

REVIEW:

Mark Strand, *DARKER* (Atheneum, 1970) 47 pp., \$2.95

A POEM IS THE RECORD OF SOME "NEWS" THE POET GOT through the process of writing the poem—revelation of a sort, there's no getting around it. When it is less than this, when it is a record of things the poet knew when he began to write it, then it is prose. By this standard, *Moby Dick*, for example, is mostly poetry, while *Paradise Lost* is mostly prose. Where prose seeks out patterns of meaning in the "given" world, poetry takes whatever it can get from the hidden world; by what is thus brought back, the "given" is profoundly altered.

The hidden world manifests itself differently to every mind. Mark Strand's vision of it is something like a photographic negative. Where we like to think of awareness as a form of illumination, for Strand illumination is a form of darkening:

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.

(from "Seven Poems")

This is only the first of a long chain of inversions from which Strand's vision depends. Becoming is the process of disappearing:

I grow into my death.
My life is small
and getting smaller. The world is green.
Nothing is all.

(from "My Life")

The desire for more is the same as the desire for less:

Flowers bloom.
Flowers die.
More is less.
I long for more:
(from "The One Song")

One can't help hearing there an ironic reminder of Blake's, "More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul. Less than All cannot satisfy Man." In Strand's view, this converts to "Less than nothing cannot satisfy man." Where all is nothing, act is a form of non-act:

Now I lie in the box
of my making while the weather
builds and the mourners shake their heads as if
to write or to die, I did not have to do either.
(from "My Death")

Getting is a process of stripping away, filling is a process of emptying, living is a process of dying. My prose here reduces these revelations to a set of trite, abstract, neat paradoxes. But in Strand's poems they fall at you out of closets and frighten you with their thin level voices. It is as though your daily life has been translated into a haunted house, where the daylight is so bright you can barely make anything out, all bleached to a sameness; then the thunder rumbles and suddenly there is a bolt of darkness in which, for an instant, the heavy furniture and the corpse and the monster stand out clearly. The darker the clearer. In one of my trips through *Darker* I kept score of how many times forms of the words "dark," "night" and "black" appeared—I counted twenty-four in the forty-three spare pages.

Where most poetry gives the impression of having resulted from a process of putting in and adding on, of constructing the whole world of the poet's vision, Strand's poetry feels like the result of a taking out and paring away, a razing of every possible world in a mighty effort to get to the essential, the fine pure basic nothing, the foundation of all value:

I praise all for nothing because there is no price.
(from "From a Litany")

But Strand's nothing cannot be taken as merely privative. It is much more like Wallace Stevens' nothing at the end of "The Snowman:" "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Strand's nothing, moreover (similar in this respect to that of Heidegger), is the very *source* of being, of whatever there is:

The present is always dark.
Its maps are black,
rising from nothing,
describing,

in their slow ascent
into themselves,
their own voyage,
its emptiness,

the bleak, temperate
necessity of its completion.
As they rise into being
they are like breath.

(from "Black Maps")

The centrality of nothing to Strand's vision has its moral as well as its metaphysical ramifications. These are most painfully expressed in the short poem, "Coming to This:"

We have done what we wanted.

We have discarded dreams, preferring the heavy industry
of each other, and we have welcomed grief
and called ruin the impossible habit to break.

And now we are here.

The dinner is ready and we cannot eat.

The meat sits in the white lake of its dish.

The wine waits.

Coming to this

has its rewards: nothing is promised, nothing is taken
away.

We have no heart or saving grace,
no place to go, no reason to remain.

Perhaps this is a cumulative effect of the whole book and not realizable from this one poem by itself, but for me the great thing here is the sense I get that somehow the reduction of life to the level of Zero Expectation is not so much a place to end it all as the only possible place to begin. You cannot be disappointed. You cannot be deluded. You cannot be defeated. You are at rest at one version of the still point of the turning world, which Eliot sought as a kind of Ultimate Good for this life. Strand, indeed, in another poem, called "The Good Life," verifies this equation of the nothing with the good—there is irony intended here too of course, but not without a deep, lovely note of authentic acceptance:

There is nothing you can do.

The good life gives no warning.
It weathers the climates of despair
and appears, on foot, unrecognized, offering nothing,
and you are there.

Looking back over Strand's earlier work (there are two previous books: *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, 1964, and *Reasons for Moving*, 1968), I find an intriguing major theme running throughout, which seems to find a culmination of sorts in *Darker*. It has to do with man's (the self-conscious animal's) separation from himself—the problem of what Emily Dickinson called "Ourself behind ourself, concealed." The dilemma is fully exploited in a poem from the second book called "The Man in the Mirror." The poet is speaking to his reflection—other self—which once "turned away/ and left me here/ to founder in the stillness of your wake," and then, after an absence which the poet lived through in a kind of sustained lethargy, suddenly reappeared one night, "a huge vegetable moon,/ a bruise coated with light." The poem ends where it began, with the two selves facing one another, the glass forever between them:

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

scared that you will stay.

By *Darker* this division has become almost an obsession with Strand. Some quick examples: one poem is called "Giving Myself Up;" another ends with the line, "I empty myself of my life and my life remains;" in another, "My body lies down/ and I hear my own/ voice lying next to me;" and so on. Full and direct treatment of the theme occurs in what I think is one of the best poems in the book, "My Life by Somebody Else." Here it is in full.

I have done what I could but you avoid me.
I left a bowl of milk on the desk to tempt you.
Nothing happened. I left my wallet there, full of money.
You must have hated me for that. You never came.

I sat at my typewriter naked, hoping you would wrestle me
to the floor. I played with myself just to arouse you.
Boredom drove me to sleep. I offered you my wife.
I sat her on the desk and spread her legs. I waited.

The days drag on. The exhausted light falls like a bandage
over my eyes. Is it because I am ugly? Was anyone
ever so sad? It is pointless to slash my wrists. My hands
would fall off. And then what hope would I have?

Why do you never come? Must I have you by being
somebody else? Must I write *My Life* by somebody else?
My Death by somebody else? Are you listening?
Somebody else has arrived. Somebody else is writing.

Here Strand has not only dramatized, with characteristic mastery of tone ("You must have hated me for that" . . . "Was anyone/ ever so sad?") the self/self dichotomy which is for him the most obstinate and frustrating barrier a man has to encounter in his drive towards the real, but in the process he has discovered a whole new perspective on it. The speaker in the poem, the "I" who has been trying to tempt his real self to emerge from hiding, becomes by the end of the poem "someone else." One is reminded of Borges' "Borges and I," in which the narrating "I" speaks of the Borges to whom everything real happens and in whom the "I"—rather than in itself

— has its being. The “I” concludes the piece with, “I do not know which of us has written this page.” But Strand here goes even Borges one better, beginning with two selves and ending with three (or maybe one)! The process of recording the cat-and-mouse game between the I and the missing self leads to the arrival of a third party, a “someone else” who by the end of the poem is writing the poem. We might recognize this “someone else” as the only possible union of the other two, a union which takes place only in the act (“writing”) of the poem. This is poetry as revelation.

One last word about technique. Strand is several removes from the currently so fashionable “deep image” persuasion. Oh, there are the memorable images all right— “The moon’s light/ spills over him like milk and the wind rinses the white/ glass bowls of his eyes.” But they are in the poems the way the critical but limited pressure points are in the human body; whereas the skeleton of the Strand poem is rather the deep statement. Paradox, often just slightly askew. Flat universal declaration— repeated. Old familiar grammatical forms, bent just a degree off center and re-loaded with mildly eccentric terms. Contradictions. These, instead of side-stepping the intellect the way the image does, crack it wide open. They meet discursive logic head-on and crack through it into the darkness beyond.

— JAMES CRENNER