Mandel's 'book of style for the world-be suicide' consisted of such trite lines as "when writing a suicide note, always use the first person singular" (Ha! Ha!), "when writing anything, you should always think of the beginning, the middle and the end, but when



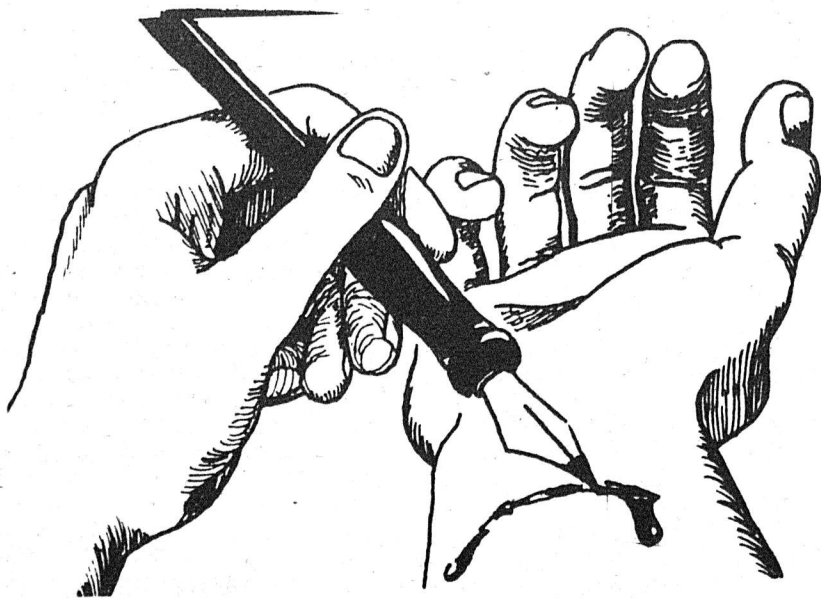
writing a suicide note—just think of the end" (Hee! Hee!), "never use such trite lines as "Goodbye cruel world" (Ho! Ho!) Ho! Hum! These are the comments of a man whom we regard as a sensitive poet?"

Dr. Mandel must be aware of the existence of those sadistic, un-funny ethnic 'jokes' which purport to find humor in the horror of the Jewish holocaust. It is dubious whether Mandel is old enough to have actually experienced personal pain as a result of this tragedy, or if he did, he must have been very young and has had sufficient time to overcome real pain. Yet there are people in Alberta for whom the pain of loss from the suicide of a loved one is recent enough to be raw. For Mandel to attempt to elicit a compassionate awareness of the problems of the Jews through the medium of his poetry while finding humor in the personal despair of others, shows a shocking lack of sensitivity. You can do better Professor Mandel. You are obliged to do better, if only out of sheer tact.

Suicide not a topic for flippancy

It is no secret that the problem of suicide in this province has reached such serious proportions that last year our Government found it necessary to hire the services of a professional Suicidologist. It is not only a matter of record that 350 people kill themselves annually in Alberta; this fact has been widely publicized by all media. While we are all shocked to read that 500 people die as a result of traffic accidents, each year, and while it is important for us to do everything we can to reduce the numbers of traffic deaths, it is also important for us to remember that these deaths are accidental. The fact that 350 people die as a result of suicide is another matter entirely. The people who die from suicide die because of their inability to cope with the insensitivities of their society.

For Mandel to come to Alberta without acquainting himself with a problem which has received much media publicity and present us with a reading of 'poetry' which laughs at the problem shows a surprising lack of public awareness. There is no suggestion here that it is possible for every writer to be aware of every problem that exists in every area, but there is a strong suggestion that a university which claims to be interested in the surrounding community, should be sufficiently interested in the problems of that community as to suggest the omission of these particular poems from the reading.



My criticism cannot be limited to a mere protest a reading of such work; I must go further and question the reason for the existence of such 'poems'. Such insensitive trivia as the 'suicide poems' which appeal to the baser instincts (at last mine), or any work which causes us to feel that despair is a topic for laughter, is not only irresponsible, it is as boring as a thrice-heard pun.

the purpose of the pen

"If there is any reason for poetry, if there is any reason to think that poets have anything at all worth saying, then it is reasonable to say that poets must write what they believe in, in order that they might be taken seriously. The pen is mighty, and the words and the works of a serious and dedicated poet do much to influence the opinions of the reading public. The poet has a responsibility to interpret human emotion and to revere human life. Anything less is sheer irresponsibility. But the irresponsibility of Eli Mandel is a doubt he might well pay more heed to than the plurality of mirrored eyes. His vision must extend beyond the 'search for the singularity of the self' to an awareness of the position of other writers.

If Dr. Mandel chooses to write such stuff as 'suicide' or 'headline' trivia, and hope that we will continue to regard him as an eminent figure of the Canadian poetic scene, then he must realize that his work reflects on equally good, but lesser known poets causing all to be viewed as literary lightweights.

Duplicity exists in Mandel's work on many levels, not all of them deliberate. His work is a combination of the sublimely sensitive and the crudely insensitive. His poems range from acute awareness to blundering boredom. These are faults any writer may be found guilty of—and survive, but when a work becomes so offensive, that work is clearly out of place and is not worth the paper it's written on.

The reading of poetry is declared a crime

The black and secret
man delights with
idiot joy within the
slaughterhouse of
human pain. Strange
places are within these
words and worlds of
him whose dinner is
the cannibalism of
another's belch of chicken.
Belch out your gaseous
vision, and ignite the
fuse of hellish desperation
if you will, while I will speak of what I know
and shake the metaphor
of your double ruptured hand
with a whisper.