

THE POLITICS OF ART

Eli Mandel's "Journals"

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WHAT MIGHT WELL BE the inaugural question of the “Journals” section of Eli Mandel’s *Life Sentence* is “When do language and place become identical?”¹ In response to this query, Smaro Kamboureli has remarked:

Although [Mandel] does not provide the answer, within the grammar of question there is already an implicit assertion: language and place can become identical. The convergence of these two orders of reality is a matter of time: ‘When do language and place become identical?’ Mandel also asks.²

The answer *to*, and, indeed, the answerability *of*, this question is exactly what I wish to concern myself with here because it touches on the political aspects of Mandel’s writing — which have frequently been overlooked by commentators.

Mandel, of course, intends *Life Sentence* to be taken as a “political” document, “something resonating out of dreams — dreams of examinations, trials, streets too ominous to walk down” (*Life Sentence*, 7). But what, precisely, does Mandel’s use of this term denote — if dreams, also, are “political” texts?

Let us start by noting that the question of when language and place become one is a mechanism for generating writing: it is the question of how to write given, as Mandel has elsewhere stated, “the impossibility of writing.”³ In this sense, the question is a device, a tactic, an incantation designed to give the poet access to a universe of discourse. This is the “conservative” dimension of writing: what the poet commits to utterance is what he “saves,” which implies a war of words, or between words and silence. There is, however, more to it than this. There is also the problem of what the writer does not say, what he leaves, or casts, out, what he forgets, or for some other reason “fails” to speak. The question of how or, better, where to begin, is already for Mandel a subversive one because it verges on the memory of an exiled portion of existence, a memory not of presence, then, but of absence, death. While writing may be a form of recollection (as Freud tells us it is), it is also an instance of the uncanny: the writer is never at home; he is always in foreign territory.⁴

The uncanny begins with substitution, it may be the most powerful human capacity. Learn the connections of failure, ritual, magic: redundancy, reduplication. (The world begins to begin *elsewhere*.) (*Life Sentence*, 55)

The writer may feel closer to foreign places than to his "own" home, closer to the "other" (or what Mandel would call his "double") than himself: "May 1980, I hear Jack Hodgins say the sea that washes on the shore of his home is the same as the sea that washes on Marquez's and so South Africa is closer to him than Toronto" (*Life Sentence*, 56). Under such conditions of language, the writer is a secret agent. His place is not home itself, or anything which can be signified by the term "home," or, as a matter of fact, anything which can be determined by words themselves. At best, his home-place, or place of writing, is a mock-home, a "substitute" home. Contrary to Kamboureli's claim, then, the question of when language and place become identical contains not an "assertion," exactly, so much as a misprision. Language and place *cannot* become one, and *when* they do, they point to horror, bondage, catastrophe. They point to the ultimate destination of all remembering (for the writer, for the writer as Jew): to the death camp itself, to, say, the "Auschwitz" of Mandel's "memorial" poem.⁵

There is, perhaps, no place which is more verbally realized than Auschwitz; it is, as it were, a book-space, the "having spoken," as Robert Kroetsch would say.⁶ It is the closure which makes all future statement unnecessary, redundant, which turns statement into mis-statement. In Mandel's "Auschwitz" poem (included in his earlier collection, *Stony Plain*), there is a sense above all that the death camp is a house of words, encyclopedic, aphoristic:

the name is hard
 a German sound made out of
 the gut guttural throat
 y scream yell ing open
 voice mouth growl
and sweat
 "the only way out of Auschwitz
 is through the chimneys"
of course
 that's second hand that's told
 again

The word space which is Auschwitz is always "second hand," always "later," which tells us that the particular problem which the poet confronts, when setting out to write (to *place* language), is what Harold Bloom names as the anxiety of influence: the writer's initial sense that all his meanings have been spoken before, that meaning itself has become exhausted, that inscription itself ("Auschwitz / in GOTHIC lettering") is a shadow cast by the lingering dead.

That language is the after-life of history is endemic to all of Mandel's writing, and has to do with the paradisaical taint, so to speak, which attaches to words, even while he composes them into new abstractions. In his reflections on the writing of the "Auschwitz" poem ("Auschwitz: Poetry of Alienation") he has traced his generation as a poet back to the profane, to his reading, after the war, of Thomas

Mann's "Introduction" to *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, where "Mann is defending Nietzsche's position in *The Birth of Tragedy*":

The truth is that life has never been able to do without the morbid, and probably no adage is more inane than the one which says, that "only disease comes from the diseased." Life is not prudish and it is probably safe to say that life prefers creative genius-bestowing disease a thousand times over to prosaic health . . .⁷

Placed beside Mandel's "Auschwitz" poem, this passage provides a rationale of the irrational. At any rate, it hints at what Mandel would designate as the "unconscious" of art. The link between language and place becomes a metaphysics, or binding contract between the parts of speech, and also the sign of an agreement, a covenant, gone awry. In this way, for him, the Holocaust becomes the type, or theme, of "late" twentieth-century writing generally characterized as postmodern. It becomes a sort of repatriation of the deconstructive gesture itself.

Mandel is a writer for whom a theory of art or, at least, a theory of composition (what Bloom would call 'askesis') is necessary for any creative endeavour; i.e., such a hypothesis is foregrounded, is *consciously* present, in the *duration* of any linguistic act. His work, then, might be said to be a travesty of Frye's notion of a utopian literary universe inhabiting every unique verbal construction. For Mandel, then, Auschwitz is the palace of art itself; it is "tradition"; it is the place of fathers. The union of time and place, language and locality, is an economy of death. And it is one of the peculiarities of Mandel's style, necessitated by his use of the death camp as a metaphor for writing, that evil is domestic: Auschwitz is (uncannily) a suburb of the imagination. Indeed, if there is an "archetype" behind his symbolization of the (ancestral) past as the site of a catastrophe, of bondage and flight, it is Milton's Pandemonium, that structure of rhetoric whose being is presented in the depths of the abyss itself, but which can only ever be the parody of another heaven, "elsewhere." Mandel is a traveller through earth's ruins, and in the blending of locales both foreign and Canadian, renders the whole concept of home-space, self-space, ambiguous. Mandel's "Journals" are, in effect, spy stories (the poet is always crossing borders, always in enemy country).

WE MIGHT RECALL that Mandel's previous collection of poems, *Out of Place*, is the history of a return to the site/sight of his birth, Estevan, Saskatchewan, a journey, we might note, which is not completed, but which gives rise to strategies of evasion, delays, as if home is somehow a prohibited place, the one place the writer must not enter. The paradox, here, is that for Mandel going home is not a voyage to the centre but to the periphery, a movement "west," or, as he has called it, "writing west."⁸ In other words, going home is a network of departures, not arrivals, a falling into, and through, the conflict-ridden schemas

of language itself. This, of course, is the overlying pattern of the "Journals," but what it tells us about all Mandel's travels is that they are camouflages — i.e., re-writings — of the family romance itself. Such an "over-writing" or retelling, in various forms, of the same story, suggests a narrative structure which both reveals and conceals: a structure thus remarkably akin to that of neurosis. Freud, as a matter of fact, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, posits, against the conservative character of the instincts, that organic development is due to the operation of "external, disruptive and diverting influences."⁹ Repetition, then, is an outward momentum; and it is here that it becomes possible to say that the "redundancy" of Mandel's prose journals is an attempt to exteriorize writing, to (re-)enter language not introspectively, but as history. Samuel Weber, in *The Legend of Freud*, summarizes Freud's contentions in a manner which could be a gloss on Mandel's whole view of the writer's relation to his "telling":

In short, Freud must *depart* from his attempt to think repetition as a movement of identity — to think, in short, repetition as such — and instead attempt to think it as departure. To do this, he must partition the origin so that the walls of its Fort! are no longer impervious to an exteriority, without which Life can never depart. For it is only as the effect of a double or split origin, an origin that is dislocated and disrupted by "external" forces — influences which leave their mark upon us — that the drives can be conceived as repetition. What they repeat, however, is no longer simply the "same" — the Fort! that is Da! — but rather a *da* that is *fort*: elsewhere, and yet also here: the "modification" or "alteration" (*Veränderung*) which is repeated as the imprint, the Abdruck of an irreducible alterity. This Abdruck, then, is what gives the drives their distinctive character. In the final analysis, "im letzten Grunde," what the drives repeat is neither a ground nor an abyss, but a violent process of in-scription, alteration, and perhaps above all: narration.¹⁰

That this recapitulation may serve as the "epic" ground/plan of Mandel's "Journals" is indicated by the fact that memory, as it is crafted by the "small" space of the diary entry, is in effect a "diachronic" process. That is, between language and place which, taken together, herald the symmetry which is the shape of cognition itself, Mandel is working out a problem in dislocation. The major framework for this splitting, as it were, of his "origin," is provided by landscape: the environments through which he moves begin to take on the configurations of fathers (mountains) or mothers (India). Again, the worlds he enters for the "first" time, ostensibly, are commemorative of places he has known before. The point, though, is that the assertion of memory leads also to the dissolving of memory, which in turns sets up a kind of anxiety about what the writer is "really" seeing and what he is not, what remains hidden, silent. In this sense, narrative itself, its inventories of disaster, the world itself, becomes a forbidden place. It becomes the place of the dead: the death of time, of fathers. To cause this world to speak is the poet's task. In "Journal, Banff: The School of Fine Arts," Mandel writes: "The mountains still have nothing to

say to me, other than touristy notions of the picturesque" (*Life Sentence*, 59). Kroetsch speaks of male space as "the silence that needs to speak."¹¹ A world trapped in its own decorums, a rococo world of libidinal, vanishing forms: the kitsch world of the death camp. Accompanying all perception is a kind of un-itemized horror, unrelieved because unimaginable. Mandel talks about "The slow thinking of mountains. For some reason, I look to the Andes with apprehension" (*Life Sentence*, 59).

In fact we might say that the whole collision between landscape and language takes place as a meeting of the giant form and the miniature, so that what Mandel is concerned with is the essential vulgarity of his reduction of the world to a symbol system (mythopoeia) such as the family romance. Since this concern embraces the whole activity of (self-)inscription, in which he is engaged, the "Journals" present a manner of writing which calls writing itself, the efficacy, the truth-telling power of words, into doubt. This is the anxiety of the spy: how to transmit messages out of enemy territory; will his words arrive, be understood; will the necessary action be taken? The writer is trapped in an infinite regression, forever mining (Milton's Mammon) the depths of the abyss, constructing archetypes, in his search for a way back to a god who, as Bloom tells us, is dead.¹² What, then, is left to speak? Possibly, the end of the world itself: writing as an end-of-the-world scenerio.

Mandel's "Journals," then, are retracings: of self, of earlier writing. They tell the story of a story: "Emblem: encountering self in the mountains. Continue to write, redrafting 'Ghosts.'" Again and again we meet that insistence on naming, coding. The measurements that lead to memory:

"Meet Richard Lemm, red-bearded, sharp-eyed, ferret; Joanna Bochner, shy — especially about her family name." (*Life Sentence*, 59)

Writing seeks to institutionalize its own forms as codes which the reader is invited then to crack (open) spill. The code, then, is not information but disinformation. Still, we admire the poet's coolness, his effort to say, in detail, that he is "here," when he is not, to establish his alibi.

Mandel's univocity, monologue, is the containing form of his message, but it is also a form which readily divides into *non sequiturs* ("the connections of failure"), parallel lines which do not intersect, which can only give rise to more and more extravagant contexts (however benign, childlike) of the subversive:

Last night, Jon Whyte attempted to reassert his presence here by planning pirated or illicit readings. Curious distinction between legitimate and illegitimate readings. The secret poets of Canada. Yet who has a better right than Jon? He carries about a huge notebook of poems and drawings, a fictional world of the mountain country and a childhood kingdom. (*Life Sentence*, 61)

Mandel's names, we have said, are code names, secret names, short forms ("Jon,"

“Rick,” “Martin,” “Mike”). They minimize language in the presence of something enormous, grotesque, suffering: the mountains themselves (which cannot speak), suggestive of invisible continents (Atlantis), immemorial catastrophes.

BUT LANGUAGE MUST BE REDUCED in this way if it is to be “sent.” Only the miniature, which comes closest to the elemental, the pure form of the word itself, only the residual, the onomatopoeic, can defy gravity: “Paranoia. Big Miller’s jazz concert in the Blue Room, voices attempting to be heard over the sound of a band electronic, inflated. Murmur, murmur. Buzz, buzz” (*Life Sentence*, 63).

Writing begins in division, spoils: “The discovery of disaster itself and so the beginning of poetry” (*Life Sentence*, 63). This describes an iconography which repeats itself indefinitely (there is no horizon). Not just the crossing, but the un-crossing of borders as well. In effect, writing proceeds by constantly replacing within the currency of its descriptions an originary moment of destruction. History is a series of pitfalls. Such a view of writing puts a premium on the act of perception, it would seem, for speech itself is made nothing other than an exegesis of the senses: sight, sound, touch. What Mandel keeps envisioning, as we see repeatedly in “Journal, In the High Mountains, Peru, Ecuador, 1976,” is, as we have said, the world’s end: “From the hotel balcony, I look out at the city. White, decaying” (*Life Sentence*, 67). The unending catalogues of apocalypse are emblems of the after-life of words; language is the dead ground of the gods.

This is a reduplicating scene; over and over again here; day after day. Shoddy commerce. Anything to sell: buckles and belts, leather strips, trinkets, AeroPeru shoulder bags. Watches. Food wagons: chickens, oranges, corn, hot dogs, pineapples, melons, meats. Cripples appear. Indian women with children. The metaphors of poverty, of its structure. (*Life Sentence*, 67-68)

There are, here, curious temptations. The poet stands on his balcony, surveying the blank ruins of the city. He establishes his perspective; the eye is isolated, situated above the crowd. He adopts, in other words, an archetypally prescriptive stance, becomes his own ancestral voice, prophesying war. We might speak of an imperialism of the eye. But something else is happening as well. The poet is also putting on a mask, to hide his arrival from the world. He seeks, superficially, even consciously, to appear as immanence, to occupy the place of god in his silence. But his achievement is not the restoration of order. His listing of the parts of the world is itself truncated, a renewal of chaos. Forms inside forms. A world without syntax, causeless. The poet, like Satan, keeps entering landscapes which are already legendary, rumours in heaven, with the intention of writing new versions of human time.

Part of the poet's "longing," as Mandel reveals, is for "clarity — and order" (*Life Sentence*, 7). But we can now see that this longing borders on, and is thus intensified by, paranoia: the fear of death, mutilation, suffering, whose symbols are everywhere. On the one hand, his is the Lear-like impulse to give the kingdom of self away, to have it returned as discourse — and as love. On the other, there are the penalties the writer must pay for harbouring desires which cannot be attached to any permanent iconography. For Mandel (as for Blake), pity, or what he calls "the metaphors of poverty," is space, a constitutive self-negation which turns the "actual" world into contemplation. The poet's self-absenting is also an attempt to relocate the world outside time, to observe it at the instant of creation, as irreducibly, unalterably, its own form. This is accomplished by way of distancing: to perceive the world, in all its multi-layered detail, is to fill up gaps in the fabric of extension. (Space, Satan says, may produce new worlds.) Thus it is that description can seem to be a retracing, a magical and mystical duplication of what is "already" there, in the otherness and mystery of its "location":

Church of San Francisco: white stone, red tracing of geometric outlines with vaguely Moorish aspect, though the chapels are baroque and rather handsomely symmetrical. I want to suggest the jumble of styles so characteristic of this uncertain place. The ruins of empire and earthquake have left no balance. Supposedly, there is a three-ton monstrance here in the church; we don't find it. All the wealth of the church; the poverty elsewhere — on the hills, outside the city, the *favellas*; we have only glimpsed them. (*Life Sentence*, 69)

Geometry as pure form becomes the circlings of the eye around an object. Seeing becomes speech becomes endless circumlocation, a naming and an un-naming of what is there. The world is symptom, visible and invisible to the exteriorizing power of the eye: "we have only glimpsed them." Or, what the eye sees is its own gaze turned back on itself; it sees its own seeing, and therefore its own blindness. Thus, the outwardness of objects becomes infinitely hypnotic, incantatory. Mandel speaks in such terms of "The power of iconography": "How much does the full organization of iconography represent, sustain, or create the power of a state (church) institution (army)?" (*Life Sentence*, 70). Meanwhile writing expresses *its* power through connections of place and history: the overcrowding, the multiplication of styles, to which Mandel refers, is an image of time dissolving, moments jostling moments before their final plunge: "the shambles that is modern Lima, its street vendors, its rickety buses, its racket of busting and decaying Detroit models of the forties and fifties" (*Life Sentence*, 71). Present becomes past. Note how the familiar has become estranged. Endless scenes of near-recognition. Carnival. Every place, every stop-over, is a substitute homecoming, a non-arrival.

This, of course, is the essence of the uncanny: "I feel I am coming closer to a fate I know or *should* have known" (71-72). This sense of anticipation is everywhere in the "Journals," hinting at the curious problem which they denote in

increasingly elaborate terms: how to suggest that perception is closed, that perception itself is a type of romance. The eye of the poet turns the world into gesture. Seeing is a fusion of memory and silence. Seeing, therefore, as Bishop Berkeley would inform us (by way of W. O. Mitchell), is a mode of *feeling*. The mystique of lived, “felt” time, history as texture: “I remember a coloured man at dinner, alone, shabbily dressed but in cloth that was once good. Quiet dignity. Around me in the city, faces from Mochica ceramics, dark, haughty, sensual” (*Life Sentence*, 73).

The world, for Mandel, is reduced to an image and, at the same time, in the unifying power of his sight, pathos. This poses the problem of what the spectator, *qua* lover, “feels” towards objects. Derrida, commenting on Levi-Strauss, characterizes the two conditions of what he calls “the possibility of totemism in general” as, first,

Pity, that fundamental affection, as primitive as the love of self, which unites us to others naturally: to other human beings, certainly, but also to all living beings

and, second, “the *originarily metaphoric* — because it belongs to the passions, says Rousseau — essence of our *language*.”¹⁸ The danger of totemism is duplicated in the poet’s anxiety about mountains. As with Satan, the path one may think of as upward (to freedom) and inward (to self) is in fact downward to greater destruction.

Mandel’s journey, then, in Blakean terms, is not that of the poet/prophet but, as it were, “downward” and “outward.” He keeps returning, in his blindness, to his failure to be an object of sight to himself. The writer not as creator but as creature, pariah: the rage of Caliban seeing and not seeing his face in the glass. Shrinking the world to an icon has to do with the whole transformation of pity as eros. The risk of all writing may be that death, the Holocaust itself, becomes love. To love one’s enemy, to take his place, write his speeches, is to “begin.” Mandel’s writing would seem to be a travesty of this very process and in that sense a movement between the sacred and the profane of “human” time. For whoever seeks to bind language in some elemental ritual for kinship ends by dispersing it: “the hills like some Babylonian version of Babel; the tower in Breughel’s painting; a demonic world” (*Life Sentence*, 73). It would seem, in short, that the visionary hero is the enemy. For Mandel, the very terms “language,” “community,” “freedom,” are attached to the forms of empire. The mask of reason, in its institutional form, is freedom — a technique by which the “primitive” (Derrida’s word) is inveigled into intercourse with the established, seemly, conventions of nature. How is this accomplished? We might think of Prospero (who started by turning the world into magic) and his contracting of Ariel on the basis of a promise of *eventual* liberation. Prospero turns the forces of nature into a moral agent, in keeping with his ultimate (always *about to be* revealed) ambitions to found a new society. Is

this not a model for Cartesian rationalism? Descartes, in his *First Meditation*, turns the sensible world into an appearance, as a preparation for his announcement of the *cogito* as the ground on which a “brave new world” of metaphysical truth can be erected. The point, of course, is that what may pass for philosophical reflection, or may be heralded as (belatedly) revolutionary, is just another deception, the creation of a new repression. What has this to do with Mandel’s characterization of writing as a political instrument? For one thing, if we were to glance at the poems in *Life Sentence* we would find that the identification of political repression has to do with the way in which the tyrant can appear to be a force of nature, a commander of the elements. In “Beware the Sick Lion,” for instance: “No one talks of the secret police activities of Somoza in Nicaragua. / Only the earthquake of anger, the typhoons of oppression.” Cognition itself is implicated in the mechanics of torture. The construction of propagandas, the nomination of enemies, the declarations of war are in the name of peace, plenty, truth. The cause of this may well be the establishment of freedom as a metaphysical convention, and the association of freedom with a future state of knowledge and action. We might think of Kant, and the way in which, *via* the categorical imperative, the mind is forever trying to keep its promise of freedom to a world of unformed, unborn, “objects,” doing so all along by constituting that world (noumena) as a negation, having already formulated its objects within the synthetic manifold of “experience.” For Freud, the super-ego is a repressive form of the radical energies of the id. For Frye, too, freedom is what the critic offers the poet: he liberates the latter into intelligibility, naturalizing his utterance as an artifact of community.

WE HAVE COME, PERHAPS, to Mandel’s ongoing dilemma: how to be in the role of writer in the midst of a language which has already been appropriated to hidden agendas. Part of the answer is that the writer at least tells the truth by revealing he is a writer. Does this imply some kind of phenomenology of healing? Consciousness, perhaps, is always consciousness (memory) of having been before. This drama is played out in “Journal, India: The Invisible Country, December 1976 to January 1977.” This “Journal” starts with an act of remembering which leads to closure: “Today, two books completed — finally” (*Life Sentence*, 93). But time is emptied inward by the over-concatenation of information which is also a process of doubling. The mind is carried back towards non-entity. Time is exposed in its sparest, storied outlines:

We pass the endless, confusing hours of the flight with books (Mike reads Paul Theroux’s *Great Railway Bazaar*, an account of a trip to India); papers (*New York Times*, *London Times*); movies (two); meals (repeatedly); wine (ceaselessly); all sequences lost. Occasionally, glimpses of a frozen, harsh world below, desert, moun-

tains. Other possibilities seem to me opening at every stage: London, Frankfurt, Tehran; I have no idea of what, no feeling for the world I should be connecting with. (*Life Sentence*, 93)

This flight becomes, again, a metaphor for a kind of regression, which means that it sets in motion the process of naming in order to erase its placements (“London, Frankfurt, Tehran”). Language itself is caught up in a cinematic fast-rewind. Mandel feels a lack of “connection” with the world over which he flies (“no feeling”). A world, then, emptied of romance. And landscape verging towards annihilation. To empty the world of time in this way has affinities with the Gothic technique of surrounding one’s story with an artificial antiquity which, in turn, the main line of narrative tries to approach and uncover.¹⁴ There is, perhaps, a residuum of the Gothic in the mountains themselves. Landscape as genre. Mandel enters India looking for another version of the same, or not looking:

We are here and not here. The Conference of Commonwealth Literature records our presence but lists in its schedule of events only one Canadian on the reading schedule and he is virtually invisible since, so far as I am aware, he has never published poetry in Canada. Determined nonetheless to fulfil obligations, Mike arranges a showing of his *The Farm Show*. Bill New, who has arrived with Peggy via Singapore, gives a brilliant paper on dialect and fiction. (*Life Sentence*, 94)

The search for a territory to stand on, to occupy, is a search for words, the right words, a language *in place*. “There’s a deep — *cynicism* would be too strong a word — *despair*, *hopelessness*, might be better” (*Life Sentence*, 95). To open the self, unlock time, in the midst of its layering, to unmystify, is to record speech as a series of emptying movements that threaten to raise up something alien, aloof.

Somewhere in our exiles, that hopelessness, the feelings I have been suppressing, surge up. There, I glimpse the tide of my own life again, the absence that is presence. Then it’s gone. (*Life Sentence*, 95)

To possess a language that poses its own conjunctions as a form, not only of retreat, but absence, cleanses language, transforms it into pure line, pure border. Meanwhile, contact with what is not here, but there, horizon, is a strategy of unmasking that becomes, possibly, confession: “I find myself sullen and withdrawn. I stay away from seminars, prowling idly among book displays” (*Life Sentence*, 95).

How are South America and India different? The Andes exist in their encodings, symbolisms. The temptation they pose for the poet, which is also their anxiety, is a return to obsolete forms, sublimity, which derive their energy from what the self has felt and done, in and out of its various pasts, heroisms, pageants. India, however, *remains* invisible; the closure comes from outside. The poet is not even the receiver of text. Thus his dramas of return are impotent. India teaches no lessons. (Thus, his monologues, thrown back on himself, seem over-technical, auto-didactic.) Above all, it is under, not above, which leads him, *qua* westerner, to

make existential claims, to assert the power of abstraction, to impose the politics of metaphor, dream. (Still, it is not *his* dream.)

Or are the structures deeper still, something Martin Kinch (or George Walker) might write about: desire, anger, inner metaphors about the personal power politics we all play so that unconscious world can exist, not as a metaphor, but as a literal power, the *real* jungle, the *real* Bombay: India, as Mahatma Ghandi seems to have known, *is* the unconscious, forever demanding the absence of ego, hence a threat to Western man, and a mystery forever. (*Life Sentence*, 103)

India, at least to the western mind, exists beyond politics, beyond, that is, ownership, forever denying the presence of its observers. Castration. What remains of politics is the mere fact, thwarting all exegesis and relativism: "India will be ruled either by meditation *or* brute force and cunning" (*Life Sentence*, 103). In such a declaration we are free to detect a dissipation that borders, at first glance, on the reduction of thought to the opaque, to entropy, that state beyond savagery. As, perhaps, in Forster, melodrama is what we bring to our perception of the void. This sets up a need to recover evidence of having been here, a topicality, an interiority: what remains is an otherness outside human passion, that "is" (yet "existence" is also only a predicate).

That is, all memory systems, traditions of reading and writing, are not so much interrupted as returned to us, intact, as solipsisms. This state of non-change is Canadian Studies in India. Hence, Mandel's insistence on familiar schemas which are attached to the landscape in a kind of pursuit sequence. The absurdity is not in the writing but in the page, in the expansiveness of a country that can bear such signatures and still "exist," a goddess that sleeps through all our invented magic.

Once more the mystery of bountifulness in the midst of poverty: the sensual self satiated, all choices given, yielded, the body fully achieved in its desire. Once, I thought, this could mean only de Sade's vision of nature: hooks and whips and eyes. But here it rises like Dante's vision: aspiring shapes, circle over circle, each winding in a staircase toward the sky, itself a metaphor of the soul's and body's union and completeness. And yet, for me — Puritan and Jew (and western Canadian — so Victorian Jew as well), the metaphor is not an easy one, though any prairie boy, interested in centaurs, will admit it or else play Bob Kroetsch's games with it, insisting on inborn rowdiness, macho self, the horseman, the whoresman, the cowboy-boy. I am *unsatisfied*. Is it then the foreign structure I object to (these sensual figures caught in their sensual music, profound abstractions of copulation, their elegant perfectly remote figures involved profoundly in their involutions)? (*Life Sentence*, 97)

This choice Mandel has diagrammed before, countless times: the religious (Dante) *versus* the profane (de Sade) or, in this context, perhaps, the Classical *versus* the Romantic. Such a polarity takes us back, momentarily, to Goethe. India generates structure (hierarchy: hence the journey *extends* itself in heroic couplets: Bill and

Peggy, Mike and Kim, Clark and Bharati); South America, though, in its “founding” syntaxes, tempts him with feeling (thus its journey keeps returning to the domestic).

The problem centres on what constitutes a shared experience (Forster, again), on what the (transplanted) group “mind” can agree on as a body of knowledge. Mandel is “here” as a citizen of his society, carrying his household gods on his back. Kroetsch tells us there was no Aeneas on the prairies. Yet Mandel explicitly questions Kroetsch’s parenthetical free play with signifiers, the macho word. One of his choices, then (which, however, leads to no “satisfaction”), is a classical rendition of romance, a completion that is also not a completion: Keats’s Grecian Urn, say (“these sensual figures caught in their sensual music”). The question, finally, may be how to *end* (the question of the question). The answer: by re-imagining, re-entering the game-space of history. This may be a sacrifice of the writing ego, or an ultimate compromise between order and (creative) imagination. (Not “soul,” but “self”: to be “content,” in Yeats’s phrase, “to live it all again.”)

After a drive in heavy rain to the airport, through customs, to the 747, and a fifty minute delay. Tehran. More delays. It becomes unlikely I’ll be able to connect at Frankfurt for London. We pass formidable mountains, the Anatolian plain, Ararat is visible. The Austrian Alps — England spreading out from the Channel. History. Europe. I think of Paritosh’s last words to me: “Everything is linked to everything else. Only connect.” (*Life Sentence*, 109)

Is this a sublimation or reinscription? Are the connections vertical or horizontal? On the return flight Mandel wages intellectual warfare with his seat partner, and asks “What have we learned?” (*Life Sentence*, 109). The choice may not be an actual choice at all, but a choosing (to remain) between, or difference. One chooses twice, always. All Mandel’s journeys take him home, to starting points, to a country of divisions, of (magic) mountains and vast, invisible, interior plains. The word “beginning” is an impossible word, a covering cherub, and what must be faced is the possibility of never having left. Are all the poet’s departures really replacements, heralding the uncanny? At what stage does contact with the alien, Ulysses’ nostalgic longing to set out again, to be carried up, mystically, to new metaphors, to pronounce the message once and for all, yield to death-in-life, to freedom as the vestige, and parody, of everything we have thought to comprehend?

WE MIGHT END by noticing somewhat more explicitly a connection which underlies not only *Life Sentence* but, in various forms, all of Mandel’s writing: that between the institutionality of language (which is tied to Mandel’s status as an academic) and the operation of chance. If, as we have been saying, writing is politics, then every writing act is a game-space, the re-enactment

of a conflict whose outcome is not predictable: stochastic.¹⁵ This is a way of saying that a word, which is also a location, such as “Estevan,” is not a location after all so much as the focus of a game of appropriation and dissemination: “Estevan” is, to paraphrase Margaret Atwood, a word in a foreign language. What kinds of dramatic formation might the writer employ to express his sense that language is implicated in this kind of uncertainty, the sense that language is not an instrument of truth, but a usurper, a de-naturing activity? We might think, perhaps, of Mandel’s earlier collection, *Black and Secret Man*, which, after all, is a re-staging of *Macbeth* which, in turn, is itself the self-perpetuating re-enactment of a crime, or series of crimes, which have already taken place — as the play is ending. (Thus, for *Macbeth*, the “future” — the events which follow from his actions — represent not the new time of the performance of the play, but the return of old time, the past, the dead: Banquo’s ghost. Birnam Wood has always already come to Dunsinane. For him, then, “nature” is a network of omens, foreshadowings, not “phenomena.” Nature is taboo. *Macbeth*’s “future” is the past: “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . .”)

The story which *Macbeth* tells is that of cognition itself: the whole drama of what is known versus what cannot be known, or told. Recall Lear on the heath, telling the winds to blow — they are “already” blowing. Michel Serres has described an identical situation as a founding myth of scientific thought itself:

If we define nature as the set of objects with which the exact sciences are concerned at a given moment in history, viewed synchronically (which is a restrictive but operational definition), the emergence of physics, in particular, can be thought of only in the global framework of our relations to nature. Now, ever since Francis Bacon’s work, these relations have been described, from the heights of his social situation, by the command-obedience couplet. One commands nature only by obeying it. This is probably a political ideology — betrayed by the prosopopeia — which implies practices of ruse, and subtlety: in short, a whole strategy. Since nature is stronger than we are, we must bend to its law, and it is through this subterfuge that we dominate it. We are under its orders and turn its forces back against order. This is the circle of ruse and productive hypocrisy: nature is a majorant; we try, ourselves, downstream, to majorize ourselves in relation to it. Here one finds again, intact, an ordered structure, a game, its rule (and how best to implement it), the struggle to seize power, and the closed cycle outlined by these moves.¹⁶

In effect, “Baconean physics,” Serres says, “made science into a duel, a combat, a struggle for domination; it gave it an agonistic model, proposing a form of ruse for it so that the *weak one* would triumph. It transformed science into a game of strategy, with its rules and its moves.”¹⁷

We find, here, a theory of history, and a theory of writing as the poet’s commemoration of his “strength against God.” This scenario also suggests an explanation for Mandel’s identification of the politics of language with dreams: not just history as dream, but, as in Freud, history *as* a history of dreaming. But if this is true, then

history is an anti-rationale. History is a history of outcast time. What the poet reads in nature is a signature of the random. Or, order is a form of chaos. (Again, in "Beware the Sick Lion": "A peasant activist found by police, his head bashed in, / both arms broken. Conclusion: train accident.")

Mandel is not dealing in his writing with the simple reduction of random events to a causal chain: this would imply tragedy, perhaps, or satire: the world as dystopia. Nor is he merely absenting ("authorial") intention (as a deliberate, calculated as opposed to purely ironic structure of narrative) from the organization of sequences — as, say, in the novels of Thomas Hardy. (With Hardy, it is still possible to suspect the existence of the hidden, the incalculable, the diabolical.) He is dealing, rather, with the political appropriation of chance: the tactics of the unpredictable, the *unpredictable*, a logic of chaos. We are close, then, to the invisible "companies" and their stranded expatriot agents in Conrad, to the "academies" of Robertson Davies, to the conspiratorial collectives in Timothy Findley. Borges has a story, "The Lottery in Babylon," which posits a "Company," under whose "beneficent influence . . . our customs are saturated with chance":

The Company, with divine modesty, avoids all publicity. Its agents, as is natural, are secret. The orders which it issues continually (perhaps incessantly) do not differ from those lavished by impostors. Moreover, who can brag about being a mere impostor? The drunkard who improvises an absurd order, the dreamer who awakens suddenly and strangles the woman who sleeps at his side, do they not execute, perhaps, a secret decision of the Company? That silent functioning, comparable to God's, gives rise to all sorts of conjectures. One abominably insinuates that the Company has not existed for centuries and that the sacred disorder of our lives is purely hereditary, traditional. Another judges it eternal and teaches that it will last until the last night, when the last god annihilates the world. Another declares that the Company is omnipotent, but that it only has influence in tiny things: in a bird's call, in the shadings of rust and of dust, in the half dreams of dawn. Another, in the words of masked heresiarchs, *that it has never existed and will not exist*. Another, no less vile, reasons that it is indifferent to affirm or deny the reality of the shadowy corporation, because Babylon is nothing else than an infinite game of chance.¹⁸

We might question whether, in a world which includes the Final Solution, the poet can be other than the director or manager of the random outcome. He is "centered" in a conflictual situation which is always threatening to break apart — and writing is renewed the moment it becomes the record of such tentative couplings followed by destructions. Writing becomes a pointing elsewhere — a series of potential histories, lineages whose endings may always be opened to new places and events. The "meanings" the poet finds on his travels may not be true meanings, but the residuum of meanings in appearances only. They are, perhaps, "intensities" — points of clarification, brilliance — which implies that language is a mode of second sight — only capable of reporting to the poet what he already knows, and

knows that he has lost. He can only go where he has been before. He can only write infinite variations of the same. All events, locales, become substitutions for that home, whose other name is the Holocaust itself.

NOTES

- ¹ Eli Mandel, "Journal, Victoria, B.C., 1980," *Life Sentence* (Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1981), 55. All other references to this edition.
- ² Smaro Kamboureli, "Locality as Writing: A Preface to the 'Preface' of *Out of Place*," *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, Nos. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1985), 267.
- ³ Eli Mandel, "Auschwitz: Poetry of Alienation," *Canadian Literature* 100 (Spring 1984), 216.
- ⁴ See, for instance, Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon The 'Mystic Writing-Pad'," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953-1960):
 If I distrust my memory — neurotics, as we know, do so to a remarkable extent, but normal people have every reason for doing so as well — I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing. In that case the surface upon which this note is preserved, the pocket-book or sheet of paper, is as it were a materialized portion of my mnemonic apparatus, which I otherwise carry about with me invisible. (xix:227)
- ⁵ See Eli Mandel, "On the 25th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz: Memorial Services, Toronto, January 25, 1970, УМНА, Bloor and Spadina," *Dreaming Backwards: The Selected Poetry of Eli Mandel* (Don Mills, Ont.: General, 1981), 74-76.
- ⁶ Robert Kroetsch, "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 4 (Spring 1983), 47.
- ⁷ Thomas Mann, "Introduction" to *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, quoted in Mandel, "Auschwitz: Poetry of Alienation," 214. (Mandel also cited this passage in *Criticism: The Silent-Speaking Words* [Toronto: CBC Publications, 1966], 24.)
- ⁸ Writing, Mandel tells us, in "Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain," *Another Time* (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcépic, 1977), is "a direction, an attraction — something like the movement of a compass needle" (69).
- ⁹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, S. E. xviii, 37-38, quoted in Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, with a Foreword by Joseph H. Smith, M.D. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), 139.
- ¹⁰ Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, 139.
- ¹¹ Kroetsch, "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," 47.
- ¹² See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 20.
- ¹³ Jacques Derrida, "The Violence of the Letter: From Levi-Straus to Rousseau," *Of Grammatology*, trans. with a Preface by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 105.
- ¹⁴ See Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981, rep. 1982):
 Every literary narrative contains another narrative: however continuous or full the one seems to be, the other is discontinuous and lacunary. Jean-Luc Nancy has called this "other" narrative the "discours de la syncope." Given that our minds tend to overestimate, even

when wary or ashamed of it, fictional writing, the reader is usually forced into the position of having to recover the "discours de la syncope," that is, the precariousness of all transitions, or the undecideability of fiction's truth. Every story is like Isabel's in Melville's *Pierre*, and every authoritative title or naming should be treated on the analogy of *Pierre*, or *The Ambiguities*. (107)

- ¹⁵ See Gregory Bateson's definition of "stochastic" in *Mind and Nature*, quoted in Alan Davies and Nick Piombino, "The Indeterminate Interval: From History to Blur," *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 1, Vol. 4 (Winter 1982):

Stochastic: (Greek, *stochazein*, to shoot with a bow at a target; that is, to scatter events in a partially random manner, some of which achieve a preferred outcome.) If a sequence of events combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure, that sequence is said to be *stochastic*. (32)

- ¹⁶ Michael Serres, "The Algebra of Literature: The Wolf's Game," *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), 267-68.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- ¹⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Lottery in Babylon," *Labyrinths*, trans. John M. Fein (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, rep. 1974), 60-61.

PETTING ZOO

Mona Elaine Adilman

The blind pony walks in darkness,
his orbit a lunar path of sawdust.
His ears ring with the clamor of children,
the din and snarl of loudspeakers.

Paunched and unshaven, the handler
licks a dirty index finger
with his tobacco-stained tongue,
counts off a wad of sweaty bills.

Christmas manger in the shopping mall.
The crowd bleats at the baby lamb,
brays at the moth-eaten dromedary,
coos at the mangy ring-necked doves.

A pair of Hansel and Gretel geese
blink in bewilderment. Their keeper,
the witch, is shredding documents,
a secret recipe for marinated goose.