

## THIS YEAR COUNTRY

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING publications of 1977 was a set of two volumes by Eli Mandel: a book of poems called *Out of Place* — an attempt to re-enter the world of his prairie boyhood — and a book of critical essays called *Another Time*, both published by Press Porcépic. They are not published as a set, but for Mandel the arts of poetry and criticism are twin acts of the same mind, and it is particularly because of the happy combination they make that they draw attention to the multiple dimensions of creativity.

Two books, two punning titles, two creative acts, two worlds: it would be tempting to locate a preoccupation with dualities here, were it not for Mandel's repeated revelation of the simultaneity of the acts. Doubleness, not dualism, is what the puns, for example, sound. The poems and essays are not Manichaeian *either/or* activities, but declarations of the integrity of the human spirit — despite the uncertainties and tensions people daily experience. And lodged in the notion of doubleness is a whole theory of art which links person with place, place with time, time with home, home with identity, identity with language, language with person. The essays constitute a set of efforts to step at different points, with different perspectives, into this circle; the poems provide an evocative example of the linking process at work, revealing the mind catching at its own doubleness: marvelling at the mystery, and both fearful and a little surprised at the horror and the joy it discovers.

The first two sections of *Out of Place* (subtitled “The Return” and “The Double”) enact two parts of the link: those of walking back into boyhood's landscapes and contemplating the mind's fascination with doppelgangers. The relation between the two is specified in the critical commentary: to return home is by its very nature to set up a doubleness, at once to affirm the difference between then and now and to collapse the distinction. And for Mandel himself, encountering “his own dilemma, writing west,” the temporal/spatial dimensions transform by degrees into language, still asserting the multiple doubleness: “the shaping form

and the sense of otherness, the resistant material." The poet-critic's task as he isolates it, then, is to find the language that will voice the simultaneous twinning of person and place, rendering the public and private landscapes one.

Though it is somewhat deceptive, to return thus to landscape is to specify one of Mandel's central concerns. The deceptiveness derives from the usual definition of "landscape" as "setting." But landscape, undeniably "out there," also exists conceptually, and in this sense it serves as both the subject and object of *Another Time*. The configuration surfaces particularly in the group of essays called "Writing West," a group concerned with images of prairie man, the romantic and the real in Western Canadian fiction, and the relation between himself and region. Directly, he writes: "The images of prairie man are images of a search for home and therefore a search for the self. The question we have come to then is not *who* is prairie man, but what *images* does he choose?" The focus lies not on a story told but on a manner of story-telling; the creative circle exists not in theme but in process; and a regional consciousness consists not of a set of mimetic representations of external geography but of the process of sharing communally the spaces one mentally inhabits. As a consequence, for Mandel, the realities of Western writing do not manifest themselves in sociological realism but in the constant re-creations, re-enactments, re-inventions of the terms of the mind. "Region," embodied in the sharing of stories (which elements of folklore? what balance of rogues, outlaws, heroes, ballads, and myths?), is therefore not identifiable just with geographical boundary lines, nor even with the facts of history. The coherence derives from the language, from the recognition that identity is a fiction, shaped by the dreams of art and shared in the shaping.

The task of the reader, in such a world, becomes more demanding than simply to be a passive recipient of instruction or entertainment. No sharing can take place unless there are sharers. Reflecting more generally on theories of aesthetics, Mandel notes that the act of listening (an active silence) is a profound tribute to language. It asserts also the human value we attach to communicating, and in turn suggests again the public connection that literature repeatedly enacts. Art is often avowedly apolitical. But even when writers eschew politics, they frequently find themselves drawn or troubled by the public, political world. It is part of the external landscape through which they move, part of the tension that declares itself most deeply in the "private and perilous" recesses of the artist's mind. Sharing the dreamed identity, the imagined world, the shaping of fiction, the reader/listener shares in the tension, too. In the public world we draw identities on the map — delineating Alberta, the prairies, Canada, the West — for a structure to rely on in daily life. Sharing the fiction, we take part in the doubleness, recognizing the limitations of the boundaries we seem to need; we reach back for ourselves into regions we scarcely know, and actively listen for the voices we recognize as our own.

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