Interview with Mark Strand

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Mark Strand is recognized as one of the premier contemporary American poets as well as an accomplished editor, translator and prose writer. The hallmarks of his style are precise language, surreal imagery, and the recurring theme of absence and negation; later collections investigate ideas of the self with pointed, often urbane wit. Named the U.S. Poet Laureate in 1990, Strand’s career has spanned nearly four decades, and he has won numerous accolades from critics and a loyal following among readers. In 1999 he was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his collection Blizzard of One.

INSCAPE: Can you tell us the difference between a poem and a prose piece and how you decide which is which?

MARK STRAND: Poems are divided into lines and stanzas, and prose is the question of sentences and paragraphs. The pressure on individual words in prose isn’t as great as it is in a poem. One reads a poem and lingers over individual words, whereas in prose one moves right along following the characters, the plot, etc. For me, writing poetry just wore me out. I just kept beating my head against the wall, and the results were never what I ever wanted them to be. It created a life of some degree of anxiety. To get up in the morning and work on something that I didn’t wholly believe in—I’d believe in it for a little while and then lose heart and finish it. Increasingly, the pleasure of writing poems diminished. Even if I thought I’d written a good poem, a month or two later I would look at it and think, “It’s just another one of my poems.” Well, what else was
it going to be? I wish it were someone else's poem sometimes. I wrote prose quickly, and it was a relief. I wrote maybe one or two drafts, and that was it. It was fun, and it was also a way of using up old, rough ideas I had for poems. I didn't worry about the line, cadence, meter, rhyme, etc. I enjoyed getting up in the morning and writing them. I didn't have high expectations. My notions of poetry were rather high and rarefied, and this isn't to say my ideas of prose were so lowly, but I felt some relief doing them. And if I thought I was writing poetry, I wouldn't have written these. You have to fool yourself sometimes into believing you're doing something else. While you're beating your dog you're saying, "Well, he's going to be a better dog afterward." That's why I have no dog.

**INSCAPE:** What is your view of the function of poetry in today's society?

**MS:** It's not going to change the world, but I believe if every head of state and every government official spent an hour a day reading poetry we'd live in a much more humane and decent world. Poetry has a humanizing influence. Poetry delivers an inner life that is articulated to the reader. People have inner lives, but they are poorly expressed and rarely known. They have no language by which to bring it out into the open. Two people deeply in love can look at each other and not have much to say except "I love you." It gets kind of boring after awhile—after the first ten or twenty years. I don't expect that from heads of state; I don't expect them to look at each other after reading a lot of poetry and say "I love you," but it
reminds us that we have inner lives. When we read poems from the past we realize that human beings have always been the way we are. We have technological advancements undreamt of a couple thousand years ago, but the way people felt then is pretty much the way people feel now. We can read those poems with pleasure because we recognize ourselves in them. Poetry helps us imagine what it's like to be human. I wish more politicians and heads of state would begin to imagine what it's like to be human. They've forgotten, and it leads to bad things. If you can't empathize, it's hard to be decent; it's hard to know what the other guy's feeling. They talk from such a distance that they don't see differences; they don't see the little things that make up a life. They see numbers; they see generalities. They deal in sound bytes and vacuous speeches; when you read them again, they don't mean anything.

**INSCAPE:** What do we need to do to best prepare ourselves to be great poets?

**MS:** You have to read. You can't be a good poet if you don't have some appreciation of poetry. People who say, "Oh, I don't want to read poetry because it'll destroy my style or my spontaneity. My innocence is golden," are never going to be poets. I think reading and patience and practice and keeping your eyes and ears open; paying attention is very important if you're going to be a poet or a writer of any kind. You have to pay attention.
INSCAPE: Do you have any patterns or rituals you go through when you write? Do you look out the window . . . ?

MS: When you live in New York there's always something going on out the window. If you look out of the window here, the mountain changes with different seasons. When I lived in Salt Lake, I wrote a lot about my surroundings. I wish I had some incredible rituals that I could sort of interest you in, but I don't have any. I just sit down and I work. If I get stuck, I open up Wallace Stevens, or somebody like that, and look for a word or something. Or I'll read a page or two of Proust.

INSCAPE: Judging by the "fire outside of the train" story, I'm sure you've received a lot of different criticism over the years. How do you decide which ones to take to heart and which ones to dismiss and write a funny poem about?

MS: I was young when I wrote that poem. I was still in my twenties and I took criticism very seriously. I wanted to get back at the guy, and I thought the best way to do it would be a poem because I didn't own a gun. But I stopped reading criticism. I don't read anything about myself. Sometimes if friends send me a review I'll read that, but I haven't read the books written about me. I just can't bear it. It doesn't seem like they're about me; it doesn't have anything to do with me. It doesn't interest me, finally. What I'm interested in is what comes out; I'm not interested in the other end. I'm very happy that people like my poems and buy my books and sometimes feel
moved to write about them, but on the other hand, I don’t want to dwell on that sphere. I think one’s life is in the bedroom, the living room, and kitchen, and amongst one’s friends, and that’s where my concerns are, ultimately.

INSCAPE: Would you categorize the way that you write some of these poems as the Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion, or are they more premeditated, where you take time to work with the parts and things?

MS: I take time and work slowly and deliberately. The spontaneous overflow of emotion is something that doesn’t happen when I’m writing poetry. It happens when I’m watching a ballgame, or eating a great meal, or something like that.

INSCAPE: You mentioned Proust and Wallace Stevens, who are your other muses?

MS: The most powerful ones are Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Tommaso Landolfi. Wordsworth was important to me at a particular time of my life. Italian poets like Leopardi; in Spain, Lorca and Antonio Machado; and in Brazil, Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Elizabeth Bishop was very important to me. My current closest friend is Charles Wright. He is the greatest poet of my generation. Without him we’d be much poorer. I believe in Jorie Graham, too and a few others.
INSCAPE: What do you think the role of poetry in education should be?

MS: I think poetry can teach you to read. If we pay attention to the way poems work and what words can do . . . Writing is thinking; reading poems is a kind of thinking, too. That doesn’t mean necessarily, that the reading of a poem is the paraphrase of a poem. To get some workable paraphrase, that’s one thing, and understanding a poem is part of responding to a poem. The experience of a poem is something else. One can experience a poem and not necessarily understand it. One can respond to a poem. One can respond to another human being without understanding that human being. We fall in love all the time with somebody we don’t understand, and then twenty years later, after we’re married, when our understanding is complete, we get divorced. Just kidding, of course.