

# The Audible Light of Words: Mark Strand on Poetry and the Self

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to look at American poet Mark Strand's thinking about what poetry is all about, as expressed in his poetry collections and prose works, especially in *The Monument* (1978), a book of "notes, observations, rants, and revelations" about literary immortality, but also a meditation on "the translation of a self, and the text as self, the self as book"; in *The Continuous Life* (1990), a collection of luminous pieces on various aspects of the literary enterprise, including reading, translation and the multitude of selves making up the self; and in *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention* (2000), a collection of insightful essays in which the poet discusses the essentials of poetry as something made by the human imagination, the meaning or content of a poem, and the creative process with the guidance of such preeminent minds as those of Carl Jung, Paul Valéry and Wallace Stevens.

**Keywords:** American poetry; Mark Strand; poetics; criticism; the self.

**Summary:** The poet as critic. The form and meaning of poetry. On the nature of the self.

**Resumen:** El objeto de este artículo es analizar el pensamiento del poeta norteamericano Mark Strand en torno a lo que representa la poesía, tal y como se manifiesta en sus poemarios y obras en prosa, más en concreto, y pormenorizado, en *The Monument* (1978), un libro de "notas, observaciones, diatribas y revelaciones" sobre la inmortalidad literaria, así como una meditación sobre "la traducción del yo, del texto como yo, del yo como libro"; en *The Continuous Life* (1990), una antología de piezas iluminadoras sobre aspectos diversos de la empresa literaria, tales como la lectura, la traducción y la multitud de seres que conforman el yo; y en *The Weather of Words. Poetic Invention* (2000), una antología de ensayos sumamente esclarecedores en los que el poeta analiza los aspectos primordiales de la poesía como creación de la imaginación humana, el significado o contenido del poema y el proceso creativo, ayudado por el magisterio de mentes tan preclaras como las de Carl Jung, Paul Valéry y Wallace Stevens.

**Palabras clave:** Poesía norteamericana; Mark Strand; poética; crítica; el ser.

**Sumario:** El poeta como crítico. La forma y el significado de la poesía. Sobre la naturaleza del yo.

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## 1. THE POET AS CRITIC

Lyric is central to the experience of literature. As Jonathan Culler observes in his ground-breaking *Theory of the Lyric*, where he establishes a more capacious theoretical framework capable of accounting for the possibilities inherent in the lyric as a tremendously versatile genre, though hermeneutics and poetics are quite distinct, they are hard to separate in practice. Whereas the former seeks to find the meaning of a text, the latter investigates the conventions and techniques belonging to the generic tradition that enable particular literary works to have the kinds of meanings and effects they have for readers. Poetics is Culler's terrain. He believes that the lyric involves "a tension between ritualistic and fictional elements" (7) or, in other words, between song and story. Among the ritualistic elements, he addresses rhythm, repetition and sound patterning as essential elements in lyric poems that need not be subordinated to meaning, as well as what he calls "lyric or triangulated address," by which he means the way lyric poems address "the audience of readers by addressing or pretending to address someone or something else, a lover, a god, natural forces, or personified abstractions" (8). At any rate, reading a vast corpus of texts ranging from Sappho through Petrarch, Goethe, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Lorca to John Ashbery, and using an inductive approach, Culler identifies several fundamental tendencies in the lyric genre that distinguish it from the other genres: brevity, a reduction of the fictional element, more intense formal structuring, greater aesthetic self-reference, greater linguistic deviance and greater epistemological subjectivity (33). He also identifies four parameters: (1) *the enunciative apparatus of the lyric*, "treating lyric enunciation not as the fictional imitation of an ordinary speech act but as a linguistic event of another type" (109) invoking absent or nonhuman addressees through apostrophe, or, even better, creating "effects of voicing rather than voice—as in the echoing of rhyme, assonance, or alliteration" (35); (2) *the lyric as an event rather than a representation of an event*, because even if the lyric frequently presents minimal action or characters, it remains largely a non-mimetic enterprise offering statements or truths about the world, praise or blame, "urging us what to value . . . in memorable apothegms" (36), using what Culler calls "the lyric present"; (3) *the ritualistic dimensions of lyric*, i.e. "the patterning of rhythm and rhyme, the repetition of stanza forms, and generally everything that recalls song or lacks a mimetic or representational function . . . making

them texts for *reperformance*” (37); and (4) *the hyperbolic quality of lyric*, which is particularly striking because of the brevity of lyric poems, which often seek “to remake the universe as a world, giving a spiritual dimension to matter” and provide “the motive for readers’ finding lyric words memorable and letting them inform experience” (38). In a nutshell, Culler argues that there are three fundamental aspects that any comprehensive theory of the lyric as a genre should keep in view: “the effects of presentness of lyric utterance, the materiality of lyric language that makes itself felt as something other than signs of a character and plot, and the rich texture of intertextual relations that relates it to other poems rather than to worldly events” (119).

Culler’s reflections can lend great insight when we tackle Mark Strand’s thinking about what poems are and can accomplish in the world. Based on his own experience as an alert reader and a practicing poet, Strand addresses the different parameters that Culler identifies as being characteristic of the lyric in a number of essays and poetry books in an implicit or explicit manner. In actual fact, as part of a century-old tradition in the Western canon, contemporary poets still feel there is something at the heart of poetry that is simply hard to decipher. This may account for their concern with exploring the irreducible core in poetry, both in their own poems (meta-literary compositions) and in pieces of literary criticism. The figure of the poet as critic has a long tradition in the history of American poetry indeed: High Modernists T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens are paradigmatic examples of poets thinking and writing with great perspicacity about the nature and role of poetry in the world. However, the notion of the poet as critic can be traced further back in time to R. W. Emerson himself, who wrote luminous essays on poetry and on the green world that shed light on the poet as bard and on the nature of poems. Mark Strand belongs to this tradition on American soil. He is a lyric poet of the first rank and his work is part of an ongoing lyric tradition whose origins can be traced back to Greco-Roman antiquity. Strand’s initial, potent intuition is that poems remain inexhaustible artifacts endowed with a power to speak to generations to come, possibly because poetry represents the purest form of knowledge, and also because it deals with that which remains unchanged despite the passage of time. The lyric as a genre is ultimately rooted in the universality and continuity of human subjectivity throughout time.

Born in Canada on Prince Edward Island and educated in the United States, Mark Strand (1934–2014) is one of the most outstanding voices of

contemporary American poetry, and also a translator and anthologist. The aim of this paper is to look at Strand's thinking about what poetry is all about, as expressed in his poetry collections and prose works, especially in *The Monument* (1978), a book of "notes, observations, rants, and revelations" about literary immortality (Aaron), but also a meditation on "the translation of a self, and the text as self, the self as book" (Maio 187); in *The Continuous Life* (1990), a collection of luminous pieces on various aspects of the literary enterprise, including reading, translation and the multitude of selves making up the self; and in "A Poet's Alphabet," "On Becoming a Poet," "Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*," and "Notes on the Craft of Poetry," four thoughtful and insightful essays included in *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention* (2000), where the poet discusses the essentials of poetry as something made by the human imagination, the meaning or content of a poem, and the creative process with the guidance of such preeminent minds as those of Carl Jung, Paul Valéry and Wallace Stevens. A close analysis of these primary texts will reveal the interweaving strands of his poetics, one that affirms time and again the continuity of lyric as an age-old genre from Greco-Roman antiquity until the present. Whether a form of communication or inexhaustible artefacts, poems happen to be made out of words that capture being, and yet Strand feels that poems must exist not only in language but beyond it if they are to speak to posterity with the same emotional urgency. Poetry might possibly be an attribute of reality, it might be in the very texture of things, it might come from a dark habitation prior to language itself, or at least this seems to be the intimation of Strand and other contemporary poets whose true vocation is to make poems with their hands and their breathing, and still take the time to think deeply about their calling. The audible light in their words testify to the inexhaustible splendour and beauty of the world implicit in the thinking and the singing of poems. After all, this is what poetry is: a form of paying attention to what is.

## 2. THE FORM AND MEANING OF POETRY

Strand is a man sensitive to his calling, but also a poet intellectually alert to the workings of language and the music of words in the making of poems. In some of his seminal essays collected in *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention* ("A Poet's Alphabet," "On Becoming a Poet," "Notes on the Craft of Poetry," and "Introduction to *The Best American Poetry*

1991,” among them), Strand has meditated on the nature of poetry and the self with penetrating lucidity. He dwells on a wide spectrum of pertinent issues: on the nature and craft of poetry, on the psychic and experiential origin of poems, on the creative process, on the emotional engagement that poems cultivate in readers, on the immortal themes lyric poems have tirelessly addressed over the centuries, on language and tradition, and on the reasons why we still feel the need to read poems. In short, he answers a constellation of relevant questions that ultimately shed light on the nature of poetry. Though scattered in a number of writings, when all his insights are put together, they make a coherent poetics. In what follows, these ideas are explored in detail.

Poetry is possibly the purest form of knowing, but it is only one among different forms of paying attention to what is. Like philosophy or science or love, poetry is a way of getting to know reality, or so says French philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999). Philosophy, science and art stem from wonder and curiosity in the face of the inexhaustible richness of reality; all of them are ways of responding and speaking to the world. In *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), Susan Stewart defines poetic making as “an anthropomorphic project” (2). She observes: “To make something where and when before there was nothing. The poet’s tragedy lies in the fading of the referent in time, in the impermanence of whatever is grasped. The poet’s recompense is the production of a form that enters into the transforming life of language” (2). Poetry somehow takes precedence, and it is the poets’ task to try and capture the evanescent moment and occasions for poems as fast as they can with the medium of words. To the questions “What is poetry?” and “What is a poem?” Strand seeks tentative answers in his essays and prose writings. In this respect, “On Becoming a Poet” is a lucid meditation on the ultimate nature of poems. After Strand describes lyric poems as being endowed with musical properties that “have about them a degree of emotional intensity, or an urgency that would account for their having been written at all” (“On Becoming a Poet” 41), he muses on the elusiveness at the heart of the experience they seek to register for posterity and on the universality of its themes:

Of all literary genres, the lyric is the least changeable. Its themes are rooted in the continuity of human subjectivity and from antiquity have assumed a connection between privacy and universality. There are countless poems from the past that speak to us with an immediacy time has not diminished,

that gauge our humanness as accurately and as passionately as any poem written today. (41)

In an interview with Katharine Coles, Strand insists on the fact that poetry “reveals more about our interactions with the world than our other modes of expression,” by shedding light on “that mix of self and other, self and surrounding, where the world ends and we begin, where we end and the world begins” (1992). To Strand’s mind, the nature of the poem remains complex, though. “Something capable of carving out such a large psychic space for itself” (“On Becoming a Poet” 43) poses a huge intellectual puzzle to his inquisitive mind. Poems are not just straightforward statements about the world or about any recognizable human experience, but somehow keep on directing the reader’s attention to themselves as constructs of the human imagination, as something made by the human mind and meant to convey a valuable message to the rest of humankind. Mary Jo Salter precisely contends that, in Strand’s vision, “the writer looks out to the world, to the ‘plain obdurate existence of subjects’ out there in the world, to find a way to make it coincide with his imagination. And yet, once the art object . . . has been made from the subject, that object is entirely self-enclosed. It is about itself, and thus at least partly about art” (206). This self-reflexive quality is characteristic of many Strand poems indeed. Even more elusive is the issue of what psychic origin accounts for the occasion of their existence. Strand feels that poems come from some dark habitation where there is a gigantic reservoir of meaning awaiting or seeking verbal visibility. At any rate, deep within the primordial roots of a poem is a self possessed by the desire to be and to become communicable to others:

A poem may be the residue of an inner urgency, one through which the self wishes to register itself, write itself into being, and, finally, to charm another self, the reader, into belief. It may also be something equally elusive—the ghost within every experience that wishes it could be seen or felt, acknowledged as a kind of meaning. (“On Becoming a Poet” 43)

That poems are made of words sounds like a truism. Strand is aware that poetry and language are inextricably linked to each other. More importantly, poetry is always formal inasmuch as it is the material shape that language assumes in the making of particular poems. Assuming language is a reservoir of potentially infinite messages, we see poems as

accurate and unique word combinations endowed with multiple meanings. In this respect, Strand's essay "Notes on the Craft of Poetry" remains a central statement on the relationships between poetry and language. The poet says: "I believe that all poetry is formal in that it exists within limits, limits that are either inherited by tradition or limits that language itself imposes. These limits exist in turn within the limits of the individual poet's conception of what is or is not a poem" (69). Form is no easy concept: "it has to do with the structure or outward appearance of something, but it also has to do with its essence. In discussions of poetry, form is a powerful word for just that reason: structure and essence seem to come together, as do the disposition of words and their meanings" (69). Form is the very essence of a poem, the words are the action, in a way dissimilar from what happens in fiction, where words tend to go unnoticed most of the time. Not without reason, Culler argues that a lyric poem is not the representation of a fictional speech act, but an event in itself. The lucid critic contends that "the lyric present" is one of the defining features of the lyric poem as a genre. The lyric poem is "temporal rather than atemporal—not outside time—iterative but not located anywhere in time, yet offering a particularly rich sense of time, of the impossible "nows" in which we, reading, repeat these lyric structures. It contributes to the sense of lyric as event, . . . an event that occurs in our world, as we repeat these lines" ("The Language of Lyric" 174).

Strand makes the lyric "a self-sustaining enterprise. His forms tend toward the infinite regress of a mirror watching a mirror" (Ehrenpreis 47), but poems are more than a handful of words carefully arranged on the page leading a sort of autonomous existence. A poem seeks to put a message across to readers, it "is considered primarily as a form of communication," and yet "poetry invokes aspects of language other than that of communication, most significantly as a variation, though diminished, of a sacred text" ("Notes on the Craft of Poetry" 72). Poems are variations of a sacred text, an absent origin, an obscure habitation that possibly precedes language itself. Strand goes a step further in defining the concepts of poetry and poem as accurately as possible. Poems might be tentative approaches to the unknown by means of words. When put together, words convey recognizable meanings, but, in the context of a poem, they might be invoking things beyond themselves. This is why poems are "inexhaustible artifacts" ("Notes on the Craft of Poetry" 74) that resist rational interpretation. What is a matter of concern is that, once a poem is paraphrased, interpreted or explained, instead of being

appreciated, it ceases to exist. For poems to be such inexhaustible artifacts, they must exist not only in language, but beyond language. In Strand's words:

Perhaps the poem is ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working-out a means of recovery. It may be that the retention of the absent origin is what is necessary for the continued life of the poem as inexhaustible artifact. (Though words may represent things or actions, in combination they may represent something else—the unspoken, hitherto-unknown unity of which the poem is the example.) (“Notes on the Craft of Poetry” 74)

Poets have reasons for writing poems. How does Strand account for his irresistible calling for poetry? In “A Poet’s Alphabet,” where the poet gives an ABC of the concepts essential to his own poetics, he says that “J is for the joy of writing” (7), whereby he refers to “le plaisir d’écrire.” The poet takes for granted that the pleasure of writing poems is a source of aesthetic and spiritual benefits that far exceed the material profit to be gained from other professions. As David Kirby claims, “at the moment of total absorption in the act of reading or writing, the poet becomes oblivious to himself, to his self, becomes no one, No One at all” (83). The art of creating inexhaustible artefacts that will survive the passage of time and talk to future generations with the same emotional urgency is no minor creative accomplishment devoid of aesthetic pleasure and intellectual joy. This is why the poet has to struggle with language in general (and with words in particular) to make art objects of lasting value verbal variations of a primordial, sacred *Ur*-text that may still talk to the living and to the unborn. What happens in the midst of the creative process of poetic invention remains a mystery, as it takes places in the *terra incognita* of the human brain. In “Notes on the Craft of Poetry,” Strand writes: “the transactions between myself and my poems. I suppose this is what we mean by craft: those transactions that become so continuous we not only associate ourselves with them but allow them to represent the means by which we make art. . . . [T]hey are largely unknown at the time of writing and are discovered afterwards, if at all” (67).

According to Strand, poems come from what he calls “the unknown,” but there are no golden rules to approach the unknown. Every poet appears to have their own recipes to touch upon what remains



largely invisible. In this respect, the unknown may be poetry conceptualised as being something implicit in the very mesh of things, an attribute of reality. If that is the case, then poems are just a verbal gesture or response to what is otherwise elusive. Most importantly, rationality appears not to play a decisive role in the making of poems, for the creative process happens in the dark, where our rational capabilities are suspended for a while. Paradoxically enough, even if rationality has little to do with the creative process in Strand's opinion, poems become vessels of knowledge in the end. They capture the insight of a vanishing moment, the unique confrontation of a mind with the world, and so poems are verbal spaces where the perceiving subject and the perceived object meet to conjure up a unique association and an unexpected revelation.<sup>1</sup>

Even if poems are tentative approaches to the unknown, the most visible part of poems is their language. As Stewart claims herself in eloquent words, language is "our vehicle of individuation. When we express our existence in language, when we create objective linguistic forms that are intelligible to others and enduring in time, we literally bring light into the inarticulate world that is the night of pre-consciousness and suffering" (3). Poems and language are inextricably linked to each other, but their relationship is not unproblematic. In his essay "Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*," Strand observes: "What is known in a poem is its language; that is, the words it uses. Yet those words seem different in a poem. Even the most familiar will seem strange. In a poem, each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus, having a weight it rarely achieves in fiction. . . . It is in poetry that

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<sup>1</sup> A propos the encounter between the perceiver and the perceived, Stewart claims that "it is only by finding means of making sense impressions intelligible to others that we are able to situate ourselves and our experiences within what is universal" and that "poiēsis as figuration relies on the senses of touching, seeing, and hearing that are central to the encounter with the presence of others" (3). It was Hegel who first gave the fullest expression to the romantic theory of the lyric as a fundamentally subjective form, "whose distinguishing feature is the centrality of subjectivity coming to consciousness of itself through experience and reflection" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 2). Two operations characterise the lyric according to Hegel: "the lyric poet 'absorbs into *himself* the external world and stamps it with inner consciousness' and he 'discloses his self-concentrated heart, raises purely dull feeling into vision and ideas, and gives words and language to this rich inner life'" (Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 94). Unlike in epic, where unity derives from action, in lyric "the unity of the poem is provided by the poet's inner movement or soul or subjectivity" (94).

the power of language is most palpably felt” (47).<sup>2</sup> Poems encourage slowness in the reading process and urge readers to savour each word carefully, considering their implications and echoes not just in the context of the poem as artefact, but also within the larger co-text of literary tradition. Very rarely are we aware that “language is fossil poetry,” as Emerson suggested in his essay “The Poet” (534), but the tribe’s language reaches a mind-boggling state of purity and semantic concentration in a poem. Devoid of the purely communicative impulse of everyday interaction, the words that poems use draw readers’ attention to the world out there, while calling attention to their own corporeality as well, reconciling Jakobson’s referential and metalinguistic functions in the process. In other words, the centripetal and centrifugal forces at work in a poem create a field of psychic energy where poems transcend their own language. This is why Strand insists on the fact that poems must exist beyond language, even if they are made of words. Such is the complexity of poems that simultaneous meanings appear to coexist in harmony or contradiction, and verbal suspension and semantic elusiveness lead the reader’s attempts to set order upon seeming chaos to complete failure. As Strand puts it in “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*”:

[P]oetry, in its figurativeness, its rhythms, endorses a state of verbal suspension. Poetry is language performing at its most beguiling and seductive while being, at the same time, elusive, even seeming to mock one’s desire for reduction, for plan and available order. It is not just that various meanings are preferable to a single dominant meaning: it may be that something beyond “meaning” is being communicated, something that originated not with the poet but in the first dim light of language, in some period of “beforeness.” (48)

Reading George Orwell’s seminal essay “Politics and the English Language,” Strand encounters for the first time in his life “a moral

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<sup>2</sup> In April 1999, in a PBS interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, when asked how poetry works, Strand answers: “A poem releases itself, secretes itself slowly, sometimes almost poisonously, into the mind of the reader.” Farnsworth asks him how poetry can do that, and the poet says: “The reader has to sort of give himself over to the poem and allow the poem to inhabit him and—how does the poem do that? It does it by rearranging the world in such a way that it appears new. It does it by using language that is slightly different from the way language is used in the workday world, so that you’re forced to pay attention to it.”

statement about good writing,” a list of golden rules one can rely upon when one’s instincts fail, as he explains in “Notes on the Craft of Poetry” (68). Orwell’s point that “just as our English can become ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, so the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts” (68) made an impression on the poet. However, Strand realised that no set of illuminating, helpful rules can effectively guide one’s way through making a poem. What is more, Strand has the intimation that “the poems that are of greatest value are those that inevitably, unselfconsciously break rules, poems whose urgency makes rules irrelevant” (69). There are no recipes for writing poems. There is no easy prescription as to what to say or not to say in a poem. The greatest poems have got a life of their own, resist reductive or oversimplifying interpretations, and follow their own nose rather than conventional rules. Poems are, thus, unpredictable, impenetrable, irreducible artefacts of unknown psychic ancestry and ascendancy. “It’s this ‘beyondness,’ that depth that you reach in a poem, that keeps you returning to it,” says Strand in an interview with Wallace Shawn of 1998. Poems may have much that resembles the ordinary world and the common language we use every day, but they are a finer world within the world. Hence, Literary Criticism is but a tentative approach to what are already tentative crusades into the unknown. This may account for the relentless evolution of Literary Criticism over the centuries: time and again critics have essayed rational assaults on the inscrutable heart of poems, and time and again they have found something irreducible and beautifully illogical (or irrationally beautiful) at their very core.

And yet, poems do have a recognizable content, a message to convey, and explore universal themes that appear to change little over time in the case of lyric poems—poems with musical properties. In “Notes on the Craft of Poetry,” Strand claims that “when we approach the question of what a poem means, we are moving very close to its source or what brought it into being” (70). Form and structure cannot be dissociated from the essence of poems, but the meaning of a poem is the hardest to decipher. Aristotle knew that, unlike history, whose object of investigation is the minutiae and particulars of days, years and centuries in the lifetime of humanity, poetry is concerned with universals. Like Philosophy, Poetry with a capital letter seeks to unveil some form of permanent truth. As the poet as playful critic suggests in his brief essay “The President’s Resignation,” poets have “always spoken for what does not change, for what resists action, for the stillness at the center of man”

(140–41). Lyric poetry concerns itself with what remains the same in spite of the passage of time: life and death, love and memory, the twin mysteries of time and space, nature and the mystery of what is, being and non-being, the utter impossibility of knowing anything for sure (for nothing can be known finally). This is possibly what Strand means by “the stillness at the center of man.” Midway between the privacy of the self and the universality of humankind, lyric poetry seeks to shed light on the geographies of the self, while looking for answers to fundamental questions that affect humanity in its entirety. Human beings are mortal creatures, and death is inescapable. No surprise that lyric poetry should investigate death and the passage of time. In “A Poet’s Alphabet,” Strand points out that “death is the central concern of lyric poetry. Lyric poetry reminds us that we live in time. It tells us that we are mortal. It celebrates or recognizes moods, ideas, events only as they exist in passing. . . . It is a long memorial, a valedictory to each discrete moment on earth” (“A Poet’s Alphabet” 4).<sup>3</sup> Discussing Donald Justice’s poetry, Strand claims that “If absence and loss are inescapable conditions of life, the poem . . . is an act of recovery. It synthesizes, for all its meagreness, what is with what is no longer; it conjures up a life that persists by denial, gathering strength from its hopelessness, and exists, finally and positively, as an emblem of survival” (1980).

Strand is a poem-maker, but he is also a thoughtful reader of poems. In his “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*,” the poet thinks deeply about the reading process, and this is the epiphany he comes up with:

. . . reading poetry is often a search for the unknown, something that lies at the heart of experience but cannot be pointed out or described without being altered or diminished—something that nevertheless can be contained so that it is not so terrifying. It is not knowledge but rather some occasion for belief, some reason for assent, some avowal of being. (49)

Just as the poet makes poems to shed light on the unknown, the reader confronts poems as fragments of the unknown in search of some form of enlightenment too. But not all poetry is concerned with the opaque, the dark or the unknown: “Some try not to, choosing to speak of

<sup>3</sup> In “A Statement on Writing,” Strand writes on mortality: “Whether I admit it or not, I write to participate in the delusion of my own immortality which is born every minute. And yet, I write to resist myself. I find resistance irresistible” (317).

what is known, of common experiences in which our humanness is most powerfully felt, experiences that we share with those who lived hundreds of years ago” (“Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*” 49–50). However, writing about what appears not to have changed at all is no easy task, says Strand, since poets have to use the linguistic and poetic conventions of their time to talk about human universals.

If Strand is such an alert reader, what exactly does he look for when reading poems? In the introduction to the poems in the winter 1995–96 issue of *Ploughshares*, Strand lists the properties or attributes he looks for in poems: unconcerned with truth or conventional beauty, he confesses that the poems that he tends to like the most are poems that engage him; sense and witty nonsense are a pleasure to him; both cadences and flatness, elaboration and simplicity seduce him. Even if he has “no set notion about what a poem ought to be,” he feels that poetry “speaks for a level of experience unaccounted for by other literary genres or by popular forms of entertainment.” Part of the beauty of poetry is precisely that it resists, in its careful and cadenced disclosures, any final interpretation. Emotional engagement, rhetorical simplicity and music appear to be the virtues Strand admires in what he deems good poetry, but also astonishment is the virtue that seduces him above the rest. In the *PBS* interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth mentioned above, when asked what he looks for when he reads a poem, he answers:

I look for astonishment. I look to be moved, to have my view of the world in which I live somewhat changed, enlarged. I want both to belong more strongly to it or more emphatically to it, and yet, to be able to see it, to have—well, it’s almost a paradox to say this—a more compassionate distance.

Strand is a poet sensitive to words and to the ideas embedded in them. In “Views of the Mysterious Hill: The Appearance of Parnassus in American Poetry,” he dwells on another intrinsic feature of great poems: “the martyr’s bones (the literary remains of the great poets) are the portable stuff from which the ultimate elegance can be made” (133). Literature is made from previous literature; it builds on what has been accomplished in the past. Embracing Eliot’s central insight in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Strand dwells on the inescapable moral obligation of the poet who takes his vocation seriously to turn back to the best that has been thought and written by his literary ancestors. In

this respect, in his meditation “A Poet’s Alphabet,” under the section “I is for *immortality*,” Strand claims that poets “know that even if individual poems die, though in some cases slowly, poetry will continue: that its subjects, its constant themes, are less liable to change than fashions in languages, and that this is where an alternate, less lustrous immortality might be. We all know that a poem can influence other poems, remain alive in them, just as previous poems are alive in it” (7). And in his “Notes on the Craft of Poetry,” Strand insists once again on the importance of Eliotian tradition as the ultimate blood of all poetry: “A poem is itself and is the act by which it is born. It is self-referential and is not necessarily preceded by any known order, except that of other poems” (73). Eliot expressed it eloquently in these terms: “the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (106).

## 2. ON THE NATURE OF THE SELF

Many of Strand’s poems are attempts at unveiling the secrets and inner landscapes of the self. In many of his poetry books we find gestures of a mind trying to decipher the irreplaceable and unique individual, the otherness of a self-confronting itself, while writing itself into being at the same time. Even if Strand is engaged in self-scrutiny, what we get to hear in his poems is the impersonal voice of the “I” speaker. As Samuel Maio points out in *Creating Another Self: Modern American Personal Poetry*, Strand, like Charles Simic and David Ignatow, has chosen a self-effacing mode of voice for his poetry: “The self-effacing mode offers yet another option for the poet engaged in self-examination: attempting to be impersonal while speaking of personal concerns. . . . The poet of the self-effacing mode selects a voice and technique intended to absent himself or herself from the poem” (180). Consequently, he makes the appropriate aesthetic choices: the sparse use of words, regular syntax and simple prose point to feelings of absence and to seeming impersonality.

*The Monument* (1978) is a book of fragmentary nature in the whole of Strand’s corpus. At the time of its publication in the late seventies, it looked out of keeping with the rest of the poet’s most serious writing, but today it looks like a prescient, postmodern meditation on literature, translation and the self, and also a constellation of eloquent aphorisms, a

polyphonic palimpsest made from quotes lifted from a wide range of works, authors and philosophers (Suetonius, William Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Friedrich Nietzsche, Anton Chekhov, Miguel de Unamuno, Juan Ramón Jiménez, E. M. Cioran, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren, Jorge Luis Borges, etc.). According to Jonathan Aaron, it is “a book of ‘notes, observations, instructions, rants, and revelations’ satirising the notion of literary immortality. It was Strand’s answer to a question he had heard asked at a translation conference: ‘How would you like to be translated in five hundred years?’” Strand thought it a ‘fabulous question. It stumped everyone.’ The book was his answer” (203). *The Monument* is then the product of a brilliant mind, an awkward book rich in irreverent and witty observations on the literary enterprise and on literary immortality. In an interview with Frank Graziano, Strand himself says: “I started writing *The Monument* and it became less and less about the translator of a particular text, and more about the translation of a self, and the text as self, the self as book” (Graziano 37). Much of what Strand says in *The Monument* finds its way into many of his poems in his poetry collections. As I shall try to demonstrate in what follows, the self in Strand’s poetics is conceptualised in three different ways: (1) the self as everything and/or everybody else; (2) the self as a void, a vacancy or an absence; and (3) the self as an indecipherable mystery. By investigating the self so thoroughly, Strand is seeking to shed light on human nature. However, as James F. Nicosia observes in his book-length study of the poet, in such an arduous endeavour:

The “real” world, he says, does not provide us with any clarity. Indeterminacy and confusion rule. To seek a fixed truth within such a world is a futile endeavor. Instead, one must erase the need to discover one’s self in the real world. That world should be erased by full imaginative participation—in any event, in a dream, in writing or reading a poem, in becoming someone other than oneself, in translating others’ works. Remove the chaos of the world and one can find the world. Remove the chaos of the self and one will find oneself. (16)

Section 4 of *The Monument* is a crystal-clear statement of Strand’s intimation that the self is everything and/or everybody else apart from itself. The poet essays innumerable variations on Rimbaud’s conviction that “je est un autre,” that the self is a multitude of selves living together

within the boundaries of the body, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes at odds. In this respect, many Strand poems explore the ubiquitous (and at times hedonistic) expansion of a voracious self *ad infinitum*, in a way which is strongly reminiscent of Whitman's democratic desire to encompass the whole universe within the boundaries of his own self. Thus, in *Dark Harbor* we read: "I would like to step out of my heart's door and be / Under the great sky. I would like to step out / And be on the other side, and be part of all / That surrounds me" (Strand 20). Section 4 of *The Monument* opens with a lengthy quote lifted from one of Unamuno's philosophical meditations, entitled "The Secret of Life." Confronting the mystery of death, the Spanish philosopher dwells lucidly on the notion that the desire to live more and longer is the core secret of human life from which all other secrets spring. Right after Unamuno's words, Strand dwells on the ghostly act of writing, whereby the self appears to write itself into being. At some point in section 4 the speaking voice addresses a future translator of Strand's work: "It is a struggle to believe I am writing to someone else, to you, when I imagine the spectral conditions of your existence. This work has allowed you to exist, yet this work exists because you are translating it" (56). It is the translator that brings the work he/she is translating back to life in the new poetic conventions and language of his/her time. Writing is the beautiful geometry of the human soul, but also the dance of the hand along the invisible paths on paper and a form of touching. Writing is a way to touch knowledge and caress other people's hands and hearts. "*I know of no writing that doesn't touch. . . . Writing in its essence touches upon the body. . . . Writing touches upon bodies along the absolute limit separating the sense of the one from the skin and nerves of the other*" (11; original emphasis), says Jean-Luc Nancy. Touching the body with the incorporeality of sense or meaning: this is what great writing accomplishes best of all. We are touched upon by Strand's poetic thought and writing.

The self always seeks to be itself and something or someone else, without ceasing to be itself. It is its own prolongation into the world at large that makes it an immeasurable mystery. In this respect, in a prose text entitled "Two Letters" included in Strand's *The Continuous Life* (1990), we find "Gregor Samsa's Letter to H.," which is an eloquent meditation on the multitude of selves living within ourselves:



Do we not, if we are lucky, live many lives, assume many masks, and, with death always imminent, do we not keep hoping to be reborn? This is the human condition. We are citizens of one world only when we apply to the next; we are perpetual exiles, living on the outside of what is possible, creating for ourselves the terms of our own exclusion, yet hoping to overcome them. Our misery and our happiness are inextricable. (*The Continuous Life* 13)

Such is the kaleidoscopic intricacy of the self that it becomes synonymous with the universe at large, with the boundless beauty and vastness of the world. Thus, section 44 of *The Monument* reminds the reader that the world is vaster than the self and what we might say about it. Comprehensive though it may strive to be, there are huge territories of reality that remain uncharted, there are moments in time for which there is no room in *The Monument*, spacious as it is. In Strand's words: "There are moments that crave memorial as if they were worthy, as if they were history and not merely in it, moments of the bluest sky, of the most intense sun, of the greatest happiness of the least known man or woman, moments that may have gone on for years in the most remote village on earth. They shall exist outside The Monument" (*The Story of Our Lives* 99). At this point, as usual, this playful work becomes metaliterary and self-reflexive. Like the lyric poems Strand composes, this passage reminds us that we exist in time, that life is a succession of discrete moments in the unstoppable ebb and flow of existence, and that writing cannot encompass everything that happens around us, even if the self desires to be everything out there. Obviously, it is impossible to be everything and everyone else, and so Strand's writing is tinged with an irresistible nostalgia. Not without reason, in "A Poet's Alphabet" he says: "We end up lamenting the loss of something we never possessed" (*The Weather of Words* 14–15).

The self is also conceptualised as being a void, a vacancy, absence, nothing in Strand's work. In the negative transcendence at the heart of his poetics, "the taste of absence is "honey," claims Hoff (63). In an attempt at self-effacement or self-annihilation, the poetic persona empties itself of its own life, probably because "the recognition of self comes through the removal of self" (Nicosia 16). This might be a gesture of nihilism or just the blunt realisation that the self is nothing. In this respect, Dave Lucas observes the following:

[M]ost critical responses to Strand's work have emphasized his evacuation of the self. Linda Gregerson writes: "When Mark Strand reinvented the poem, he began by leaving out the world." David Kirby, in his *Mark Strand and the Poet's Place in Contemporary Culture*, goes further: "Both the pleasure and the paradox of reading Mark Strand lie in the realization that the Strand persona, even though he seems at first to be withdrawing in the cocoon of self, is in fact stepping from the self, away from the Technicolor cartoon of contemporary life." True enough, Strand's early poems—often inspired by surrealist painting and poetry—are filled with self-annihilation. (248)

In "A Poet's Alphabet," the poet observes that "nothing" and "oblivion" are concepts central to his own poetics: "N is also for nothing, which, in its all-embracing modesty, is the manageable sister of everything. Ah, nothing! About which anything can be said, and is. An absence that knows no bounds. The climax of inaction. It has been perhaps the central influence on my writing. It is the original of sleep and the end of life" (10).<sup>4</sup> As for oblivion, he observes: "I feel as strongly about it as I do about nothing. Forgetfulness, the fullness of forgetting, the possibilities of forgottenness. The freedom of unmindfulness. It is the true beginning of poetry. It is the blank for which the will wills" (11). As Maio points out, Strand "has directed much of his poetry to themes of personal absence and nullity. To correspond to these themes, he has tried to efface himself from his poetic voice. Of course, no poet can actually efface himself or herself from the poem. Any poem is a direct manifestation of the poet's presence" (180). Time and again in *The Monument*, the self is presented as a huge absence, as a blank space, as nothing. Let us consider the following quotes:

# 6 "I have no rest from myself, I feel as though I am devouring my whole life..." . . . In what language do I live? I live in none. I live in you. (58)

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<sup>4</sup> Like forgetfulness, nothing and nothingness have been a concept central to Strand's poetic thinking. In a lecture wittily entitled "On Nothing," delivered at Sewanee in 2012 and possibly still unpublished, Strand "made a distinction between *nothing* and *nothingness*—the latter being something a little too bid to count as nothing. Nothingness . . . was a concept, *a thing about* nothing rather than actually nothing" (Salter 193). Strand's concern with nothing is reminiscent of Wallace Stevens's, his acknowledged master. In the well-known poem "The Snow Man," we read: "For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (9).

# 9 The Monument is a void, artless and everlasting. What I was I am no longer. I speak for nothing, the nothing that I am, the nothing that is this work. And you shall perpetuate me not in the name of what I was, but in the name of what I am. (61)

# 21 “We are truly ourselves only when we coincide with nothing, not even ourselves.” (75)

# 22 This poor document does not have to do with a self, it dwells on the absence of a self. . . . So much is excluded that it could not be a document of self-centeredness. If it is a mirror to anything, it is to the gap between the nothing that was and the nothing that will be. (77)

But the self as void or absence is also found in innumerable poems and prose texts by Mark Strand. For instance, in an early poem like “Keeping Things Whole,” included in *Reasons for Moving* (1968), a book marked by “an intense questioning of what constitutes the self, and a sense of self-negation” (Bloom 15), the poetic voice sings:

In a field  
I am the absence  
of field.  
This is  
always the case.  
Wherever I am  
I am what is missing. (ll. 1–7)

In this particular poem, the “content is the speaker’s self-scrutiny, which leads to his self-definition: ‘I am what is missing.’ . . . The speaker is obviously alienated from the physical world; he represents a nothingness, someone unable to mark his presence” (Maio 85–86). Similarly, in two poems included in *Darker* (1970), a book that “retains his fascination with the divided self” (Bloom 15), Strand dwells on the nothingness that the self is and on the emptiness of one’s life. In “The Remains” he sings: “Time tells me what I am. I change and I am the same. / I empty myself of my life and my life remains” (69). And in the poem called “The Guardian,” the lyric subject speaks of his own absence: “Guardian of my death, / preserve my absence. I am alive” (3). Furthermore, in *The Sargentville Notebook* (1973), a book of brief,

illuminating aphorisms published as *Reasons for Moving. Darker & The Sargentville Notebook* in 1992 and 2000, we also find illuminating statements on the ghostly, illusory nature of the self: “The poet couldn’t speak of himself, / but only of the gradations leading toward him and away” (52) and “Take my side / and there will be nothing left of me” (55).

Finally, the self is also conceptualised as being a mystery of gigantic proportions. The sense of otherness and estrangement the self experiences when confronting itself is a recurrent theme in Strand’s work. As Hoff suggests, the desire to be strangers to ourselves, “to step outside the self into a world of constantly shifting possibilities . . . freed from expectation and the choking hold of a predicated self” pushes us to “move from the darkness of the world into the light of nothing” (72). But nothing itself is full of promise and countless possibilities. In an essay titled “Introduction to Joseph Brodsky,” Strand claims that “nothing can be known finally, but all things exist in a never-ending chain of contexts” (94). The same intuition applies to the self: there is no way of getting to know the self for good, as it remains an unassailable mystery that needs to be interpreted in a relationship to everyone and everything else. Here is a handful of quotes from Strand’s poems that testify to the mystery. In “Black Maps,” a poem from *Darker* (1970), we read these lines: “Nothing will tell you / where you are. / Each moment is a place / you’ve never been” (*The Weather of Words* 80). These words highlight not only the fact that humans exist in time, but also the sense of radical epistemological uncertainty concerning the self that pervades much of Strand’s poetry. Similarly, in “For Jessica, my Daughter,” a poem from *The Late Hour* (1978), we read:

Jessica, it is so much easier  
to think of our lives,  
as we move under the brief luster of leaves,  
loving what we have,  
than to think of how it is  
such small beings as we  
travel in the dark  
with no visible way  
or end in sight. (ll. 12–20)

In a poem titled “The Continuous Life” included in *The Continuous Life* (1990), we read powerful lines exploring existential *Angst* and the very enigma of life itself, suspended midway “between two great darks,” the once preceding birth and the one following death:

Explain that you live between two great darks, the first  
 With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest  
 Thing is having been born, that you live in a blur  
 Of hours and days, months and years, and believe  
 It has meaning, despite the occasional fear  
 You are slipping away with nothing completed, nothing  
 To prove you existed. (ll. 13–19)

And in “The Night, the Porch,” a poem from *Blizzard of One* (1998), we read:

To stare at nothing is to learn by heart  
 What all of us will be swept into, and baring oneself  
 To the wind is feeling the ungraspable somewhere close by.  
 . . .  
 What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the comfort  
 Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. (ll. 1–3, 5–6)

Mark Strand is a poet immersed in deep thinking about the nature of poetry and about the mystery of the self in time and in space. His poetry books and essays have got the simplicity and perfection of a circle in that they have a remarkable coherence from beginning to end. A practising poet of the first rank himself, Strand unveils to twenty-first-century readers dimensions to poetry and the self that may go unnoticed to most individuals. In fact, his poetic territory is “the self, the edge of self, and the edge of the world, . . . that shadow land between self and reality” (Shawn 155). He writes with simplicity and elegance about issues that still matter. “Each moment is a place / you’ve never been”: thus reads a verse line from “Black Maps,” a poem quoted above. The beauty of this line stems from the simple juxtaposition of time and space in a handful of memorable words. This line is an exquisite vortex of simultaneous meanings: life is made out of eel-slippery moments in time that one cannot revisit and cannot predict. The newness of each moment lies precisely in the capacity of life to surprise us. One should approach every moment punctuating one’s life full of curiosity and expectation. Upon

closer inspection, this line is semantically and philosophically dense. Being happens in time and space, those elemental Kantian axes outside of which nothing can possibly exist. But, like being itself, time and space remain impenetrable mysteries.

Throughout his literary career, Strand has tirelessly explored the nature of poetry and the self. His obsession with the interior and the way in which the imagination figures reality are recurrent themes in his work. More importantly, his vision is consistent from beginning to end: the self, like the world, is largely inscrutable. However, Strand feels that poetry can aid us in understanding the self as otherness, as a void to be filled in or as everybody and/or everything else in the universe. As Nicosia claims, “his voice and figurations evolve, but his attitudes toward the world do not change. His faith in poetry fluctuates, but poetry remains the central redeeming force in his poetic life” (15) and his poems are “havens, . . . harbors against the world’s maelstroms” (23). He is clearly indebted to the master Wallace Stevens, as the major subject in his poetry is “the question of human perception” and the “goal of his poetry appears to be to strip away the outer world so as to make the subject of poetry the act of perception in the mind, the creation of the poem on the page” (Stitt 204–05). This is what Nicosia calls “the dichotomous nature between the poet and the world” (26). However, thanks to the potency of the imagination, poetry has the capacity to set the world within and the world without in order for the self. In this respect, in the “Introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*,” Strand says something of import that is worth quoting in full:

The way poetry has of setting our internal house in order, of formalizing emotion difficult to articulate, is one of the reasons we still depend on it in moments of crisis and during those times when it is important that we know, in so many words, what we are going through... Without poetry, we would have either silence or banality, the former leaving us to our own inadequate devices for experiencing illumination, the latter cheapening with generalization what we wished to have for ourselves alone, turning our experience into impoverishment, our sense of ourselves into embarrassment. (51–52)

In poetry words are the embodiment of sound and light at the same time, because of their epistemological and imaginative potency to set the world within and without in order. This is possibly one of the reasons

why poems always remained for Strand harbours or havens in the face of the impenetrability of reality and the self. Even if he embraced nothing and oblivion as fruitful points of departure for the act of poetic creation, his poems and essays appear to convey the message that the nothing that is full of promise, radiance and light, as it conjures up a world of endless possibilities. Ultimately, what Strand gives his readers as a gift is nothing less than the audible light of words.

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