

## Mark Strand's Conception of Poetry: A Study

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### Abstract

A comprehensive definition of poetry is either not possible or, perhaps still awaited. The nature and function of poetry clearly shows that it is hard to limit poetry in a capsule-formula or to confine it to any particular point of view. Every age has contributed something to our understanding and appreciation of poetry, but no generation has had the perfect key to unlock its magical power and its capacity to amuse or disturb us. As Marks Strand says, "The discussions of craft are at best tentative".

**Key Words:** Craft, Criticism, Nature , Poetry, Reader

Reading poetry often seems like searching for the unknown for something that lies at the heart of experience but cannot be pointed out or described without being altered or diminished' (Slow Down for Poetry).<sup>1</sup>

Defining poetry and capturing its elusive nature have kept poets, philosophers, literary critics and scholars on tenterhooks throughout the course of civilized world. Their reflections are, on the whole, declaration of individual responses. A comprehensive definition of poetry is either not possible or, perhaps still awaited. The nature and function of poetry clearly shows that it is hard to limit poetry in a capsule-formula or to confine it to any particular point of view. Every age has contributed something to our understanding and appreciation of poetry, but no generation has had the perfect key to unlock its magical power and its capacity to amuse or disturb us. As Marks Strand says, "The discussions of craft are at best tentative". If such is the fate of poets and critics, the agony of the ordinary readers could well be imagined. It must be

like groping in darkness and searching for the unknown. Plato could feel the 'divine madness' of poetry and saw no use of it in his ideal Republic because 'it feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up'. 'Setting aside the ancient or early views even the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw poets redefining poetry divergently in the light of new theories that were given in the wake of tremendous researches done in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and aesthetics'. Therefore, in the modern age, poetry has been explored and defined in terms of communication and the responses of the reader and there has been a shift of emphasis from the 'poet' to 'poem' – 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry' (Eliot). Structuralism and the post-structuralism theories of Deconstruction further enhanced the range of critical investigation in terms of the deep structures and shifting the enquiry from language to the written or printed text. With the growing complexity of the age, new experimentations, the modern nature of interdisciplinary learning, the

coming together of the world and ever-increasing cross-cultural influences, poetry today demands more of its readers than it has ever done in the past.

### Reader's Encounter with Poetry

Mark Strand believes that the reader's encounter with poetry is an altogether different and demanding experience. We read non-fiction for pursuing facts and information because we are in need of certainty and want to banish uncertainty from our lives, and hope to have some control over the world in which we have hardly any control. Contrarily, 'the context of a poem is likely to be only the poet's voice, a voice speaking to no one in particular.' What the poem sponsors is a sense of itself, not a sense of the world. 'It invents itself. Its necessity or urgency, its tone, its mixture of meaning and sound are in the poet's voice'. The only thing that is known to the readers in a poem is its language, the words the poet uses. However, even these words appear different and strange; even the most familiar will seem strange in a poem. As Strand elucidates, 'In a poem each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus and has a weight it rarely achieves in fiction'. There are, of course, exceptions in prose, concedes Strand, as we find in the writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett but it can't be said of all the fictional writings.

As a matter of fact, Strand is of the view that in this figurativeness, its rhythm, poetry endorses a state of verbal suspension. Explaining further he says, 'Poetry is a language at its most beguiling and seductive while it is, at the same time, elusive, seeking to mock one's desire for reduction, for plain and available order.'<sup>2</sup> What makes the life difficult for the reader is not just that various meanings are preferable to a single dominant meaning

but 'it may be that something beyond meaning is being communicated'. No wonder, reading poetry is like groping in darkness, 'searching for the unknown'.

The problem with poetry is that it draws us inward contributing to a sense of self-hood, and most readers expect the opposite. The readers 'want to be entertained in ways that have nothing to do with difficulty or with complex feelings. They want to escape, to be carried along by language they are familiar with – the language of conventional truths, of common assertions. Because poetry is more than anything the individual language of a poet, people are impatient with it'. This is the common mistake readers indulge in. They are bound to be disappointed if they read poetry 'for the kind of truth that passes for truth in the everyday world – whether it be the truth of gossip or of the media'. Similarly nobody should read poetry to find out concrete information as we mean by the term in this world of facts. Clarifying further Strand says, 'It is not knowledge that poetry contains, at least not as I consider knowledge; rather it is some occasion for belief, some reason for assent, some avowal of being'.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Strand thinks that not all poems are that elusive. We come across a number of poems 'that present readers with a slice of life'. In fact, such poems make a statement about life, about everyday experience telling us about the world we are familiar with. Naturally, what happens when one reads such poems is that 'they put you back in the world you know.' The reader has no difficulty as it appears to be confirming something that he already knows. Let us take for example, the following lines of Shelley:

We look before and after,  
And pine for what's not:

Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that  
tell of saddest thought.

According to Strand, such poems deal with truths that are conventional and there is a lot of positive response and head-nodding. 'They make the world seem friendlier, more comfortable because they almost always imply that here is someone else who had an experience like yours.'<sup>4</sup> Although, here again one traces a paradox because what sounds familiar in such poems 'represents only a reduction of the real world.' However, Strand neither has a liking for nor does he himself write such poems. Therefore, when Strand says something like the following, the reader feels puzzled.

A train runs over me.  
I feel sorry  
for the engineer  
who crouches down  
and whispers in my ear  
that he is innocent.

### **The Mysterious World of Poetry**

Notwithstanding the difficulties of a reader, the enchanting power of poetry cannot be denied. There are in each of us those shimmerings of the soul that we associate with or even recognize as poetry. However, even as they move us deeply, we fail to find any language to communicate it. We do not have suitable language or expression to describe the heart-rending scene of a death, the joy of a birth, the soothing breeze of the monsoon, the pleasure of a calm summer morning, the rain-awakened flowers, the infinite depth of the night sky and so on. The urge to speak or to write rises but we merely hold our breath or we sigh. However, as the reader achieves proximity with a poem, 'it seems to tell him what he knows but cannot say.' Explaining how a stage came

when his father began to enjoy his poetry, Strand felt elated when he realized the magical power of poetry. 'They told him in so many words what he was feeling. They put him in touch with himself.'<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty of a reader would be eased a little if he can perceive the focus of the poet. Explaining it Mark Strand says that a poet's focus is not so fixed on the world outside as we get in a fiction. 'It's fixed on that area where inside meets the outside, where the poet's sensibility meets the weather, meets the street, meets other people, meets what he reads. So a poet describes that point of contact, and inhabits it when he is writing – the edge of the self, the edge of the world – that shadow-land between self and reality. Sometimes the focus is tipped slightly in favour of the self, sometimes more objectively, in favour of the world. Sometimes, when the balance is tipped towards the self, strange things are said. After all, the farther you are from the world that everyone recognizes as the world, the odder it looks. Some novels do report on this liminal space, but most do not. They are not focused on 'what's out there', and the novelist erases himself to ensure the autonomy of the narrative. A poet would never erase himself because as Strand says, 'It is his voice that is the poem.' This is a brilliantly accurate explanation of the stuff that is poetry and could be of great help in holding on to the poet's voice.

According to Mark Strand, a poem exists not only in a language but also beyond it. It is perhaps 'ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working out a means of recovery.' Somewhere Strand describes poetry as 'an act of discovery.' Therefore, complete explanation of a poem is not possible. As a matter of fact, 'the degree to which a poem is explained is

precisely the degree to which it ceases being a poem' for as Strand holds, 'if nothing is left of a poem, it has become the explanation of itself and the readers of the explanation will experience only the explanation, not the poem.' What a poet can best do is to address himself to ideas and issues he himself is concerned about. However, as these issues exist at the very centre of our culture and have to do with being human and being alive, 'we still depend on it in moments of crisis and during those times when it is important that we know in so many words what we are going through.'<sup>6</sup>

### **Form or Technique of a Poem**

If such is the mysterious world of poetry, any effort to make a critical or intellectual enquiry of the craft can meet only with partial success. Thus, Strand believes that discussions of craft are precarious. Although a continuous transaction between the poet and his creation is going on, it takes place in the dark. It is difficult for the artist to describe them in procedural terms. This transaction is the sole property of the artist and cannot be transferred to or adopted by others. 'One of the reasons for this is that they are largely unknown at the time of writing and are discovered afterwards, if at all.' So, even the poet knows only afterwards what it is that he has done. Writing proves to be a means of trying to find out what the poet has to say. Quoting Jung, Strand writes in Notes on the Craft of Poetry, 'As long as we ourselves are caught up in the process of creation, we neither see nor understand; indeed we ought not to understand, for nothing is more injurious to immediate experience than cognition.' Therefore, even those aspects of the poems which achieve for the poet his greatest individuality – the apparatus of argument, image and sound, etc. cannot be said to be

clearly known to the poet. Illustrating his point further, Strand quotes Wallace Stevens, 'You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how. Your knowledge is irrational.'

Mark Strand is of the opinion that following a simple set of rules cannot guarantee the success of a poem. If it were so, 'poems would not be held in high esteem, as, of course they are.' Strand does not agree to the classification of poems into formal and non-formal. He holds that all poetry – metrical or free verse, is formal because 'it exists within limits that language itself imposes, limits also depend on individual poet's conception of 'what is or is not a poem'. Even free verse written in the last twenty or thirty years which is considered non-formal, is as formal as any other verse. Therefore, it also uses anaphoral and parallelistic structures, both as syntactically restrictive as they are rhythmically binding. Moreover, each poem has its own separate life. 'Each poem demands that I treat it differently from the rest, come to terms with it, seek out its own best beginning and ending. Further, to speak of an idea which has remained unchanged in the course of time, in the language of our time is a difficult task. Therefore, 'each poem to a certain extent speaks of itself, for its own newness, shows its ties to the conventions of the moment and its distortions of them.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

It makes us believe that it belongs to our time even though what it tells is really old. This is a form of deception that allows poetry to escape the commonplace. When the conventions of another time, which have been worked and reworked, are used again, they run the danger of becoming banal – worn out, sentimental verses that

are the stuff of greeting cards. And yet it is precisely through the conventions that we recognize poetry to be poetry. Poets pay homage to the poets who preceded them and achieve impersonality by recombining old figures and altering them slightly, by using meters, by fitting rhyme

schemes and stanzaic patterns to the syntax and ideas of contemporary speech. As Strand concludes almost like T.S Eliot, 'This is the secret life of poetry. It is always paying homage to the past extending a tradition into the present.'

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