

THE LUCKY FORM OF TRUTH: MARK STRAND READS EDWARD HOPPER'S PAINTINGS

LA AFORTUNADA FORMA DE LA VERDAD: MARK STRAND LEE LAS PINTURAS DE EDWARD HOPPER

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Abstract

This article explores poet Mark Strand's facet as an art critic and, more specifically, the way in which the pictorial universe of American painter Edward Hopper influenced his own poetry, both thematically and stylistically. Reading Hopper's well-known oil on canvas *House by the Railroad* (1925) in a *New York Times* article entitled "Crossing the Tracks to Hopper's World," published on 17 October 1971, Strand dwells on "Hopper's fascination with *passage*" (340). Years later, he would expand his critical exegesis of *House by the Railroad* and other canvasses by the American painter in a book-length essay titled *Hopper* (1994) in ways that are expressive of his own poetics. Both Strand and Hopper look at the world with an inquisitive gaze and capture moments in time with utter clarity to show that the self is a mystery and humans are transients yearning for a moment of revelation, a momentary stay against confusion.

Keywords: Mark Strand, Edward Hopper, self, matter, non-human world, nothingness.

Resumen

El presente artículo indaga en la faceta del poeta Mark Strand como crítico de arte y, más concretamente, el modo como el universo pictórico del pintor

norteamericano Edward Hopper influyó en su poesía, tanto temática como estilísticamente. Leyendo el conocido óleo de Hopper *Casa junto a las vías* (1925) en un artículo del *New York Times* titulado “Crossing the Tracks to Hopper’s World”, publicado el 17 de octubre de 1971, Strand medita sobre “la fascinación de Hopper por el *paso*” (340). Años después, ampliaría su exégesis crítica de *Casa junto a las vías* y otros lienzos del pintor norteamericano en el libro titulado *Hopper* (1994) en unos términos que evocan su propia poética. Strand y Hopper contemplan el mundo con una mirada inquisitiva y atrapan momentos con absoluta claridad para demostrar que el *yo* es un misterio y que los seres humanos somos criaturas efímeras que anhelan un momento de revelación, una fugaz protección ante la confusión.

Palabras clave: Mark Strand, Edward Hopper, ser, materia, mundo no humano, nada.

1. *Ut pictura poesis*

A prolific poet, translator, anthologist, and essayist, Mark Strand (1934-2014) is, according to Harold Bloom, one of the most revered American poets of the second half of the twentieth century. In Bloom’s view, his contribution to American poetry has been vast: “it is as a poet that he is most influential, attacking throughout his poetry the question of the self and its divisions and tensions, and the place of the poet and poetry in the contemporary world” (16). Strand’s poetry collections comprise well over a dozen titles: *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (1964), *Reasons for Moving* (1968), *Darker* (1970), *The Story of Our Lives* (1973), *The Late Hour* (1978), *Selected Poems* (1980), *The Continuous Life* (1990), *Dark Harbor* (1993), *Blizzard of One* (1998), *89 Clouds* (1999), *Chicken, Shadow, Moon & More* (2000), *Man and Camel* (2006), *New Selected Poems* (2009), *Almost Invisible* (2012), and *Collected Poems* (2014). His main prose works include *The Sargentville Notebook* (1973), *The Monument* (1978), the short story collection *Mr. and Mrs. Baby* (1985), the collected essays on literature entitled *The Weather of Words: Poetic Invention* (2000), as well three art books entitled *Art of the Real* (1983), *William Bailey* (1987) and *Hopper* (1994, 2001). Over the years, Strand also produced translations from the Spanish of García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, and Octavio Paz, from the Portuguese of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and from the Latin of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, among others.

This article explores Strand’s facet as an art critic and, more specifically, how the pictorial universe of American painter Edward Hopper (1880-

1967) influenced his own poetry, both thematically and stylistically. Strand does not overtly acknowledge Hopper's influence in his poetry, but it is no surprise that he should have turned to him rather than to any other painter for inspiration. As Strand explains in his introduction to *Hopper*, the world depicted by the American painter is similar to the one he saw as a child in the 1940s. As suggested by Laima Kardokas, Strand "recognizes the painter to be his aesthetic doppelgänger or 'double'" (120), and the basis for the poet's fascination with painter is "the recognition of the uncanny" or the "twilight zone of experience" (Kardokas 120). Dwelling on "the ekphrastic relationship" (113) and "creative symbiosis" (117) between Strand and Hopper, Kardokas has noted that "[b]oth artists make use of a highly similar iconography" and that "their work engenders a feeling of stillness caught in an artificially constructed space; both create an experience of personal reality difficult to describe or represent" (111). Most importantly, both artists display a special affinity for "the evocation of the *unheimlich* or uncanniness" (Kardokas 112), as they turn to familiar objects and places and transform them "from the comfortably familiar into the strangely unfamiliar" (112). The result is "an art that creates the experience of a personal inner reality of the Sublime" (Kardokas 119) and that "attempts to make a hidden dimension of existence tangible" (120). In this regard, "calling up quotidian images that suggest the normalcy of every life" (Kardokas 123), Strand "succeeds in subverting their familiarity into alienation" (123) through the deployment of "recurring images of the psyche" and "by storytelling that refuses to adhere to the tradition of beginning, middle, and end, where characters can never be identified or counted on, and time refuses to move linearly" (Kardokas 124).

A painter himself by training, Strand could not but turn to Hopper's captivating canvases to better understand his own artistic agenda and his vocation as a poet. Reading Hopper's well-known oil on canvas *House by the Railroad* (1925) in an early *New York Times* article entitled "Crossing the Tracks to Hopper's World," published on 17 October 1971, Strand dwells on "Hopper's fascination with *passage*" (340) in words that are expressive of his own poetics and the concerns of a lifetime devoted to poetry. *Tempus fugit*: the tracks stand for the passage of time, for the ephemerality of human existence. The poet writes thus: "while looking at his [Hopper's] work, we are made to feel like transients, momentary visitors to a scene that will endure without us and that suffers our presence with aggressive reticence" ("Crossing the Tracks" 340-41). The empty house on the other side of the tracks ultimately speaks of time and mortality: "When we look at his paintings we are made

to feel, more than we care to, like time's creatures. [...] Hopper's ability to use space convincingly as a metaphor for time is extraordinary" (341), claims Strand. And yet Hopper's (and Strand's) message is not nihilist. Both artists celebrate life—the persistence and flourishing of life despite the absence of the human. Where Hopper evokes the sense of human absence through geometrical figures strategically placed on the canvas with utmost dexterity in paintings like *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963), Strand resorts to common words, composes lines devoid of ornamentation, marked by simple repetition and austerity, to convey the same message. As he claimed in a *Paris Review* interview published in the late 1970s, he was writing in “a new international style that has a lot to do with plainness of fiction, a certain reliance on surrealist techniques, and a strong narrative element” (quoted in Salter, 206). Disdainful of artifice and superfluous ornament, he makes use of a limited lexical repertoire of elemental words (stone, air, trees, sky, stone, nothing) that are repeated time and again in his poems.

The evocation of presence and absence out of which life itself is woven is a pervasive theme addressed by Strand in his own poems. Thus, “Keeping Things Whole,” his most well-known and anthologised poem, published in his first book, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (1964), captures with great mastery this sense of absence (i.e., the feeling of a world stripped of the self) and constitutes a magnificent gloss on Hopper's paintings *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963). The poem consists of three short stanzas that interrogate the nature of the self with a language that is transparent to the point of dissolution. The poetic persona perceives itself as an absence: “In a field / I am the absence / of field” (*Reasons for Moving* 40). Moving in space is tantamount to parting the air only to let it claim its own territory back. The atoms of the walking body make room for themselves in the air, but then air occupies the very same space again:

When I walk
I part the air
and always the air
moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been. (40)

The moment of revelation comes at the end of the poem, where the poetic voice observes that everyone has their reasons for moving. “I move / to keep things whole” (40), it confesses, as if moving in space were of the essence to

keep a cosmic equilibrium. Oftentimes, in Strand's poetics the self becomes a blank space, a void, an *other*, a vortex where both time and space converge into a point of maximum intensity. This is just one instance of the ways in which both artists—the poet and the painter—resemble each other in their pursuit of fleeting moments of epiphany. In what follows, this paper seeks to elucidate the aesthetic affinities that bring the painter and the poet together. It argues that that “two imperatives—the one that urges us to continue and the other that compels us to stay—creat[ing] a tension that is constant in Hopper's work” (*Hopper* 3), which Strand himself identifies in Hopper's paintings, are also discernible in his poetry. The mesmerising effect his poems have on readers often resides in this conflict. It is their task “to discover both a place to go and a reason to remain” (Childs 131).

2. Two Rhyming Sensibilities

In an opening statement to the Conference on Poetry and Philosophy held at the University of Warwick on 26 October 2007, Canadian poet Robert Bringhurst thinks deeply about the nature of poetry in words that have the texture of transcendence. He thinks that *poetry* is “a word with several related senses” and “a name for a characteristic or condition of reality” (198). Most importantly, he believes that poetry is “the lucky form of reality, not just the lucky form of language—in the same way that music is the lucky form of truth, not just the lucky form of sound” (198). Not only is poetry the name of an aspect of reality, but also “the name of a corresponding kind of linguistic and intellectual behaviour” (199) whereby poets compose poems, both in speaking and in writing. Poetry is thus a form of craftsmanship. Poets (from the Greek verb *ποιέω*, meaning ‘to make’ or ‘to do’) make poems out of words to respond to something in reality that is not easily captured. To Bringhurst's mind, this happens “because mind and language are trying to answer to the poetry of the real” (199). In this regard, French philosopher Alain Badiou (1999) has convincingly argued that philosophy, science, art, and politics are indeed forms of producing new truths. Poetry is no exception. If poetry is thus an attribute or property of what-is, then painting, like philosophy or music, might also be a way of responding to the *poetry of the real*. Drawing on Bringhurst's analogy, it could be argued that painting may well be the lucky form of truth, not just the lucky form of lines, textures and colour. Painting also seeks to respond to the poetry of the real in the best way it can. It is probably not a happy coincidence that the first of the three books Strand ever devoted to art criticism was precisely entitled *Art of the Real* (1983). The

other books were *William Bailey* (1987) and *Hopper* (1994, 2001), the latter of which shows Strand reading the American painter's oeuvre, or, to honour accuracy, a selection of 30 of his most well-known paintings. Reading a painting might be not very different from reading a poem. Both painting and poetry are forms of communication and vessels of meaning that capture and preserve precious moments of illumination for posterity. In other words, both paintings and poems are inexhaustible artefacts made by the human hand and imagination that seek to persist in time for coming generations.

Edward Hopper is the best-known American realist painter of the inter-war period. Though he agreed he was a realist, he said that he was "not a realist who imitates nature" (Goodrich 161), but rather an artist "interested primarily in the vast field of experience and sensation which neither literature nor a purely plastic art deals with" (Goodrich 163). His work is intensely private and is pervaded by a strong sense of solitude and psychological introspection, crucial themes in his paintings. In "Hopper's Polluted Silence," a perceptive essay published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1995, the novelist John Updike described his best canvases as "calm, silent, stoic, luminous, classic" (np). After a long apprenticeship period in New York and a formative journey to Paris in 1906, where he studied works by European artists at first hand, educating himself by visiting museums and exhibitions, from 1910 onwards Hopper started earning a living as an illustrator, producing prints and watercolours that sold well. He settled in Greenwich Village, which was to be his base for the rest of his life, though he spent his summers painting in rural New England, in Gloucester and Cape Anne, and in Ogunquit and Monhegan Island. In 1923, at 42, he married Josephine Nivison, a former fellow student and a painter herself, who modelled for all the female figures in his paintings. Success, popularity, and widespread recognition would come two years later, for 1925 was a real *annus mirabilis* in his career. Hopper painted what is now generally acknowledged to be his first fully mature picture, *House by the Railroad*, which incidentally became the first painting by any artist to be acquired for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (Lucie-Smith and Levin np). With its deliberate, disciplined sparseness and simplicity, it is typical of the paintings he was to produce in subsequent years. The canvas shows a solitary 19th-century Second Empire-style house, standing starkly alone against the railway tracks, and it evokes the relentless passage of time and the loneliness of travel. Though realist in style, Hopper's paintings often make use of covert symbolism. The tracks are thus a synecdoche standing for the train

as a symbol of speed and modernity, whereas the Victorian house appears to nostalgically evoke a paradise of communal life closer to the rhythms of the seasons and the natural world now lost under the pressure of modern life.

In his maturity as a painter in the 1930s and 1940s, in the inter-war period, Hopper excelled in landscape painting. At this point, he turned to the geographies of his native America for inspiration. Prototypically, his canvases show natural landscapes and seascapes expressive of a world untainted by human presence, or cityscapes that convey the loneliness, vacuity, and stagnation of town life in the first half of the twentieth century. Hopper is more an urban painter than a painter of landscapes. Quite often “to look at a Hopper is often to be participating in a portrait of aloneness” (Saulter 203) of individuals drifting in urban settings typical of big cities. Thus, alongside paintings of lighthouses or harsh New England landscapes, there are cityscapes of New York, showing not only deserted streets at night, hotels, motels, trains and highways, but also the public and semi-public places where people gathered to combat loneliness: restaurants, cafés, theatres, cinemas and offices. Fascinated as he was by space, motion and the new possibilities offered by travel and the car, his canvasses appear to offer a frozen moment, a glimpse of life as if viewed in passing from a moving elevated train or nearby street corner. Most importantly, human figures in Hopper's paintings appear to be terribly solitary, non-communicating beings, adrift amid the anonymity and boredom of big metropolises. He thus captured the starkness and vastness of America, as well as the sense of human hopelessness and disillusion that swept across America following the Great Depression in the 1930s. A superb colorist, he used different hues and geometric shapes to structure his landscapes, buildings, and interiors with great dexterity. In his own words, his artistic ideal was to paint “with such simple honesty and effacement of the mechanics of art as to give almost the shock of reality itself” (Doherty 78).

Strand's fascination with Hopper's pictorial universe may well be accounted for by several reasons. First, Strand had an academic training in this art form. He studied at Antioch College, where he took a BA, but he also received a BFA from Yale, where he studied painting under Josef Albers, and an MA at the University of Iowa, where he worked closely with poet Donald Justice. Ever since, the art of painting held endless fascinations for him, till the very end of his life, excelling in the collage technique. Second, there seem to be clear aesthetic and stylistic affinities between Strand and Hopper. As Jay Parini lucidly observes, “Strand's poetry is known for a clarity reminiscent of

the paintings of Edward Hopper, and for a deeply inward sense of language” (473). Both strive after clarity in their own manner. As a result, there might be a painterly dimension to Strand’s poems and a poetic dimension to Hopper’s paintings. And third, there are striking thematic parallelisms between Strand’s poems and Hopper’s paintings. Time and again, they offer images of the world or bites of reality devoid of human presence, with no human figures in them. A world without *us*, seemingly uncontaminated or untouched by our species, is what Hopper is best at capturing through his deft brush stroke. The focus is first and foremost on place and space: space as a fundamental axis containing life and experience alongside time; place as domesticated space or space made familiar by human standards, as Tuan and Schoff contend in *Two Essays on a Sense of Place* (1988). But the focus is also on time and what it does to the human and nonhuman world, as exemplified by the motions of daylight across the surfaces of the objects populating the world. As argued by Jane Bennet, matter is not “raw, brute, or inert” (vii), but vibrant and alive instead, as things have the capacity “to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Far from being inert, the objects painted by Hopper gesture to the thing-power that is pervasive on earth and betray a world of communicative entities that are part of a vast material-semiotic web.

3. Space as a Metaphor for Time

It is precisely geometry and light, motion and stasis, that Strand dwells on in his lucid reading of Hopper’s paintings in his book-length essay entitled *Hopper* (1994), where he performs a kind of incisive pictorial hermeneutics and describes Hopper’s paintings as “short isolated moments of figuration” (23). As already pointed out, Strand’s interest in Hopper might be traced back to as early as October 1971, when he published “Crossing the Tracks to Hopper’s World.” In the spring of 1985, he would publish yet another article titled “Hopper: The Loneliness Factor,” where the poet argued that loneliness is less a result of “narrative elements” (257) than of “certain repeated structural motifs” (257) associated not with the human figures represented in his works, but with “certain geometrical imperatives having to do with missing or sealed-off vanishing points” (257). In 1994, he would further elaborate on his discussion of *House by the Railroad* in *Hopper* in terms that denote a rare intellectual alertness to every single detail in this particular canvas, as well as to “the geometric rhetoric of the paintings” (Childs 131). The house “seems out of place yet self-possessed, even

dignified, a survivor" (*Hopper* 16) from a time now gone, yet it resists all attempts at reductive interpretation: "It stands in the sun but is inaccessible. Its hiddenness is illuminated but not revealed" (16). Furthermore, the house is "emblematic of a kind of separateness [...] which, because of its arresting surface, is unassailable" (Childs 135). Strand is intent on underlining the impenetrability of the house, even if it is readily accessible to the naked eye in the sunlight that illuminates it. Time and again, he highlights "its posture of denial" (16) and its "harsh air of refusal" (17), the fact that the house is simply "beyond us" (16), as if erected in a province of no-time. The poet-as-critic writes thus on the elegance and mystery surrounding the house:

Standing apart, a relic of another time, the house is a piece of doomed architecture, a place with a history we cannot know. It has been passed by, and the grandeur of its containment doubles as an image of refusal. We cannot tell if it is inhabited or not. [...] It defines, with the simplest, most straightforward means, an attitude of resistance, of hierarchical disregard, and at the same time a dignified submission to the inevitable. (*Hopper* 17)

House by the Railroad is a powerful elegy as well as a profound meditation on what vanishes for good and on what persists despite the passage of time, on the transitory and on the timeless, and on space as inhabited by humans. It is a canvas that ultimately pays homage to the persistence of the nonhuman world despite changes in the outward appearances of communal life, often brought about by technological progress. Let us remember that in the 1920s the number of cars sold in the US tripled and the face of rural America was dramatically metamorphosed, which resulted in a change in humans' perception of space. Looking at landscapes from within vehicles gave people a new perspective on the fast-vanishing landscapes around them. In Hopper's painting, the solitary and isolated image of the house by the railroad evokes the inexorable development of technology (humans' instrumental manipulation of and dominion over the world) and the sudden intromission of the human into a hitherto sylvan, unperturbed landscape in the green world. In Strand's exegesis of the painting, he refuses to make it into a symbol of the loneliness and alienation that human progress brings about, though. The contrast is intriguing, to say the least. On the one hand, there is an old, self-contained and dignified house, frozen for posterity by Hopper's art, a treasure-house of stories that it is impossible for spectators to decipher or reconstruct now, and, on the other hand, there is the railroad, pointing to something

beyond the canvas itself—i.e., modernity, city life, the promise of motion and travel. Nevertheless, Strand's exegesis is purely formal and descriptive of its "geometric properties" (16); it discards any kind of sentimentalism. The poet's focus is thus on the characteristic isosceles trapezoid at the core of the canvas formed by the tracks and the cornice of the house, on the contrast between the verticality of the house and the horizontality of the railroad, and on the effects of the morning daylight travelling across the façade, as if to enhance the vitality intrinsic to a world of vibrant matter where entities form creative assemblages. The house resists "the temporal pull of light or the pull of progress or our own continuousness" (17) and its dignity is further enhanced by the symmetry of doors and windows, as well as Hopper's masterful use of colour.

Point of view is also eloquent in *House by the Railroad*. Spectators look at the house from the other side of the railroad, from a lower position in relation to that of the house location. The house stands unperturbed and imperturbable in the present, surrounded by a halo of calm and quiet, serenity and resistance to change and to the velocity of modern life as represented by the railroad. It somehow harmonises both domestic and sylvan spaces. Of this painting Strand wrote in 1971 that "Hopper's ability to use space convincingly as a metaphor for time is extraordinary" ("Crossing the Tracks" 341). Humans are vulnerable, transitory, mortal beings, but life as such will go on in spite of our absence. As Strand notes, Hopper manages to convey this powerful message by means of a dexterous arrangement of purely formal elements on the canvas. In "A Poet's Alphabet," an essay included in *The Weather of Words*, Strand dwells on time and writes yet another perfect gloss on Hopper's painting:

P is for the passage of time. It is also for the secret passage that leads out of time into the stillness of what has not yet been named into being, the passage that leads to the birthplace of poems. It is for the passage that is the route of my passing, my having been, and for the passage of places into history, and through history into forgottenness. (12)

Presence and absence are two of the fundamental threads woven into Strand's poetic universe, if only because humans are temporal creatures, earthly beings whose lives unfold and come into full bloom in time. Like in Hopper's paintings, there are houses in Strand's poetry, observed as if from the distance, described with a certain degree of emotional detachment and

objectivity. Such is the case of “The Tunnel,” a poem from *Reasons for Moving* (1968), which opens thus:

A man has been standing
in front of my house
for days. I peek at him
from the living room
window and at night,
unable to sleep,
I shine my flashlight
down on the lawn.
He is always there. (*Reasons for Moving* 31)

The image offered by the poem is disturbing, as subsequent stanzas reveal that the poetic persona is being watched by a sort of *doppelgänger*. Having made up his mind to “dig a tunnel / to a neighbouring yard” (31) with pick and shovel, the lyrical subject comes out in front of a house that happens to be his own house. Standing there, exhausted after the physical strain of tunnel digging and hoping someone might come to his rescue, he experiences a sense of estrangement and the sudden revelation that he is being observed. Strand's poems often convey the sense that there is no end to understanding one's own self, which is conceived of as an unassailable enigma:

I feel I'm being watched
and sometimes I hear
a man's voice,
but nothing is done
and I have been waiting for days. (32)

The interplay of presence and absence as the recurrent pattern on the carpet of human existence is also discernible in “The Guardian,” a poem from *Darker* where the lyrical subject dwells on vanishing things with nostalgia: “The sun setting. The lawns on fire. / The lost day, the lost light. / Why do I love what fades?” (*Reasons for Moving* 73). What fades has been, but is no more. Yet mourning the departure of the dying day, the lyrical subject will not give up on his determination to bear witness to the world and preserve a record of the last rays of sunlight on the lawns. By the end of the poem, the poetic persona embraces its own absence as an inextricable part of its own identity:

You who left, who were leaving,
what dark rooms do you inhabit?
Guardian of my death,
preserve my absence. I am alive. (73)

“Snowfall,” a poem from *The Late Hour*, offers these eloquent lines enacting space as a metaphor for time:

Watching snow cover the ground, cover itself,
cover everything that is not you, you see
it is the downward drift of light
upon the sound of air sweeping away the air,
it is the fall of moments into moments, the burial
of sleep, the down of winter, the negative of night. (*The Story of Our Lives* 152)

According to creativity theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “the poet’s responsibility to be a witness, a recorder of experience, is part of the broader responsibility we all have for keeping the universe ordered through our consciousness” (231). In words reminiscent of Rilke’s awareness of the transience of human existence, Strand writes that we are a cosmic accident, which precisely fuels creative work and our compulsion to capture nuances of reality the best way we can: “It’s such a lucky accident, having been born, that we’re almost obliged to pay attention” (Csikszentmihalyi 231), the poet admits in his interview with Csikszentmihalyi. Most importantly, he recognises that we are “the only part of the universe that’s self-conscious” (Csikszentmihalyi 231) and that there is a deep sense of kinship beneath the vibrant matter of the more-than-human world as envisioned by Karen Barad in her landmark *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: “we’re made of the same stuff that stars are made of, or that floats around in space. [...] Most of our experience is that of being a witness. We see and hear and smell other things. I think being alive is responding” (Csikszentmihalyi 231). Watching snow fall and cover everything that is not the self (“everything that is not you”)—and yet a prolongation of the self into the more-than-human world—, the lyrical subject in “Snow” finds out that falling snow, traversing space, is another apt metaphor for the passage of time, “the fall of moments into moments” (*The Story of Our Lives* 152). Reality is in a state of permanent flux that denotes time inexorably passing by; the poet’s, like the painter’s, self-imposed mission and vocation is to respond and bear witness to this

boundless metamorphosis, which is to say to the more-than-human world changing from one second to the next. Like in some of Hopper's paintings, "an instant has been frozen" (*Hopper* 63), assuming not "the monumental shape of a geometrical figure" (*Hopper* 63), but that of a poem titled "Snow." As Saulter claims, in Strand's view "the artist or the writer looks out to the world, to the "plain obdurate existence" of subjects out there in the world, to find a way to make it coincide with his imagination. And yet, once the art object—the painting or the poem—has been made from the subject, that objects is entirely self-enclosed" (205). A poem or a painting becomes an inexhaustible artefact.

4. Light and Geometry in Hopper's Interiors

Light and geometry are central to the whole conception beneath Hopper's paintings of landscapes and outdoor spaces. But Hopper's canvases also offer images of domesticity and interiors—public, semiprivate or private spaces such as rooms in houses or hotels, cafés and restaurants, cinemas and bars. In his later work these rooms are often devoid of human presence, which is a deliberate decision. All one gets to see is "interiors without people, walls blazoned with chunks of sunlight" (*Hopper* 63), space defined by light and an interplay between interior and exterior space, as if to suggest that there is bound to be some form of harmony between human-made rooms and the natural world as represented by the sea and sunlight. *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) are a case in point. They are very similar, yet the former shows an austerity which is "much more congenial" (*Hopper* 63) than that of the latter. This is an excerpt from Strand's reading of Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea*, a canvas that shows sunlight, sky and sea literally flooding two rooms with a breathtaking view:

The water seems to come right up to the door, as if there were no middle ground or shore, as if, in fact, it had been stolen from Magritte. It is a view of nature, unembellished and extreme. On the left side of the painting is a narrow, crowded view of nature's opposite—a room furnished with a couch or chair, a bureau, and a painting—the selected accoutrements of domestic life. (*Hopper* 63)

Rooms by the Sea is a moving celebration of the natural world. In other Hoppers, nature is conceptualised as being the opposite of the order and measure embodied by culture and civilisation. Nature in such paintings as *Cape Cod Evening* (1939) or *Gas* (1940) is a disquieting, almost hostile

presence. By contrast, in *Rooms by the Sea* nature is evoked by the presence of a dark blue sea that reaches up to the very door threshold and by the benign, warm sunlight. The intensity of the sunlight illuminating the canvas is the kind of diaphanous, calming, and balsamic light one might experience at midday or in mid-morning. As Strand observes, the ubiquitous isosceles trapezoid so characteristic of Hopper's paintings is present twice in this work: there is a striking parallelism between the trapezoid drawn by sunlight in the room in the foreground and the one in the background room. The room in the background stands for a human-made world or civilisation. What is moving about the painting as a whole is that it appears to affirm with rotundity that there is bound to be some form of harmony between nature and civilisation, that the world is one and the same despite human-made distinctions. Hence the intensity of the colours used by Hopper, the superb transition from the dark blue sea, through the white sunlight on the wall and yellow on the entrance floor, to the interior room in the background, displaying complementary colours (red sofa and green floor). Outside of the rooms, the blue sky is a pale echo of the dark blue sea. The sky is clear, with no signs of birds, unperturbed by the flight of seagulls or albatrosses. The overall impression is one of peace and quiet, while the open window in the adjoining room invites the spectator to go outdoors and enjoy the pleasure of being alive amid so much exuberance and beauty. There are no people in this painting, but the canvas is tremendously human in that it highlights this invitation to enjoy the pleasures of the natural world. It ultimately conveys the sense of being alive in a physical world, a part of the larger mesh of things.

Painted 12 years later, *Sun in an Empty Room* is quite a different painting. This is an excerpt from Strand's penetrating reading of Hopper's work:

[T]here is nothing calming about the light. It comes in a window and falls twice in the same room—on a wall close to the window and on a lightly recessed wall. That is all the action there is. [...] The light strikes two places at once, and we feel its terminal character instead of anything that hints of continuation. [...] [I]t is Hopper's last great painting, *a vision of the world without us; not merely a place that excludes us, but a place emptied of us.* (Hopper 65; italics ours)

Sun in an Empty Room sees the light of day four years before Hopper's death, in the last stage of his career. It offers a view of a presumably human world with no trace of human presence at all. It is as if he had determined to embrace a posthumanist view of the world and a non-anthropocentric

conception of what-is. The elimination of furniture suggests “a shift in his focus from the manner in which we occupy or inhabit a space to a more radical questioning of the conditions or possibilities of habitation as such” (Childs 141). As Kranzfelder notes, the elimination of furniture in *Sun in an Empty Room* is expressive of the elimination of human presence; it lacks “even a trace of the requisites that would indicate human presence” (Kranzfelder 192). A sinister light coming through the open window creates a space of chiaroscuro areas which are perfectly well delineated in geometric terms. The rhythm implicit in the canvas is precisely made possible by the alternating illuminated and dark spaces within the empty room. Not much happens in this painting, except nothingness itself. The projection of sunlight across the interior of the room follows its course unimpeded except for the edge of the protruding wall and strikes two places in this dehumanised interior. Strand’s reading of this painting highlights the geometric figures that shape the canvas. Geometry in Hopper’s hands has the solidity of a triple series of parallelograms: the two chunks of sunlight on the room wall and the window itself through which the sunlight comes in from the outside. In the interior of the room the light leads to nowhere, just to an empty corner devoid of humanity. Light persists, the implicit message appears to emphasise, while human life is transient and ephemeral. This is a stark *vision of the world without us, a place emptied of us*. The tree boughs we get a glimpse of through the window might hide the singing of songbirds, but their very appearance looks sinister. The final impression is one of utter nakedness, silence, emptiness, nothingness. In his essay titled “A Poet’s Alphabet,” a propos nothing, Strand writes words that might be an excellent gloss for *Sun in an Empty Room*:

N is also for nothing, which, in its all-embracing modesty, is the manageable sister of everything. Ah, nothing! About which anything can be said, and is. An absence that knows no bounds. The climax of inaction. It has been perhaps the central influence on my writing. It is the original of sleep and the end of life. (*Weather of Words* 10)

The same sense of emptiness—a vision of our life without us—is conveyed by Strand in many of his poems, where he dwells on the nothingness that the self is and on the emptiness of one’s own life. Thus, in “The Story of Our Lives,” the title poem of *The Story of Our Lives* (1973), we read these lines in the opening section:

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 black line that would bind us
or keep us apart.
The way it is, it would seem
the book of our lives is empty. (*The Story of Our Lives* 27)

Twenty-five years later, in “The Night, the Porch,” a poem from *Blizzard of One* (1998), we read lines that convey a similar message:

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. (10)

What both poems appear to have in common is that they suggest the story of our lives is written beforehand, maybe as part of a chapter in a huge book that contains the world in its entirety. The self remains a stranger to itself, a bit of living matter adrift in the world, and Strand expresses so with extreme verbal austerity, which makes the poems all the more moving for that. They compel the reader to stop and listen again, and also to move on. Waiting for a momentous event in the story of one’s life, “turning the pages / hoping for something” to happen, life passes by, and, all of a sudden, the poetic persona has intimations not of immortality, but of “the ungraspable

somewhere close by" (10), of ticking clocks, of impending death. The wind, trees and falling leaves are an apt reminder of human transience as well, such are the irresistible fascinations vanishing things still keep on holding for the poet. It takes a lifetime to start interpreting and understanding the characters the book of nature is written in, appears to imply the poetic persona: "There is no end to what we can learn" (10), about the world and about ourselves. The lines just quoted close with a sober reminder that the book of the world "was never written with us in mind" (10), which recalls Strand's hunch that we humans are a cosmic accident, even though we like to think, self-conceited as we are, that we are the centre of the universe in our deeply-ingrained anthropocentric mindset. As Saulter has observed, "[s]ubmergence and transcendence (in the first case, the dark descent into one's own unacknowledged experience, and in the second case, the illuminated ascent to what's outside one's own experience): these are Mark Strand's subjects" (195).

5. A Momentary Stay Against Confusion

Strand's fascination with Hopper lasted until the end of his life. Mary Jo Saulter, his literary executor, explains how she transcribed and typed on her laptop a handwritten draft of one of his last essays, "a review commissioned by the *New York Review of Books* of a 2013 exhibit of Edward Hopper's work" (198), about his favourite painter. "[W]ritten in pencil in a remarkably clear, somewhat large cursive" (199), the draft gave the impression that Strand "was *drawing* his ideas about Hopper's process of drawing and painting" (199). Dwelling on the difference between vision and realization in the genesis of a work of art, this is how the essay opens:

Paints and scrapes, paints and scrapes to get something right, the something that is not there at the outset but reveals itself slowly, and then completely, having travelled an arduous route during which vision and image come together, for a while, until dissatisfaction sets in, and the painting and scraping begin again. (Saulter 200)

As Saulter notes, "[w]hat the painter and poet do is discover, by sketching their subject again and again and again, the unknown content" (202). Strand turned to Hopper's paintings time and again throughout his life, "trying to pinpoint the family resemblances among the paintings that so haunted him" (Saulter 202). The "two imperatives—the one that urges us to continue and the other that compels us to stay" (*Hopper* 3) which Strand sensed in Hopper's

paintings appear to be pervasive in his work as well. The poet and the painter felt the irresistible compulsion to create, each in a different medium, and in so doing they unveiled to readers and viewers nuances of reality that go unnoticed most of the time. Both seem to embrace a posthumanist view of the world—one where the human and nonhuman are part and parcel of a symposium of the whole of vibrant entities.

In interpreting Strand's reading of Hopper's paintings, we are reading *a reading of paintings*, so we are at least twice removed from the original works, to say nothing of the act of translating the art of painting into words or of having language mediating our critical appreciation of Hopper's canvases. And yet it seems there is a discernible aesthetic core common to both Hopper's and Strand's art if we care to look and listen to their paintings and poems attentively, with open eyes and ears. Both share an apparent simplicity in style, a tendency to give themselves over to the perception of the real (but the real as seen through the looking-glass of *estrangement*), a calm geometric virtuosity, which is to be found in quotidian existence and in everyday objects. There is a timeless quality to Hopper's and Strand's work, a sense of utter calm, unperturbed tranquillity and yet of fragile equilibrium amid chaos, usually in an urban setting, that of the anonymous cityscape, or in a natural setting impinged on by the oblique presence of the human. As Robert Frost put it in "The Figure a Poem Makes," the figure Strand's poems and Hopper's paintings make constitute "a momentary stay against confusion" (vi). Frost expresses it thus:

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. (vi)

Strand's and Hopper's work is marked by a deceptive simplicity that hides a wealth of meaning and profundity of thought. Their aesthetics is of ascetic clarity and deliberate austerity—a poor man's art. Their concern is the acutely perceived real and their method consists in offering their fellow human beings a blunt statement about reality, the well-defined outline of things one is faced with upon perceiving the real. From their intimation that people live in time and space is their art born, an art that emphasises the isolation and

loneliness of humanity. A clarification of life, a little moment of epiphany, the sudden luminous detail: these are possibly Strand's and Hopper's gifts. Their poems and their paintings, firmly grounded in the physical world, are possibly yet another lucky form of truth.

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