

An Interview With Eli Mandel

Margery Fee

Margery: I wanted first of all to talk about your being a professor, because I get feelings from you sometimes that you have an ambiguous feeling about who you are, well, a professor or a poet or a critic or what.

Eli: Yeah, I think that consciously, I've always tried to pretend that there is no division between my poetic self and myself as a teacher; I think that we should make a distinction between being a teacher and a professor, though that's another thing.

M: Yeah, well that's sort of insulting...

E: Yeah, well the distinction would be, I love the teaching part of it, and I think something creative happens in a good class. The professional art of it, that is being a professor, that's another matter entirely because that involves one in such things as administration, college committees, university committees, department politics, the structure of the university and the whole kind of political life of the university which in turn is part of the political life of the country admittedly, but something which doesn't interest me as much as it once did. So I'm saying that first of all, that there's this distinction to be made between that whole professional life and the teaching life itself. And the teaching life I think of as creative. Now in the sense that it is creative, it takes away from your poetic power. People sometimes make the mistake of thinking it's the administrative and political life side of it that takes away from your poetic power. It doesn't except in so far as it keeps you busy. You know you're occupied writing memos and committee reports and therefore you can't be writing poems. But real teaching is a drain; it's like writing a poem, you end up having used up that creative energy which would have gone into your writing. I think all poets are teachers, and all teachers are poets, or the best in both cases are so. A really good example is Irving Layton. Irving, long before he was in the university system was a didactic man, both as a poet and as a critic. And so one can get a book like *Engagements*, a book of his prose which is teaching, he's a born teacher. So there is that tension, that ambiguity.

M: So you have a set fund of energy, of creative energy that can be drained somehow.

E: I wouldn't say a set fund, it varies from time to time. We all live more or less creatively. Either your faculties are roused up as Blake would

say, or they're not. And there are times when you've got more energy and times when you've got less. At least that's how I experience it. And certainly an awful lot of nervous energy and an awful lot of creative energy is used up in teaching as far as I'm concerned, I think at a loss to the poetry, so maybe sometimes I'm ambivalent about it.

M: What starts you off on writing a poem? Does it come from energy or does it sometimes come from boredom? Sometimes I'm bored, and I get out of it by writing a poem.

E: It's rather like sexual experience, it's there all the time. That is to say desire is there all the time and it's roused or not. It can be roused by boredom, it can be roused by particular appearances. It can be repressed by other appearances and so on. Again I'm going to refer to someone else here — Dennis Lee has got an article called "Country Cadence" and in that he talks beautifully about this sound going on in your head all the time. And for me as for Dennis and for I think a lot of poets, poems don't begin with ideas and poems don't begin even with images. Poems begin with a kind of sound in my head. Sometimes with a feeling or irritation, rather than boredom, a feeling of pressure inside my head that just builds up and builds up and has to be released in one way or another. And so I sit down and I write. Now once I begin writing, one poem generates another. And I would say that a book of poems is very frequently for me at least, an attempt to keep clarifying for myself a set of images that has begun to appear in some poems and the more I write the more I can write. One poem generates another, and that provides for the unity of the book itself. At some point that sort of attempt at clarification is complete, and I say the book is complete and that's that and let it go.

M: So it's a sort of catharsis almost? You write for a sort of relief?

E: I began, way back in the distant past, whenever it was, there was a romantic adolescent period and I was writing for whatever reason adolescents write. I think almost every literate person at one time or another writes poetry. But when I began to think of myself seriously as a poet which was after the war, after World War II, I had a Nietzschean view of the poet's role and a Thomas Mann view of the poet's role. He's the sick person who makes the society well and in other words the function of poetry was for me cathartic in that sense. It was the price that I paid as a creative person to serve in my society or something like that.

M: So poetry has a social function, it's not just a personal thing you can lock in the closet.

E: Oh, it has a social function for me. For me at that time and I really have to emphasize the temporal element here, poetry was very very much concerned with getting into the open things that it seemed to me almost impossible to get into the open — saying secrets, telling secrets as it were. It seemed to me that that had a very definite social function; the function being that one was the one who was going to tell these things that no one else would talk about.

M: So your experience can be generalized. You feel that people can read these poems and say yes this is a secret that we all have, but he's the one that said it. So you're writing for people, not just for yourself.

Do you think of who's going to read them?

E: After the fact, after the fact. As I said, before, at the time I write out of a pressure that can't be defined. Now over time, a long period, things have changed somewhat. I've said often that you don't write poems, poems write you. I believe this very strongly and I've encountered it elsewhere since. Octavio Paz, the great Spanish poet and philosopher says the very same thing. Levi-Strauss says that we are written by the myths that we use and so on. What I mean by that is, as time goes on and you become identified as a poet, you write a book of poems, you look at that book of poems and you say, "Oh, I see — that was what that book was about." People say well you're a poet and they ask you questions as you're asking me questions now. You have become that role now. The next book that you're going to write bears some relationship to that change that has taken place. The first book has created you and now you have all the obligations of being the writer, of the one who has written that. Perhaps the next book is going to attempt to clarify the first, because so many people misunderstand it.

M: I can see that, sure, sure. So when you talk about being responsible to society, are you speaking politically? I see a lot of politics in your poems. Does that come out naturally, or do you ever inject that — do you feel it is part of the way you think?

E: Well I'm trying to set up here a notion of development. I'm trying to suggest that. After all I've been writing at least, if you think of the published works, twenty years, 1954 to 1974, and there's a development and that development is partly conscious and partly not. It's partly in the forms as they make their demands on me and I attempt to fulfill those demands which are made. It's partly an attempt at clarification of my own position as a writer and so on. Now one of the things I'm aware of is that what I'm dealing with when I'm dealing with poetry is power. Poetry is energy, poetry is delight, poetry is power. And politics is power, and it's the tension between two kinds of power which really really concerns me. Now it's been said many times ... Solzhenitsyn says that writers form a second government. That's something like Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators", and I just can't imagine a poetry which in some sense or another is apolitical. Merely to turn your back on politics is in fact to make a political statement of a certain kind. So while I began in one sense in the Nietzschean romantic tradition of the poet as concerned with a kind of sacred private experience which is necessary for the health of the tribe, I've developed from that I think to a much more public position where I consciously concern myself with political issues. I'm a bit surprised to discover this.

M: Do you feel it's set poetry, or does the issue affect you emotionally and then you say, right, that's the focus, the concentration camps or some particular thing?

E: Well Irving Layton says that I wait around for the great leftist leaders of the world one by one to die so I can write poems about them. He says "Just think Eli, wait till..."

M: Wait till Mao dies...

E: Wait till Mao dies, that will be your masterpiece. It's true, though, a

lot of my political poetry is elegaic. It's about the passing away of orders.

M: It's too bad that happened. Which is kind of depressing when you think about it. Do you feel that you could write an evil poem? If you can put a social value on poetry, well then can you say that a poem is evil or immoral?

E: Yes indeed, and this really really occupies me. You're touching there on a question which just staggers me. Ann and I went to see *Badlanders* the other night, and when we walked out I said to her, "That's an immoral picture." Of course then we got into an argument about what's immoral and what's moral and finally I retreated to the Jamesian position where I said, "Well, the characters aren't interesting..."

M: I think you got pushed too far there maybe.

E: Sure, I think it's fairly evident from my criticism and also from my poetry over the past ten years at least that one of my concerns has been that one that George Steiner concerns himself with in *Language and Silence* — the extent to which we are involved in the evils which are part of the world and the extent to which our language is involved and therefore the extent to which certain uses of the language are involved. Or to put this I think in its most challenging way and this is implied in Steiner — it's out of the world we call the civilized world that some of the most dreadful barbarisms have arisen. These didn't arise in opposition to that world, they came out of it. It may be that what we call the humanist position implies that barbarity. Put it another way — that's the argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. The price of civilization is aggression and guilt and that's a very abstract way of saying, "Yes, I think that culture, and poetry is part of culture, could very well be involved in an enormous evil and therefore individual poems can also be involved." The question for the writer then is to find out to what extent that is so and how he can handle that question.

M: So I think that you can have two kinds of evil poem; a poem that is in itself perhaps evil, and I think we should talk about that a bit more. And then there's the fact that I could read a political poem and get a feeling that I had done something or participated in some kind of activity which would then prevent me from going out and doing something, a poem which would make me feel romantic or fulfilled in some way. So there's two ways a poem can distract.

E: One way is that it can prettify, it can beautify things that ought not to be beautified. It was said, "After Auschwitz, no poetry." The meaning of this silence demanded by some writers was that anything you say about it is going to make it less than, not more than, the horror that it was. Then there are those that put it the other way and say that to remain silent is a crime. We have to bear witness, we have to testify to this. There is the sense that, as you say, the poem can distract you, that's one kind of evil. Now there's another kind, and that is the kind that raises that awful question about poetry and belief. What if the writer is a fascist, what if he's an anti-semitic writer? It's been said of Pound that he was anti-semitic, and I've thought about Pound a great

deal. I'm reading Kenner's *The Pound Era* right now. How does one handle that?

M: And what about Blake? He said some pretty strong things about Jews.

E: Yes indeed, Blake makes enormous demands on one's imagination and belief. What if you think he's on the wrong side, how do you handle that?

M: Well I think it's upsetting to find that you love a poet's work and then realize that as for his beliefs, you wouldn't have gone along with it at all on a lot of levels.

E: One answer is of course the kind that Sir Phillip Sidney gave and which in contemporary terms we'd put this way — that poems do not in fact make literal demands on belief, they hold up 'models of' and that model is a good one, that model is a bad one or, they're hypothetical, they don't assert.

M: What it feels like to be.

E: Yeah, that's right, they don't assert, they suppose. You don't have to believe in the ghost of Hamlet's father, you just have to suppose there was a ghost. Well, I'm not satisfied with that answer.

M: Well, neither am I but I don't think you can ever be satisfied, or if you are maybe you have to stop reading and writing and go and do something. But then that's an activist kind of answer.

E: How long have people written books of poetry? It's not a perennial activity. The whole notion of art in the sense that we think of poetry as an art is, at least in our society, only about 250 years old. It's something 18th century.

M: It used to be part of religion or part of magic or part of something else.

E: That's right. For some of the great painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the problem of belief was solved by the simple fact that they were painting for a given religion. That was their function. As William Kurelek, the Canadian painter, says, he's got a medieval concept of art. He paints because people ask him to and for the glory of God. It's simple then.

M: It's simple, but ... Somewhere I think you described yourself as a moral anarchist — one of my friends heard you say that, and I wanted to talk about it.

E: Well, you've just been hearing me talk about it!

M: That's moral anarchism, yes!

E: In part, no. I think what's implied by that notion is my belief that all big structures — and all big systems, that is social systems, that is institutions of various kinds like the university — that is moral and metaphysical systems in thought, that is critical systems in aesthetics and poetics and so on — all are to be distrusted. I believe in minute particulars, and that's the moral anarchism of it. I really feel that though there's no question that we do exist as part of a structure, and we can't deny our being as social beings, and so on, I really think we should be very suspicious of the demands put upon us by those orders. The *moral* aspect of it is a little more difficult, but I think you have to make a commitment to yourself that your anarchy will not be

destructive. This fundamentally implies, and this comes back to the question of what would be an evil poem, that you're not manipulating other people.

M: That you do your thing without dragging other people into it.

E: Manipulation seems to be the ultimate evil, that is, using other people. You have to be in some sort of relationship with them, obviously, but you don't have to use them. I think that every writer must always be forced to ask himself something about the extent to which he is using somebody else.

M: That's very hard not to do.

E: I want to add one thing. There's a very serious problem that I've only begun to think about as deeply as I want to and that is of course the extent to which — of course the most difficult of all structures to deal with is language itself — *language* is a structure.

M: What if it is the fundamental immoral thing?

E: All our values in one sense are implicit in the syntax of our language, and that is something that is into us so early — well Chomsky's even argued that it's innate.

M: It's part of our brain. In which case one has no choice. I wanted to talk about being a poet again. Do you feel if you were isolated from other poets in society you would be as creative? Do you need the support of other writers?

E: Isolated in what sense? You mean that I didn't see them or talk to them?

M: Yeah, or that you didn't feel that anybody was reading your poetry.

E: I think it doesn't matter to me very much to see and talk to other writers. On the whole I don't like it. Two or three writers in this country are very good friends of mine, and I'm very friendly with them. And I mean on the personal level, we're really good friends. I have made it a practice never to write letters about poetry to other poets. I don't have a body of correspondence of that kind. And though when I'm with other writers, Al Purdy, Mike Ondaatje, Irving Layton, Dennis Lee, these are people I see very frequently, we gossip about writing, I don't like writers as groups. I don't attend the League of Canadian Poets' meetings, although I was one of the founding people, I was the first president of it for two years. It's grown to be a very efficient organization and I support it. So I'm saying so far as being with writers, I'm not terribly interested. They're not an awfully interesting group. They're egotistical.

M: One in a room is enough. But I'm thinking of the social implications for a well functioning culture and what that means to the individual artist.

E: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that my writing Canadian poetry, that is writing poetry in Canada, became possible when I realized that people were doing it, and doing it well. When I came back from Europe after World War II and I had begun to learn about modern poetry, and I was very excited about that. I was reading Auden, Hopkins, Yeats, I was reading Eliot and so on and terribly excited by it and believing I could do something. I remember in the library at Regina coming across a book called *Go to Sleep World* by Raymond Souster, a

Canadian writer and I read it and I said, "Wow this is the real stuff." That meant a great deal to me. And I think that the community of writers — if one is thinking simply of the way one poem sounds off another poem, one poem resonates with another poem, that community is very important. And it's important to me to read Blake and Yeats and Stevens and Crane and Berryman and Theodore Roethke and Canadian writers.

M: So you feel like a Canadian poet. Do you think of yourself as a Canadian poet?

E: Not particularly. I think of myself now as a prairie poet, a writer whose being was formed by the experience of living on the prairies as a boy. I think the first six to ten years are absolutely essential. There's no way of escaping that. I think I could trace that in my work, much to my surprise. I think of myself as a first generation Canadian, my parents being immigrants. I think of the Jewish colonies of the prairies as being important. When I say a Jewish boy of the prairies, that's a kind of abstraction. That's still, nonetheless, important.

M: Is that why this book is called *Stony Plain*?

E: *Stony Plain* is a title arrived at with a great deal of difficulty. I began the book calling it *Stony Plain Nation* and there was something about that I didn't like so I dropped that title and as I was working further and further with the book there were a whole series of different titles. I called it *The Secret Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau* and then the *Elliott Trudeau Papers*. I think a book's been published called *The Trudeau Papers*. When the manuscript first went out, it was called *War Measures* and I'm glad I dropped it because Gary Geddes used it in another book. Then I realized what was wrong with *Stony Plain Nation*. 'Nation' of course implies Indians, and there's something about Indians in that book but I didn't want that much emphasis on Indians so I dropped 'nation'. *Stony Plain* is right because this is a book that's going back to roots, towards the prairies. The whole prairie experience is much more important and I intend to go even more particularly toward it this summer.

M: I feel that you've moved from the kind of poems you were writing at the beginning to some of the poems in *Stony Plain* — there's a definite change from some sort of myth-depth poetry to more surface, more *stone*. Almost like the movement in the titles from something like a labyrinth to something very simple and flat. Do you think that's going to continue?

E: Oh yes. I think the poetics change in some way. I don't know which comes first, the actual change in the poetry or in the poetics but I put it this way. While I don't like being identified with the so-called mythopoeic school, I agree with you about the depth poetry earlier. I think the earlier poetry was concerned with secrets in people and things and with kind of psychological mysteries.

M: Always going inside — *in* the labyrinth.

E: That's right. And the latest poetry is concerned with surfaces. But you can put that difference in another way. The earlier poetry was using language in a highly organized structured and symbolic way, whatever I mean by symbolism.

M: Let's not get into that!

E: In the later poetry the language is simpler, sparer, cleaner in some sense. And that's because I've come to believe and this seems to me very important indeed... As George Bowering put it very well indeed — what a poet has to do is go to the language and ask for what is there. In the same way that I believe you have to allow the words you use to be open enough so that what's out there in the world begins to speak in your poetry. Warren Tallman asked me at a reading I gave in Vancouver — when I write a poem do I think of what is in my head or what's on the page? I said what's on the page. You can put the difference exactly this way; when I began to write I used to think of what was in my head. Now I think of what's on the page.

M: So you sort of have the pieces and you're moving them around — like making a collage.

E: That's right and you look for the words — you don't sort of charge at the thing and assert your will, you look for the words that will in themselves contain exactly what you want to say, and they do. One superb example that works for me in *Stony Plain*, it may not for some people, this is just one example, is in the Wabamum poems. It's that tiny little poem that goes:

to have come to this
simplicity

 to know
only
 the absolute
calm
 lake
 before
 night

Now there are two things about that. One is that every word really resonates. For example, 'absolute' — the absolute is the ultimate, the thing-in-itself, reality, but the absolute calm, every word resonates equally. If you go out to that lake just before sunset you can see a moment when that happens on that lake. It's an absolutely — description isn't the right word — precise poem. It puts on the page what is really out there.

M: That feeling you get that no matter how many words you bring into it you're not going to get any closer than that.

E: Fifteen words. That's another thing, that's economy.

M: I really like those. They're so different. It's a whole new set of things that I have to think about when I think about you as a poet.

E: Now an interesting thing is — I've wondered about this too — What would those poems have sounded like if they had not been written by me?

M: Exactly. They're in the context of you. And that makes a big difference to people.

E: They're stolen too. I'm not ashamed of that. There are two in-

fluences behind the Wabamum poems. One is Phyllis Webb's 'Naked Poems' and the other is Barrie Nichol's *Still Water*. I think Victor Coleman thinks rather poorly of me for that, but it still doesn't bother me.

M: You mean he doesn't like you getting into his area. He writes poems like that.

E: I have a feeling that Victor thinks I'm being opportunistic.

M: I wanted to talk about how *Crusoe* was done. The way the poems were selected and how other people were involved in them.

E: Ann and I had a long discussion about that the other night — again — in connection with how one thinks of oneself as a writer. The actual sequence of events, which is important, is this. I sent the manuscript of what became *Stony Plain* to Dennis Lee from Rome to Toronto, no from Spain, and by the time we reached Rome I had his answer. The answer was that he and Peggy Atwood had read the manuscript and both of them, although they thought there were very good things in it, were somewhat disappointed. Now I should point out that the manuscript that they got was about a third longer than the present *Stony Plain*. It was called *War Measures* and it was eighty poems. This has been cleaned up a good deal. And Dennis said there were many many poems in it that he thought he would like to see in print. It's important to know that Dennis is an extraordinary editor. He's got a beautiful editorial mind. He sees at once the possibility of a book. Or he says "There's no book here." What he was seeing as he read *Stony Plain* was *Crusoe*. That is, a book which indicated a development. And he was so enthusiastic about that than rather than do *Stony Plain* he wanted to do the book that later became *Crusoe: Selected Poems and New*. And they'd be prepared at Anansi to do that. So we worked on it through the next fall and completed the selection in about three months and the book came out in the spring. At the same time Dave Godfrey had got wind of the manuscript of *Stony Plain* and he said he wanted to print that and I got an agreement from Anansi that both books could come out. I'd hoped that *Stony Plain* would come out first and *Crusoe* a few months later but Anansi was pretty quick and they came at exactly the same time. And that's the sequence of events. There's something else I know that you're asking and that is what about the fact that two other poets chose, selected, and arranged and presented my work. A lot of people have been curious about that. Well, I've got two answers. One is that an awful lot more editing goes on than most people ever admit. They keep it quiet. It's really true. Dave Godfrey did a lot of editing of *Stony Plain* with me. Everybody knows stories about say Thomas Wolfe's manuscripts, how they were cut in half by the editor. Constantly in Canadian writing and elsewhere there is an editing process. Some writers resist it and others don't. I know that I get dozens and dozens of manuscripts and before those manuscripts go to publishers I have made editorial suggestion, sometimes formally and sometimes informally and those suggestions are embodied in the work. It's no secret that Doug Jones wrote an extra chapter for *Butterfly on Rock* because I was one of the readers of the original manuscript and I said that this book is a book that does not

come anywhere within the purview of contemporary writing in Canada. So there was a chapter added on the contemporary scene. It's not all that startling.

M: People don't like to admit it, you're right, they like to think that that's their book, all theirs and no one else's.

E: The second thing is I was really intrigued by the idea of having Dennis and Peggy make the selection in collaboration with me. Nothing was put in that book that I didn't want put in. Almost all the revisions are my own — not all in the sense that some were suggested by Dennis. At one point Dennis got enthusiastic enough to rewrite one of my poems but Peggy looked at it and said "That's a poem by Dennis Lee and not by Eli Mandel".

M: That's the reverberation of poems on poets. People reading poems and writing their own poems about them. I think there's a difference between revising someone else's poem and writing your own poem about that poem.

E: But what's in *Crusoe* I would say that's mine.* That's my book. They made the selection. Well, I hope one day to make a second selection, as P.K. Page has done now, and then we'd see, and do something a little bit different. But it catches as a book it seems to me the development that's there and it catches many of the moods and a lot of the poems are cleaner than they were before. There are passages and lines that are out. Most of the revision consisted, as people have noted, of excision to the strength of the poems.

M: Have you ever thought of writing a book which you started out with the book in your head and then wrote the poems to fit, like serial poems or poems in one voice, or a book like *Billy the Kid* with a hero.

E: I'm thinking of something like that now for the first time. Most of the other books simply got written.

M: You mean you simply had enough poems.

E: Well the interesting thing is they got written as books within relatively short periods. *An Idiot Joy* was written from September to May of one year and then a few poems were added during the summer. *Stony Plain*, which took seven years to write in one sense, in another sense was written over a three month period in Spain. I'd written about twenty poems over quite a long period of time. I wasn't writing much poetry and was doing a fair amount of criticism and I began working on this and the whole thing came together. In a sense there was a structure in my mind for *Stony Plain* and there must have been for *An Idiot Joy*. But I know there's a difference between that and the kind of poem you're thinking of. And right now I've even got a title, *Dreaming Backwards*, from Yeats, and I've got a notion that I think I know what it is I want to do. Now how unified that will turn out, given the kind of mind I've got — given the way my mind works with poetry, I don't know, but I want to write a book which is concerned at least in a general way with Estevan, with the Jewish colonies, with the prairies. I want to locate the whole thing in that setting and move it about in time and space to a degree but only in the degree of getting back there from now and then coming back here. So conceptually the idea of a book that would be about time and space. And a particular place and a

particular time. Documents too.

M: Have you ever considered writing a novel?

E: Not in twenty years. I guess about twenty years ago I was writing a novel called *The Seven Elevators of Allsbury*.

M: Sounds great. What was it about?

E: It was about a murder on the prairies. The body of a girl was found after an elevator burned down. You know elevators do burn down. They're spectacular fires lasting two or three days. They blow up. And a girl's body was found in one of these elevators in a small town. I wrote about seventy pages and gave that up. I won a prize at university for a short story. I used to write short stories, but now almost all my writing is either poetry or criticism. And I'm thinking about getting a book of critical papers published. For the last two years now I've been thinking about that.

M: You've got lots. You don't see yourself as needing to write something longer than poetry? Some people feel that way you know: "It's time I wrote a novel."

E: What I want to do is to have the chance and the time and the luck to write at least one more book and maybe two more — maybe three more books of poetry and then there would be a body of work. I'm not quite as casual about what I would allow myself to print as say maybe Frank Davey is or George Bowering. The serial kind of poem.

M: It's printed and they do another one and it's printed and that's fine.

E: It's a professional thing.

M: They're not thinking about a finished thing, whereas yours are as finished as you can get them at that point.

E: Without being critical of that position because I admire both writers, and I think for example Frank is getting better all the time and George is an awfully interesting writer, I could just not write a book like his *Curious* in which he writes about various poets. *Autobiology* I think's interesting. I don't think I've yet reached the point where I think of the poem as simply those words on the page, that's the thing. So I can't write a serial poem. There's still structure, and that's quite strong.

M: I would think that they have a structure, too, but they don't emphasize it, they pretend it all just came out over the tea and cookies. I wanted to talk about Christopher Smart and other people you've been influenced by. Do you see any particular poet or writer as now an influence on you? I know you've probably changed over the years.

E: I think Yeats, Yeats and Pound perhaps. I think the whole concept of the speaking voice, of the dramatic voice — never write a thing you couldn't conceive of a person actually saying, of yourself actually saying. A terrific view of language. Or Auden's voice — poetry as memorable speech. The musical quality of Pound and the aphoristic and intellectual quality of Auden. These things influenced me. Stevens was at one time an enormous influence because I saw in him the power of abstraction. Abstract poetry. John Berryman because of his diction and because of the elegaic note. And then I suppose a number of writers which might surprise you.

Theodore Roethke because of "One Villanelle". "I know by going where I have to go". Writers like that. Yeats was the most important.

Contrary to what people might say, Smart and Blake were not influences.

M: It's kind of hard to write like that now.

E: Smart couldn't be an influence. I once tried to do something with all the work I had done with Smart. He couldn't be an influence because of the particular mode he was working in, the high ode, the exalted Biblical approach and that's just not possible now. And Blake because I never fully assimilated Blake. And you really have to assimilate a writer. Somehow his voice has to speak through you. Or Harold Bloom's idea that in a way you have to rewrite him so that it looks as if he imitated you. I just couldn't do that with Blake. But I think, I keep thinking I could with Yeats.

M: He's easier to grasp even though he's pretty monumental too.

E: And every now and again a European writer. Sometimes just a single poem. Sometimes a lot. Rilke is one, who I think influenced Dennis Lee, though he mightily denies it. There are conceptions there, images there which remain with you all the times. And I think Irving Layton. People have noticed that. It's because I've read Irving so thoroughly for so many years.