

Exploring Placemindedness: The Spatial Imagination in Mark Strand's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Places, spaces, and landscapes are largely present and vitally significant in the poetry of Mark Strand, who describes them not as mere settings for his poems or backgrounds for the human experiences the poems seek to convey. Rather, an obsession with such places and spaces extends to a profound exploration of the human psyche and existential condition. Strand's use of landscapes transcends traditional depictions, embodying a metaphysical dimension where the external environment reflects and intensifies the internal states of his characters. His landscapes often evoke a sense of isolation, emptiness, and the passage of time, contributing to a contemplative atmosphere that encourages readers to delve deeper into themes of identity, memory, and mortality. By examining the interplay between physical and psychological spaces in Strand's poetry, this paper aims to uncover how his intricate portrayal of landscapes enhances the emotional and philosophical depth of his work, offering insights into the complex relationship between place and self in contemporary poetry.

Keywords: Mark Strand, Topophilia, Spatial Studies, Geocriticism, Spatiality.

استكشاف الوعي المكاني: الخيال المكاني في شعر مارك ستراند

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المخلص

تتواجد الأماكن والمساحات والمناظر الطبيعية بشكل كبير وذات أهمية حيوية في شعر مارك ستراند، الذي يصفها ليس كمجرد مواقع لقصائده أو خلفيات للتجارب الإنسانية التي تسعى القصائد إلى نقلها. بل إن الاهتمام الكبير بمثل هذه الأماكن والمساحات يمتد إلى استكشاف عميق للنفس البشرية والحالة الوجودية. استخدام ستراند للمناظر الطبيعية يتجاوز التصويرات التقليدية، متجسداً بعداً ميتافيزيقياً حيث تعكس البيئة الخارجية وتكثف الحالات الداخلية لشخصياته. غالباً ما تستدعي مناظره الطبيعية شعوراً بالعزلة والفراغ ومرور الزمن، مما يساهم في خلق جو تأملي يشجع القراء على التعمق في موضوعات الهوية والذاكرة والفناء. من خلال دراسة التفاعل بين المساحات المادية والنفسية في شعر ستراند، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى كشف كيف يعزز تصويره المتقن للمناظر الطبيعية العمق العاطفي والفلسفي لعمله، مقدمة رؤية حول العلاقة المعقدة بين المكان والذات في الشعر المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استكشاف الوعي المكاني، الخيال المكاني. مارك ستراند.

Mark Strand (1934–2014), a celebrated American poet, is known for his reflective and poignant writings which often explore subjects of memory, individuality, and self-examination. Place has a significant role in Strand's poetry, serving as a backdrop, a symbol, and a means of self-exploration. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of Mark Strand's use of place and space in selected poems, with a particular emphasis on the foreboding and unsettling landscapes. It explores how these settings contribute to the concept of topophilia, as advocated by Robert Tally.

The presence of place, whether physical or abstract, is an essential element in Strand's poems. His incorporation of geography is noteworthy due to its ability to evoke a sense of eerie atmosphere and negative sentiment. The poet's language effectively elicits a unique environment, producing a pervasive atmosphere of fear and seclusion that permeates throughout the entirety of the poem (Nicosia 10).

Strand is a renowned American poet, editor, translator, and prose writer. His literary style is distinguished by its use of lucid language, unusual

and unconventional imagery, and a repeating motif of absence and elimination. According to Cornelia A. Pernik, in his latter writings, Strand delves into the notion of self with astute and refined wit (5). In 1990, Strand was designated as the poet laureate of the United States and had a prosperous career that lasted over fifty years. He garnered multiple accolades from reviewers and cultivated a dedicated readership. He received the esteemed Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1999 for his collection *Blizzard of One* (1998) whereas his debut collection, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (1964) remains one of the most acknowledges of his works as it presents his distinctive methodology in poetry, characterized by an all-encompassing feeling of unease and agitated restlessness (Aaron 202).

Strand is widely recognized for his intriguing, introspective, and often nontraditional poetic works. He explores the topics of memory, identity, and the human condition in his work. Frequently, the author manipulates the boundaries between actuality and fantasy, composing poetry that exhibits surreal qualities and intellectual stimulation. His poetry is characterized by its profound nature, inherent ambiguity, and ability to evoke profound emotional and intellectual responses among its readers (Nicosia 10). The ongoing legacy of his contributions to American literature is evident, as his work remains widely read and esteemed.

A comprehensive understanding of Strand's poetry necessitates a thorough examination of the historical and cultural milieu in which it was created. Strand's literary works were produced during the latter half of the 20th century, a time marked by notable social and political upheaval. The simultaneous events of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate affair contributed to the development of a prevailing climate of ambiguity and concern within American society. Strand's poetry reflects a sense of uncertainty and disquietude, often exploring the adverse facets of our existence and the susceptibility of our being within an

inhospitable and alarming milieu. Furthermore, it demonstrates a phenomenon known as topophobia, which can be interpreted as a response to the particular historical and cultural conditions prevalent during its era. It also suggests that at times of substantial uncertainty and disruption, even the most familiar locations have the potential to elicit terror and present potential dangers.

Strand's portrayal of the universe, particularly in his early poetry, predominantly encompasses elements like fear, gloom, worry, morbidity, anxiety, apprehension, and the anticipation of dangerous situations. In the context of apprehension, the individuals, or speakers of Strand, demonstrate a variety of concerns regarding the self, space, and place as signs of an unsatisfactory or rather uncomfortable state of being. Undoubtedly, this characteristic has been acknowledged as a notable attribute of Strand's poetry, particularly the presentation of unease towards hostile surroundings, or as Nicosia contends, "the expression of fear towards a malignant world" (Nicosia 2). Furthermore, Haitham Al-Zubbaidi observes that:

The world Mark Strand depicts, particularly in his early poetry, is mostly a world of fear, darkness, anxiety, morbidity, uneasiness, apprehension and anticipation of danger. In this world of fear, the characters, or speakers of Strand, are characterized by multiple concerns with the self, space and place as being markers of the displeasing, or rather disturbing, existence (2854)

Strand's depiction of the world and comprehension of geography and place are derived from his firsthand encounters while traversing North and South America as a result of his father's business. He is originally from Prince Edward Island, Canada, and has had the opportunity to undergo his growing years in various places around the United States, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, and Italy (Bloom 14). This particular experience has significantly bolstered his linguistic proficiency,

provided him with exposure to a wide range of geographical environments, and seems to have a role in shaping the prevailing atmosphere of terror, dread, and worldwide anxiety that is evident in his poetic works. Strand's poetry exhibits a conspicuous manifestation of these feelings, as the natural world is portrayed as either hostile or dispirited. James F. Nicosia characterizes Strand's natural environment as unpredictable and either antagonistic or apathetic towards humanity, providing only transient sanctuary. He posits that place is "a volatile place—either malevolent or apathetic toward humanity within which one can only hope to find short-term shelter" (Nicosia 2). Moreover, despite its transient nature, this shelter becomes inadequate in offering sufficient safety to mitigate the escalating internal concerns that manifest in external situations.

"Sleeping with One Eye Open," a poem from his first collection of poetry, published in 1964 and carrying the same title, is an example of his early work. Strand depicts a world where the speaker's topophrenia is a result of everything. "Sleeping with One Eye Open" suggests a condition of partial awake or attention, suggesting a state of alertness and unease. This fits well with Strand's topophrenic condition, which the speaker of his poems goes through. To create a terrifying and reflective atmosphere, he uses vivid and, at times, unsettling visuals. By detailing his home's features, the speaker illustrates his dread of space:

Unmoved by what the wind does, The windows
Are not rattled, nor do the various
Areas Of the house make their usual racket –
Creak at The joints, trusses, and studs.[...]
It's my night to be rattled, Saddled
With spooks. (*CP* 15)

These images evoke a sense of ambiguity and vulnerability, suggesting an enigmatic and unsettling setting where outward

appearances may be misleading. The poem delves into themes of anxiety, vulnerability, and the subtle complexities inherent in the human condition. The phrase "sleeping with one eye open" suggests a fear of being caught off guard, a lack of absolute trust in the universe, and a constant state of vigilance and unease. The poem ends with the line "And I lie sleeping with one eye open, / Hoping / That nothing, nothing will happen" (*CP* 15) leaving the reader with a sense of unresolved tension and an image of a sudden, catastrophic and looming event, which underscores the poem's enigmatic quality and sense of topophrenia. The storm outside is nothing but usual as the trees outside are "unmoved" and the windows are "not rattled". It is rather the speaker himself who feels "dead, / Folded / Away in [his] blankets for good, and / Forgotten" (*CP* 15).

Strand utilizes maps in his poetry in a way to portray deep images of space and geography. Cartography, as an academic field that incorporates artistic and scientific elements, serves the dual objective of facilitating global exploration through the use of maps and providing precise representations of geographical features and locations on these maps. Strand's poem "Black Maps," published in his collection *Darker* in 1970, delves deeper into topophrenia and how a place reflects the inner fears and anxieties of individuals:

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. (*CP* 100)

As he states that "the present is always dark," Strand establishes the present moment as an unknown, unmapped space. This darkness can be linked to topophobia, a fear of not only real places, but also imagined places or mental maps that are overwhelming or disorienting. The "black maps" themselves embody the anxiety of navigating the unknown. Unlike traditional maps that provide direction, these maps only describe "their own voyage" and "emptiness." This reinforces the feeling of being lost and lacking a sense of place. It reflects the fear of never finding one's place within the vastness of the present. The maps' "slow ascent / into themselves" emphasizes their self-referential nature. They don't depict an external world but rather their own incompleteness. This furthers the idea of being trapped within a meaningless internal space, a symptom of topophobia. The final lines "your house is not marked / on any of them, / nor are your friends, / waiting for you to appear," solidify the feeling of disorientation. The speaker's usual points of reference, their home and social connections, are absent on these maps, further highlighting the isolation and lack of belonging associated with topophobia. Everywhere the speaker looks seems to be in a perpetual state of liminality in his mind. The poem's one and only point of view is the poet's eyes through which he searches for a familiar place, a home, seeing nothing but blackness, as the cosmos eludes his grasp (Al-Zubbaidi 2857). Similarly, Mahdi suggests that "The concept of a liminal situation can be applied to entire communities that are going through a crisis or overwhelmed with disorderliness" (8251). Thus, these lines suggest that the world we experience is hostile and plays a significant role in the speaker's sense of topophobia.

Robert Tally argues in his "Foreword" to *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and the Fantastic: Ecologies, Geographies, Oddities* that "By presenting a practical and meaningful image of a space that is

nevertheless completely figurative, maps essentially entertain alternative realities by which to make sense of the real-world spaces and places” (v). And he further adds that “Such versatility accounts for all the well nigh universal appeal of the maps as a tool for orienting oneself in space, for navigating routes through space, and for representing territories at a helpfully abstract level” (vi). Yet, the maps in Strand’s poems are nothing but ordinary or orienting. They are rather tools for mapping fear and the extensive sense of topophrenia felt by the speaker.

In addition to the above mentioned, Strand develops a connection to the land of birth and death and utilizes nature to highlight the topophrenia felt in those places. In the poem "Elegy for my Father," from his collection *The Story of Our Lives* (1973), Strand depicts the setting of his father’s death in Canada's enclosed bay Bedford Basin. It is well-known that harbors are frequented by gull birds. For his own solace in grief, Strand turns to nature, specifically clouds, birds, and animals. Clouds and storms are terrifying, buildings are destroyed, and gulls are observing. It is a turbulent period in this place. The loss of his father has left him with a disturbed mind. A source of boundless energy and passion for Strand throughout his life, Strand's father suddenly goes pale and lifeless. Like leaves that have withered in the winter, his father wilts (Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Hameedawi 5). The topophrenia and the feelings felt there are brought to light by this once joyful setting that has become a somber and terrifying one:

Clouds came down

And burried the buildings along the water,

And the water was silent.

The gulls stared.

The moon poised on the hill's white shoulder was there

The wind on Bedford Basin was there.

The pale green light of winter was there. (CP 135)

The poem makes reference to particular elements such as the "Bedford Basin," "the hill's white shoulder," and the "pale green light of winter." The emphasis on specific features implies a level of knowledge with the geographical area. The speaker is evidently cognizant of the place. The deliberate emphasis on the moon, wind, and pale light serves to highlight distinct elements within the surrounding landscape. This emphasis may be an effort to anchor oneself in the familiar, despite the disturbing nature of the situation. The depiction of clouds enveloping buildings is an implausible occurrence, suggesting a distorted interpretation and a possible apprehension over the environment being overpowering or menacing. This interruption may indicate an increased level of worry or a feeling of unease within the seemingly familiar environment. In addition, the gulls remained motionless, devoid of their typical noises or responses. The observed detachment could potentially indicate a feeling of impotence or anxiety when confronted with the disquieting shift of the familiar environment. Consequently, it appears that this well-known place is undergoing a transformation, becoming unfamiliar, otherworldly, and possibly menacing as a result of the emerging sentiments of grief and bereavement that are linked to it.

In another poem titled "The Beach Hotel" and published in *Blizzard of One* (1998), Strand describes what is supposed to be a place of joy and happiness but turned into a gloomy place that resembles a graveyard. The speaker opens the poem by mentioning that the ship has sailed without them (the speaker and the listener), which left them stranded on an empty beach for what seems to be an eternity:

Oh, look, the ship is sailing without us! And the wind
Is from the east, and the next ship leaves in a year.

Let's go back to the beach hotel where the rain never stops,
Where the garden, green and shadow-filled, says, in the rarest
Of whispers, "Beware of encroachment." We can stroll, can visit
The dead decked out in their ashen pajamas, and after a tour
Of the birches, can lie on the rumpled bed, watching
The ancient moonlight creep across the floor. The windowpanes
Will shake, and waves of darkness, cold, uncalled for, grim,
Will cover us. (*CP* 331)

The speaker describes the garden as being green and shadow-filled, which suggests that even the coziest places can become topophrenic due to the speaker's inner psyche and its projection onto its surroundings. The style of the poem, which is narrative and running without breaks, reflects the dark mood and the gloomy feelings associated with the hotel where apparently someone else has been staying there and died while waiting for another ship to come. And it seems that a similar fate is awaiting the speaker of the poem as he waits hopelessly for another ship to come.

The garden, a place that brings joy and life, is "shadow-filled," suggesting a gloomy and dark mood. Adding to this, Strand personifies the garden by making it "whisper," which adds a heavy sense of fear and apprehensiveness. Strand vividly describes what is lost so as to feel to feel its absence more acutely, and this absence acts as a magnifier of fear when it is combined with such dark and abandoned places. In other words, absence brings out the topophrenia felt by the speaker and blinds him to the beauty or familiarity of place and further transfers it to the most foreboding setting.

Strand's places are haunted by ghosts, not only of the past, but of imagined and abandoned lives. Thus, this beach hotel holds the memories of past lives and future ones. Strand's place in this poem, as in other poems, is so paradoxical that it carries both familiar and

haunting atmospheres that cause a blend of feelings in the speaker, cultivating in an uneasy sense of fear.

In conclusion, the incorporation of place in Mark Strand's poetry is a multifaceted and indispensable component of his literary oeuvre. The poet's adeptness is apparent in his ability to infuse physical environments with deep emotional impact, to blur the distinction between actuality and fantasy, and to explore themes of displacement and memory. The poet uses place as a means to delve into the human condition, providing readers with a comprehensive and introspective examination of the psyche and its most profound concerns, including those pertaining to place and the physical environment. The poet's lines create otherworldly settings that merge the limits between reality and imagination, providing a space for deep self-reflection and contemplation. Strand's poetry offers a profound examination of the intricate interplay between reality and perception within contemporary society. It centers on the simulated and topophrenic dimensions of human existence, as well as the impact of memory in the construction of simulacra. It encourages readers to thoroughly analyze the authenticity of their experiences and the fundamental nature of the environment in which they reside.

The poems of Strand often delve into themes of displacement, existential ambiguity, and a sense of discomfort over the human condition. Despite not explicitly depicting traditional dystopian environments or adhering to the conventional dystopian genre, his work explores an emotional and psychological manifestation of dystopia and create views humanity and its future with alarm (Alsaedi 10). Furthermore, it explores the themes and emotions that are frequently associated with dystopian narratives. Strand's literary contributions inspire readers to engage in contemplation regarding the complexities and uncertainties inherent in the human condition, as well as the

potential unease that may arise when faced with an ever-changing and often bewildering milieu. A considerable proportion of his poetic works convey a deep-seated emotional or psychological distress, reflecting a feeling of displacement and unease. This emotional dystopia often arises as a result of the contrast between one's internal identity and the external world. The poet's works frequently portray individuals grappling with sensations of seclusion, estrangement, or even being engulfed in their own musings and sentiments.

Moreover, Strand's poetry showcases atypical and unsettling imagery. The utilization of unusual and often unsettling visuals serves to heighten the ambiance of dystopian society. The poet's works create an environment that is both familiar and foreign, causing the distinction between reality and imagination to become blurred, leading to a feeling of uncertainty and unease. Strand's poetry is profoundly shaped by the notions of place and spatiality. The poet's literary compositions commonly explore the intricate relationship between individuals and their surroundings, encompassing both tangible and fictional realms. These works often evoke a sense of ambiance, detachment, and introspection. Spatial interactions and space are more than just a background for events, a blank slate waiting to be filled with acts or movements, or something to be regarded as what Michael Foucault describes as "the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (Foucault 70). In addition, Henri Lefebvre made it obvious in *The Production of Space* that space is both a product and a productive entity; in fact, it is space that produces humans. In Strand's poetry, the presence of space elicits emotions of fear and darkness that are linked to apprehension and desolation.

In his famous lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault explains what space is by differentiating between the internal spaces of our bodies and the exterior spaces that surround us, such as our lives, the passage of time,

and our historical background. His main point is that the place that causes us distress is quite varied and diversified in nature as he says that "This space that gnaws and claws at us is a heterogenous space" (Foucault 23). The expression "the space that gnaws and claws at us" implies a feeling of uneasiness, discomfort, or psychological anguish provoked by a particular place or area. The idea proposes that there may be a place that causes people to experience negative emotions or inner turmoil. In contrast to popular belief, space does not merely exist; it actively impacts people's emotions and minds. As a result, the context determines the exact use of this expression. Because of this, it might refer to real-life settings, such a scary or desolate area, as exemplified in "The Tunnel", or it can denote a psychological or emotional state, where the "space" is symbolic and signifies a mental or emotional state that distresses an individual, as illustrated in "Keeping Things Whole."

Ultimately, the poetry of Mark Strand skillfully combines landscapes, places, and the complexities of the topophrenic experience, transforming these components from being only backdrops to active participants in the poetic narrative. Strand's subtle portrayal of landscapes serves as a mirror to the inner turmoil, existential reflections, and fleeting nature of human existence. Strand not only depicts the physical world vividly and even hauntingly, but he also explores the depths of the human psyche, emphasizing the close relationship between the outside world and inner feelings, all in light of topophrenia and mapping fear. Furthermore, this complex relationship emphasizes the significance of place in comprehending the self. Through the relationship between place and identity, Strand's poetry enables us to consider our own ties to the places and landscapes we visit, awakening a new sense of place and deepening our understanding of the material and spiritual aspects of contemporary poetry.

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