Mark Strand's Life and Career

Jay Parini

Strand was born in Canada on Prince Edward Island. He studied at Antioch College, where he took a BA. He also received a BFA from Yale, where he studied painting. At the University of Iowa, he worked closely with poet Donald Justice, completing an MA in 1962. He spent a year in Italy on a Fulbright scholarship, and later taught at Iowa for three years. In 1965 he spent a year as Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Brazil, where he was deeply influenced by contemporary Latin American poets (especially the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade). Strand has moved around a good deal, teaching at many American universities, including Columbia, Princeton, Harvard, and the University of Utah, where he is now professor of English.

Strand's poetry is known for a clarity reminiscent of the paintings of Edward Hopper, and for a deeply inward sense of language. Many of the poems aspire to the condition of dreams, shot through with images possessing a strangely haunting vividness, as in 'The Ghost Ship', which summons a mysterious ship that floats 'Through the crowded streets ... / its vague / tonnage like wind'. He frequently invokes everyday images, as in 'The Mailman', where a wraith-like mailman visits the narrator at midnight to deliver 'terrible personal news'. In 'The Last Bus' the poet imagines Rio de Janeiro, calling the sea 'a dream' in which the city 'dies and is reborn'. The poem is surreal in a manner that combines the dreamlike quality of Pablo Neruda with aspects of nightmare that recall such European expressionists as Georg Trakl.

Strand's first book, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* was published in 1964. His second, *Reasons for Moving* (1968), attracted widespread attention from critics; it includes 'Eating Poetry' which begins: 'Ink runs from the corners of my mouth. / There is no happiness like mine. / I have been eating poetry.' This antic surrealism also animates poems like 'Moontan', 'The Man in the Tree', and 'The Marriage'. *Darker* (1970) was an obliquely autobiographical volume, containing such poems as 'My Life' and 'My Death'. These poems are full of a quiet, ironically pictured anguish as the poet teeters on the brink of self-consciousness in pursuit of his *via negative*. In 1973 Strand published *The Story of Our Lives*, more explicitly autobiographical than anything he had written before. It includes a striking elegy for the poet's father.

*The Late Hour* (1978) is among the strongest of Strand's several books, containing poems for the poet's son and daughter, and a number of poems (such as 'The Late Hour', 'Snowfall', and 'The Garden') that possess a deeply elegiac quality. In this book, Strand began writing with a freshness and simplicity that recall the poetry of ancient China.

As the Mexican poet Octavio Paz has written: 'Mark Strand has chosen the negative path, with loss as the first step towards fullness: it is also the opening to a transparent verbal perfection.' Strand's *Selected Poems* (New York, 1980) adds to previously published work a number of beautifully realized autobiographical poems, including 'Shooting Whales' and 'Nights in Hackett's Cove'. Strand has also published a book of short
stories, several translations from European and Latin American poets, and an anthology of contemporary poetry. For criticism, see Richard Howard, *Alone with American* (New York, 1969).


Jonathan Aaron

*The Monument* (1978) . . . showed that Strand had not lost his faith in the uses of self-mockery. A book of "notes, observations, instructions, rants, and revelations" satirizing the notion of literary immortality, it was Strand's answer to a question he'd 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. Harry Ford (Strand's editor then at Atheneum and now at Knopf, to whom Strand has always been devoted) turned *The Monument* down, thinking "it would ruin my career. I think he meant that it was bad, tasteless, and would offend my contemporaries." In its playfully barbed irreverence, the book seemed out of keeping with Strand's ostensibly more serious writing. It looked then to some like a wrong move. Today it seems a brilliantly prescient entertainment.

After *Selected Poems* came out in 1980, Strand hit something of a wall. "I gave up [writing poems] that year," he says, looking back. "I didn't like what I was writing, I didn't believe in my autobiographical poems." He began to concentrate on journalism and art criticism. He wrote the sweetly freakish comedies collected in *Mr. and Mrs. Baby and Other Stories* (1985), which featured the likes of Glover Bartlett, who reveals to his wife that he used to be a collie, or the nameless narrator who's certain his father has returned to life as a fly, then as a horse, and finally as his girlfriend. In settings that ranged from contemporary Southern California to the Arcadia of Greek myth, Strand explored new approaches to parody and satire and, in doing so, began to work himself free of what he felt were the imaginative and stylistic limitations of dramatic self-regard. "And then," he says, "in 1985, I read Robert Fitzgerald's translation of *The Aeneid*. I decided I'd try a poem, and I wrote 'Cento Virgilianus,' and I was off and running."


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