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"Sleeping with One Eye Open": Fear and Ontology in the Poetry of Mark Strand

Keywords
Mark Strand, Poetry, American Literature
Mark Strand’s “Sleeping with One Eye Open,” one of his earliest poems and the first of his Selected Poems, is indicative of the fear, darkness, and anxiety that permeate all of Strand’s work. Here, surrounded by a world at ease, unusually still and “unmoved,” the speaker describes his own contrasting anxiety. “It’s my night to be rattled,/ Saddled/ With spooks,” he says. The room we visit as readers is “clammy and cold,/ Moonhandled/ and weird,” and waiting out the night, the speaker lies in his bed, “[s]leeping with one eye open,/ Hoping/ That nothing, nothing will happen” (SP 1).

This fear—this continual anxiety—is typical Strand. Like few poets of our time, Strand has the uncanny ability to draw forth and make manifest the darkness that lingers beneath the surface of our quiet lives and to stir up the dust of possibilities. For Strand, the world is a place of perpetual mystery; its beauties are marked by a temporality and impermanence and “the worst is always waiting/ Around the next corner or hiding in the dry,/ Unsteady branch of a sick tree, debating,/ Whether or not to fell the passerby” (SP 6). Strand is keenly aware of the tenuous nature of our lives, and the title of his poem—the title also of his first book—seems to suggest a preferred ontological state, a way of existing where the ever present, often frightening mysteries of the world are both revealed and created. Sleeping with one eye open, in a perpetual state of both dream and wakefulness, Strand is granted a rare and frightening entry into a world unvisited or rarely visited by others.
to flounder in the stillness of your wake.

Your suit floating, your hair
moving like eel grass
in a shallow bay, you drifted
out of the mirror’s room, through the hall
and into the open air. (SP 24)

Although the speaker is moved to a series of elegiac passions and pleadings for the return of his reflection, very little seems to happen in this poem; and when his reflection returns, like “a huge vegetable moon,/ a bruise coated with light,” it seems that little has really changed since the opening of the poem. The other room, the mirror’s room, which the speaker wishes to reach, where he wishes to hide, remains unreachable, while his old self, his old reflection has been replaced by a new vision, “dreamlike and obscene,” and Strand ends his poem with these telling words:

It will always be this way.
I stand here scared
that you will disappear,
scared that you will stay.

Strand’s speaker is immobilized by his fear yet desirous, nonetheless, for the mysteries that lie behind the mirror: his other self and the mirror’s dark room. Whether his reflection stays or leaves, the fear remains, and having created this fear, through his own questioning of the unquestionable, through his own continual deferral rather than acceptance of the world, Strand creates a hypersensitive state of being, groundless, where everything becomes questionable and nothing can be taken for granted.

For Strand, the creation of this groundlessness is the necessary first step toward any kind of transcendence, and in Darker—an appropriately titled collection—Strand continues to explore the fear, darkness, and anxiety at the center of our lives. But unlike his first two books, Darker is marked by a more aggressive sense of action; less passive, Strand’s speaker, his doppelganger of sorts, has begun to seek
out the darkness more consciously. In “The Dress,” for instance, Strand depicts the sense of a willful movement toward negation:

Lie down on the bright hill
with the moon’s hand on your cheek,
your flesh deep in the white folds of your dress,
and you will not hear the passionate mole extending the length of his darkness,
or the owl arranging all of the night,
which is his wisdom, or the poem filling your pillow with its blue feathers.
But if you step out of your dress and move into the shade
the mole will find you, so will the owl,
and so will the poem,
and you will fall into another darkness, one you will find
yourself making and remaking until it is perfect.

In contrast to the many poems of his previous collections there is also a recognizable sense of hope in this poem. Strand has begun to embrace the unknowable and the impermanent, and the potential for revision present here, the ability of “making and remaking until it is perfect,” seems to capture Strand’s own sense of the possibility of change. Unlike “The Man in the Mirror,” where the speaker is helplessly confronted with the slow and unstoppable loss of his self, Strand’s speaker finds instead a more positive sense of change.

Regarding this movement in Darker, David Kirby, the only critic to date having written a full volume on Strand’s poetry, has said that:

Both anxiety and enlightenment are present in Darker. The title may be deceptive, however; the proportion of dark to light is changing, and without knowing it, Strand’s personae is on the verge of an important realization: that the poetry, which has seemed merely an
Kirby is correct in observing that Strand’s poetry is indeed beginning a slow movement toward enlightenment. He is also correct in observing that Strand’s poetry has become a means of remedy for the fear in his life. But what Kirby does not mention, and what seems essential to any discussion of Strand’s process, is the fact that Strand’s poems are not only a remedy for this “disquiet” but also a conscious creation of that state. For Strand the state of fear achieved in his poems is not only representative of his many entries into the dark and the mysterious but it is also the means by which to achieve this entry. The fear in Strand’s poetry creates a state of anxiety which inevitably leads to a confrontation with that fear and when these two collide, the world of fixed possibilities, of certainty and stagnancy is thrown into flux and change.

Looking closely again at “The Dress,” we can see that Strand sets up a conscious opposition between the first and second sentences of the poem. This opposition coincides with the contradictory elements of light and dark, and there is an immediate conflict in the poem between these two elements. In the first sentence the speaker describes the moon’s light and the bright hill while in the second he points to the unknown world that lies hidden in the darkness. The descriptions of the moon caressing the subject’s cheek and the “white folds” of the dress suggest an ominous, perhaps false sense of comfort and ease. But this comfort, suggests the speaker, only keeps us from the real beauties and mysteries of the night: “the poem/ filling your pillow with its blue feathers.” To be at ease—content on the bright hill—is to lack desire, and to lack desire is to live without a future.

It is in the second sentence that Strand reveals the true goal of the poem and of his whole poetics thus far. Whether Strand intended the symbol or not, he is the “the mole,” and his process, like the blind, “passionate” mole burrowing through darkness, is to move continually inward and away from the light. “On the bright hill,” there is only the “moon’s hand.” But, Strand suggests, stepping out of our clothes and
moving naked into the darkness, we find both the poem and the possibility of revision, of remaking the world. Out of the darkness, Strand carefully creates a world of unknown possibilities, where the owl (who hunts only at night), the mole (which spends its life beneath the bright hill), and even the poem, exist in a constantly shifting state of revision, a chaos from which comes a more formal creation.

Strand’s aim in these poems thus far has been a conscious form of negative transcendence. Strand’s figures are always moving away from the light and sometimes joyously, sometimes unwillingly into the dark. It is as if Plato’s parable were wrong, and the truth, the ideal, lies not in the bright sunlight outside the cave, but in the obscure, deceptive movements of the shadows on the wall. Outside, in the light, having never visited the dark, one is as blind and mistaken as the cave dweller. Strand seeks a glimpse of both these worlds in his poetry, but it is the movement toward darkness and the fearful joy of the unknown that are the most necessary step in his progress toward both revision and possibility. The bright and the unobscured, the delineated aspects of a comfortable world without shadows and without mystery, are Strand’s real nightmare: a tempting but ultimately false deception. Assaulted by the fear of the emptiness of life, Strand does not cling to trivial philosophies or theology. Instead he embraces this emptiness in an attempt to lose and then regain both his self and sanity. It is a baptism of fire, a continual catharsis, a revision; and constantly in pursuit of both meaning and meaninglessness, Strand’s poetry wavers between a type of fearful awe and disgust of the darkness. But Strand knows the necessary and literary steps for redemption, and his process becomes the hero’s journey through hell and back again.

In “The Way It Is” Strand moves through a self-created, self-inflicted nightmare world of horror and disgust. The epigraph to the poem is from Wallace Stevens: “the world is ugly/ And the people are sad,” (SP 79) pointing to an imaginative deficit perhaps, but one cannot help but think of Sartre’s No Exit and the dictum that “hell is other people.” The poem, as opposed to the others examined thus far, seems to be outward looking, but Strand describes this world from only the
most subjective point of view.

I lie in bed.
I toss all night
in the cold unruffled deep
of my sheets and cannot sleep.

My neighbor marches in his room,
wear ing the sleek
mask of a hawk with a large beak.
He stands by the window. a violet plume

rises from his helmet’s dome.
The moon’s light
spills over him like milk and the wind rinses the white
glass bowls of his eyes. (SP 79)

Beginning with the “I” and moving outward from there, this poem also resembles “Sleeping with One Eye Open.” Again, the speaker is in bed, awake and unable to sleep—a common syndrome of Strand’s speakers—and again he finds himself subject to a host of unwanted visions. His neighbor is a type of vicious nationalist, “waving a small American flag” in the park, and the world outside becomes an infernal place of murder and torment. Unlike his neighbor, though, whose nationalism, self-interest, and sensuality have made him blind and immune to the suffering going on around him, Strand’s speaker-hero looks helplessly on this world of horror as if to gain some insight from its suffering. The world the speaker sees is not a real world, it is not the simple reconstruction of history or politics, it does not refer to the age he inhabits, but is an imagined world, an interior world in which the exterior world is redrafted and reevaluated, judged in an interior drama, which judges itself equally. Strand imagines himself “...in the park/ on horseback,
surrounded by dark,/ leading the armies of peace” and realizes that “[e]veryone who has sold himself wants to buy himself back.” It is here where Strand draws a momentary insight from his exploration of this dark interior scene. It is the one nugget of wisdom for which Strand’s
speakers are inevitably searching, the one hard truth that comes from facing our fears and the unknowable without hesitation. The speaker realizes he has also sold himself; his vision of this world is a psychological projection of his own fears and, recognizing the horror of the exterior world, he recognizes, too, the horror of his own.

As Strand’s poetry progresses, though, so does his resolve to stand in the face of this darkness and to watch and discover. In the poem “In Celebration,” a somewhat but not entirely ironic title, Strand’s hero speaks to us again, telling the reader, the “you,” that there is celebration in this darkness. “You know...” says the speaker,

... That this
is the celebration, the only celebration,
that by giving yourself over to nothing,
you shall be healed. You know there is joy in feeling your lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future, so you wait, you stare and wait, and the dust settles and the miraculous hours of childhood wander in darkness. (SP 91)

This is a fascinating poem. Strand’s power for negative capability, his ability to praise even that that destroys us and to embrace and confront the emptiness at the center of our lives, is remarkable. This is the only possible response to the world that Strand envisions and inhabits, and as the speaker says, it is “the ONLY celebration,” all other celebration being false, and is the culmination of many of the ideas in his previous books. Even more than in “Giving Myself Up” and “The Remains” in his previous volume, Strand’s speaker emptied himself completely and sits miraculously at ease in the center of that emptiness. In the poem “In Celebration” Strand knows, just as he did in “Sleeping with One Eye Open,” that “by giving yourself over to nothing,/ you shall be healed.” This is the negative transcendence at the heart of Strand’s poetics where the taste of “absence” is “honey,” and “there is joy in feeling your lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future.” As opposed to an ecstatic and
revelatory joy, such as we might find in the early poems of Walt Whitman, Strand’s speaker becomes, instead, like the quenched flame the Buddhist calls nirvana. Emptied completely of ego, Strand’s speaker sits in a perpetual state of quiet celebration, embracing the slow and inevitable destruction of his self.

Alas, Strand’s transcendence is never truly a nirvanic moment. Perhaps Strand senses the limitations of any such simple transcendence for he continually wavers between an attraction to and repulsion of this darkness and fear; he celebrates his own slow destruction as an inevitable part of his life, yet continues to question and interrogate this celebration. For Strand there is always more to the story than meets the eye, and in “The Story of Our Lives,” instead of praising the stillness and the inevitable approach of death, Strand’s characters instead seek to “move beyond the book” of their lives. The wish for perpetual stillness—the desire that “nothing will happen”—which dominates many of Strand’s earlier poems and seems to characterize “In Celebration,” is counterbalanced in this volume and later volumes by a continual desire for more, which is less. The characters in this poem, instead of joyously accepting the predetermined nature of their lives, sitting back and allowing the inevitable to pass, wish instead for something more, “something like mercy or change,/ a black line that would bind us/ or keep us apart.” Instead of the fear of possibility, Strand has moved forward into a fear of stagnancy, and the via negativa, Strand’s slow refusal of self and life becomes instead a means of continual creation.

In “The Story of Our Lives,” from the volume of the same title, Strand has made of his own characters a world not unlike the vision of his own world. But again, by a negative deferral of their own lives, by giving themselves over to the book, like the poem “In Celebration,” Strand’s characters are granted the rare opportunity to step outside their predicated lives and look with both wonder and fear upon themselves. Just as Strand abstracts himself in “The Man in the Mirror,” in order to gaze more honestly on himself, in order to engender the necessary fear for that confrontation, the speaker of this poem does the same. Instead of looking at the world from the inside out, they are reading the story of
their own lives as if they were reading the story of someone else: "We are reading the story of our lives," says the speaker,

as though we were in it,
as though we had written it.
This comes up again and again.
In one of the chapters
I lean back and push the book aside
because the book says
it is what I am doing.
I lean back and begin to write about the book.
I write that I wish to move beyond the book,
beyond my life into another life.
and then later,

The book will not survive.
We are the living proof of that.
It is dark outside, in the room it is darker.
I hear your breathing.
You are asking me if I am tired,
if I want to keep reading.
Yes, I am tired.
Yes, I want to keep reading. (SP 97, 98)

Again, Strand’s speaker becomes the stoic seeker of the dark and unknowable, moving determined through his fear as through a thick field of brush, slowly clearing a path, but toward what he does not know. "Yes," he says, "I am tired," but "Yes, I want to keep reading." The speaker has become addicted to his life, trapped by the story of his life, and the desire to move beyond can only be achieved by a radical questioning of both the book and his self. But the speaker’s insights and his desire for more are only achieved after he has already stepped outside of his self, abstracted his own life and the life of his mate, in order to know and perhaps overcome the inherent stagnancy of that life. Yet still, as with all of Strand’s poems, there is no end, no real transcendence, no nirvana, but only the desire for and the process of question and revision.
As Strand writes, in one of the most powerful and disturbing stanzas of his career:

They sat beside each other on the couch.
They were the copies, the tired phantoms of something they had been before.
The attitudes they took were jaded.
They stared into the book and were horrified by their innocence, their reluctance to give up.
They sat beside each other on the couch.
They were determined to accept the truth.
Whatever it was they would accept it.
The book would have to be written and would have to be read.
They are the book and they are nothing else. (SP 102, 103)

“The Untelling” is similar in tone and intention. The character here—and I say character because Strand’s poems so often have a narrative, almost parable-like feel to them—is plagued by a repeated scene from his childhood—one he wishes to capture and record in proper form—but at every attempt he is balked by a sense of the falsity of his own words.

It bothered him, as if too much had been said.
He would have preferred the lake without a story, or no story and no lake.
His pursuit was a form of evasion: the more he tried to uncover the more there was to conceal the less he understood. (SP 108)

Just as the speaker in “The Dress” makes and remakes the darkness to perfection, the character of the “The Untelling” attempts to revisit and
remake his own past. In direct contrast to the “Story of Our Lives,” the character here is in control of his own story; but wrapped up in the telling, wrapped up in memory and the attempt to record the truth as it really was, the character continually fails. Only through sleep and darkness does he find that he finally enters the landscape of his writing. Then and only then does he sit down to write the final version of “The Untelling.”

He felt himself at that moment to be more than his need to survive, more than his losses, because he was less than anything. He swayed back and forth. The silence was in him and it rose like joy, like the beginning. When he opened his eyes, the silence had spread, the sheets of darkness seemed endless, the sheets he held in his hand. He turned and walked to the house. He went to the room that looked out on the lawn. He sat and began to write:

THE UNTELLING

To the Woman in the yellow Dress. (SP 112)

The movement of Strand’s character in “The Untelling” is a conscious movement through dream and word to achieve the insight necessary to write one’s life. Just as the characters of “The Story of Our Lives” are given a glimpse of themselves from the outside, the character of this poem achieves a similar state of abstraction by entering the darkness of his own book, his own words.

Moving forward, The Late Hour, like Strand’s other titles, points
toward the progression into and through the darkness of his poetry. This is an important volume in Strand’s career, for none of his future titles, excepting *Dark Harbor*, make any mention of darkness or fear. *The Continuous Life* and his most recent *A Blizzard of One*, seem to operate on a post-anxiety level. We can see in *The Late Hour*, the last of Strand’s darker volumes, a slow movement through and acceptance of this darkness. Strand, in this and his following volumes, has finally reconciled himself to the dark. The anxiety and fear seen previously, though necessary steps, have become less frightening and more natural aspects of his life, and in “The Coming of Light” we can see a radical change in Strand’s poetics. Finally, after the years of darkness and forced confrontation with this dark, Strand is granted a rare vision of light:

Even this late it happens:
the coming of love, the coming of light.
You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,
stars gather, dreams pour into your pillows,
sending up warm bouquets of air.
Even this late the bones of the body shine
and tomorrow’s dust flares into breath. *(SP 115)*

There is a marked difference of tone in this poem compared to Strand’s earlier lyrics. Instead of “The closets of his unhappiness,” and the “black grass,” and “the black stars” of the poems of *Darker*, “The Coming of Light” reveals an optimism unseen in Strand’s poetry thus far. No longer looking toward the future as a place of perpetual darkness and fearful possibility, the speaker sees the proverbial “dust” of tomorrow and the dust of his own body as it “flares into breath.” Practically all the poems of *The Late Hour* make reference to light, just as many of the poems from *Sleeping with One Eye Open* made reference to the dark. In “Seven Days” each day is marked by a particular quality of light, and in “Snowfall” Strand finally finds what the speaker calls “the negative of night.” But like “The Dress” and “In Celebration,” this is a temporary, though not unimportant transition. There remains in these poems the ever-present night, and the light that he finds is followed always by a direct contemplation of the dark. In the last day of “Seven
Days” the speaker walks “late at night” in “the odor of roses” and contemplates “the old stars falling and the ashes of one thing and another.” Looking back on a dark past and looking forward to “the dream of light” going on without him, Strand’s hero continues his journey through the late night of his life.

In “Always,” a poem from The Continuous Life, Strand’s sixth collection, he returns again to the cold logic of Wallace Stevens’ “The Snow Man,” contemplating “the nothing that is” (303). Strand continues his search for a negative transcendence, but in “Always,” this transcendence is achieved not by deferral but by a very casual forgetting. “The forgetters,” as Strand calls them, were always “hard at work.”

They tilted their heads to one side, closing their eyes.  
Then a house disappeared, and a man in his yard  
With all his flowers in a row.  
The great forgetters wrinkled their brows.  
Then Florida went and San Francisco  
Where tugs and barges leave  
Small gleaming scars across the bay. (CL 30)

Strand continues from here until both North and South America, Japan, Bulgaria, and even the moon itself are gone, forgotten in a casual sitting round, drinking, smoking, and talking. Unlike his earlier lyrics, which required a conscious approach to the darkness, the negation in this poem is as casual as an evening with friends. This type of stripping away has become an intimate and continual part of the speaker’s life, as the title “Always” suggests, and at the heart of this negation, the center, which can only be called dark—or pure light, which is the blinding equivalent of the dark—is the always pursued possibility of Strand’s poetics: “the blaze of promise everywhere.” Strand has finally achieved, in this volume and his next (A Blizzard of One), the final goal of his poetics: to live in a world of constant creation and re-creation.

In “A.M.,” a very similar poem, Strand is again at the exact end of the night, the morning hours where he embraces the coming of
the day. After the many books of dark and fear-filled images, Strand’s hero moves easily now into the light, avoiding what he calls the “damages of night.” Yet, near the end of the poem, we see that the sun’s rays reveal a world that is, if not equally, then nearly as dark and frightening as the previous night.

...How well the sun’s rays probe  
The rotting carcass of a skate, how well  
They show the worms and swarming flies at work,  
How well they shine upon the fatal sprawl  
Of everything on earth. . . . (CL 5)

Strand, as only Strand can, has turned his whole philosophy on its own head; and just as he managed to celebrate “how the lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future” in his poem “In Celebration, Strand achieves a similar negative capability by his stoic acceptance and praise of this death-revealing light. This light, which reveals so much to us about a world we never see, is similar, though, to Strand’s earlier process. Strand’s movements into the dark and his constant curiosity and need to reveal and experience the darker images of the world are similar to the sun’s own ability to reveal the death and “fatal sprawl” of the earth. In the late poems of Strand, the stillness of his poetics remains; but his stoicism, his ability to stand in the face of fear, darkness, death, and the loss of his own self, has changed from an anxiety-filled yet determined stance, to a more casual, almost nonchalant, sophisticated, and perhaps ironical awareness of life.

This new awareness: the casual stance of the veteran hero back from his many journeys, is finely illustrated in Strand’s most recent volume A Blizzard of One. Strand has always known the impossibility of his task; his many descents into the depths of fear, his confrontation with the dark and nothingness of our lives has been a perpetual movement from dark to light and back to the dark again. From these many poems, these many journeys, Strand’s greatest insight, though, is the realization of the necessity of that journey. Strand has not given up questioning, nor has he given up his continual confrontation with what is. He has not given up his method, but has come to the perfection of
that method. The state of fear which defined Strand’s early poetics has been replaced and overcome by a state of negative capability, where he neither praises nor fears the unknown. In “The Night, The Porch,” an early poem in Strand’s latest volume, we see the speaker continue the approach toward nothing.

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.
Trees can sway or be still. Day or night can be what they wish.
What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the comfort
Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. This is the crux
Of the matter, which is why even now we seem to be waiting
For something whose appearance would be its vanishing—
The sound, say of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf,
Or less. There is no end to what we can learn. The book
out there
Tells us as much, and was never written with us in mind.

(BO 10)

These final lines are strikingly similar to Strand’s earlier poem “Taking A Walk With You” in Sleeping with One Eye Open. In this earlier poem, Strand says,

The tree we lean against
Was never made to stand
For something else,
Let alone ourselves.
Nor were these fields
And gullies planned
With us in mind. (SP 9)

I mention this in order to help make meaning of this particular poem but also to show the consistency of Strand’s thought throughout his career. Both poems point to an uncaring reality outside the speaker and both point to a state of abandonment that is received with stoic calm. Again, it is this void, this place that was not made for us nor cares for us, that
the speaker finds himself questioning. It is also the state of being that both allows and creates this questioning. In this world, free from the teleology of fate, where accident is more common than destiny, Strand's speakers, instead of giving in to the numbing effects of nihilism, find instead the freedom of possibility. When Strand asks us to "stare at nothing" and to bare ourselves to the wind in order to feel "the ungraspable somewhere close by," it is to this ontological state—this place of being that is not ours, where we are strangers even to ourselves—that Strand takes us. To desire "the comfort / of being strangers," to ourselves is to step outside the self into a world of constantly shifting possibilities where, freed from expectation and the choking hold of a predicated self, we move from the darkness of the world into the light of nothing. In Strand's own words, following a line of Rainer Maria Rilke's:

"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. I would like to be
In that solitude of soundless things, in the random
Company of the wind, to be weightless, nameless.

But not for long, for I would be downcast without
The things I keep inside my heart; and in no time
I would be back, Ah! the old heart

In which I sleep, in which my sleep increases, in which
My grief is ponderous, in which the leaves are falling,
In which the streets are long, in which the night

Is dark, in which the sky is great, the old heart
That murmurs to me of what cannot go on,
Of the dancing, of the inmost dancing.

(Dark Harbor 20)


