

## SCOTT MINAR

*Mark Strand: In Memoriam*

My wife woke me one morning in 2014 to tell me that Mark Strand had died. Strand served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1990 to 1992—though, interestingly, he was born in the maritime provinces of Canada. In my last email from him, he offered me permission to use his poem “Eating Poetry” in a poetry writing exercise book I was editing at the time. He wrote, “Take it. Poets don’t make any money off of these things. Not that I’m saying I couldn’t use some.” Mark Strand’s poetry was appreciated broadly, enthusiastically—but not nearly enough in my view. A friend of mine sent me a quote from an interview with him published in *New Letters*: “It is not the story of my life, the life that I live, but the character of my inner life that is projected into these poems.” I had a copy of this quote taped to my desk for four or five years. It reminded me of who I wanted to be as a writer.

I didn’t know Strand well. We exchanged a few emails over the years. I sent him an essay I published in *The Laurel Review* regarding his book *Man and Camel*. He liked it very much. His praise was the highlight of my year. He sympathized with me over my hip replacements, writing, “Jesus, Scott, so many people have been having those!” I felt a particular affinity with and affection for him, not only because he was generous and down-to-earth, but because I had taught at Antioch College, one of his alma maters, and lived in the Maritimes, where he was raised. Strand’s poetry transformed my life. I never got a chance to tell him that, though I hoped I showed it in my writing. I wrote about him often, presenting a number of papers at conferences where I compared his work to Paul Celan and Charles Simic. I sent him a question while I was working on the Celan piece. When he found out what I was doing, he wrote, “I never thought I was in his league.” I responded with, “Well, no one is really in his league. But there are certain features of your work—

the way you handle nature, abstraction, language—that remind me of him sometimes.” The book I reviewed, *Man and Camel*, was, I think, his magnum opus. His last book. That is something to be admired a great deal. As I grow older, I find myself getting more tired. I have less that I need to say, but I spend a lot more time trying to say it. His energy as a writer, as an artist, was inexhaustible.

There were and are many poems in *Man and Camel* that blew me away. I refer to Simic and Strand as “the painter poets.” Samples of Strand’s visual art are available on-line and fascinatingly minimal in character. Simic’s work can be more elaborate, and just as fascinating in my view. It is what these paintings tell us about their poetry that fascinates me. Strand’s mind and his eye, it seems to me, were drawn to a kind of abstract essentialism. He reduced things to their abstract souls, and then recreated what he found when he did that. His art was transparent with numina, and it needed to be read that way. Some readers had trouble understanding what he did. He wasn’t colorful enough or sensational enough, but these things had to be understood in context in order to be appreciated. I grew up with Holocaust survivors. I learned what it is like to come to a place in the psyche, in the soul, where there are no words. None will do; nothing will help. To write (and paint) either from or just beyond that intellectual space was Strand’s goal. And he met it thrillingly. But one had to have eyes to see that. Many did and do.

There are two pieces in *Man and Camel* that were commissioned as texts to be performed with formal music. The second, “Poem After the Seven Last Words,” may be Mark Strand’s greatest poem. It was commissioned as a Christmas piece for the holidays. Its opening lines are

The story of the end, of the last word  
of the end, when told, is a story that never ends.  
We tell it and retell it—one word, then another  
until it seems that no last word is possible . . . .

I argue in my review that Strand only appears to be talking about the Passion Story and that really he is using it as a metaphor for art. It was, I think, an accurate and scholarly read of the poem. But it implicitly presumes that the death of a great human being is not art. I got the feeling, the strong feeling at the time, that Strand was talking about his own death, the coming of it. If one has been sick or happens to be growing old, the temptation to peak beyond the veil is almost overwhelming. If we read this poem in its entirety, I think this is indeed what we find. But to have the eyes to do that is a rather stunning thing.

What follows is the end of my review, which I think says more in praise of this man than I could ever do otherwise. I will miss him. The world will.

α ω

“Sections 6 and 7 of ‘Poem After the Seven Last Words’ lead us nonetheless to the finish of this book. Strand writes in section 6,

. . . This was his moment,  
 his final moment. “It is finished,” he said into a vastness  
 that led to an even greater vastness, and yet all of it  
 within him. He contained it all. That was the miracle,  
 to be both large and small in the same instant . . . .

Later in section 6 after the death of Christ, he adds

And from the storm that swirled  
 in his wake a formal nakedness took shape, the truth  
 of disguise and the mask of belief were joined forever.

The last ideas in section 6 are difficult ones. If the disguise is true, as Jesus’ humanity disguised his spirit yet was nonetheless a ‘true’ humanity (otherwise where was the sacrifice?), then the belief that

we wear as a 'mask' is also true. In other words, the mask of belief is difficult to wear unless we also believe in the truth of disguise; thus they are 'joined forever.' One only works with the other conjoined. Extending this spirit argument to the artist follows easily. The artist, and particularly a poet like Mark Strand, always dons the disguise of his or her art. The poem is what we wear and wear publicly as a sign of our coming, of our being here at all. It is our 'formal nakedness'—a face behind a mask inside a reflection. But nonetheless true, certainly no less real than the tragedies that seem to threaten to immolate our world or the victories which appear to save it.

In section 7, the last section, Strand ruminates after the death of things:

Back down these stairs to the same scene,  
to the moon, the stars, the night wind. Hours pass  
and only the harp off in the distance and the wind  
moving through it. And soon the sun's gray disc,  
darkened by clouds, sailing above. And beyond,  
as always, the sea of endless transparence, of utmost  
calm, a place of constant beginning that has with in  
what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no hand  
has touched, what has not arisen in the human heart.

To that place, to the keeper of that place, I commit myself.

There is a music in this place, of course, 'a harp off in the distance.' There is a 'sea of endless transparence, of utmost calm' and 'a place of constant beginning' which contains 'what no eye has seen.' Strand's ending embraces the mysteries of what is unknowable about us: our worlds and our futures. The speaker in this poem commits himself to the 'place of constant beginning' and 'to the keeper of that place.' Strand's speaker worships at the temple of 'beginning' or life, which is always on the other side of the funeral parlor, the hill, the quiet bedroom in which we fade. So the poet passes from the constructs of art to the arcane physics of humanity and our as yet undying nature."