

ELI MANDEL -- ON POEMS AND POETRY

Eli Wolf Mandel was born in 1922, in Estevan, Saskatchewan. He received his B.A. and M.A. at the University of Saskatchewan, and his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. He came to the Department of English at U of A in 1957.

Professor Mandel is a well-known poet whose poems have appeared during the past twelve or thirteen

years in various magazines, such as The Northern Review, Contact, CIV/n, Queen's Quarterly, The Tamarack Review, Canadian Forum, and others. Several of his poems were included in Canadian, British and American anthologies, and he also appeared on the CBC program "Athology". A wide selection of his poetry was published in Trio (1954), a volume presenting works by Eli

Mandel, Phyllis Webb and Gail Turnbull. His latest volume, *Fuseli Poems*, was published this year by the Contact Press in Toronto.

He is the 1956-60 recipient of the Canada Foundation Fellowship in Creative Writing.

At present, Dr. Mandel is editing an anthology of young Canadian poets "who deserve to be known better", to be published next spring.

By John Marki

Modern poetry, with all the animated, indeed, passionate arguments about it, is not so much a master of controversy as a case of relative ignorance. Bewildered by the apparent explosions in form, meaning and appeal, and by an often irritating obscurity, we often forget that whatever its approach, poetry's concern today is essentially the same as has been through the ages. This realization appears to be the most important general conclusion gained from the conversation we had some days ago with Professor Mandel, one of the best-known contemporary Canadian poets.

Our conversation began with a question about Dr. Mandel's first start as a poet, his first publications and literary associations. He told us that his first published poems appeared during his undergraduate years in *The Sheaf*, the student paper of the Saskatoon campus.

"We had a very good literary page in *The Sheaf*, and there were some highly talented people on the literary staff, people who later became well-known artists. Frances Hyland, the actress, for instance, also Anthony Thorne, the painter, and John Stedmond, now editor of *Queen's Quarterly*; these people helped me a lot, not simply by publishing my poems but also by the discussions and arguments we had."

We asked if these discussions concerned literary theory, and before we knew it, we were into the middle of a fascinating, if rather involved, discussion on modern poetry in general. "Theory", Dr. Mandel said, "never really enters the writing of my poems. First come the poems, then comes theory."

It was at this point that we took the plunge: What starts the poems then? What is "inspiration?" "An image, usually, or quite often a dramatic situation," Dr. Mandel answered. "The same images may appear again and again in several poems, often in variants or modulations, developing a set or pattern. The image in the first of the *Fuseli Poems*, for instance, 'The Fire Place,' is modulated in other poems into a labyrinth or a castle. The castle-image generates another one, an image within the image, as you will find in 'Fuseli: Girl Combing Her Hair, Watched by a Young Man.'

"The images follow each other, or develop, as in a dream or in a nightmare, for the *Fuseli Poems* could also be called 'nightmare poems'. Hence the title of the collection." Henry Fuseli was a Swiss-born painter who lived in England in the second half of the eighteenth century. Several of his paintings are meant to represent nightmares, and have puzzled and fascinated critics ever since they were first exhibited. "I've long felt a great sympathy for Fuseli," Dr. Mandel said. "He, too was an artist, a Jew, a professor, and he has something like the artistic approach that I want."

But what exactly is this nightmare-poetry? we asked. And does it account for the generous amount of obscurity that, we had to admit, we found in the *Fuseli Poems* and in modern poetry in general?

The poet's total desires, Dr. Mandel said in his reply, come into conflict with society and with actuality. As a consequence of the repression of these desires, the vision of the poet takes the form of a nightmare, in much the same manner



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as dreams themselves are the unconscious release of repressions.

The obscurity in modern poetry is explained, then, first of all by this dream—or nightmare—quality of the poetic experience itself. But obscurity is also deliberate, to a degree, and in the sense that it is a defence put up by the poet. He has a secret, as it were (the conflict between the individual desires and actuality), and while he wants to tell it all, he must not.

This idea of poetry is Freudian in that it holds that the (dream-) images reflect a dramatically created mind, not necessarily that of the poet but of the speaker. And because it implies that the mind reflected is also the mind of society, it owes much to Jung's psychology of archetypes. In expressing the nightmare the poet to some extent comes to terms with it. And, again, since it is an archetypal experience, one would assume cathartic functions in the reader.

"Of course," Dr. Mandel added, "these are only general statements, and general statements on poetry are not to be trusted."

And once obscurity is mentioned as characteristic of modern poetry, one must not forget about irony which is just as characteristic and paramount. Referring to his own poems, Dr. Mandel distinguished three kinds of irony. The tension itself between society and the individual creates a permanent ironical undertone. Also, there is the poet's ambiguous attitude towards his own poetry: he may not be sure that he is not taking something very serious-

ly that society will not consider as serious. To cover up his fear of "making a fool of himself", a "defensive" irony enters his poems. Finally, the feeling that the view of society is radically different from his own can place the poet in an ironically inverted situation. He may become like the madman who thinks that society around him is insane, and he is the only sane person in the world. Such was the case of Christopher Smart, for instance.

At this point we asked Dr. Mandel if this concept of poetry, in his opinion, was a new, a "modern" one, and what connection, if any, did it have with tradition.

"In the expression of the nightmare-theme and of the poet's sense of alienation," he answered, "I think that my poetry is traditional. I think these are traditional themes."

Especially in English poetry was the nightmare-theme traditional. Spenser, Shakespeare, in the sonnets, Milton, Blake, Shelley, Tennyson, to mention only a few, are visionary poets, or "nightmare-poets", and this approach is in the main line of tradition. The other approach is imitative or mimetic poetry. Mimesis and myth-making both involve a view of reality; the essence of poetry, after all, is in the permanent tensions of these views and in the effort to resolve them, to come to terms with them. In these efforts one attempts a total commitment.

That brings up the problem of form, doesn't it? we asked.

"Form is a matter of a lot of hard work and practice", Dr. Mandel replied. Revisions are extremely im-

portant. One has certain "touchstones" or standards, in the sense Arnold or Eliot use the term, and one rewrites the poems according to them, "over and over and over again." Even then, lapses may occur, and so, ultimately, as far as form is concerned, "you play it by ear. You can't learn it, you can't fake it, you know when you have it and know when you haven't got it." No poet knows just which particular poem or passage will be successful, and public acceptance can substantially disagree with his own preferences.

Do you have personal favorites among the *Fuseli Poems*?

"I suppose I do," Dr. Mandel answered. "I'm satisfied with 'Ducks in a Pond', for instance. There is a movement in this poem from particular to general to particular again; from the first image to another generated by it, then back to the first again, amplified, as it were, by the comment the second image made upon it. It's as toic poem, a poem that 'accepts things':

... Poise of mallards in a pool
as in the pupils of an eye
where fire
burned on water seems a
pose of praise
sufficient for the gabble of
my days."

Another one of Dr. Mandel's favorites among the *Fuseli Poems* is the ironical "Mail Order Catalogue", a poem he calls a modern version of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Just as in Keats' poem the urn becomes a catalogue of images frozen into one single moment that knows no time, a modern-day mail order catalogue is a

... paradigm of experience
from beginning: abdominal
belts
to end: zippers lightning
It represents the labyrinth of modern world, in an ironical juxtaposition of contemporary and romantic images:
... hired men walking on
the hill
all in a blaze of fire, the wire
strung from their hands like
harps
fencing acres
stays, pants,
the attic urn ...

The poet is in this labyrinth, in this castle that represents experience, or the rigidities of his own personality, but, and this is very important, sometimes he breaks out.

"So far, in this discussion," said Dr. Mandel, "we've placed too great an emphasis on the irrational, ironic, alien, subversive qualities of poetry, neglecting those qualities that I hope my poetry also expresses: the feeling for the object itself, the validity of sensation. Love, passion, insight, intelligence, order, compassion.

I feel quite strongly that, as Wilfred Owen put it, 'the poetry is in the pity.' This pity or compassion means comprehension in the total sense. It means understanding the situation that you and the other person, as human beings are in. "My poems," he added, "are not selfish. I want them to be constructive, I want them 'to rebuild Arcady again'. They're not only the expression of the conflict of desire and experience and of the resulting nightmare, they're also a statement, an affirmation that we're capable of coming to terms with experience and with the nightmare."

Are you aware of influences in your poetry? we asked.

"Certainly," Dr. Mandel answered. "Ever since my earliest childhood I've been aware of poetry itself, especially bad poetry. I was brought up on Elbert Hubbard, Scrapbook, and on pulp magazine fiction. And as the awareness grew, influences grew also. In high school I wrote much bad poetry, derivative, imitative verse, very bad Shelley, very bad Keats, and also some comic

poems.

"After the war, I spent a term at one of the so-called 'khaki-universities' in England. It was there that I met for the first time people who took poetry seriously, and it was there that poetry became a vital concern of mine. I began to read modern poetry intensively, and the first significant influences on my own verse were the 'great' names in modern literature: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Stevens. Also Hardy, who I especially like. Those were the people that seemed the most important at that time. Today Canadian poets have the strongest influence on me. The present literary situation in Canada can make serious poetry possible, and Canadian poetry today is as lively as any that's being written anywhere. James Reaney, Irving Layton, Wilfred Watson write poetry that influences me. I owe a great deal also to F. R. Scott, Louis Dudek, John Sutherland, Raymond Soustes, Northrop Frye, and first of all, A. J. M. Smith. They all have helped me a lot, publishing my poems, encouraging or advising my work."

Northrop Frye's name led the conversation to criticism. "I don't believe", said Dr. Mandel, "that criticism is a parasitic activity." It is a creative activity in Arnold's and Frye's terms, and its role is, as Arnold praised it, to provide "an intellectual climate" for poetry. The critic's task (and in this regard, Dr. Mandel follows Northrop and Frye) is not to evaluate or rank poetry in order of merit, but to try to find out as precisely as possible what the poet is saying. Poets themselves ought to be critics, too, even though few of them are good critics of their own work, and shouldn't be trusted when they talk about it. But poets are usually extremely good critics of others, and in English literature there's a great tradition of brilliant poet-critics, like Sidney, Dryden, Coleridge, Arnold or Eliot.

"I now regard poetry", Dr. Mandel said in conclusion, "as a normal activity in my days. That is to say, do it constantly even if with varying intensity. One poem seems to generate another, and also poetically luckier days are often followed by not so fortunate ones. But whichever way it is, poetry has become an essential part of my life."

Finally, answering our last (we must confess, rather stereotyped) question, Dr. Mandel cautioned against any generalized advice "to the young". He things that reading contemporary poetry will give the best encouragement to young writers. In practice that means the reading of such magazines as *Delta*, *Prism*, *Canadian Forum*, or *Alphabet*. Then he recalled the episode of how Archibald Lampman found encouragement reading Sir Ch. G. D. Roberts' *Orion*. "The real source of creativity", he concluded, "is the discovery that someone in the same situation is doing the sort of thing you'd like to do. And that is simply writing, and writing well."

AG BANQUET

Agriculture's Class of '61 held its banquet and formal dance Saturday, January 21 in the Macdonald Hotel. Approximately 200 people heard toasts and addresses by Students' Union President Alex McCalla, Dr. A. W. Henry, Mr. N. H. Bogner, Mr. O. G. Wasuita, and Ag Dean C. F. Bentley.

Guest speaker was Professor W. Pilkington, assistant to the dean of education, who spoke on "stereotypes". His talk stressed that students should reason, and not be stereotype quoters of knowledge. He urged the graduating class to pass on their University knowledge, emphasizing the need to be fluent with the English language and the art of speaking.

Entertainment was provided by signers Norm Bogner and Vern Gledie. Tommy Banks' Orchestra