

THE ROMANTIC EYE AS CANVAS; OR, THE COURSE OF MARK STRAND'S "VIOLENT STORM"

Jeffrey Childs

*This is he men miscall Fate,
Threading dark ways, arriving late ...*

Emerson

The poem "Violent Storm" appears in Mark Strand's first volume of poetry, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (1964), and, along with the poem that lends its title to the volume, constitutes an important thread in his reflections on the wayward tendencies of the creative imagination. Both poems close with particular representations of the eye as symptomatic of a state of imaginative disaffection, and I propose to focus especially on the form of this representation as it emerges in the final lines of "Violent Storm". To do this, however, requires acknowledging the privilege accorded to visual metaphors in the characterization of imaginative states during and after the romantic period and grasping the way these metaphors establish and rework complex evaluative frameworks. This means tracing a line of figurative thinking from its latent presence in Milton to its more prominent appearance in Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Emerson, and Stevens. This list could be extended considerably, but these six writers establish the core of the problem, and aspects of the work of all are, in my view, immediately palpable in Strand's poem.

Let me approach the problem as directly as possible: what emerges in the work of the five writers I have just mentioned, and thus what Strand inherits, is a problem of consciousness stated in terms of the mutual necessity of light and darkness. In other words, darkness and light are regarded as woven together, such that they cannot be separated without undoing the fabric of consciousness itself. This said, two questions

immediately arise: 1) Are the terms of this pattern - that is, the weaving metaphor I have just employed - shared, or do they differ among the writers mentioned above? 2) Does this pattern describe a problem of consciousness *per se*, or rather a particular state of consciousness? In answer to the first question, as I hope to show, the weaving metaphor used to describe this problem is remarkably consistent throughout the work of these writers. Even in that of Emerson and Strand, who represent this concern more directly in terms of the eye - that is, who depict it not as a problem of what the eye sees but rather what it is - this metaphor is deployed elsewhere to indicate the problematic nature of perception, or the necessary insinuation of the imperceptible in the act of perception. The second question is more complex, and I can only suggest that, individual differences aside, the figurative pattern in question tends overwhelmingly to be used to indicate a particular moment or state of consciousness, which in turn is taken to refer to a possible or necessary moment in the movement of consciousness in general. I realize that there is an enormous gulf between the words "possible" and "necessary" here, and however much I might wish to eliminate this ambiguity I am afraid that it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so. Rather I hope to draw out the shared nature of this problem and outline the implications of Strand's variation of it.

The first task necessary for establishing a link between Strand and his predecessors is determining the central concern of "Violent Storm." Much of its imagery is carried over from the poem "Sleeping with One Eye Open," although unlike the latter, "Violent Storm" seeks to establish a contrast between two imaginative states: that of the speaker and that which the speaker has turned away from, though whether this turning is a willed activity or not is one of the poem's main questions. The speaker avoids the use of the singular personal pronoun "I", opting instead for the plural "we", an ironic choice, since it is the speaker's sense of isolation that distinguishes him from

Those who have chosen to pass the night
Entertaining friends
And intimate ideas in the bright,
Commodious rooms of dreams ...¹

1 All quotations of Strand's poetry are taken from his *Selected Poems*, whose full bibliographic information can be found in the Works Cited section of this paper.

The speaker's condition continues to emerge negatively, through an implied contrast with the state he is actively describing, until he risks what approaches a confession:

For them,
The long night sweeping over these trees
And houses will have been no more than one
In a series whose end
Only the nervous or morbid consider.
But for us, the wide-awake, who tend
To believe the worst is always waiting
Around the next corner or hiding in the dry,
Unsteady branch of a sick tree, debating
Whether or not to fell the passerby,
It has a sinister air.

The alternation of day and night that leads to an abstract sense of time – and hence, after Blake, to a sense of mortality – is underscored earlier in the poem by a reference to the storm outside as “a quirk in the dry run/Of conventional weather.” Attempting to wrest a degree of imaginative freedom from the dryness and morbidity of “conventional weather”, the speaker becomes a kind of Blakean Spectre of Urthona, who, in the description of Harold Bloom, is “the dark shadow of Los, the ordinary fearful selfhood in every poet” (BLOOM 1971: 33). Bloom’s description provides a key to Strand’s use of the plural pronoun, since Los’s imaginative stance is both isolating and exemplary. Strand’s speaker counts himself among “the wide-awake,” a condition that corresponds to a type of imaginative knowing, but one in which the present is so strongly identified with a future time that it is virtually voided of any positive content. The two “illusions” depicted in the poem are represented in the misleadingly casual terms of a vacation, but one in which physical inactivity is clearly a figure for the ceasing of mental or imaginative struggle:

How we wish we were sunning ourselves
 In a world of familiar views
 And fixed conditions, confined
 By what we know, and able to refuse
 Entry to the unaccounted for.

.....

No longer the exclusive,
 Last resorts in which we could unwind,
 Lounging in easy chairs,
 Recalling the various wrongs
 We had been done or spared, our rooms
 Seem suddenly mixed up in our affairs.

The answer to the speaker's "How we wish ..." is, in my view, "partially", and the participial "sunning" aptly expresses the general romantic ambivalence that surrounds the figure of the sun, an ambivalence that tends to lead to the positing of (at least) two figurative suns: one whose emanative strength is displaced or usurped by the poet and another which turns the earth's opacity into a source of shadow and darkness, and hence figurative potential, as in Emerson's statement: "[t]he sun were insipid if the earth were not opaque" (EMERSON 1990: 386). That the vacation motif present in this poem is only partially desirable is also conveyed by the sense of confinement associated with it, and it is important to stress the affinity between this motif and the meaning of "nothing" as it emerges in the final lines of "Sleeping with One Eye Open":

And I lie sleeping with one eye open,
 Hoping
 That nothing, nothing will happen.

The repetition of the word "nothing" in the poem's final line can be taken either to heighten or to undermine its expressive force. The drift of "Violent Storm" suggests that it should be read as performing both, as if signaling its dual status as attributed and uttered discourse. The speaker has imagined himself into a corner, the only escape from which is represented as the further dissolution of his selfhood. Whether or not this double gesture is imaginatively satisfying remains to be seen. Note, however,

that in "Violent Storm" the insufficiency of a certain conception of selfhood is explicitly stated: "We cannot take ourselves or what belongs to us/For granted." The suggestion is of a false sense of security, represented by the "Closed windows" and "bolted doors" that ostensibly keep the "loose, untidy wind" at bay. But the wind "pours/Through the open chambers of the trees," and in its expressive and destructive force becomes synonymous with poetry and, ultimately, with the poetic self, which requires placing this poem within a figurative universe that includes the writings of Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens, among others. In this vein, the sharing of the semes of "looseness" and "undoing" by the speaker of "Sleeping with One Eye Open" and the wind in "Violent Storm" is highly suggestive, as is the pun on "unwind" in the latter poem. This correspondence is further supported by the speaker's recognition that his own selfhood cannot be definitively established by any inside/outside pattern of figuration; that is, that "our rooms/Seem suddenly mixed up in our affairs." What is curious about this expression is the use of the adverb "suddenly," as if a recognition of the intricacy of the speaker's selfhood befell him from some external source, a figurative irony of considerable extent, and one whose impact reaches back to the apparently direct statement of self-insufficiency cited above. The question thus becomes whether the self cannot be taken for granted because an external factor threatens to undo it, or because the initial sense of its integrity turns out to be an illusion. The poem does not answer this question, and in not answering it assumes a position alongside "Sleeping with One Eye Open" as a poem about an unresolved crisis of the imagination. In both poems, the speakers' imaginative power is externalized, represented as a natural event, and hence disowned; consequently their poetic selfhood is deconstituted.²

Just how far this representational strategy will take Strand exceeds the limits of this paper, but perhaps a more general key to this poem's constitution of selfhood is provided by Strand's use of the word "commodious." The "bright/Commodious rooms of dreams", in which his counter-figures are bound together in mutual entertainment, are spatial projections of a psycho-temporal condition, or one in which a perceived abundance of time is translated into the apprehension of an unfillable

2 I must emphasize that this act of deconstitution is thematic in nature and, especially in the case of Strand, thematic concerns frequently do not coincide with the work his poems seek to perform, of which the edifying of his own poetic powers is an important element.

(accommodating) space. Psychologically, its effect is one of slackening, as the tension produced in the self by its projection forward in time is relieved. Philosophically, this state could be described as leading to a form of Epicureanism, and thus, as Keats and Blake suggest in their poetry, constitutes perhaps the largest single threat to the formation of a poet, which is why it is represented in this poem as a state to be overcome.³

Readers familiar with the poetry of Wallace Stevens will undoubtedly hear in Strand's use of the word "commodious" echoes of a passage that bears an essential relation to the condition I have just described. I am referring to the short poem "The Beginning", from *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950). The poem describes the passing of summer, personified as a female presence, and in fact begins with a reference to her past glory, now reduced to a "few stains/And the rust and rot of the door through which she went." Summer is a synecdochal representation of nature itself, and Stevens follows Blake in portraying natural existence as immensely compelling in human terms and yet necessarily tragic, and thus imaginatively stifling. Summer sits "To comb her dewy hair" in the aftermath of her fullness, and this lateness of being is depicted in the image of "a touchless light [summer's "dewy hair" but also summer herself],/Perplexed by its darker iridescences." "Perplexed" here condenses both its current meaning of "confused" and its etymological sense of "entangled", or "entwined". Summer's consciousness, as light, is tinged with "darker iridescences," with the knowledge of its essentially temporal nature, and with the sense of this knowledge arriving too late, or after the fullness of her power has passed. This knowledge is hence a kind of compensation for the loss of power, though how it can be trumped out of tragic awareness into edifying thought is not suggested in the poem. No less significantly, for Stevens or for Strand, the fate of summer in this poem represents a form of belatedness, or what in his *Notes Toward the Supreme Fiction* Stevens calls "later reason" (section I, line 21).

Aspects of this condition have been depicted in the writings of Freud, Emerson, Stevens, and Bloom, among others, but what is crucial about it for our discussion is what it implies about the temporal arrangement of the construction of meaningfulness, of meaning's necessary belatedness. Frequently in the poetry of Stevens and Strand,

³ Symptomatically, however, this overcoming is not depicted in Strand's poem as a willed or willable event but rather remains beyond the reach of the speaking subject.

this condition is represented by the act of reading. In “The Beginning,” however, it appears in several distinct modes: in the relation of the poem’s title to its body; in the asynchronous depiction of power and consciousness (expressed, it should be added, through natural imagery); and, almost pictorially, in the relations of light and dark established in the poem, as well as in the image of summer’s “Inwoven” dress:

This is the chair from which she gathered up
Her dress, the carefulest, commodious weave

Inwoven by a weaver to twelve bells ...
The dress is lying, cast-off, on the floor. (STEVENS 1990: 428)

The gathering up of her dress represents summer’s ripening, or the point at which her coincidence with the moment of her being is total, while its discarding expresses her fall into belatedness. Stevens’ poem is itself a reconstitution of images from Blake and Shelley, images I think are ultimately traceable to Milton. In Blake’s *Jerusalem* (Chapter 2, Plate 29), Albion addresses Vala in terms that reveal the latter’s affinity with the character of summer in Stevens’ poem:

Who art thou that appearest in gloomy pomp
Involving the Divine Vision in colours of autumn ripeness
I never saw thee till this time, nor beheld life abstracted
Nor darkness immingled with light on my furrowd field
Whence camest thou! who art thou O loveliest? the Divine Vision
Is as nothing before thee, faded is all life and joy. (BLAKE 1988: 29-34)

In fact, in Stevens’ poem, summer plays the roles of both Albion and Vala as one who both elicits and beholds this condition of belatedness, referred to by Blake as “life abstracted”, a phrase that suggests the kinship between this condition and “later reason” or “retroactive meaningfulness”, Harold Bloom’s loose translation of Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (BLOOM 1977:168). Figuratively it is represented by a mingling of light and darkness, a pattern that looks forward to Stevens’ poem but also to the “inwoven darkness” of Shelley’s *Alastor*, in which the Poet glimpses the failing of his own poetic powers in the mingling of darkness with the “dun beams” of the moon:

When on the threshold of the green recess
The wanderer's footsteps fell, he knew that death
Was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled,
Did he resign his high and holy soul
To the images of the majestic past,
That paused within his passive being now,
Through some dim latticed chamber.

.....

Hope and despair,
The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear
Marred his repose, the influxes of sense,
And his own being unalloyed by pain,
Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed
The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there
At peace, and faintly smiling:— his last sight
Was the great moon, which o'er the western line
Of the wide world her mighty horn suspended,
With whose dun beams inwoven darkness seemed
To mingle. (SHELLEY 1977: 85)

Shelley's "inwoven darkness" is, of course, a glimpsing of mortality, but the imagery of this passage suggests that its central concern is really imaginative death, or Coleridgean death-in-life. The wanderer's being is rendered "passive" and "feeble"; it is open to "the influxes of sense" but can no longer act upon them. This is the context for the *apparent* mingling of darkness with the moon's "dun beams." Shelley's pun on the word "dun" no doubt echoes that of Shakespeare's sonnet 130 but is used here to underscore the redundancy, even relief, of actual physical death in the face of its imaginative version. The troublesome word in this passage is "inwoven", troublesome because of its unclear relationship to the alternative "woven" and because of its apparently redundant echo in the word "mingle". How can something that is "inwoven" be said to "mingle", unless it has become simultaneously involved with more than one substance?

The passage from *Alastor* is not a simple example of redundancy, however poetically or stylistically justifiable it might be. Rather, it has significant cognitive

implications, the drawing out of which requires a consideration of its immediate poetic context and of its dominant precursor image. Contextually, it is important to note that, like Blake's "My Spectre Around Me Day and Night" and Strand's "Violent Storm", *Alastor* is a poem about the threat to the imagination of an excessive inwardness or solipsism. A consequence of this state is – and here the cognitive necessity and impossibility of the weaving metaphor becomes palpable – an unraveling of the poetic subject into distinct threads, one of which is that of a critical or meta-consciousness, which are nonetheless mutually dependent; that is, which together constitute the fabric of poetic subjectivity. Shelley portrays this form of consciousness, which transforms mental processes into objects of representation, as darkness, as darkness "inwoven" because it has no external source but rather is cast by, or in, the (self-)representation of consciousness.

But Shelley is not the first to make this "inwoven darkness" visible, even if he lends it his own original contours. Indeed, before him, before Blake even, there is Milton, and Milton's own struggle with darkness, especially that portrayed in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*:

Thus talking hand in hand alone they pass'd
On to their blissful Bower; it was a place
Chos'n by the sovran Planter, when he fram'd
Of thickest covert was inwoven shade
Of firm and fragrant leaf ... (MILTON 1980: 230)

Milton's "inwoven shade" belongs to the "blissful Bower" of his prelapsarian Garden of Eden, and thus does not refer to a problem of consciousness – that is, to an awareness of mortality. Instead, it is a gift from the "sovran Planter" meant for "man's delightful use", which is to say, meant to ward off monotony:

Thus at thir shadie Lodge arriv'd, both stood
Both turnd, and under open Skie, Air, Earth and Heav'n
And starrie Pole: Thou also mad'st the Night,
Which we in our appointed work imployd
Have finisht happie in our mutual help
And mutual love, the Crown of all our bliss
For us too large, where thy abundance wants

Partakers, and uncropt falls to the ground.
 To fill the Earth, who shall with us extoll
 Thy goodness infinite, both when we wake,
 And when we seek, as now, thy gift of sleep. (MILTON 1980: 231)

The gift of “inwoven shade” is one element of the more general offering of alternation, which includes the polarities of night/day and waking/sleeping, both of which can be viewed as instances, albeit wayward ones, of the more comprehensive polarity of light and darkness. In this “blissful Bower” darkness is, strictly speaking, unnecessary, another rendering of “unessential Night” (Book II, l. 439), since it is inconceivable that any singular state or quality granted by the “Maker Omnipotent” could be, in itself, excessive or insufficient.

I cannot here do justice to Milton’s complex and far-reaching figurative argument but have attempted to indicate a tension between, on the one hand, the desire to incorporate within this space a certain freedom or degree of self-making (in this respect, it is significant that his “inwoven shade” is in part composed of laurel leaves) and the sense that such a step is logically unnecessary, if not properly blasphemous. The vision of a pastoral world in which opposites, or contraries, are present and yet unable to yield any narrative of becoming also corresponds to the description of Beulah found in Blake’s *Milton*, and yet Blake shows Beulah to be alarmingly close to the solipsistic state of imaginative dearth he calls Ulro, as well as being more generally articulated with a series of related states that, taken together, tell us a story of the unfolding of human consciousness. Whatever Milton intended by his use of the image of “inwoven shade”, it seems clear that a significant chain of romantic and post-romantic writers have inherited it as a necessary description of the fabric of human consciousness.

As I remarked earlier, in the poems “Violent Storm” and “The Beginning,” the word “commodious” is used to indicate a state or feeling whose meaning is constructed a posteriori, a state imagined as woven out of a temporal obliviousness and representable as pure or seamless light. As I have attempted to show, its counter-state – or the state in which this condition is gathered up into consciousness – has been represented repeatedly and with remarkable consistency: from Blake (“darkness immingled with light”) through Shelley (“inwoven darkness”) and Stevens (“a touchless light/Perplexed by its darker iridescences”) to the final lines of Strand’s poem: “Already now the lights/That shared our wakefulness are dimming/And the dark brushes against

our eyes.” Strand’s version of this pattern is closer than any of these others to Emerson’s powerful interiorization of natural imagery, conveyed in his use of the word “eye” as a figure for the locus of imaginative transformation, as in the following passage on the common nature of stars and poets: “These beautiful basilisks set their brute, glorious eyes on the eye of every child, and, if they can, cause their nature to pass through his wondering eyes into him, and so all things are mixed.” (EMERSON 1990: 91). Emerson inherits this identification of the eye as the seat of imaginative power from Coleridge, and particularly from the latter’s *Dejection: An Ode*:

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze—and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel how beautiful they are! (COLERIDGE 1985:114-115)

Emerson’s own projection of the relationship between the quality of blankness and the eye introduces a subtle but significant twist to this passage: “The ruin or blank that we see when we look at nature is in our own eye” (EMERSON 1990: 35). Without undermining the creative force of Coleridge’s identification, Emerson significantly qualifies it by translating it into spatial terms: located *within* the eye, blankness is transformed from *the* identifying characteristic of the eye to *an* identifying characteristic. This shift is part of Emerson’s attempt to domesticate the romantic imagination, to claim the conditions of its volatility or alternation as our permanent natural habitat. One of the consequences of this is the effacing of the difference between the active and passive valences of the imagination – or between the imagination as the means of establishing one’s relation to the world and the imagination as a measure of the distance that separates one from the world – as if the passing of nature through the “glorious eyes” of the stars into the “wondering eyes” of the child

REPOVANEIC SAIAICANNANV ANOUMHAF: COGINTO: OUBVET: SIVS: S: S: VIOLENT STORM

were enabled by the blank that resides in both. Effacing this difference undermines the force of the hyperbolic representation of the disaffected imagination that characterizes the line of romantic and post-romantic thought that I have attempted to evoke here and to which the poem “Violent Storm” returns. If in Emerson, the eye names the locus of the exchange of power between subject and object, in Strand’s poem, the eye stands between subject and object, allowing for their articulation and simultaneously reinforcing the distance that separates them. In its dissociation from the Cartesian categories of subject and object, the speaking “eye” of “Violent Storm” emerges as neutral (or neutered) third possibility, as a sheer instrument of articulation, void of any determined content, much as a paintbrush or empty canvas could be conceived.⁴ An object itself, the eye nonetheless objectifies; it makes passive what it observes, pacifies it, as images are stroked across its retina. The use of the active form of the verb “brushes” almost obscures the painterly analogy latent in the image that draws the poem to a close, and yet this usage powerfully indicates the usurpation of the artist’s own activity by the “influx” of his senses, in a manner that suggests the strong thematic kinship between this poem and the passage from Shelley’s *Alastor* cited above. A distant cousin of Blake’s Spectre of Urthona as well as Shelley’s Poet, Strand’s eyes know – that is to say, imagine – that they are dying by virtue of the fact that they cannot move, cannot be moved. And yet requiems of the imagination are always something else, closer to exorcisms than to funereal processions. As Wallace Stevens tells us, in “The Plain Sense of Things,” in lines that evoke something of the inevitability of the romantic imagination, even – or especially – in determining our perceptions of the inevitable,

The absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,

4 Despite this characterization, I do not mean to suggest that Strand has moved beyond the pitfalls (and potentialities) of Cartesian dualism. Rather his work, like that of Beckett, seems to cleave to its categories with as much tenacity as critical force. The precise role played by such categories in the development of romantic and post-romantic thought is still in need of examination, though it seems to me that the severe process of objectification Strand’s speakers undergo is a kind of mirror opposite of that element of romantic thought commonly known as animism. Since such opposites are not alternatives, what practical force do they exercise upon each other?

The great pond and its waste of lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires. (STEVENS 1990: 503)

WORKS CITED

- BLAKE, W. (1988): *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*. Rev. ed. Ed. D. V. Erdman. New York: Anchor Books.
- BLOOM, H. (1971): *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Rev. ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- _____. (1977): *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- COLERIDGE, S. T. (1985): *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*. Ed. H. J. Jackson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- EMERSON, R.W. (1990): *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*. Ed. Richard Poirier. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MILTON, J. (1980): *The Complete Poems*. Ed. B. A. Wright. London: Dent.
- SHELLEY, P. B. (1977): *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. D. H. Reiman and S. B. Powers. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- STEVENS, W. (1990): *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Vintage Books.
- STRAND, M. (1990): *Selected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.