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## **Relying on Donations from the Unconscious: A Critical Study of Mark Strand's Poetry**

**Dr. Md Equebal Hussain**

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, M.S. College, Motihari,  
Bihar, India.

### **Abstract**

The fundamental world of poetry in Mark Strand, a major voice of our time is the inward world. In this sense he comes closest to the Subjective School of American poetry and the poetry of Deep Imagism which explicitly stress on the importance of the unconscious in the creation of poetry. This sinking deeper into the mind also connects Strand with surrealism. Surrealism has many characteristics, but only a few of which can be found in Strand's poetry. He allows the images in his poetry to be influenced by 'the vegetation of the unconscious', but his poetry is free from the unrestrained whimsicalities which one finds in the poetry and paintings of many surrealists. Perceptual, emotive and extremely evocative, Strand's poetry in spite of the invasion of the unconscious on his muse, is disarmingly simple. The difficulty in reading Strand arises, not on account of allusions and references as in Eliot but on account of the extremely subjective images which have their fountains in the unconscious.

This paper seeks to make a critical reading of Strand's poetry which relies on donations from the unconscious yet gives this mode aesthetic dignity.

### **Keywords**

Unconscious; Subjective School; Deep Imagism; Surrealism; Allusions; Mark Strand.

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Mark Strand (1934- ), the fourth Poet Laureate of the United States of America, is one of the exponents of a new poetry that is not based on any poetic theory but is entirely non-programmatic. Author of ten collections of poems, Mark Strand has earned tremendous acclaim for his deeply moving themes which 'strike deeply into the heart of modern man' (Stevens 151), and has carved a niche for himself by opting for a style that 'enhances the strange power with which he expresses his disquieting thoughts' (Stevens 151). While Harold Bloom considers Strand a 'poet of genius' (Bloom 136), Donald Justice declares him to be 'one of the best, may be the very best of the new poets' (Hussain 28). Robert B. Shaw opines that Strand is 'one of the most imitated poets' (Shaw 175) today. Strand has influenced many a younger poet like Louise Gluck, Hass, Charles Simic and John Tate.

In fact, Strand's poetry concerned with feelings of alienation and foreboding typically represents the post-modern mode characterised by a minimalist, surrealistic style and a strong narrative impulse. His position in the contemporary scenario has been very justly summed up by Robert Miklitsch:

Mark Strand is an outstanding poet. He stands out because falling as he does between that generation of major American poets alive today (Ammons, Ashberry, Howard, Kinnel, Merrill, Merwin, Rich Wright) and the younger poets who are just now gaining public recognition. (Gluck, Hass and Simic to name three), he is both a transitional figure and a representative one. (Miklitsch 357)

The fundamental world of poetry in Mark Strand is the inward world. In this sense he comes closest to the Subjective School of American poetry and the poetry of Deep Imagism which explicitly stress on the importance of the unconscious in the creation of poetry. This sinking deeper into the mind also connects Strand with surrealism. Surrealism, however, has many characteristics only a few of which can be found in Strand's poetry. He allows the images in his poetry to be influenced by 'the vegetation of the unconscious', but his poetry is free from the unrestrained whimsicalities which one finds in the poetry and paintings of many surrealists. Perceptual, emotive and extremely evocative, Strand's poetry in spite of the invasion of the unconscious on his muse, is disarmingly simple. Here is one of the typical Strand poems – spare, wind-blown and stripped of everything non-essential:

In a field  
I am the absence  
of field.  
This is  
always the case.  
wherever I am  
I am what is missing. (10)

The poem written in characteristic Strand style of plainness of diction gives the picture of a world – disjointed, disintegrated, broken, and alien. While the poem “emerges with the simpler surface we think of as characteristic of Strand's technique, dislocation is still a central mode” (Gregerson 93). The poet's absence creates a vacuum which even his presence cannot fill. The poet appears a creature of nothingness, of nowhere, of a void. With respect to the world of physical reality, the speaker feels himself to be a void, a nothingness. The poem has a surface structure so very simple but this is only a deceptive simplicity. Like a great work of art, the poem is capable of attracting various individuals in various ways. “Poetry's play and the play of the poet are nicely attuned in this

anecdote. I might sight it as evidence of a serio-comic mixture of tone at the root of the poem” (Cooper 5). Strand, however does not fully agree with the view:

It’s a paradox. I wouldn’t put that in the class of humor. It’s a paradoxical situation: wherever I am, I am what is missing. I mean, in effect it simply says, I suppose, in the end, that the world can get along very well without me, and in fact, by being there is an interruption.” (Cooper 2)

Therefore, the very division of the responses to the poem illustrates the difficulty of a critical description of Strand’s style.

Eliot’s poetry is difficult because in the complicated texture of his poems he incorporates allusions, references, and anecdotes, the meaning of which may not be very easily accessible to the reader of poetry. The difficulty that one comes across in the poetry of Strand is qualitatively of a different type – a kind of ambiguity which in a poem creates depth, dimension, and significance. Between the reference and the referent this obscurity establishes an infinite number of meaningful arrangements, none of which a reader may be able to pin down completely, but he should be able to respond to the total beauty of the poem itself.

Many references and quotations in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* baffles even a fairly well-read reader. One may not know who Madame Sosostriis is, or the esoteric significance of The Tarot cards, or the meaning of the two lines in old German in the first page of *The Burial of the Dead* – to give only a few examples of the innumerable erudite references that we come across in Eliot’s poetry. It is remarkable to point out that these references, words, and esoteric associations create a particular kind of difficulty which we do not find in the poetry of Mark Strand. However, the difficulty arises on account of extremely subjective images that we get in his poetry. In the first four lines of one of Strand’s poems “The Door” one may encounter a very different kind of difficulty:

The door is before you again and the shrieking

Starts and the mad voice is saying here here.  
The myth of comfort dies and the couch of her  
Body turns to dust. Clouds enter your eyes.

Intrinsic in the very quality of the image is a certain amount of obscurity which cannot be eradicated with the aid of any reference book. No Jessie Weston or Frazer would help us here. The poet, in the above lines, has seized on a particular experience with his own special brand of visual imagination, and this is why it may be cited as an example of subjective imagery. The lines that follow these four contain a similar kind of imagery:

It is autumn. People are jumping from jetliners;  
Their relatives leap into the air to join them.  
That is what the shrieking is about. Nobody wants  
To leave, nobody wants to stay behind. (46)

These lines are very simple – as simple as statements containing a description can conceivably be – yet around these lines exists an aura of rich meaningfulness. To all the admirers of Strand, these lines contain an unpredictable amount of freshness which we do not find in the more intellectualized type of poetry practiced both in the United States and England. This fresh quality is possible in poetry perhaps only when a poet has access to his unconscious. The images Strand employs in his poetry are substantially different from those one usually comes across in *The Imagist Anthology*. They are more subjective. Technically speaking, the imagery one finds in Strand can very well be called surrealistic which has also been pointed out by numerous critics and which Strand himself accedes to. A few more examples would elaborate it: Let us save the babies /Let us run downtown/The babies are screaming. (41); The bellows of your heart pumping./Think of the bats/Rushing out of their caves/Like a dark wind to greet you; (37); and My mind floats in the purple air of my skull./I see myself dancing. I smile at everybody./Slowly I dance out of the

burning house of my head./And who isn't borne again and again into heaven?  
(59)

One is definitely tempted to compare Strand's technique with surrealism where one notices the peculiarly distorted relationship in which one unit of experience is juxtaposed with another, where ambiguity arises not so much from the description of these 'unit-experiences' which may be eminently realistic as from the special quality of this relationship itself. Most of Dali's paintings belong to this category, where the clock that hangs from a tree-branch does look like a clock and the tree does not strike us as anything other than a tree, or a set of drawers that emerges from a woman's thigh resembles a set of real drawers coming out of a real thigh of a real woman, but the question that is usually raised in this connection is about the feasibility of a clock having sprouted off a twig, or the existence of a set of drawers in a woman's thigh. Similarly, in Strand we come across images which are individually realistic, but the way they are related to one another may seem to be fascinatingly surrealistic. For example "A train runs over me" is a clear, even rationally understandable statement, but the moment we are told that 'the speaker' feels sorry for the engineer who 'crouches down' and whispers in his ear that 'he is innocent', it takes on a more ambiguous dimension to which we respond only instinctively.

Mark Strand, therefore, believes in a direct relationship between the unconscious and the imagery he uses in his poems. It may be mentioned in this connection that the word "dark" has been chosen by Strand and many other poets before him to symbolize the depth of experience. Like Wright, Levertov and Bly, Mark Strand has purged the word 'dark' of its pejorative connotations and used it as a specialized symbol.

This technique has made critics trace in Strand the influence of surrealism. While some critics declare him to be out and out a surrealist who writes poems or even produces mere 'translationese' under the influence of the Latin American and Central European surrealists like Octavio Paz, Rafael Alberti,

Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Vallejo, Popa and Holub, others call his technique 'some-what-surrealistic' or 'neo-surrealistic'. Poulin uses the term 'ironic surrealism' to describe Strand's unique sensibility. Moreover, Strand too considers himself to be "a part of a new international style that has a lot to do with plainness of diction, a certain reliance on surrealistic technique, a strong narrative element" (Ohio Review 57).

Before analyzing the influence of Surrealism on Strand, it is important to know what surrealists do. M.H. Abrams points out,

The expressed aim was a revolution against all restraints on the free functioning of the human mind. These restraints included the logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions, and the control of artistic creation by forethought and intention. To ensure the unhampered operation of deep mind, which they regarded as the only source of valid knowledge and art, *surrealists turned to 'automatic writing', and to exploiting the material of dreams, of states of mind between sleep and waking, and of natural or artificially induced hallucinations.* (Abrams 205)

Surrealism is, therefore, a fusion of the real and the irrational into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality. What the surrealists do is to blend the perceptions of the unconscious mind with the external realities of phenomenal world. Therefore, Andre Breton urged writers to substitute irrational for rational vision and to search the unknown mind in an effort to express the real process of thought. The reality, as the surrealists believed, lay in the human consciousness which is available to man in the innocence of childhood and in dreams. Therefore, they often employed grotesque themes, dreams, hallucinations and sub-conscious visions in their work. A recurrent device was the placing of the familiar objects in new or illogical relationships to stress the superficiality of conventional vision of reality. As a matter of fact, the basis of surrealism as a movement lay very much in Freud's method of psychological investigation which

revealed to the artists and writers a new world of fantastic images drawn from the sub-conscious and from dreams.

Surely, Mark Strand shows the influence of the surrealists in that he is almost relentlessly turning inwards and depends on incantatory forms and cinematic images. Indoor and outdoor, reality and fantasy, violence and tenderness fade into each other. To work out his themes, the poet develops them in movements that suggest infinite regress, or the patterns of nursery rhymes:

We are reading the story of our lives  
which takes place in a room.  
The room looks out on a street.  
There is no one there,  
no sound of anything.  
The trees are heavy with leaves,  
the parked cars never move.  
We keep turning the pages,  
hoping for something,  
something like mercy or change,  
a back line that would bind us  
or keep us apart.  
The way it is, it would seem  
the book of our lives is empty.  
The furniture in the room is never shifted,  
and the rugs become darker each time  
our shadows pass over them.  
It is almost as if the room were the world.  
We sit beside each other on the couch,  
reading about the couch.  
We say it is ideal.  
It is ideal. (97)



A number of poems read like ‘parable’, clever, stylized, and highly artificial, even arch, and are often dismissed for their unconvincing whimsicality. What makes them irritating to some critics is the view that “these poems are divorced from everyday truth – its opening lines are likely to establish a situation we immediately recognize as, in some basic sense, false” (Stitt 874).

A scar remembers the wound.  
The wound remembers the pain.  
Once more you are crying. (65)  
A train runs over me.  
I feel sorry  
for the engineer  
who crouches down  
and whispers in my ear  
that he is innocent. (20)

However, there are critics who shower praise on Strand. Gaynor F. Bradish says,

For a number of years one has had the pleasure of admiring the work of Mark Strand. He is one of the finest, most controlled of lyric poets, and his poems, written with an impeccable and seemingly effortless technique, have become increasingly fascinating. They are fascinating as superbly finished poetry. They are fascinating as well for the artistic strategies they employ, and despite his own completely distinct voice, fascinating for the other writers and artists they do not echo but evoke. (Bradish 1509)

The quintessential Strand at its purest can be found in the concluding “Poem” of Seven Poems:

I have a key  
So I open the door and walk in  
It is dark and I walk in.

It is darker and I walk in. (65)

The utter simplicity of action and language, the repetitions, the subtle alterations in sentence structure, and especially the shift to the comparative, 'darker', and the placing of the 'I' work to wondrous and mysterious effect. The voice is unmistakably Mark Strand's and no one else's, and thematically he has always had the 'key' to darkness.

According to Octavio Paz, Strand "explores the terra infirma of our lives. Fascinated by emptiness, he conceives of the poem as a description of absence...as absence of meaning: being cancels significance" (Williams 707). Strand relies on high poetics for his effect, although sometimes these feel counterfeit because they seldom touch on a verifiable world. Strand's method is to deploy various elemental signs and symbols in an effort to say the unsayable. He has learnt how to do this from Latin-American surrealists like Paz and Vallejo and from Central Europeans like Popa and Holub:

The bluish, pale  
face of the house  
rises above me  
like a wall of ice (35)  
The bellows of your heart pumping.  
Think of the bats  
Rushing out of their caves  
Like a dark wind to greet you; (37)

Nevertheless, as Harold Bloom points out, "Strand's unique achievement is to raise this mode to an aesthetic dignity that astonishes the reader" (Bloom 3894). Self-trained to a private universe of unreality, where he has learned the gnomic wisdom of the deep tautology, Strand peers out into the anxieties of the public world, to show again what can be shown, the shallow tautologies of a universal hysteria, as much a hysteria of protest as of societal repression. He spares us

the opaque vulgarity of 'Confessional' verse by daring to expose how immediate in him a more universal anguish rages:

The huge doll of my body  
refuses to rise.  
I am the toy of women.  
My mother  
would prop me up for her friends.  
"Talk, talk", she would beg.  
I moved my mouth  
but words did not come.  
My wife took me down from the shelf  
I lay in her arms. "We suffer  
the sickness of self", she would whisper.  
And I lay there dumb.  
Now my daughter  
gives me a plastic nurser  
filled with water.  
"You are my real baby," she says.  
Poor child!  
I look into the brown  
mirrors of her eyes  
and see myself  
diminishing, sinking down  
to a depth she does not know is there  
out of breath,  
I will not rise again.  
I grow into my death.  
My life is small  
and getting smaller. The world is green.

Nothing is all. (72)

Strand's most characteristic work is found not in the later poems but in the early ones. What we see there is a dissociation of sensibility not unlike that which Eliot used to speak about in which the mind feels alienated from the 'body' (meaning the flesh or material substance, as opposed to the spirit). The central issues in Strand's early poetry are psychological and depend far less on reality-states than on the impressions, feelings, and beliefs of a single, perhaps atypical, perceiving mind. These poems also introduce the readers, inevitably, to the characteristic speaking voice of nearly all early Strand poems – the unconscious through which everything seen, thought, felt, is filtered. Undoubtedly, this character is very nearly identical to Mark Strand himself, and yet to equate him with Strand would be to deny the role which the imagination plays in them.

The world of the mind is clearly predominant in Mark Strand; reality is capricious, not to be trusted, even unknowable in any certain sense. The question of knowledge for Strand depends upon the question of perception; reality is so inconstant that the observer cannot trust what he seems to see. However in his later poems, Strand writes with a good deal of confidence about the world of outward reality; in the early poems his trust is placed instead in the world of the mind. Thus these poems reproduce not images perceived 'out there' so much as the images imagined 'in here'. Strand's major subject, then, becomes the question of human perception and how this can result in poetry. In an interview with Nolan Miller, a professor of literature at Antioch College and the fiction editor of the *Antioch Review*, Mark Strand says: "The writing of a poem by a kid in college isn't like the writing of a paper for a course in Milton. Poems are totally self-generated and represent whatever that person is at the time, and that person continues to exist until he or she is eighty years old, and the advice or judgments given in college are not forgotten. That is why it's hard to teach writing, that's why it's dangerous. The artist learns only by making mistakes" (*Antioch Review* 112-13).

Not ready to be labeled a surrealist, Mark Strand says that for certain writers, chance is every bit as important as causality, and that it is hard for a post-modernist writer to deny it. Several critics also do not agree to Mark Strand being labelled a surrealist. Thus, while Nolan Miller thinks that Strand “does not take any kind of philosophical stance, any consistent mode of expression” (Antioch Review 83), Philip Cooper considers Strand’s work to be “characteristically gentle” (Cooper 6), whereas surrealism is something frantic. Indeed what distinguishes Strand from the surrealists is that however bizarre, far-fetched the externals are, there is always an element of verifiable – a universal human anguish which invites readers to share the poet’s experiences.

Summing up, in the contemporary poets like Robert Bly, James Wright, Merwin and Mark Strand one comes across images which are individually realistic, but the way they are related to one another may seem to be fascinatingly surrealist. For example, ‘clear as the eyes of chickens’ (“Silence” by Robert Bly) is a clear, even rationally understandable statement, but the moment the clarity of chickens’ eyes is compared with autumn as Bly has done in his poem, it takes on a more ambiguous dimension to which one responds only instinctively. The same technique can be seen in the juxtaposition of the ‘two athletes’ and ‘the cathedral of the wind’ in James Wright’s Spring Images, and the ‘parade of old women’ with ‘mosquitoes near still water’ in “A Dream of Burial”, ‘the dead’ with ‘honey’ in Merwin’s “Provision”, and ‘the railroad tracks’ with ‘men’s minds’ and ‘wild roses’ in Duffy’s “Poem on Forgetting the Body”.

These poets, therefore, believe in a direct relationship between the unconscious and the imagery they use in their poems; ‘without these true images, this water from the unconscious, the language continues to dry up’ (enotes.com). It may be mentioned in this connection that the word ‘dark’ has been unanimously chosen by these poets to symbolize depth of experience. In his book of only sixty pages, *Silence in the Snowy Field*, Bly has used this word exactly forty times. He has purged the word ‘dark’ of its pejorative connotations

and used it as a specialized symbol, so much so that a reader not sufficiently initiated to this school of poetry will not be able to evaluate this word properly.

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