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Brief, Undeniable: Lyric Address in Mark Strand

In "after the critique of lyric," an essay published in *PMLA* in 2008, Rei Terada hopes that poetry critics might collectively "let 'lyric' dissolve into literature and 'literature' into culture, using a minimalist definition of 'culture' from which no production or everyday experience can be excluded" (199). Continued debate over the meaning and merits of the lyric genre of poetry seem to indicate resistance to the dissolution of lyric into culture Terada encourages. At the same time, recent work on lyric has followed Terada's directive in many respects, turning away from what she calls "belief in [lyric's] ontology" in favor of readings that situate lyric within a given cultural context, mapping how institutional pressures and scientific advances have shaped the genre's direction from the twentieth century onward (198).[1] This methodology encompasses and furthers the "critique of lyric" to which the title of Terada's essay refers. This ongoing "critique of lyric" was arguably instantiated by Virginia Jackson in her book *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), which Terada calls a "watershed in lyric studies" (197). In *Dickinson's Misery,* Jackson argues that Emily Dickinson's poems have been incorporated into a critical reading process dependent on a suspect conceptualization of lyric. Attending to the historical situatedness and readership of Dickinson's manuscripts, Jackson analyzes them in terms of the privacy and particularity that often characterized their initial dissemination. For Jackson, whether Dickinson is even a lyric poet remains an open question; in any case, Jackson contends, rather than being intrinsic to her poetry, the designation of lyric poet has been posthumously assigned to Dickinson through a process Jackson calls "lyricization" (64). She claims that readers have de-historicized Dickinson's poems through a faulty "syllogistic logic of address" that unfairly "converts the isolated 'I' into the universal 'we' by bypassing the mediation of any particular 'you'" (129). "By being taken

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out of their sociable circumstances," Jackson argues, "those manuscripts have become poems, and by becoming poems, they have been interpreted as lyrics" (21).

However, the process of lyricization focuses the question of what lyric actually is outside its cultural determinants, a question that only becomes more fraught with each new study showing how what is meant by "lyric" is informed, delimited, and even created by forces outside the poems ostensibly constituting the genre. In a review of Jonathan Culler's *Theory of the Lyric*, Lytle Shaw usefully observes a tension between two approaches to lyric criticism, with Jackson's and Culler's books serving as examples of each. While Jackson's book anticipates Terada's assertion that "what most needs explanation in lyric occurs before and after the poem, in the motives for the materialization of lyric or lyricism," this strategy has the potential disadvantage of limiting the import and reach of lyric works outside their immediate environs (198). Critics like Culler, meanwhile, read more diachronically, stressing features common to lyric across disparate time periods and cultures, but can leave themselves open to the charge of having insufficiently attended to historicity. Shaw ends his essay by asking whether there might be a middle ground between these opposed ways of reading, which he sums up as "determinist historicism and universalist poetics" —a means of bridging "the synchronic and the diachronic" critical lenses these stances operate from by "thinking the two in relation to each other" (412–13). To do so, he suggests a return to poetry outside lyric, "the larger field of poetics" that gets minimized when lyric is made synonymous with all of poetry.

In this essay, I attempt the sort of work Shaw's essay calls for, but not quite in the way he calls for it. I focus on the poetry of Mark Strand, which exemplifies lyric self-critique, revealing both the universalizing tropes attendant to lyric and an awareness that their situatedness must temper these instincts. Something of an outsider in his youth, by his late career Strand had won most of the major poetry awards and was one of the more admired poets of his generation. An inheritor of the lyric tradition passed down from poets such as Lowell, Bishop, Stevens, and Berryman, he was attuned both to the figure of the lyric poet in Romanticism and the New Criticism and to the social changes that impacted lyric writing in the twentieth century—in other words, to both diachronic and synchronic modes of lyric interpretation. Strand's work proves an important instance of a poet reading lyric from within

lyric by illuminating how lyric's embedded or archived theorizations of self, other, and the movement of poems between them help account for its current predominance in the poetic landscape amid, and perhaps despite, its ongoing historicization and demystification.

1.

By general critical consensus, the central theme of Strand's poetry is the self; it is not only the biographical self, but also the self as it is fashioned in poetry. For Strand, writing and reading lyric poetry involves moving from the experiential body to an articulation of the writing subject worked out in and as language. One key to understanding Strand's poetry is to note his awareness, often expressed within his poems themselves, that behind the distancing mechanisms common to lyric poems such as the creation of a speaker separate from the author, a body of lyric poems offers an ongoing record of their creator's being and thinking, that is, the lyric self. This lyric self is not a timeless, idealized subjectivity but a historically constrained textual register of the workings of a given writer's poetic consciousness. This self is not identical with the speaker of any single poem, since the lyric self typically emerges not in a single poem but over a career; it is the poet's animating, evolving voice, sometimes disguised by irony or persona, but at work behind each speaker in their poems. It cannot be reduced to style, as it encompasses both form and theme, speaking, finally, to the poet's ongoing sense of reality and their place in it.[2]

This concept can be applied to forms outside lyric as well; the novelist Garth Greenwell, for example, has identified as one of the most challenging aspects of writing the fact that "we examine and reveal our most intimate selves on the page," not because of "the extent to which our writing is confessional or autobiographical" but because "to write a story or a poem or an essay is to make a claim about what we find beautiful, about what moves us, to reveal a vision of the world." The expression of this "vision of the world" bestows upon the reader the sense of an organizing agency—the impression that the work is the fruit of the interplay between a particular sensibility and external reality. While other genres can produce this impression, it most takes the shape of a self in lyric exactly because of the longstanding link between lyric poetry and subjectivity. Reflecting on this connection in his essay "On Becoming a Poet," Strand posits that good poems

> have a lyric identity that goes beyond whatever their subject happens to be. They have a voice, and the formation of that voice, the gathering up of imagined sound into utterance, may be the true occasion for their existence. A poem may be the residue of an inner urgency, one through which the self wishes to register itself, write itself into being, and, finally, to charm another self, the reader, into belief. (*The Weather of Words* 43)

What Strand calls "lyric identity" is roughly analogous to my use of "lyric self." These terms coalesce around the premise that voice, as Strand writes, is the source of lyric. The gathering up of voice into shaped, directed sound produces the lyric self, which, as a wholly textual entity, "write[s] itself into being."

Strand complicates this broad articulation of lyric's essence with his synchronic assessments of the varied forms taken by lyric in the work of writers from different eras. His essay "Landscape and the Poetry of Self" compares William Wordsworth to the Confessional poets Robert Lowell and John Berryman. Wordsworth, Strand writes, "takes his own Being in the world more for granted than any contemporary poet is able to" (105). The self of *The Prelude* "brings itself into being, recalls itself" (106). The Confessional poets, in contrast, conjure a self that is "terminal, physical, isolated" (107). Their poems are full of incidental details of place and time that offer a means, Strand argues, of "authenticating the self"—a means to which Wordsworth, painting his landscapes in broad strokes, is not beholden (107). For Wordsworth "the self precedes experience," while for the Confessionals "experience must precede a sense of self" (106).

Strand's poems, too, intimate his awareness of his place in history, of what is possible for the lyric poet today and what no longer seems to be so. Strand's insights posit a distinction between Romantic poets and contemporary ones that highlights an important aspect of the evolution of lyric. If, as Strand argues, Wordsworth's poems evoke a self-sufficiency absent in the work of poets of the present day, this change can be figured in terms of how poets from either era conceive of audience. Wordsworth is not indifferent to his reader, but his poems do not depend on them in the way modern poems do. "No matter how self-centered the confessional poet is," Strand writes, "he is tirelessly sociable . . . the confessional poet cannot bear to be alone" (112). One the one hand,

Wordsworth's speakers generally seem comfortable with aloneness, and may even long for solitude insofar as it makes communion with nature possible. For later poets, on the other hand, aloneness is a condition to be endured, maybe mourned, or at best temporarily assuaged.[3]

Influential traditional accounts have insisted on a notion of lyrical performance. Hegel insisted both on the pure subjectivity of the lyric poet and on the "universal validity" of their "insights and feelings," so that the lyric poet, writing as a private mind and simultaneously into a social world, paradoxically "both is and is not himself; he does his best to communicate not himself but something else" (1111, 1121). Moreover, this message possessed an indifference to its audience very famously refined by John Stuart Mill, who constrasted poetry with "eloquence," which "is *heard*; poetry is *over*heard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener" (12). The solitude of the later lyric poet, however, must be noticed, witnessed; and once witnessed it was no longer solitude of the same sort. As Mill observed, his poet's lyric depends on the guise of privacy. The poet is akin to an actor who "knows that there is an audience present; but if he acts as though he knew it, he acts ill." Mills's lyric was something staged, performed: "What we have said to ourselves, we may tell to others afterwards" (12).[4]

This performed quality of lyric links back to Hegel's insistence that lyric solitude is never wholly self-contained and must include "something else": an awareness of community. Aloneness becomes the performance of performance, which reads as directness, and this directness is in part facilitated by a turn from the conventions of mimesis to more rhetorical strategies.

For Michael Warner, the modern notion of the public is historically generated, and that its rise coincides with the dominance of the lyric poem:

> the period in which publics have acquired the full significance of popular sovereignty and the bourgeois public sphere also happens, perhaps not by coincidence, to be the period in which the lyric—now understood as timeless overheard self-communion—displaces all other poetic genres (epic, poems on affairs of state, georgic, elegy, satire). It is now thought of simply as poetry. (81–82)

For Warner, lyric's ascendancy within poetry follows on, but does not essentially alter, the widespread critical adoption of the Romantic model proposed by Mill, wherein the poet self-communes without regard for an audience:

> In reading something as lyric, rather than regard the speaking voice as wholly alienated to the text, we regard it as transcendent. Though it could only be produced through the displacement of writing, we read it with cultivated disregard of its circumstance of circulation, understanding it as an image of absolute privacy. (80–81)

Warner argues that in each direction, the exchange is constructed, artificial; readers of lyric picture the speaker as solitary, while the lyric poem in turn "appears to take no cognizance of its addressee whatsoever" (79). But over the last century especially, the word "appears," upon which the entire enterprise depends, no longer holds so firmly; the fictionality of the notion of lyric as "an image of absolute privacy" has in fact been made increasingly plain, thanks in part to the reification, as a cultural *donnée*, of the very publics about which Warner elaborates elsewhere in his book. Indeed, one way the paired notions of lyric and public might be linked in ways that continue to modify the lyric genre throughout the twentieth century is if the developments Warner discerns in publics in general apply, and consequentially so, for the lyric genre in particular. A public, writes Warner,

> might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds—have manifest positive content. . . . A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable. (75)

This "stranger-relationality in a pure form" can be used to describe, as well as any other, the bond formed between the lyric poet and her reading audience. Strand's lyric lateness is reflected by the extent to which his poems register both his awareness of lyric audience as stranger-relationality and the significance of this development for lyric.

The stranger-relationality of modern lyric follows on its rhetorical dimension, which dictates that the self transcribed onto the page ultimately seeks to commune not merely with itself but with a reader.[5] Lyric's rhetoric blends the privacy of a single subjectivity with the indeterminacy of its eventual reader. This makes the lyric poem an indirect form of communication, one in which communication itself may be subordinated to other linguistic ends, and one wherein the poet may well not even know what his poem communicates. For this reason, even when the poet locates and limits his audience, he must surrender control of the poem's meaning to posterity. In Louise Glück's words, "the writer's audience is chronological" (*Proofs and Theories* 9). It follows that for any lyric poem its complete audience is always in process, undefined, uncertain. The poet Ilya Kaminsky expounds on this phenomenon in an interview, calling the poem "a moment of awe—that silence that travels from one human body to another by means of words." This traversing of time and space to engender meaning is at the core of lyric's appeal, its ability to generate, as Kaminsky puts it, "a private language of music and imagery that is strange and compelling enough that it can speak privately to thousands of people at the same time."

Mutlu Blasing observes an inner tension essential to lyric whereby the poet's adoption of a common language—her "subjection to a preexisting system that at once socializes and individuates" her—is belied by "the particular ways in which she makes audible the shape, the 'beautiful necessities,' of the language" through which she produces the "I" of the lyric poem (6, 35). This is lyric's signature effect: to constitute a subject by wresting individuality from the generic signifiers of a common language. But it always does so socially, which is to say, relationally, seeking the reader whose participation completes its rhetorical purpose. "Lyric poetry is not mimesis," Blasing writes; it is "a radically public language" (2, 4). The significance of the "I" posited in a lyric poem is a function of the "you" it addresses: the lyric poem "depends, in fact, on being heard by a 'you' as an 'I' speaking" (30–31). The lyric poem is a little machine made of words (to borrow William Carlos Williams's formulation) whose primary function is to address, to reach out. Conversely, each reading of a lyric poem is a reciprocal gesture, a response to the poem's outward utterance.

The rhetorical nature and function of modern lyric puts significant pressure on the old model of lyric solitude, summed up by Warner

as "timeless overheard self-communion," which downplays the reader's presence (82). Absent the reader, two challenges emerge for lyric that have become more acute in late modernity: it is irrelevant (to the extent that it is unread) or solipsistic (to the extent that it disdains to need to be read). Indeed, it can be both of these conditions at once, and each exacerbates the other. It is because he recognizes this fact that Strand, as Linda Gregerson notes, has "designs on a readership" despite his renunciatory, spare style (5). Louise Glück goes so far as to state that his "signature move" is to make "you" the dominant pronoun in his poetry (*American Originality* 13).

Importantly, though, Strand's embrace of the reader is not wholehearted. Rather, his poems project an ambivalence provoked by his recognition of the poem's dependence on the reader and his simultaneous resistance to that dependence. Strand's ambivalence can be read as an index of the ways in which lyric has come to signify a repository of human expectations even as these are frustrated by lyric's historical fluctuations and formal limitations. His poems question lyric from within because they reflect his skepticism concerning the final coherence or validity of its basic aims—namely, to produce a self and to connect with other selves. Thus, insofar as the lyric poem proffers a version of the self to the reader, Strand's poems often remark on the evanescence or fragility of that self, as in his most anthologized early poem, the anti-Emersonian "Keeping Things Whole": "Wherever I am / I am what is missing" (*NSP* 10). In general, too, Strand's early poems establish a clear demarcation between the biographical Strand and the textual one his poems instantiate, as if to underscore both the former's mortality and the latter's artificiality. The kind of self in which lyric seems to want to make its readers believe is one Strand doubts we can have at all, for which reason he "reenacts obsessively the sacrifice of the self as a condition for the making of the poem," in Rosanna Warren's phrasing (60).

Strand's attitude toward his reader, too, is affected by his view of the provisional nature of the relationship between poet and audience. Asked in a 1981 interview about the "direct and aggressive relationship" those poems had with the reader, Strand describes his first books as confrontational: "The lyrical element was missing from those early poems, I wasn't concerned with it at all. I was interested in shocking the reader, in presenting him with those truths that would upset him"

(Strand and Bacchilega 63). In challenging the reader in this way, lyric also implicates itself, since a central upsetting truth to which Strand's work often points is that the poem is merely a temporary barrier, a weak shield against a final aloneness. Recurring references in Strand's work to the uncertainty of the future and to the unknowability of the poem's reader indicate his deeper pessimism about the social possibilities realizable in poetry, the marginal cultural status of which can render the too-serious poet self-important, even unintentionally comic. W.R. Johnson summarizes the consciousness of lateness that plagues the modern poet: "absence of a real audience and the failure of performance" in turn "engender an anxiety, a kind of bad conscience, a sense of the poet's irrelevance, impotence, and unreality" (16). Johnson raises a concern about the utility of poetry that has its own long tradition, stretching back to Percy Shelley's defense of poetry and further, but one that has taken on a new resonance in and after modernism. Describing what it means "to be a poet in a destitute time," Martin Heidegger argues that to be a modern poet is to be no longer able to take poetry for granted: "the time's destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him" (94). Strand is such a poet, one whose fixation on lyric's weaknesses renders his work self-effacing. Lyric poems voicing disbelief in the lyric project pit content against genre, juxtaposing an intellectual distrust of the value and possibility of the transmission of meaning against the inherent intimacy of the lyric poem, its built-in capacity and desire to address. Strand's poems manifest, often against Strand's antiromantic tendencies, lyric's quest to connect with other selves in order to mitigate against aloneness. Indeed, Strand's poems fixate on the self as relation, as embodied and embedded in a world full of other bodies alongside which it must find its place. And each self must do so because of or in spite of the simple fact of human impermanence, the transience of all selves. Poetry thus becomes a means not only of affirming the human but of defying mortality, death being the final challenge to which poetry must respond. Such aims position Strand as a reluctant inheritor of Wallace Stevens' high view of art, someone who draws inspiration from but is not quite able to believe the idea that, as Stevens puts it in his poem "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," art can "make a dwelling in the air / in which being there together is enough" (295).

II.

A brief survey of Strand's 1970 collection *Darker* will clarify how these formal strategies appear in his early work. "Giving Myself Up" literalizes the presentation and dissection of the lyric self, as the speaker gives up the parts of his body, one by one, describing each through metaphor as he does: "I give up my hands which are ten wishes. / I give up my arms which have wanted to leave me anyway" (*NSP* 46). The poem ends by simultaneously refusing the reader and vowing the lyric self's re-emergence: "And you will have none of it because already I am beginning / again without anything" (*NSP* 46). Similarly, "Letter" dramatizes the poem as epistle, reflecting on the ways words and ideas are usurped from one and made use of by another in ceaseless performances:

> How things fall to others!
> The self no longer belonging to me, but asleep
> in a stranger's shadow, now clothing
> the stranger, now leading him off. (*NSP* 48)

These lines depict the communicative gesture carried out by the poem as potentially sheltering ("clothing / the stranger") but also potentially hazardous ("leading him off"). In either case, the poet gives away something of himself in the conjuring of a lyric subjectivity, an activity that, since it is the poetic gesture as such, the poet cannot avoid.

It is because this exchange is so hazardous, because the ideal reader may be a fiction and in any case can never be fully known, that the rendering of a verbal self in lyric poetry can feel like a surrendering of that self. Strand at once acknowledges and resists his dependence on the reader, asserting the haphazard nature of the relationship and the special (not to say foolish) trust it necessitates. The speaker in "My Life by Somebody Else" waits anxiously for a mysterious "you" to arrive, tempting him or her by any means available, only to conclude despairingly, faced not only with this idealized other's perpetual absence but with his own life's revision at the hands of another:

> Why do you never come? Must I have you by being
> Somebody else? Must I write *My Life* by somebody else?
> *My Death* by somebody else? Are you listening?
> Somebody else has arrived. Somebody else is writing. (*NSP* 63)

This poem enacts a relinquishment of control that depends for its success on the good faith of the "somebody else" to which it refers. But the poem refuses to offer any evidence for faith in this good faith. "It is pointless to slash my wrists," the speaker declares hyperbolically; not even death will arouse the reader's interest, and even so, by the final lines of the poem the speaker's presence has been supplanted by the "somebody else" he both longs for and dreads (*NSP* 63). The speaker's disappearance ironizes any notion of self at all, positing that all selves, writerly and readerly, leverage human uses of language against the implacable eventuality of death.

For if the lyric poem is both a way to inscribe a self into reality and a communicative action connoting intimacy, death is its figurative other, a shadow over language pointing to silence. Because of this, as Strand remarks in an interview, "most lyric poems lead to some acknowledgement of death" (Strand and Shawn 159). Even by ceasing, the lyric poem offers a small picture of the ending of life and, contrastingly, of the moments of communion life makes possible. It is as though the poem keeps the speaker alive throughout the moment of its being read, and the speaker's last words, as content marries form, comprise a reminder that the reader, too, is mortal. In his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry," T.S. Eliot, whose ideas about poetic impersonality are visible in Strand, describes the transmission of the poem from the writer to reader as precipitating a kind of writerly demise:

> The final handing over, so to speak, of the poem to an unknown audience, for what that audience will make of it, seems to me the consummation of the process begun in solitude and without thought of the audience, the long process of gestation of the poem, because it marks the final separation of the poem from the author. Let the author, at this point, rest in peace. (827)

Strand's work is replete with images of the author resting in peace at the poem's end. The pattern is present from the very outset of his career. "When the Vacation is Over for Good," from his first collection, *Sleeping With One Eye Open* (1964), is a formally precise poem, split into six quatrains. Here are the first four lines:

> It will be strange
> Knowing at last it couldn't go on forever,

> The certain voice telling us over and over
> That nothing would change,

The uneven line lengths persist throughout the poem, as does the ABBA rhyme scheme. In addition, while the shorter first and fourth lines of each quatrain employ perfect rhyme, the longer middle lines use slant rhyme: "summer" and "warmer," "what" and "it," and so forth. A single sentence in its entirety, the poem concludes as follows:

> And somehow trying,
> But still unable, to know just what it was
> That went so completely wrong, or why it is
> We are dying. (*NSP* 5)

The poem's slant rhyme expresses the speaker's ambition and repeated failure to reach an aesthetic perfection intimated in the exact rhyme of the shorter lines. The speaker's intractable attempt to "make it right," over the course of a sinuous, long poetic sentence, ends on a semantic contrast between the tidily rhyming words "trying" and "dying." The period at the poem's close removes the reader from the experience of reading it as death removes the living from life: nothing is ever fully made right, the poem suggests, and then we die, finding, if not perfection, relief from having endlessly to seek after it. "When the Vacation is Over for Good" thus enacts the journey of the lyric self in miniature, down to the studied opposition between "trying," which is the business of the living, and "dying," where all effort ends.

This notion of the single poem as brief instantiation or snapshot of the self, its ending signaling death, is everywhere in Strand's poetry and shows how central the concept of the lyric self is to his work. I cite here some of his poems' closing lines:

> from "The Sleep": " . . . the dark . . . out of which I shall never appear" (*NSP* 56);
> from "My Life": "My life is small / and getting smaller. The world is green. / Nothing is all," (*NSP* 61–2);
> from "The Way It Is": "The dead / shall inherit the dead" (*NSP* 68);
> from "The Room": "the end is in sight" (*The Story of Our Lives* 16);

from "The Coming of Light": "and tomorrow's dust flares into breath" (*NSP* 137);
from "Lines for Winter": "tell yourself / in that final flowing of cold through your limbs / that you love what you are" (*NSP* 139);
from "Snowfall": "the burial / of sleep, the down of winter, the negative of night" (*NSP* 156);
from "The Garden": "even now / in the moment before it disappears" (*Selected Poems* 140);[6]
from "Night Piece": "as if / the city, finally, were singing itself to sleep" (*SP* 142);
from "The Late Hour": "the lonely and the feckless end" (*NSP* 145).

Taken together, these endings show how for Strand the simple fact that the lyric poem tends to be short, and more particularly, must end, connotes something at least as certain as its semantic content. The intractability of death bespeaks a final separation, so that its presence in a poem, even in the background, makes any solace in identification and communion fleeting. For this reason, Strand resists the sentimentalism encouraged by a mythologized or idealized vision of the bond between writer and reader. "Black Maps" is an example of a poem that strives to tell the reader, as Strand puts it, "those truths that would upset him" (Strand and Bacchilega 63). "Nothing will tell you / where you are," the poem advises. "Each moment is a place / You've never been." All potential sources of enlightenment are dispensed with, since "The present is always dark." Whatever bond it creates with the reader, the poem closes by promising the dissolution of that bond: "Only you are there, // saying hello / to what you will be," that is, nothing (*NSP* 53–54).

While this tension in Strand between lyrical form and anti-lyric or oppositional content is never fully overcome, the poems in his collection *The Late Hour* (1978) hint at a deeper resolve to do so. "White," from *The Late Hour* (1978), reflects on how "the white of death" seems to encroach everywhere now that the speaker is middle-aged, but still concludes by invoking a mysterious, potentially beneficent unity: "All things are one. / All things are joined / even beyond the edge of sight" (*SP* 119). In the same volume, the speaker in "My Son" imagines the son he never had calling to him from a place outside death, "a place

/ beyond, // beyond love, / where nothing, / everything, / wants to be born" (*NSP* 140–41). This image of the unrealized life as desire, as deep longing to live, seems to put it on equal footing with death and non-existence.

Strand describes the poems in *The Late Hour* as "edging toward the autobiographical," which, he adds, was "something I wished to avoid" (McNees 84). But the formal implications of these slips into autobiography are instructive. Strand begins to write not only about his childhood (in poems like "Pot Roast" and "The House in French Village" that, perhaps because they don't suit Strand's particular gifts, seem less than fully realized, as though weaker imitations of Lowell) but about members of his family—and, importantly, not only about them but to them. This strategy of address is highly effective in Strand because it allows him to create poetic scenes of genuine intimacy, since he is writing to someone he knows and loves, while still allowing for the presence of the future reader via what Susan Stewart and Jonathan Culler have termed triangulated address (Stewart 12–13; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 186–87). To borrow from Mill, the conceit here is that the reader overhears the poem, as a piece of writing that could never be directly addressed to someone the speaker does not know. This construct creates a distance between speaker and reader that underscores the poem's tacit reservations about the unknown reader and therefore about its own (and poetry's) communicative reach. But the flimsiness of this construct, which we discussed earlier, means that Strand actually turns toward the reader in the act of seeming to turn away. He creates an intimate, domestic space in his poems from which the reader is presumed to be absent but does so with the full knowledge of the reader's eventual presence and of the necessity of that presence. Strand's mid-career work thus practices a tentative openness to the reader emanating from his intuitive understanding of what the lyric poem is: an enterprise in aesthetic communication, a generous call seeking a generous response. At the same time, Strand's reservations about the potential inherent in lyric remain implicit throughout these poems, which, in emphasizing both the provisional nature of the lyric self and the elusiveness of the connection with the reader, signal the frailty of the very aims that define them.

Close readings of two more poems, one from *The Late Hour* and one from Strand's 1998 collection *Blizzard of One*, will illuminate this inner

tension. Both poems use triangulated address by invoking a relative or loved one. First, "For Jessica, My Daughter," which begins in a mood of trepidation:

> Tonight I walked,
> close to the house,
> and was afraid

The speaker's fear "of the dark and faraway" is effected by his comparison between "such small beings as we" and the immense elements and forms we move under and within: "the wind / and . . . the cold, / . . . the stars blazing / in the immense arc of sky." Here as elsewhere in Strand, the physical and temporal smallness of the self becomes an existential concern that in turn renders the representation of subjectivity within lyric a vanity project, a paltry endeavor. The speaker comforts himself by turning to the past, remembering moments

> when the body's bones became light
> and the wound of the skull
> opened to receive
> the cold rays of the cosmos,
> and were, for an instant,
> themselves the cosmos,
> there are times when I could believe
> we were the children of stars

Besides being somewhat fanciful, as with the allusion to the possibility of being "the children of stars," this section of the poem labors somewhat, the diction hinting that the speaker disbelieves his own words. The lurking violence of "wound" and "skull," the indifference of "cold rays," and the mere "instant" in which this connectivity transpires combine to color the passage with a darkness or negativity that outweighs its positive content. But the speaker persists, revising his argument, since "tonight / it is different." The fear remains, leavened slightly by a lyric intimacy that augurs other potentialities:

> Afraid of the dark
> in which we drift or vanish altogether,
> I imagine a light

that would not let us stray too far apart,
a secret moon or mirror,
a sheet of paper,
something you could carry
in the dark
when I am away. (*NSP* 142–43)

The last section of the poem, like its first section, is governed by the words "afraid" and "dark": the speaker's fear has not left him and seems unlikely to. His last hope—fueled, perhaps, by the same imagination from which poems are unearthed—is emplaced in a figural "light" that can counter the darkness. His wish to remain close to his daughter is expressed negatively and tenuously, in the bare wish not to "stray too far apart." The source of this hope is shadowed, "secret," and what it conjures seems prone to ruin: "mirror" sounds like "mere" (and rhymes with "fear," the shadow of which is still present), and the sheet of paper, a synecdochic reference to literature and poetry, is also only itself, something easily burnt or thrown away. In this way the poem observes the borders of its own reach, as Strand indirectly hints at the absurdity of the belief that poetry provides an avenue for the inscription of a truly lasting version of the self.

The poem's insistence on some form of union beyond death ("when I am away") is faintly figured by the slant rhyme and alliteration in its final lines—the near-miss of "light" and "apart," the repeating "s" and "t" sounds in "stray", "secret," and "sheet." But the rhymes are imperfect, the words alike but not identical, and this swerve alerts us to poetry's wilful slighting of its own purposes, its idiosyncratic resistance to cultivated expectations and maybe even to address itself and the community it seeks. Forms of speech engender meanings that always translate erroneously. The failure to communicate perfectly with the other is built into the attempt. Strand's lyric pessimism is in evidence here, in the mysterious gap between what the poem says and what is read.

Again, though, the paradox of lyric remains, for the failure is not a complete one. The poem ends on a neatly hidden clean rhyme between its final word, "away," and the word "stray," buried in the middle of the last stanza. While on the level of content the poem lingers on the absoluteness of separation—the closing words "dark" and "away" outweigh the tentative "you could carry"—the poem, as a lyric poem, still extends

outside itself, its final "you" addressing not only Jessica but the future reader, who must inevitably, if only briefly, carry the poem in his mind while and after reading it. The poem's final line, with its resolving music, returns one more time to a bare faith in lyric as extension of a self, as a means of address, that flimsy sheet of paper carried into the dark.

The title of "Our Masterpiece is the Private Life," a poem from *Blizzard of One*, introduces it as a paean to solipsism. Like "For Jessica, My Daughter," "Our Masterpiece is the Private Life" is a domestic poem, written to a loved one, though its initial "you" is implied not in the title but the dedication, "For Jules"—Strand's second wife, whom he married in 1976. Its setting is a seaside holiday, its three sections offering three glimpses into a day or weekend in the life of an older married couple. And as with "For Jessica, My Daughter," the poem's first section expresses the speaker's unease, this time in the form of a question:

> Is there something down by the water keeping itself from us,
> Some shy event, some secret of the light that falls upon the
> deep,
> Some source of sorrow that does not wish to be discovered yet?

The speaker resists this unnerving possibility by turning to the satisfactions found in beauty, what we can glean from the "coarse porcelain / Of the world's skin." "Why look for more?" the poem asks, and in its second section, as the vacationing couple eat a quiet dinner, continues this line of thinking: disregard the "advocates of awfulness and sorrow," the speaker suggests, and enjoy the expensive meal: "let's eat / Our brill, and sip this beautiful white Beaune." The setting is not a perfect one—"the light is artificial, and we are not well-dressed"—but he remains defiant: "So what. We like it here."

The "coarse porcelain" of the aesthetic domain, however, cannot provide the meaning the speaker asks it to; its insubstantiality, already hinted at in the oxymoronic nature of the phrase, says as much. Perhaps, though, what lack remains can be alleviated by emotional intimacy, closeness with another:

> The way you speak,
>
> In that low voice, our late-night disclosures . . . why live
> For anything else? Our masterpiece is the private life.

As with "For Jessica, My Daughter," the poem is at once indirect and intimate, since the speaker is confiding in a partner or lover and not the reader. The speaker's companion—"the interior paramour, a figment, a palpable impalpable other," as Charles Berger comments, linking the poem to Stevens—enacts a kind of screen, one whose silent invisibility only accentuates how the poem speaks (180). Additionally, Strand has painted the scene with enough detail—the oceanside restaurant with its artificial lighting, the fish, the wine, the country air—that the reader feels privy to the moment and its emotions.

The poem's title phrase, "Our masterpiece is the private life," is no sooner stated than it is called into question. In the third section, set on the waterfront, the speaker continues to take the measure of a life of aesthetic pursuits and domestic bliss. But the comforts found in art and in togetherness cannot quell his uncertainty:

> Breathing the night air as the moment of pleasure taken
> In pleasure vanishing seems to grow, its self-soiling
>
> Beauty, which can only be what it was, sustaining itself
> A little longer in its going, I think of our own smooth passage
> Through the graded partitions, the crises that bleed
>
> Into the ordinary, leaving us a little more tired each time

Aspects of existence celebrated earlier—beauty and intimacy—are here reappraised and found wanting because, like everything else, they fade with time. Temporality is the enemy in this poem. Pleasure always vanishes, and although even its vanishing is ironically a source of pleasure, that pleasure too disappears. Theme follows form here; this sentence of the poem, which continues across three stanzas, is itself sinuous and beautiful, slowly vanishing in the act of being read. Even its reappearance in each new act of reading will not save it from ultimate entropy. The phrase "self-soiling" and "beauty" is enjambed across two stanzas, as if to emphasize the extreme contrast between them. I noticed in a recent rereading the possibility of an excretory pun given the fact that the phrase "smooth passage" occurs so soon after "self-soiling": everything, says Strand, no matter how lovely, eventually turns to shit. Take the "crises" that so excited (and thereby sustained) this couple earlier in their relationship, which have become banal through repetition, receding "into the ordinary."

The lament of "Our Masterpiece is the Private Life" is that time finally erases human experience, and the urgency and universality of this lament break down the barriers of class, region, and domestic privacy the poem otherwise interposes between itself and the reader. If the private life always becomes the ordinary life, the proper course, in seeking answers, is to turn not to uniqueness but to commonality. But to attempt to provide such answers is beyond the scope of the poem, which ends on a run of iconic images:

> The drive along the winding road
>
> Back to the house, the sea pounding against the cliffs,
> The glass of whiskey on the table, the open book, the questions,
> All the day's rewards waiting at the doors of sleep (*NSP* 220–21)

Berger summarizes the poem's ending by noting how its "closing catalogue of daily events summons ordinary experience once again," as familiar signifiers of the literary life draw the reader in (182). But notably, these final lines have no subject or main verb. The poem's last sentence is simply a series of events and objects. The I of the poem has disappeared, having been subsumed into the very moments and things it sought to sacralize. This tactic not only presents in the space of the poem the slow erasure of subjectivity that is its chief concern; it reveals how every poem delivers to its reader a presence that is also an absence. Each poem tropes the gap between its speaker, as iteration of a lyric self, and the fact that that speaker is always merely a product of the language undergirding it; and further back, the gap between every poem and the author for whom it stands in, the I inevitably receding into the background.

III.

On this account, Strand reads lyric poetry less as a source of supposed transcendent communion with the distant other than as a human project with its own expiration date. To build it up beyond that is a fiction. But a tempting one. Asked in an interview what he wants to be remembered for, Strand searches around a bit— "My kindness to animals," he suggests—before stating that he wants to be remembered as "what Paul Tillich called the ontic self: me being me right now. To be

me, duplicated exactly. I'd like to be known as it is impossible to know anyone after he's dead. I'd like to be known as always alive" (qtd. in Strand and Bacchilega 64). There's a facetious element to this response, of course, but is not "to be known as always alive" the fantasy lyric facilitates? Insofar as it actuates a lyric self, the lyric poem is the poet's transcription of being into language in order to surpass and survive herself. Strand's poetry both unmasks this idea and reveals him to be at least sporadically enchanted by it. His book *The Monument*, addressed and dedicated to its future translator, examines the topic at length. "I might have had my likeness carved in stone," Strand writes, "but it is not my image that I want you to have, nor my life, nor the life around me, only this document. What I include of myself is unreal and distracting. Only this luminous moment has life, this instant in which we both write, this flash of voice" (*NSP* 100). The flash of connection between writer and future reader, the sudden bond between otherwise distanced selves: this, Strand testifies, is the essence of lyric poetry, which cannot have what it truly wants, that is, some kind of immortality: "Poems have come to seem so little. Even *The Monument* is little. How it wishes it were something it cannot be—its own perpetual birth instead of its death again and again, each sentence a memorial" (*NSP* 110).

Strand's latent frustration with lyric causes his poems to accuse themselves, unable to carry out what they seem to promise by virtue of being lyric poems. Susan Stewart has elaborated beautifully on the connection between the poem and the promise:

> I propose that the sound of poetry is heard in the way a promise is heard. . . . When I promise, I create an expectation, an obligation, and a necessary condition for closure. Whether we are in the presence of each other or not, the promise exists. Whether you, the one who receives the promise, continue to exist or not, the promise exists. (104)

Stewart here casts the importance of the promise as twofold: it is reciprocal, requiring a reader to receive it, and it is resistant to the ordinary restrictions that delimit human community, that is, geographic or temporal separation, up to and including its most extreme form, death. The longevity of the promise is encoded within it and creates its appeal. It displays the lyric poem as bound up with a drive toward community

and against mortality. This is the case not only for Strand but for all lyric poets, in whose work, as Helen Vendler writes of Whitman, "the primal wish for human intimacy, whether with the visible or the invisible, strives continually against a deathwards drift toward intimacy with nonbeing" (51).

Strand's poems, too, are promises—but promises convinced as often as not of their failure. They will fail because they are mere language and so face the constant threat of being unheard or ignored, a very real danger given poetry's marginalization under capitalism. Relatedly and more basically still, they and all lyric promises fail insofar as they are swallowed up by time, whose vastness dwarfs lyric's small attempts to inculcate connection. Strand, who can be a very funny poet, often turns to the comic as a means of illustrating the depth of this problem. One of his main uses of humor is deflationary, revealing the difference between the world as it is imagined or hoped it to be and the world as it actually is. In his book *Dark Harbor*, for instance, Strand's speaker describes his life-affirming decision "to sit in a restaurant with a bowl / Of soup before me to celebrate how good life / Has been and how it has culminated in this instant" (*NSP* 193). Any sense of indomitability conjured by the passage is immediately (and knowingly) undone by the bowl of soup and its suggestion of senescence or infirmity. Now or soon, selves are ageing, lumpen, and foolish, and therefore, goes Strand's comic argument, so are the poems which record them in order to immortalize or at least preserve them; indeed, the whole project of poetry might on this level be solipsistic, the forlorn hope not only that "saying selfhood is hating Dad or wanting Mom, / Is being kissed by a reader somewhere," but that this wished-for kiss justifies the utterance that provoked it (*NSP* 201).

Strand's humor, in other words, may be a kind of self-defense mechanism, a wink to the reader releasing the poem (and us) from the spell of faith in lyric's claim on us. It is not just that lyric poetry fosters a dream of immortality, but that it does so without noisily calling attention to the fact, making the illusion hard to detect and therefore palatable while still remaining, at its core, something fantastical, an exercise in wishful thinking. Strand's philosophical commitments enjoin him to resist this tendency, even if it is discernable in his poetry. That it is visible might owe in part to what could be called Strand's dispositive leanings, his emotional (though not intellectual) identification

with Stevens's elevation of the aesthetic sphere to the status of religious belief. More demonstrably, it owes to his poems themselves, which, simply by virtue of being lyric poems, record the urge to outlast the physical self and to connect with other selves.

Exactly because it always emerges historically, literature is always under threat of returning to history, and a mode of interpretation with the aim of avoiding reader-oriented distortions and fallacies is to define it as such right from the outset. This is one way of describing what Jackson's book does with Dickinson's poems. But it is a peculiar function of literature, and one maybe especially true of lyric, with its instantiation of a self and its implication of the reader, that something interior to it engineers it to resist being read in this way, to challenge time and its relentlessly localizing sweep, to protest against being one more set of cultural data. Strand suggests somewhere that poetry performs this work partly by "invok[ing] aspects of language other than that of communication, most significantly as a variation, though diminished, of a sacred text" (*The Weather of Words* 72). Robert von Hallberg, Jonathan Culler, and other critics have likewise observed a link between religious practice and the history of lyric (von Hallberg 12; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* 229). Something of the incantatory or the ritualistic may color its origins. Similarly, Northrop Frye cites Mallarmé and Rilke as poets who have identified praise as the final aim of lyric (36). Ancient lyric was often choral, as in many of the Biblical psalms; and it is possible that the collective, social "we" of this lyric both depended on and helped to fortify a bond between the poem's collective utterers, and between poem and audience, the foundation of which was metaphysical.[7] In modern lyric this bond has been dispensed with or is at least no longer authoritative for both poet and reader; it must be established each time anew by the poem as it discovers its audience. This is one reason for the intense subjectivity we associate with lyric. But even in its solitude, lyric retains a symbolic if faint connection to the metaphysical, since it is still the voice reaching outside itself, seeking a form of sponsorship from without. Only now it depends more than historically on the "you" it hopes to charm in order to overcome a sense of isolation that threatens to defeat its project entirely.

Even presuming the existence of this "you," it is not self-evident that the purpose and worth of lyric is discoverable on its own terms. The *raison d'être* of lyric is the great question of Strand's poetry, sometimes

buried, sometimes bared. His work forms an extended meditation on the problem of whether "poetry is possible without metaphysics," since, as Blasing puts it, "there is no I without a you; there is no I or you without speech, the possibility of meaning; and there is no assurance of a meaningful language without the Word within the word" (117). The tension to which Strand and poets of his time must respond emerges in lyric's propensity to reify much of what the secular episteme has cast into question.[8] As T.J. Clark asserts at the end of his book *Farewell to an Idea*, "lyric in our time is deeply ludicrous," the implications of its form challenging the philosophical commitments of late modernity; all the same, Clark allows, we seem unable to rid ourselves of it (401). And if lyric persists, it does so by asking us to believe in what we seem in some ways predisposed to want to: a coherent vision of selfhood, the value of art and poetic communication, and not just the transmission of meaning but its lasting significance, the meaning of meaning.

Attending to the varieties and possibilities incipient in forms of poetry outside lyric could, in showing what poetry is and can be absent the lyric I, indirectly provide a fuller sense of lyric's scope and limitations. Here, in lieu of such a pursuit, I have used the genre to examine itself, and in keeping with this tactic, let me point to a final insight from within lyric into the motivations that underlie it. Here are the last lines of Strand's poem "The Continuous Life," from which this essay borrows its title:

> Say that each of you tries
> To keep busy, learning to lean down close and hear
> The careless breathing of earth and feel its available
> Languor come over you, wave after wave, sending
> Small tremors of love through your brief,
> Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond. (*NSP* 177)

The phrase "brief, undeniable," enjambed across the poem's last two lines, indexes both the frustrated intensity of Strand's lyric project and the conundrum of lyric selfhood generally. The words oppose each other: we are hardly even here, the first says; but still, we are, responds the second. Poised between transience and certitude, Strand's poems circle again and again around perhaps the sole impetus within lyric to which, using only its words, we can definitively reconcile ourselves:

that it actualizes the ageless compulsion, literally felt or not, to inscribe oneself into history, to find a listener, to be other than alone.

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NOTES

1. Among others, see White, Skillman, and Javadizadeh.

2. Hegel offers some justification for the idea of the lyric self in his *Aesthetics* through the close connection he draws between self-expression and lyric form. The content of lyric, he writes, "is not the object but the subject, the inner world, the mind that considers and feels" (1038). A defining element of lyric for Hegel is "the way in which [the poet's] mind with its subjective judgement, its joy, admiration, grief, and, in short, its feeling comes to consciousness of itself"—a notion that tracks closely with the development of what I term the lyric self (1113).

3. Lowell's "Skunk Hour" is the exemplar in this regard, elevating aloneness to a fever pitch as the quintessential modern plight. Similarly, Strand's poem "A Morning," while it takes a stubborn pleasure in the mystery of solitude, still finds the endpoint of the escape from the social realm to be "a light-filled grave" (*New Selected Poems* 163).

4. Mutlu Konuk Blasing pinpoints the conundrum I observe here, namely that "the reason the lyric poet turns her back to the audience, without which she cannot exist, is that she must be heard" (31). Jackson concurs, writing that Mill's formulation "makes lyric into a public performance that only pretends to be self-addressed" (131).

5. Numerous critics have insisted on the lyric poem's rhetorical nature. For W.R. Johnson, "What is essential . . . to lyric is rhetoric" (23); Blasing asserts that "lyric is the most rhetorical of genres" (34); and Culler confirms that "there is always a *you* in the lyric" ("Lyric, History, and Genre" 75).

6. Hereafter abbreviated parenthetically in-text as *SP*.

7. In fact, Frye, surveying the whole history of lyric, argues that "we cannot simply identify the lyrical with the subjective," since "lyrical poetry may be a communal enterprise, like the Old Testament Psalms or the odes of Pindar" (31–32). This is further evidence for the malleability of lyric, but in this essay I focus on its modern incarnation, which begins roughly with the onset of Romanticism.

8. See on this point Heidegger, who writes in his essay "What are Poets For?" that today "even the trace of the holy has become unrecognizable. It remains undecided whether we still experience the holy as the track leading to the godhead of the divine, or whether we now encounter no more than a trace of the holy. It remains unclear what the track leading to the trace might be. It remains in question how such a track might show itself to us" (97).

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