

R. P. Bilan

**Review Article**  
**Canadian Poet-Critics**

Much recent Canadian criticism has centred on the question of what is distinctively Canadian in our literature. D. G. Jones' *Butterfly On Rock* and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* are the most notable examples of the kind of criticism that has become fairly dominant. Eli Mandel's *Another Time*<sup>1</sup> and Dennis Lee's *Savage Fields*<sup>2</sup> both break with this pattern, but in very different ways. Mandel returns to what has been the traditional task of the poet-critic: he attempts to explain, and to create a taste for, new kinds of poetry, and he explores, from a different angle, many of the concerns of his own poetic work. Dennis Lee, on the other hand, takes the role of the poet-critic in a new direction. *Savage Fields* is a decidedly theoretical and speculative book and examines, finally, more than literature. One might well have expected, from the author of *Civil Elegies*, a politically-oriented criticism, but Lee goes beyond any narrow nationalist focus and presents a radical inquiry into the very basis of western civilization. While Mandel and Lee, then, write very different *kinds* of criticism, they both, essentially, have the same central concern—not with the Canadian identity, but with the nature of modernism.

The appeal, and to some extent the strength, of Mandel's criticism is obvious. He moves beyond narrowly focused explication and raises larger questions not only about modernism, but also about the nature of literature and about the place and value of literature in contemporary life. These are not merely academic questions to Mandel, but clearly matters of considerable personal urgency. However, the weaknesses of his criticism are at least equally apparent, and it is perhaps best to confront these first. While Mandel is very interested in ideas, he is not a rigorous thinker, and at times he seems simply to be taken over by certain ideas. Moreover, he is a very dependent critic, and in places his work is little more than an echoing of stronger voices.

Mandel informs us in his preface that the essays in his book are "reflections rather than arguments". While we normally value the argument the critic puts forth, it is possible to value reflections alone—provided they raise new questions, or offer new suggestions. Mandel's "reflections", however, too often are simply an admission of his own puzzlement. For instance, discussing poet-critics he remarks: "The sense in which their critical work can be thought of as secondary or derived puzzles me. The sense in which it involved them in a choice between creativity and critical work I find even more difficult to understand"(12). These are not new problems and as Mandel offers no help in resolving them there seems little point in reflecting, in print, in this manner. Further,

as a result of being reflections rather than arguments, a number of these essays only go so far, and then become evasive and slide off the point. They leave us "puzzled".

Mandel's reflections fall within his own distinctive area of concern, but in commenting on such things as the fictional nature of literary reality and the significance of modernism, he essentially takes over, and applies, the ideas of other thinkers and critics. For example, he obviously has been influenced by the work of George Steiner. Unfortunately, his criticism suffers from the same defects as Steiner's—a continual retreat from the text and a tendency to surround it with a variety of impressive names—Chomsky, Laing, Norman O. Brown, Borges. Too often he simply depends on them to make his points.

Mandel's main debt, of course, is to Northrop Frye. Just how closely he follows Frye can be seen in his essay "The City In Canadian Poetry". Mandel's description of Wilfred Watson's poem "In the Cemetery of the Sun" can be traced back, almost word for word, to the account of the poem given by Frye in *The Bush Garden*. More importantly, Mandel has taken from Frye not just individual perceptions but the greater part of his critical framework, his concern with the priority of myth. He argues that "in poetry, place is metaphor, city is image, location is mythic. And so one begins, not with history, but with story"(115). To establish his point he discusses the city as it appears in the work of Reaney, Lampman, Klein, Watson. In other words, he takes the most obviously mythopoeic examples he can find. But what about Raymond Souster's Toronto, or Toronto in *Civil Elegies*? Or Louis Dudek's Montreal? These are real places and the poems begin in history.

The problems raised by Mandel's insistence on the priority of myth are most pressing in his two provocative essays on prairie writing, "Images of Prairie Man" and "Romance and Realism In Western Canadian Fiction". Both essays, in fact, are much better than anything that appears in the opening section, "Reflections", for they articulate clearly a definite position. In the first essay Mandel rejects the view that regional literature is a reflection of environment. He here gives even greater emphasis than does Frye, at least in *The Bush Garden*, to the priority of myth, and instead follows Leslie Fiedler's argument that environment is a creation of literature—it is mythological. "Prairie", he contends, "is a mental construct, a region of the human mind, a myth"(47). Mandel, however, slides too easily over Henry Kreisel's point about the impact of the landscape upon the mind. This impact is certainly there in the work of Stegner, Mitchell, and Grove, and it is this shaping of the imagination by environment, and not, as Mandel suggests, accuracy of detail, that constitutes regionalism.

In the essay "Romance and Realism" Mandel extends his argument. He claims: "The possibility remains that a peculiar achievement of the fiction of Western Canada is not social realism"(56). (It is worth noting that Margaret

Laurence, who surely has some authority in this matter, describes the work of Sinclair Ross *exactly* as social realism.) Nonetheless, Mandel goes on to insist: "It is no longer the historical and social, or even the geographical West, so much as the literary one, that concerns us. Equally, a value judgment is implied, a preference for one kind of writing over another. That is not necessarily wicked, even if it prefers its archetypes nude and asks for literary intelligence in its writers" (56). I can think of no better advice at this point than that given by Frank Kermode in an essay on Frye: "When you hear talk of archetypes, reach for your reality principle." Mandel lets go of his reality principle, and his preference for archetypes leads him to discuss *The Double Hook*, a novel which is not representative of western Canadian fiction. *The Double Hook* certainly presents its "archetypes nude" and while this is what attracts Mandel it seems to me the insurmountable weakness of the novel. Mandel's view is essentially what we would expect from a critic interested in myth—and a former(?) mythopoeic poet—but "myth" criticism in general, certainly Frye's in particular, has always been uncomfortable with the novel, which, much more obviously than poetry, is tied to social and historical reality. Mandel undoubtedly is calling attention to an important element in fiction—the formal, literary, "fictional"—and he is surely right, for instance, about the central importance of symbolic patterning in say *The Stone Angel*, but he removes fiction too completely from its historical reality. For all that they "fictionalize", Grove, Ross, Wiebe and Laurence all record a real West.

Myth is just one aspect of Mandel's interest in the fictional nature of literary reality; many of the essays centre on what he calls the duplicity, the reflexivity, of modern writing. Duplicity involves a sense of the fictional nature not only of literature, but also of the self and identity. This concern with duplicity has become a prominent feature of Mandel's own poetry—*Out Of Place*, his latest book of poems, has a section on the double—and it continually attracts his attention as a critic. This search for duplicity, however, does not always lead to fruitful results in Mandel's criticism. He emphasizes, quite correctly, the reflexivity in Sartre's *Saint Genet*, but also emphasizes the duplicity in the poetry of Tennyson. This may well be a neglected part of Tennyson's work, but something has gone wrong when Genet and Tennyson can be made to appear so similar. In fact, almost everything becomes a form of duplicity, a fiction, in Mandel's eyes. The extremes he goes to can be seen in his comment on Atwood's *Survival*. "*Survival* is a ghost story disguised as politics and criticism." His emphasis on the fictional quality of her book ignores all the evidence that what she is pointing to is really there. He is simply *determined* to see everything as fictional.

Mandel's other central, and related, concern in these essays is modernism, or, more accurately, post-modernism. His interest in, and openness to, post-modern developments is most evident in his essays on contemporary Canadian poetry. Here Mandel is at his best as a critic. In some ways he is doing for the

present generation what A. J. M. Smith did for an earlier one: he provides an overview of the direction of contemporary Canadian poetry and also places it in its wider international context. Like Smith, Mandel has been influential as an anthologizer (although unlike Smith he has concentrated only on the present and has not affected our sense of the poetic past), and his essay "Modern Canadian Poetry" extends the argument of his introduction to *Poets Of Contemporary Canada*. He brilliantly illuminates how the nostalgia, the longing for history, the impulse to define a contemporary past, which is so dominant a feature of Canadian writing, is essentially a manifestation of contemporary primitivism. The interest in history becomes a concern with the sources of primitivism, and Mandel seems to take the exploration of primitivism, with its opposition to civilization, as the defining characteristic of the modern.

Mandel does an excellent job of mapping the presence of the primitive in contemporary poetry, but I find his explicit refusal to evaluate this work troubling. He insists: "To understand fully the contemporary poetry of primitivism and its political implications may still be beyond the resources of criticism. And certainly it is too soon to attempt to evaluate it on aesthetic grounds alone, an attempt that would seem as incongruous as ill-judged" (112). Nonetheless, in his openness towards the work of, say, B. P. Nichol, Bill Bissett, Joe Rosenblatt, he does seem to be giving implicit approval. In any case, unlike his more famous mentor, Mandel consistently quotes passages from the poem he is discussing, and this inevitably raises the question of evaluation. He quotes, for example, a lengthy passage from Bissett's *Nobody Owns the Earth*: it's worth looking at a representative section of that passage:

now ther peopul arm themselves against us on th bordr between  
our countries now if not for our strength and our independence of ther  
fascist ways afr th record industry and rock show take ovr, rip off, afr  
ther draft dodgers, if not our strength, our independence, wud cum  
ther tanks, ther ballistik missles, ther show of hate, ther army (108).

Bissett, it is true, rejects normal spelling, but that strikes me as a rather trivial kind of "formal primitivism". What else is there here, that is new, that one can approve of? Neither the rhythms nor the use of the line is particularly new. Surely only an extreme nationalist can approve of the attitudes expressed in the poem—and Mandel, I assume, does not. There seems little here to deserve his implicit approval. Mandel is simply evading the critic's task. A. J. M. Smith, on the other hand, did evaluate, and that is part of his considerable critical importance.

It is not just Mandel's failure to evaluate that raises problems; it is difficult to make sense of his seemingly favorable attitude towards primitivism, his apparent acceptance of primitivism's rejection not just of present-day civilization, but of humanism and high culture. In his essay "The Language of Silence" he takes as his starting point George Steiner's analysis of modernism, but then

presents his own critique of Steiner's pessimism about the failure of literate humanism and the retreat from the word. But it is here that I find Mandel's argument, to use again one of his favorite words, puzzling. Steiner insists that verbal language is the vehicle of reason and deplors the impoverishment of language and the abandonment of reason in the modern world. Mandel, however, blithely calls the values of civilization and literacy into question: "One of the major impulses of the modern era has been a radical critique of civilization, particularly of its Apollonian order and the forms it imposes. In the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Frazer, it is not Apollo, but Dionysus whose voice we hear. What does the god of light and form mean to the apostles of violence?"(38) There is a simplification here—in Nietzsche, and certainly in Freud, we *do* hear the voice of Apollo as well as of Dionysus. *Civilization And Its Discontents* does *not* end by rejecting the necessity of civilization. Mandel himself, however, does tend in that direction. But does he mean that he supports the "apostles of violence"? Mandel is obviously attracted to the primitive, and he clearly prefers it, or at least the artistic exploration of the primitive, to the civilized. In a sense this is odd, because, at least in his criticism, Mandel himself is so clearly civilized, and un-Dionysian. As a result, it is difficult to believe in the final seriousness of his questioning of civilized values. This appears to be a case of the rational mind fascinated by its opposite—doubles again.

The problems raised both by Mandel's attitude towards evaluation and by his ambivalent response to civilization are most striking in what is, nonetheless, the finest essay in the book, "Cohen's Life As A Slave". Cohen's *The Energy of Slaves* is in many ways simply a point of departure for Mandel's discussion of the place of art in a post-modern age. He seems most comfortable with, and best at, this kind of general critical essay; at least by way of contrast, "Atwood Gothic", where he attempts something more like explication, shows him at his worst. Like Dennis Lee, Mandel takes Cohen's work to be central and insists that "he represents contemporary sensibility". This is questionable, and I find the view of Cohen put forth by Sandra Djwa closer to the truth: "(He) substitutes a narrowed, bizarre area of human experience at the expense of the ordinary human average." But for Mandel, *The Energy Of Slaves* stands as the ultimate challenge to the claims of humanism and high culture, and he commits himself to what seems the hopeless task of defending the book. Whatever one thinks about this undertaking, he has written a provocative, challenging essay that brings what he has to say to a focus.

Mandel's response to the book itself seems either overly-ingenuous or simply evasive. He observes that the poems show "flat uninteresting structures, limp lines, flaccid diction, with just enough of a hint of the old lyric flair to reinforce the challenge to one's taste in such matters". But, he insists: "The great classical structures of critical argument bear no relationship to this collapsed lyricism parading its limpness"(132). Mandel implies an obvious enough judg-

ment, but then backs away from it for he claims "a double bind exists: condemn him and you are on the side of a now impossible refinement; join him and you admit your complicity"(133). But I don't agree that this "double bind" inevitably exists. The opposition that Cohen repeatedly makes in the poems between "art and *real* wars, *real* love, *real* revolution", between art and life, only makes sense to those like Cohen, and Mandel, who emphasize form, style, myth. If art is seen as continuous with life, as the highest manifestation of life's creativity, the opposition of art and life dissolves. Cohen's denial of art becomes a denial of the creativity of life. Mandel's essay, nonetheless, as well as Cohen's book, stands as a fascinating account of the current questioning of the values of high culture and civilization. For a fuller analysis of civilization, however, and for an even more radical critique, we need to turn to the work of Dennis Lee.

*Savage Fields* is an ambitious book; as its subtitle informs us, it is an essay on literature and cosmology. Lee makes it very explicit, in fact, that *Savage Fields* "is only incidentally a work of literary criticism—that it is clearing the ground for investigations which go well beyond the literary"(11). Nonetheless, Lee's own investigation of modern "cosmology" is presented mainly through a discussion of literary texts. This double-focused approach makes the book very unusual; D.H. Lawrence's *The Symbolic Meaning*, the earlier, more theoretical and speculative version of *Studies In Classic American Literature*, is one of the few works I can think of that it at all resembles. Further, Lee's book, like Lawrence's, involves, indeed, centres on, a wholesale condemnation of "modernity". But Lee's book is more insistently theoretical than Lawrence's, and here he runs into trouble. As interesting as I find Lee's study to be, and as much as I admire the seriousness behind the book, I think he lacks the theoretical, certainly the philosophical, capability necessary for what he undertakes. The speculative parts of the work are highly questionable and the literary-critical parts, while often perceptive and fascinating, suffer from the abstract nature of his approach.

The problems with the book begin immediately—in fact, are most conspicuous—in the introductory chapter, "Savage Fields". Here Lee attempts to set out his position and explain his terminology. He insists that strife between what he calls "world" and "earth" defines "the fundamental structure of being in our era"; this strife is the essential cosmology of modernity. He elaborates on his use of these key terms: "World includes 'civilization', but it is more than civilization as it has traditionally been understood. World is the ensemble of beings which are either conscious, or manipulated by consciousness for its own purposes. And world's main purpose is to dominate earth"(4). "Earth", on the other hand, "includes 'nature', but it is more than nature as it has traditionally been understood"(4). Lee acknowledges that he has taken these terms from Heidegger, but that he has changed their meaning; unfortunately, these opening explanations, as Lee admits, raise more questions than they answer and the terms never become sufficiently precise. To the extent that they do have a definite meaning, "earth" so often is used as equivalent to nature or instinct,

and "world" to civilization—albeit rational, technological civilization—that, at times, it is difficult to see what is gained by invoking the new terms. Lee repeatedly seems simply to be examining the split between nature and civilization discussed by D.G. Jones in *Butterfly On Rock*, but on a more abstract, cosmological, and vaguer level.

Lee's book is, essentially, an attack on "world". His opening descriptions of "world" and "earth" make his condemnation of "world" obvious: "*Viewed from the vantage point of world, there is nothing but world. The bullets, bulldozers, mental structures, rigid moral assumptions and will to power which define the stance of world (in these books) are infinitely extensible*"(7). Lee then lists the distinguishing characteristics of "world" (as he sees it): it is an ensemble whose members are conscious; it wills to master and control earth; it insists on viewing earth as value-free; when it masters but still cannot know earth, it attacks and destroys it. "Earth" on the other hand is described much more positively, and the contrast with "world" seems extreme. Isn't world anything but bullets, bulldozers and will-to-power? Don't imagination, creativity, art, intellectual vision, compassion and love, also belong to world? In Lee's view, apparently not.

Lee, of course, claims to derive this view of world, of savage fields, from contemporary literature, but all he offers as "evidence" is an analysis of two works: Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. This is an extremely limited base for an argument supposedly mapping out the nature of modern cosmology. The only other works that Lee refers to in support of his argument, and these in a footnote, are Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and four minor novels all published by Anansi. This is not much more in the way of support, and the narrow range of Lee's references reveals an extraordinary provinciality. Does the work of Richler, Laurence, Davies, Hood, Purdy, show life as "savage fields"? Or Bellow and Malamud? Lee needs to confront some of these writers, whose work seems a challenge to his view. Further, Lee never fully justifies the importance he attributes to *Billy The Kid* and *Beautiful Losers*. It's difficult to defend Cohen as a thinker since F's ideas are heavily dependent on Norman O. Brown (who is more than, as Lee sees it, simply a "catalyst" for Cohen), and the significance of parts of the book that Lee praises (see page 64, for example) is often undercut by the fact that they are written in such a pedestrian manner. Lee himself dismisses the last seventy pages of the book as often boring, glib, and flip. This is shaky ground on which to build a case about modernity.

Even if one granted a centrality to *Billy The Kid* and *Beautiful Losers*, Lee's account of savage fields seems to me, to some extent, imposed on these works. Certainly in his discussion of Ondaatje's book, he often argues from a thesis, and not, as he claims, from the text. He maintains that *Billy The Kid* shows three major movements: earth-assault, world-assault, and earth-in-world. In the moment of earth-assault "human consciousness is pummelled and nearly demolished by instinctual energy". Lee seems to be allowing that earth, too, is

destructive, but he merely cites examples of earth-assault without commenting on them. (In fact, once one puts the passages back into their context in the poem, Lee's procedure is seen to be very misleading.) In the section on "world-assault", however, he responds very differently; he comments at some length in order to make explicit the negative character of "world": "Ondaatje depicts man as the animal which mechanizes itself—which becomes a killing machine. Gun, machine, and mind: in *Billy The Kid* these are the weapons of world"(18). And again: "Billy is defining himself as an instrument of murder, a citizen of world"(19). But certain of the passages that Lee cites as examples of world-assault can be seen this way only by misreading. He refers, for instance, to Billy's "massacre" of the sick cat Ferns. Killing the cat, it is true, reveals Billy's talent as a killer, but it is anything but a "massacre"—it is more an act of compassion. Further, on Billy's reflection about killing, "One must eliminate much", Lee comments: "What Billy eliminates, or longs to eliminate is all sense of citizenship in earth"(20). Surely what Billy has to eliminate is any moral sense, emotional response, caring—the positive qualities of world. Ondaatje undoubtedly is critical of excessive rationality—Garrett is "sane assassin"—but this is not all he sees in "world". It is Lee who denies that any positive features belong to world.

Lee's discussion of the role of F in *Beautiful Losers* shows most clearly what he dislikes about world and modernity, but it also shows the limitations of his response to modernism. He contends that F represents world in its mastering stage, and that this is characterized by three dominant attitudes: an insistence on radical freedom, a radical dependency on technique, and a radical solipsism (that is, if, as world attests, God is dead and nature simply neutral raw material, there cannot be anything outside of man for him to receive). Lee provides a fine explanation of how F exhibits these attitudes and unquestionably he is calling attention to central features, and serious shortcomings, of the modern world. But for all that is admirable in this analysis it falsifies, finally, the nature of world. Lee's deep conservatism causes him to limit too drastically man's capacity to *create* meaning. At one point he writes of F: "He is trying out the role of Zarathustra. Now he will create meaning without believing in meaning, pitting his absurd fables of meaning against a meaningless cosmos"(87). Lee seems to think that unless meaning is received, given, man's attempt to create meaning leads to an endless series of systems of meaning, and ultimately to a reliance on, or a take-over by, technique. Now even if *Beautiful Losers* does show F succumbing to technique, I see no reason to take that as inevitable, and representative, and consequently to have so little faith in the power of the imagination to create significance. Where if not from man, or at least, *through* man, is meaning to come? Lee's response to this question seems to be to hark back to an earlier time when meaning was simply "given": "It is not just that men have 'a system', then, but that they have 'nothing but a system'. Some may retain at least the vestigial sense of a time when people could dwell in planet in fear and trembling, or in reverence, or as creatures within a created order. But

technological man is incapable of grasping those possibilities as anything but raw data"(99). Within a "created" order, then, there was a meaning that has been lost.

This created order, the sacramental universe, has been displaced by the liberal cosmology, and Lee concentrates his attack on the predominant liberalism which "teaches that men inhabit an objective and value-free universe, which we know and re-fashion through calculating reason"(50). His attempt to show that the fact-value distinction, inseparable from the liberal view of the universe, is "logically untenable" is rather glib, but this view of nature, and the Cartesian view of a split between subject and object, have been increasingly criticized by a wide range of thinkers. The problem with Lee's position is that he seems essentially to want to return to the world displaced by the liberal cosmology. In a footnote he does remark that it would be "almost impossible. . . to return to pre-liberal verities" (120), to the notion of a sacramental universe, but nonetheless this seems the main direction of his thought. Certainly his praise of *Beautiful Losers* centres on Cohen's presentation of the possibility of regaining a sacramental universe, what Lee calls the Isis Continuum: Isis "is planet experienced in its true nature: unified, all loving, and holy. . . Planet is still as magical as the Iroquois knew it to be. 'God is alive'. There is not some new reality to be created: there is merely familiar reality, to be accepted for the first time as its holy self" (71). Here the view of life as savage fields is transcended. This is the world prior to the "de-valorization and the bifurcation effected by the liberal cosmology"(77). The *real* world. There is no such thing as earth-assault and planet has unity of being. Even assuming that this *was* the way things were before the liberal cosmology—surely a debatable if not simply doubtful idea—it cannot be regained. D. H. Lawrence, it is true, at certain moments—searching out the Etruscan past, reflecting on the meaning of the Book of Revelation—showed similar longings for an animistic, sacramental universe. But he knew finally that it could not be recovered and that man, as "thought-adventurer", must press on, not back. Lee seems to long for what Owen Barfield, in *Saving The Appearances*, calls "original participation" with nature. But, Barfield insists, this original world of participation "*is* a lost world; and no good can come of harking back to it." Barfield himself, it's worth noting, suggests that man is moving towards what he calls "final participation", which demands an active engagement of the imagination, but Lee seems trapped by his static picture of reality, and by his nostalgia.

By the end of his book Lee appears to have thought himself into a corner. His attack on modernity, on world, becomes so radical that he distrusts thought itself: "Thinking proceeds by objectifying and mastering. . . this means that thinking is already an exercise in the world-mode of conscious control"(110). He therefore concludes: "It cannot finally be good to go on thinking within the models that rule in our civilization"(111). But this is essentially what Lee himself has done in *Savage Fields* and he obviously found the attempt worth

making. What he has not done is think precisely and clearly enough within these models, nor has he managed to be, in Lawrence's sense, a "thought-adventurer", one who extends the models. Nonetheless, Lee has extended the boundaries of Canadian criticism, and, whatever the defects of his examination of modernity or of Mandel's response to post-modernism, the questions that they both, in their very different ways, raise about the significance of modernism, and about the very value of humanism, high culture and civilization are, obviously, of central and pressing importance. Hopefully their work signals a general turn in Canadian criticism, away from the study of distinctively Canadian themes, images, and patterns, towards the mainstream of criticism and towards an engagement with the major questions of our time.

## NOTES

1. *Another Time*. By Eli Mandel. Erin: Press Porceac, 1977, Pp. 160. \$4.95.
2. *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology*. By Dennis Lee. Toronto: Anansi, 1977. Pp. 125. \$5.95.