BLACK AND SECRET POET

Notes on Eli Mandel

John Ower

THE PIECES IN Eli Mandel's four major collections, (in *Trio*, 1954; *Fuseli Poems*, 1960; *Black and Secret Man*, 1964; *An Idiot Joy*, 1967) are as strange and as knotty as anything in Canadian poetry. Given the difficulty and singularity of his work, it seems wise first of all to place it in some sort of meaningful context. Three lines of analysis seem particularly useful in this connection. The first is that Mandel's ethnic background appears significant not only with regard to those poems containing specifically Jewish allusions, but may also serve as a major formative influence upon both the poet's vision and his style. Secondly, Mandel is a poet of spiritual upset and rebellion, and can be appreciated only in the atmosphere of crisis that gave birth to romanticism, existentialism and contemporary anarchism. Thirdly, he is a myth-maker, and his work cannot be comprehended without some understanding of mythopoeia. In particular, his poetry shows both the radical imaginative re-arrangement of reality and the plumbing of the unconscious mind which are characteristically interrelated facets of myth-making poetry. A discussion centred upon the three points just mentioned should help to account for the tonality of Mandel's work, as well as providing an opportunity to touch upon at least some of his more important themes and techniques.

IN THE FIRST CHAPTER of *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach plays his own variation on Matthew Arnold's distinction between Hebraism and Hellenism as polar mentalities and major forces in Western civilization. That Mandel is himself aware of such a distinction in personal and artistic terms is shown in "Charles Isaac Mandel":

> Those uplands of the suburban mind,
> sunlit, where dwell the lithe ironists,

athletic as greeks, boy-lovers,
mathematical in love as in science.
Formalists. What have I to do with them?
I gather the few relics of my father:
his soiled Tallis, his Tefillin,
the strict black leather of his dark faith.

His poetry in fact provides almost a text-book example of the vision and the literary "style" which Auerbach finds in Old Testament literature. Auerbach observes that the Homeric preoccupation with a clearly articulated, uniformly illuminated sensory surface, in which everything is externalized and accounted for, is largely absent from the Biblical stories.[1] The empirical foreground yields precedence to spiritual and psychological matters running far beneath the surface, and only such aspects of a story as bear on these are narrated. These episodes derive their significance and coherence not from a "horizontal" linkage in the phenomenal, but rather from a "vertical" or symbolic connection to the secret purposes of God and to man's unexpressed responses. Both the impact and the difficulty of a poem like "Black and Secret Man" arises from just such a "Biblical" style:

These are the pictures that I took: you see
The garden here outside my home. You see
The roots which hung my father, mother's
Tangled hedge, this runnelled creeper vine.
Here is the tree where in the summer hung
The guest of summer, temple-haunting martlet.
And here the tree with twenty mortal murders
On its crown.

This sort of poetry, characterized like the Old Testament by "certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, 'background' quality, multiplicity of meanings and need for interpretation",[2] is also characteristically "modern". However, Mandel's Jewish background may account at least in part for the sensibility underlying the method.

In his discussion of the Old Testament narratives, Auerbach also stresses the relative depth of their characterizations, and their concern with the developmental and problematic aspects of human existence.[3] Although these are again typical of modern literature, the almost obsessive self-exploration in Mandel's poetry, his preoccupation with evil and madness, and his search for a viable spiritual and psychological stance, could perhaps be classified as Hebraic. In particular, his concern with disintegration and degradation as a prelude to integrity follows the

pattern of humiliation and exaltation in the careers of the Biblical heroes.[4] The macabre treatment of familial relationships in such poems as "Joy of Conquest", "Estevan Saskatchewan", "Black and Secret Man" and "Pictures in an institution" recalls Auerbach's observation that in Jewish life the connection between "the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessings and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison."[5] This saturation of day to day existence with a profound and mysterious significance until it becomes supercharged with the "sublime, tragic and problematic"[6] may also explain why in Mandel's poetry even the commonplace and the insignificant become charged with a strange and sometimes terrible *mana*.

All of the above comments can of course be summarized by saying that Mandel is a romantic. His, moreover, is a romanticism which is "decadent" in Tindall's sense of a late efflorescence of a particular movement which pushes its implications to the limits of extremity or elaboration.[7] His first three volumes in particular can be seen as providing a Canadian counterpart to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers in whom romanticism reaches its logical or illogical conclusions.

Romanticism, and late romanticism in particular, is intimately related to the spiritual crisis which has been brewing since the end of the eighteenth century, and it is not surprising that spiritual upset and rebellion should form two major ingredients in Mandel's poetry. Like those of many of the romantics and the existentialists, his troubles may centre in the fact that something has gone wrong either with God or with man's relationship to Him. In "Day of Atonement: Standing", Mandel in a state of semi-rebellion confronts a "fierce" God, and it is obvious that only drastic measures can mend the relationship. In *An Idiot Joy* there are murmurings that God, if not uncaring or absent, has at least "failed to be unambiguous" in matters deeply concerning the poet. In this type of situation, the old values based on religious faith, which traditionally substantiated and regulated almost every aspect of civilized life, inevitably become either dead or oppressive. As "Hebraism" suggests negatively through its irony, this particular crisis will be felt with special acuteness by an individual from a background which was saturated with religion:

> The law is the law and is
> terribly Hebrew which is as you
> know mostly poems about cooking
> and meat to be cured in water and
> salt and children to be counted

for pages of generation amid clean
and also unclean women

If God is still present in this world of sterile regulation, it is in the form of Joyce's *deo boia*, and the law and order which He sanctions have a punitive rather than a saving force. The whole of the present dispensation in fact becomes demonic and destructive:

When the echo of the last footstep dies
and on the empty street you turn empty eyes,
what do you think that you will see?
A hangman and a hanging tree.

Such a vision quite naturally promotes an attitude of rebelliousness which can affect every aspect of the life of the afflicted individual. It is seen as morally imperative to break with the old covenant in all its manifestations in search of new values. In Mandel's poetry this drama of multiple rebellion is acted out particularly in *An Idiot Joy*. Thus, in "Psalm 24" modern Judaism is seen as being no longer an intimately lived experience like the religion of David, but rather a rabbinical bookishness which does violence to life and must therefore be cast off. "The madness of our polity" rejects the present political and social order as the systematized sadism of bloodthirsty savages:

On the prairies where I lived
a boy who put a needle in a gopher's eye
knew more of civil law than all my friends,

The logical answer to such an establishment is the militant anarchism of "The burning man" and "Whence cometh our help?".

In Mandel's poetry even the workaday world can become a Kafkaesque nightmare in which the individual is imprisoned and destroyed by a demonic power-structure. In the first of the poems in *Trio*, an office-building becomes a labyrinth in which the poet, after hours of bemused wandering, is finally confronted by the Minotaur of authority. "Pictures in an institution" similarly portrays the university campus in terms of an insane authoritarianism which can only provoke a violent reply. Finally, it should be mentioned that Mandel's rebellion includes a psychological revolt against consciousness. If it is the reason and morality which we consciously accept, that have created the hangman's world, then it is only in the dark recesses of the Freudian or Jungian unconscious, however terrible these may seem initially, that we can possibly find salvation. This explains the poet's emphasis in *An Idiot Joy* upon the irrational as a force which is capable of

sweeping away the old, dead order. Idiots and barbarians provide at least a "kind of solution" to the problems of the modern world.

Mandel's poetry not only documents the various facets of existential rebellion, but also illustrates the danger inherent in cutting the umbilical cord of tradition. Urizen is expiring, but he is still alive enough to condemn to death, and the rebel Atlas-like assumes a terrible burden of guilt and anxiety. Thus, in "Thief Hanging in Baptist Halls", the poet's rejection of "polite vegetation, deans, a presbyterian sun,/brick minds quaintly shaped in Gothic and glass" is accompanied by a feeling of humiliating public condemnation:

> I wish he would not shrug
> and smile weakly at me
> as if ashamed that he is hanging there,
> his dean's suit fallen off, his leg cocked
> as if to run
> or (too weak, too tired, too undone)
> to do what can be done
> about his nakedness.

Nor is this sense of reprobation unwarranted. *Black and Secret Man* was, its author tells us, "written so that I could confront and recognize whatever is dark in human nature, and to discover how much of it is a reflection of self". Such pieces as "Secret Flower", "The burning man" and "The front lines" suggest that there is in fact as much evil to be exorcised from the rebel himself as there is in the world which he attacks. "To a friend who sued the mayor and lost" stresses this point by means of Camus' paradox of the altruistic revolutionary falling to the same moral level as his opponents.

The existential rebel is not only burdened with his personal albatross of evil and guilt, but is ultimately threatened with the disintegration of both his psyche and his world-order. His revolt brings with it alienation and a lack of spiritual guidelines. A new self and a new world must somehow be forged out of emptiness and chaos in a terrible isolation. For Mandel, as we have said, the only hope seems to lie in a surrender to the black and turbulent forces of the unconscious in the hope that they carry within themselves the seeds of a new dispensation. The ever-present possibility of madness which this gamble involves is a significant theme in his work. In the early piece "Orpheus", the act of poetic creation, which for Mandel is part and parcel of the revolt against consciousness, leads to the *sparagmos* of the personality. On the other hand, "Crusoe" in *An Idiot Joy* suggests that the poet has written "in order not to go mad". That his art may

indeed serve as a prophylaxis, releasing and objectifying his inner tensions, is suggested by the fact that many of his poems are permeated with what "Manner of Suicide" terms "the archaic symbolism of the psychotic". Thus, the macabre methods of self-extermination catalogued in that poem are really the grotesque projections of derangement. The poet evidently feels that there is a very real danger of suicide or insanity forestalling a spiritual rebirth.

However, there is in fact method behind much of the apparent madness of Mandel's imagery. Like Crawford, Jay Macpherson and Reaney, he is a myth-making poet, and some grasp of the theory and practice of mythopoeia is essential to an understanding of his work. Historically speaking, Mandel's myth-making proclivity is another aspect of his romanticism, being traceable through such twentieth-century visionaries as Pound, Yeats and Edith Sitwell to the climate of sensibility which produced the poetry of Shelley and Blake. It should, however, be noted that besides the influence of esoteric romanticism, the technique of the early poetry in particular shows a good deal of the more deliberate intellectuality of such modern "metaphysicals" as T. S. Eliot and Robert Lowell. This is especially true of the imagery, in which Mandel often achieves a powerful fusion of the romantic visionary metaphor with the metaphysical conceit. In some of the poems in *An Idiot Joy* there is a much freer association of images, but these pieces are closer to surrealism than to anything in English romanticism.

Speaking in rather crude generalities, we can say that romantic myth-making originates with a vision of the universe as being substantiated by a metaphysical principle by which it is rendered both one and alive. In the early poem "Aspects in a Mirror" Mandel expresses this sense of the fundamental unity of the cosmos in terms of the Platonism which has contributed so much to the myth-making tradition:

> Delight me no longer with this glass,
> There are many things I should have done.
> All images grow dimmer, pass.
> The many are sustained in one.

Because of the ultimate oneness of the world, the distinctions made by empirical consciousness between different places, times and material phenomena are in the last analysis meaningless. One mark of the myth-making poet is accordingly a radical vision which telescopes space and history and breaks down the logical compartments into which post-Aristotelian man has increasingly tended to divide his experience. Thus in the series of pieces which open his selection of *Trio*, Mandel the poet lost in the office building becomes the ancient Greek Theseus

braving the labyrinth; an amateur aviator, a combination of Daedalus and Icarus: a mining accident, the dismemberment of Orpheus. Just as the myth-making poet plays tricks with place and time, so he violates at will such "reasonable" distinctions as those normally drawn between man and nature, or between the animal, the vegetable, and the mineral:

> But parrots bring in sleep only the surly shape
> Of images of men turned into beasts
> Carrying their loads of shame upon their backs,
> That forest where the trees are shapes of girls
> And every stone an image of a face, and eyes
> Are in the flowers, and I could weep for all
> Those lost and stoned and silent faces.

Ultimately, these lines suggest a poetic world in which, subject to the artist's intentions, anything is equatable with anything else. The poet's vision of faces in stone is especially characteristic of the mythopoeic sensibility. On the one hand, Mandel's image shows the proclivity of the myth-maker for representing everything in terms of life, and of human life in particular. On the other, it illustrates the characteristic belief that man can descend spiritually down the scale of being even as far as the inanimate. In "Leda and the Swan" and "Rapunzel" such downward transformations become part of a nightmare sexual fantasy, while in "Entomology" the vicious sterility of a Urizenic society is expressed in images of insect-life. However, in "The apology", a passage into the inanimate is associated with a process resembling the *samana* techniques for escaping the ego:

> I want the table to appreciate my
> delight in its leaves: I will stand on
> four legs and try hard to be wooden
> and brown with folding leaves
> I will fold and unfold my leaves
> like a wooden butterfly
> and birthday cards can be put on me

Both this passage and the one quoted immediately before it imply that not only are categories which carve up space, time and matter in the last analysis unreal, but also that the dynamic unity of the universe finds expression in the metamorphosis of one form into another. In imagining himself a table, Mandel is participating in the activity of an "esemplastic power" which drives matter through an endless succession of changes. The next logical step is for the myth-maker to see metamorphosis in terms of a series of interlocking cycles of organic

growth and decay, evolution and atavism which are manifested in every aspect of existence. That Mandel is at least aware of such a possibility is suggested in "The moon in all her phases":

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

However, such a vision is yet to appear in his poetry in a systematically elaborated form.

It has been a standard assumption of romanticism that man is linked to the One which underlies the universe through his unconscious mind. With some apparent reinforcement from the psychology of Jung, this has obviously been adopted as a basic tenet of Mandel's poetic faith. Traditional symbols of the unconscious, including the cave, the labyrinthine building, and enveloping water, recur frequently in his work. His mythopoeia thus belongs to the world of archetypal symbolism which finds expression in dreams, hallucinations and madness, in primitive myth and legend, in folk and fairy-tales, and in the literary mode which Northrop Frye terms romance.[8] It shares with these diverse phenomena a logic of symbolic association very different from the processes of the conscious reason, and an emotional pitch more intense than that considered proper to mimetic fiction.

As Jung quite properly emphasizes, the archetypes of the unconscious are ambivalent,[9] and in linking himself to the *weltgeist* through the unconscious, the poet becomes possessed by a Dionysian energy which is at the same time good and evil, joyous and painful, beautiful and fearful, creative and destructive. From its very beginning romanticism was impelled to stress the negative side of the equation, and in its later phases a possession by and obsession with its demonic elements leads to the phenomenon of "the romantic agony". As the poem "Orpheus" clearly shows, Mandel is very much a poet of the romantic agony. In order to gain the divine inspiration which is necessary for his art, the singer must venture into the black "mine" of the unconscious. However, the "daemonic, chthonic powers"[10] are terrible and destructive as well as creative, and the poet undergoes destruction at their hands:

> Who found his body and who found his head
> And who wiped god from off his eyes and face?

It is accordingly not surprising that mythopoeia should in Mandel's work be

associated with the nightmare world of madness, perversion, evil and violent crime. The poet is in fact "a black and secret man of blood" and, as "Manner of suicide" suggests, his act of creation is a form of self-destruction. In "Thief Hanging in Baptist Halls", the artist is represented as both immolated and condemned, thus powerfully combining two motifs of the romantic agony which recur a number of times in Mandel's poetry.

However, although the world of mythopoeia becomes one of satanism, horror and dissolution, it is paradoxically necessary for man's salvation. The poet, by submitting himself to the Dionysian through his unconscious, obtains the spiritual power to sweep away the sterile and demonic world of the hangman god. As is the case with the destruction wrought by the revolutionary, this negative process becomes a terrible but necessary first step in the recreation of a new order both externally and within. Through madness, perversion and evil, the individual's old spiritually dead order of conscience and consciousness will be shattered. Moreover, as Joseph Campbell suggests with regard to the hero-quest, the pain and disintegration which must be undergone are really the negative face of ambivalent archetypes, which if boldly approached, will show themselves to be propitious.[11] Through his very evil and agony, the poet returns to the radical innocence of "an idiot joy" in which true creativity and a "singular love" become possible. The imagination, in addition to being a power of vision, is thus one of recreation and redemption. The condemned and tormented artist is really analogous to the crucified Christ, whose act of sacrifice has regenerated both man and the world. Significantly enough, the poet's passion in "Thief Hanging in Baptist Halls" is followed by a personal apocalypse:

> He dangles while the city bursts in green and steel,
> black flower in the mouth of my speech:
> The proud halls reel,
> gothic and steel melt in the spinning sun.

Similarly, in "Manner of suicide", Mandel's contemplation of the most gruesome methods of self-destruction leads in the end to the revelation of "a new heaven and a new earth" in which man is in the loving care of a beneficent Divinity. Such glimpses of illumination may perhaps foreshadow a more sustained visionary ecstasy such as we encounter in the poetry of Blake or Edith Sitwell.

HAVING ATTEMPTED to place Mandel's poetry in context while touching upon some of his major themes and techniques, I will venture a

brief appraisal of his work. On the credit side of the ledger can certainly be placed the toughness and power of his intellect. Some of his poems display a steadiness and clarity of insight into the depths of the self which is worthy of a trained analyst. The same keen-edged hardness characterizes his poetic technique at its best, and is particularly noticeable in the punch of some of his imagery. The following lines from "Estevan Saskatchewan" illustrate the kick which Mandel's mind can deliver when it is in top poetic form:

> A small town bears the mark of Cain,
> Or the oldest brother with the dead king's wife
> In a foul relation as viewed by sons,
> Lies on the land, squat, producing
> Love's queer offspring only,
> Which issue drives the young
> To feign a summer madness, consort with skulls,
> While the farmer's chorus, a Greek harbinger,
> Forecasts by frost or rings about the moon
> How ill and black the seeds will grow.

This passage exemplifies another feature of Mandel's best poetry: an emotion which, like hot iron, glows and burns and yet is forged into hard, definite forms.

The forcefulness of thought and feeling in much of Mandel's verse is connected with the spiritual and moral accomplishment of a penetrating insight into the perversions of a sick soul in a sick world. This is only made possible by the poet's terrible honesty, which confronts the worst of which man is capable while carefully analyzing and exposing his own involvement. Also to Mandel's credit is the spiritual vitality which can not only face degradation, but also find in it materials for creative self-expression and even "an idiot joy":

> Lord, Lord, pollution everywhere
> But I breathe still
> and breathless, sweet
> woodbine, colour of honey, touches my skin
> as if my unbelieving eyes made no difference at all

Finally, Mandel must be praised for the ironic detachment and wry humor which prove that he has maintained his sanity on the edge of the abyss:

> Notice: the library is closed to all who read
> any student carrying a gun
> registers first, exempt from fines,
> is given thirteen books per month,
> one course in science, one in math,
> two options

campus police
will see to co-eds' underwear

Despite his evident virtues, Mandel seems to me to remain a promising rather than a mature or a major artist. One of the biggest deficiencies of at least the work before *An Idiot Joy* is the relative narrowness of its emotional range. This is to be connected with the fact that the besetting sin which the poet reveals to us is perhaps not the Oedipus complex or a desire for violence but rather an inordinate fixation of a too, too sensitive self upon the negative. However, a piece like "Messages" shows that Mandel is capable of breaking out of his emotional straightjacket, and it is to be hoped that time will bring a more complete visionary conversion from the romantic agony to a divine comedy.

Mandel's poetry also seems to lack the all-embracing, precisely articulated world-picture and poetic structure which characterize the great visionaries. The backbone of the artistic stature of Dante, Milton, Blake and Yeats is that all of them managed to order a wide range of experience around a spiritual centre, and also to develop a syntax of ideas and images. Something of this sort would provide Mandel with a basis for more ambitious poetic structures than his present brief pieces, or at least give a greater degree of coherence and direction to his future output.

There are also a number of technical flaws in the fabric of Mandel's poetry. In the earlier volumes, his intellect occasionally escapes from the control necessary for artistic success, and blemishes his work with preciosity, artificiality or obscurity:

> What he was skulled in and built, the frame of,
> The grain and shelter of his house and place,
> Bone's trust of jointure and contract, all claims have
> Yielded in him who is separate and vagrant in flesh and place.

The typographical doodling of many of the poems in *An Idiot Joy*, although currently fashionable, also seems at times a bit contrived for comfort.

It is very much to Mandel's credit that his intellectual control prevents the melodramatic pitch which is proper to his world of romance from rising to the shrillness of Yeats' "hysterical women". However, in some of the poems in *An Idiot Joy*, his voice does descend to the quaver of sentimentality. Such conceptions as "dreaming beasts with huge unhurt eyes" and "walnut-coloured men" who in "far-off wind-swept voices/revolve their prayers as if they were wheels or stars" hover on the verge of whimsical pathos. The following passage has undoubtedly crossed the border-line:

Tonight
in the sky's filing-cabinet
I discover my unwritten letters,
xerox of the last mss
by an unnamed, doubtless poor, scholar.

In his future poetry, Mandel should definitely eschew the Charlie-Chaplinesque.

Moreover, even at its best, his work seldom rises beyond a rhetorical utterance to the lyricism which is the mark of the fully integrated poetic sensibility. The technical toughness of the early volumes precludes the singing voice, and even the more flexible verse of *An Idiot Joy* is rarely lyrical. Only on a few occasions, as in "The Speaking Earth", does he approach the fusion of intellect, emotion, and music which we find, for example, in Herbert's "Virtue". Perhaps Mandel should experiment more with the formal disciplines exemplified in the great lyric tradition of Spenser, Keats and Tennyson.

By way of conclusion, it should be stressed that Mandel's poetry shows development as well as continuity. If nothing else, the pieces in *An Idiot Joy* display a gain in technical suavity. Mandel's further growth as an artist is only to be expected, and it will be interesting to see what lines it will take. In particular, the future will tell whether he belongs to the company of what Frye calls unfolding artists, or whether he is a poet of metamorphic growth like Yeats. His work to date appears to be the expression of the metamorphic spiritual pattern of crisis and conversion. If this is indeed the case, his art may show some spectacular developments. As happened with Edith Sitwell, a relatively sudden onset of visionary ecstasy may be accompanied by an efflorescence of technique. Should this happen, Mandel may produce poetry which bears the same relationship to his present work as a butterfly to the chrysalis from which it painfully emerged.

[1] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11-12.
[2] *Ibid.*, 23.
[3] *Ibid.*, 17-20.
[4] *Ibid.*, 18.
[5] *Ibid.*, 22.
[6] *Ibid.*, 22.
[7] William York Tindall, *Forces in Modern British Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 18-19.
[8] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 33.
[9] C. G. Jung, "Aion," *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 9, Pt. II (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), 68-69.
[10] T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages", V. 11, 40-41.
[11] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), 97-171.