From Room to Room: The Poetry of Eli Mandel
selected and with an introduction by Peter Webb
afterword by Andrew Stubbs

Plans Deranged by Time: The Poetry of George Fetherling
selected and with an introduction by A.F. Moritz
afterword by George Fetherling

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Sometime before 2005, Al Moritz and Neil Besner must have sat down together over coffee and said: “What this country needs is a good 5-cent cigar.” As Besner explains in the Foreword that appears in each edition of the Laurier Poetry Series, this “cigar” took the following shape:

Our idea is to ask a critic (sometimes himself a poet) to select thirty-five poems from across a poet’s career; write an engaging, accessible introduction; and have the poet himself . . . [if still alive] write an afterword.

The hope was by this means to create an “affordable edition of contemporary Canadian poetry for use in the classroom and the enjoyment of anyone wishing to read some of the finest poetry Canada has to offer” (news release from Wilfrid Laurier University Press).

Initially, they approached Catherine Hunter to create such a book on the poetry of Lorna Crozier, said book bearing the title Before the First Word and being released in 2005. Since then, Wilfrid Laurier University Press has done a great service to the cause of the preservation and dissemination of Canadian poetry by releasing an average of two such books a year in their continuing series.

The two books under consideration here are the latest installments.

Eli Mandel was born in 1922 in Estevan, Saskatchewan (the same town as Dennis Cooley). Although he passed away in 1992, a series of strokes left him unable to write for much of his later life. From Room to Room helps to revive his memory. As Peter Webb states in his introduction, “recovery has been . . . elusive” as a result of Mandel being “a difficult poet – destined more for critical acclaim than popular acceptance” (x). Mandel drew on a wide variety of styles and influences, leading Webb to state that “Mandel’s resistance to labels is crucial in appreciating the formal complexity and thematic richness of his work” (x). In the relatively small space allotted to him, Webb does a great job of setting out the wide diversity of themes that Mandel explored in his poetry.

“Minotaur Poems,” the six-part poetic sequence that Webb so eloquently discussed, opens the collection. The reader is immediately enchanted by the opening words:

It has been hours in these rooms,
the opening to which, door or sash,
I have lost. I have gone from room to room
asking the janitors who were sweeping up
the brains that lay on the floors, (1)
The first four lines are innocuous, lulling the reader into a state of restfulness, though one accompanied by an air of expectancy. What has been “hours in these rooms,” and why? The activity of janitors does not raise any alarms. And then there’s the surprise of the fifth line, awakening our sensibilities. Mandel creates an interesting rhythm. The anapest (unstressed – unstressed – stressed) that ends the first line (“in these rooms”) is contrasted by the second line, where the words following the caesura—“door or sash”—are in a stressed – unstressed – stressed pattern that could be considered an example of catalexis, where the line has been shortened by a foot. However, the metric pattern is repeated at the start of the next line, so this can only be an example of the more unusual metric foot called a cretic, which is again employed in the next three words before we are returned to the iambic. Mandel begins the next line with a trochaic, continuing with an iambic before concluding with an anapest. Finally, in the fifth line, we have a repeat of two iambics followed by an anapest. The dexterity by which the various metric patterns are splayed upon the page shows a poet well in control of his domain. However, it is the movement of sound and sense as one moves with or against the other that creates the landscape of a poem. And Mandel creates impressive landscapes. In “Minotaur Poems,” we find lines like these: “The air was filled with a buzzing and flying / and the invisible hum of a bee’s wings was honey / in my father’s framed and engined mind” (1).

Mandel is a master of other poetic devices, something he more than amply demonstrates in “Mary Midnight’s Prologue.” Take this stanza from near the end:

I have swallowed other poets in other times.
My uterus is seminal with rhymes.
You think your present is your singing past.
I know the darkness is the future lost. (12)

Here, Mandel plays with half and full rhymes. Earlier in the poem, he was able to rhyme “pantaloons” with “balloon” as a full rhyme and “heart” with “hurt” as a half. The intrepid reader may be interested in knowing that Mary Midnight was the effeminate pseudonym for Christopher Smart, a mid-seventeenth-century poet and preacher who spent large parts of his life in insane asylums.

In contrast to Mandel, George Fetherling is alive. This prolific author, who has published over a dozen poetry books, two novels and a memoir, as well as editing numerous others, wrote, until 1999, under the name of either Doug or Douglas Fetherling. The biographical note provided at the start of this work reveals a writer whose interests were seemingly unbounded. The note also lists Fetherling’s date of birth as 1949, nearly three decades after Mandel’s, placing Fetherling not just in a different generation but in one that, due initially to the efforts of Irving Layton, had freed itself from the yoke of British poetic tyranny. In his introduction, A.F. Moritz describes Fetherling’s poetry and the age in which he arose as having

formal resemblances to that of some of the scholar-poets (though Fetherling is an autodidact and a reader, not a university-trained scholar) and author-poets of the mid-twentieth century: Robert Fitzgerald, Horace Gregory, Dudley Fitts, Lawrence Durrell, or the fine translations that have been made of Julio Cortázar’s and Günter Grass’s poetry. Probably this is not a matter of influence but of the fact that, like the other North American poets maturing in the 1950s and 1960s, Fetherling worked in the aftermath of Pound and Eliot. Like the American poets named above (as opposed to, say, the “Beat” group and the Black Mountain group, though like them embracing the help of William Carlos Williams
and his followers and Kenneth Rexroth), he tried to deflect those influences into something that recaptured elements of classic English poetry while fully retaining modernity, its speed, vividness, and liberty of subject, rhythm and expression. (xi)

Williams’s influence is clearly discernible in “Alleycat,” the poem that opens this collection:

Back of the Yards
    crossing the street
only when necessary
and then very quickly
    head and tail
downward
    the shortest path
between two points indistinct (1)

Each line is a breath unit but, unlike say Charles Olson or Robert Creeley of Black Mountain fame, a syntactical flow has been retained.
Contrasting Mandel’s poetic lines with Fetherling’s, there is a staccato clip to the latter. Whereas Mandel would place a thought on single line, Fetherling is more likely to have his line breaks interrupt the flow of thought. This can be seen in “The Dark Grid”:

You have seen me there
    and know I only know the back doors
of restaurants
    their distinctive arrays of garbage
little brick holes that are warm
for those not confused by purpose (5)

Line endings break up long sentences into syntactical units, isolating them by a rhythmic stutter. However, as can be seen in the last line cited, this is not always the case. In fact, if the more Williams-like line breaks of “Alleycat” had been followed, the last line would have appeared as:

    for those not confused
        by purpose

This highlights one of the problems of this series. A restricted number of poems is selected from throughout the poet’s career, but they are not dated, so readers are not able to follow the evolution of the person as poet. We are not informed as to whether “Alleycat” and “The Dark Grid” formed part of the same collection or whether they were written twenty years apart. Such information is important.

We must assume that “Mappamundi” was written some considerable time after the first two poems cited, as the line structure and, hence, the rhythm have radically changed:

Autumn has come and leaves blow aloft
    like kites torn apart by competing winds.
At this distance you can’t hear the clouds
    colliding but only the rain being blotted
on the pavement. Twigs snap. Bones snap.
So many dead. (54)
In his afterword, after citing Kenneth Rexroth and comparing him to George Woodcock, Fetherling states:

Rereading most of my published poetry now, I see the same principle, the same argument, replayed through the filter of a later generation’s voice. It seems to me that the desire to create new codes of hearing – as it were, to address the equivalents of the jazzers and occultists while sidestepping the cops – is one of the two strongest elements in my work. (57)

Perhaps sidestepping cops is what poets do best, for they never want another to arrest their flow of words. We have seen how Mandel and Fetherling, two of Canada’s prominent poets, have approached this flow from radically different perspectives. It is difficult for Canadian publishers, due to the structure and requirements of granting agencies, to engage in such a thing as the Laurier Poetry Series. Perhaps that is why it is left up to a university press to do so. We, the consumers of poetry, must be thankful to Wilfrid Laurier University Press for having undertaken the restoration of this heritage.


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