'A Strange Kind of Love': Love and Disembodiment in Mark Strand's Poem "The Story of Our Lives"

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Abstract: The present essay consists of an in-depth analysis of the poem entitled "The Story of Our Lives", written by Mark Strand, on the subject of the absence of physicality in the love relationship concerning that poem. I have chosen this poem specifically because it addresses several points that I have found significant regarding its characters: the space of the room, the experience of dreams, the failure of language, the dichotomy of body and mind, and the presence of the book as the ruler of their fate. I have followed a phenomenological approach mainly under the study of Drew Leder's work *The Absent Body* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. The relevance of my investigation relies on the fact that, although absence and disembodiment have already been described as some of the most distinguishable traits in Strand's work, I will connect these elements to the theme of love in his poetry, a subject that has not been studied as a main focus.
Keywords: Disembodiment, love, fate, room, phenomenology, Mark Strand.

"Una extraña forma de amor": Amor y desencarnación en el poema de Mark Strand "The Story of Our Lives"

Resumen: El presente ensayo consiste en un profundo análisis del poema titulado "The Story of Our Lives", escrito por Mark Strand, sobre el tema de la ausencia de fisicalidad en la relación de amor que concierne al poema. He escogido este poema específicamente porque trata diversos puntos que encuentro significativos en cuanto a los personajes en él: el espacio de la habitación, la experiencia de los sueños, el fallo del lenguaje, la dicotomía entre el cuerpo y la mente, y la presencia del libro como el controlador de su destino. He seguido un enfoque fenomenológico, principalmente bajo el estudio del trabajo de Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* y *The Poetics of Space* de Gastón Bachelard. La relevancia de mi investigación recae en el hecho de que, aunque la ausencia y la desencarnación ya se han descrito como algunos de los rasgos más característicos en el trabajo de Mark Strand, conectaré estos elementos con el asunto del amor en su poesía, un tema que no se ha estudiado todavía como enfoque principal.
Palabras clave: desencarnación, amor, destino, habitación, fenomenología, Mark Strand.

1. Introduction

Mark Strand, a poet rooted in the American lyric tradition, is recognised for his examination of themes such as absence, memory, time, and the self, blending surreal aspects with philosophical richness, simplicity and irony. Influential literary figures in Strand's work include Whitman, Bishop, and particularly, Stevens.

In "The Story of Our Lives" Strand depicts the life of a couple whose lives are doomed by a book that seems to dictate all their actions. The book, which is first mentioned in the opening lines of the poem, is being read by the couple that appears in it; husband and wife are unable to escape their fate, which is always made known to both them and the reader, by means of the actions inscribed in the book. The landscape inhabited by the couple is the reduced space of a room. From the very beginning, the characters admit both their imprisonment and their inability to perform any action but that of reading the book. As John Bensko argues, the title itself can be misleading since it would suggest some biographical text (83) although, as we will see later, this is not the case. Regarding the deceptive title of the poem, it may be of interest to bring to the fore T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", since it was a great influence in the poetry of Mark Strand. In *Moments of Being*, a book where Barrie Brett collects moments in the lives of various celebrities where they share experiences that were relevant for them, Mark Strand told him that "at the age of seventeen, I read the poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' by T. S. Eliot. It was this literary moment that made me want to write poetry" (213). It is not strange then, that, despite their differences, we can find some similarities in the strategic election of an ironic title that doesn't match with the content that it may suggest but rather disconcerts the reader, who finds that the contents of the poem diverge from what should be expected in a poem of love. Throughout the poem we will encounter two different narrators: the main character, or husband, who sometimes addresses the reader and other times addresses his wife; and the second narrator, which is the book itself. Strand makes use of italics whenever the book takes the role of narrator to differentiate it from the speaker as narrator.

Throughout this essay I will approach the idea of disembodiment as a disconnection from the human living body. I contemplate the body through the organs of perception, mechanical or dehumanising acts on humans, and the dominance of mental over physical aspects. I also consider the greater focus on inanimate objects than on living bodies, and how sleep and nearness to death represent disengagement from the body. Finally, I contrast the written body with the real one.

2. The Strandian Room. The Space of Disembodiment

The scenarios in Strand's poems tend to be inner spaces set in unspecified locations. Regarding the choice of the room as his prototypical landscape, when interviewed by W. T. Pfefferle, Mark Strand asserted: "The space of my poem is the space of the room in the poems" (25). The room described in "The Story of Our Lives" resembles more incarceration and jail, or even a haunted house, than a harmonious place where conjugal life unfolds. The idea that the story takes place entirely within a single room is far from a love story; it suggests that while there may have been happy times, the couple now feels confined and apathetic, as if they are drifting apart. One room alone cannot capture the entirety of a couple's journey together, as implied by the title in the poem. As a means to analyse the room in the poem as the place of disembodiment, I will follow Bachelard's concept of *topoanalysis*. Bachelard describes this type of analysis as "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (31). In order to perform a topoanalysis, the researcher must make questions about the space to be analysed: its size, the light, the objects and furniture, the characters in it, etc. As Bachelard mentions, "For a knowledge of intimacy, localization of the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than determination of dates" (30). Taking this into account, the spareness of the description of the room, together with the behaviour of its inhabitants, provide significant clues in Strand's treatment of physicality in the poem. In his book of essays, *The Weather of Words*, Strand quotes Bachelard: "Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (117). Therefore, the room, Strand's prototypical scenario, and the absence of action and movement in it will be of great importance in order to understand the atmosphere of the poem and how it enhances the feeling of disembodiment.

What follows is my topoanalysis of "The Story of Our Lives":

Size: unspecified.
Light, colour, temperature: dark outside, darker in the room.
View: the street, trees, cars, the house of another man.
Furniture and objects: the book, rugs, couch, mirror, masks, a crown, cold dresses, costumes.
Characters: the speaker and his wife, the book, the other man.

The poem begins with the lines: "We are reading The Story of Our Lives / which takes place in a room" (Strand 27). Although we have no details about the size of the room, the following line suggests a very reduced setting to be able to contain the story of anyone's life: "It is almost as if the room were the world" (27). Here Strand not only diminishes the spatial, with regards to the place where they live, but also to the mental aspect. Gaston Bachelard argues that "Our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (26). If the room is the character's world, then the world -both physical and emotional-, becomes a tiny microcosm in Strand's poem, since it has been limited to just one room. The setting described in the first lines will not change throughout the poem. There are no details about the room's size or the predominant colours. The only exception is the allusion to a few objects that only contribute more to the strangeness and discomfort of the couple. Furthermore, we may observe that this bleak atmosphere is enhanced by the lack of movement and sound; neither natural elements nor immaterial objects ever move or are moved. If life outside the room only offers a somber perspective, life inside the room appears even more disheartening: "It is dark outside, in the room it is darker" (33). The space of the room exposes an even gloomier ambiance than the paralyzed world beyond them. According to Bachelard, "The house even more than the landscape is a 'psychic state', and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy" (91). In the intimate space of the room there is neither light nor colour but darkness, which is commonly associated with depressing emotional states. In Strand's own words: "In some ways dark or the darkness has always been my freedom because it's where I can project whatever I want" (Handal 6). Therefore, both his choice of the room, as mentioned earlier, and the insistence on darkness provide him with the elements with which he feels most comfortable in his creativity. Although the room has a view of the street, the only insight it provides enhances the paralysis that pervades the couple's life both inside and outside the room, since there are no signs of life outside the room either (Strand 27). The anonymity of the space brings detachment since when we are rooted in a space, we are prone to naming the city, the street, or even the neighbourhood to which we feel attached. In his prologue to *Tormenta de uno* by Mark Strand, Dámaso López, very accurately describes Strand's archetypal scenarios: "Places do not even get a proper name. Some features of their

architecture or urban planning are alluded to, but not their names; it is just the city, an anonymous city in which any city could be reflected" (Strand 7).[1] Despite its anonymity, the room's uncanniness is precisely what makes it singular and particularly Strandian. The place resembles the *Hades* that Strand describes in the pages of his text "A Poet's Alphabet", like a particular version of some anteroom previous to Hell:

> H is for Hades, which I like to think of as an influence because of all places it strikes to me as the most poetic. A last resort, a high-walled kingdom, it has one major disadvantage -the weather-, which is windy, dark and cold. Its major advantage is the great amount of leisure time it offers. It is straight down under the world, and is the immortal resting place of souls. (6)

Hades stands for a stronger entrapment than that of hell, since nothing happens there but an eternal waiting. For this reason, if we think of the couple inhabiting a room in absolute loneliness, in a place where nothing ever occurs, we identify their room as closer to Hades -the space of *Thanatos*, ascribed to those who wait to enter hell- than to Paradise -the space of *Eros*, belonging to the living and to love. Regarding the objects in the room, Strand significantly focuses more on the inanimate objects -things that are not made of flesh and blood, and therefore do not have bodies-, than on the characters: "The furniture in the room is never shifted, / and the rugs become darker each time / our shadows pass over them" (27). Together with the fixed position of the furniture, we encounter two figures that remain as motionless as the few objects surrounding them. In the act of stepping onto the rugs, only their shadows are mentioned, and not their physical forms. This creates an eerie sensation, as though the characters were nothing more than apparitions. Peter Stitt discusses Strand's peculiar confinement of imagination:

> It is somewhat curious that Strand's retreat into a world of the mind should be accompanied by such extreme reductiveness. Somehow the method does not so much liberate the imagination as confine it. Being released from

1 The quote belongs to the Spanish translation of Mark Strand's *Blizzard of One* edited by Visor Libros in 2019.

> the demands of reality has meant for many writers a lush
> flowering of creativity within which they could go ahead
> and make up anything. (205)

Strand's treatment of the elements in the room bestows them with some phantasmagorical quality, since they are so unstable in their own immobility that they seem on the verge of disappearance: "The rugs, the furniture, / seem almost imaginary now" (28). The actions performed by the couple are always passive and repetitive, as if they were also objects themselves. The repetition of the last verses uttered in an almost mechanical way deprives them of their humanity:

> We sit beside each other on the couch,
> reading about the coach.
> We say it is ideal.
> It is ideal. (27)

As readers we have more knowledge about the furniture -the inanimate- than about the actual couple -flesh and bones-. In Strand's poem, the relationship between body and world is severed, and we can only envision the characters in the book as ethereal characters and not as fully embodied human beings. Besides, we will find in the poem some instances of unreal imaginary spaces, such as when we read: "I read and was moved by the desire to offer myself / to the house of your sleep" (30). Here Strand builds an alternative space that belongs solely to the woman, and by joining her in that house of her sleep, the husband would be disconnected from his physical consciousness, just like her. In relation to these lines, Harold Bloom suggests that the speaker "wants to inhabit that sleep with her, to escape the all-knowing book" (19). Sleep is both a way to escape the tyranny of the book, but also the emotional pain ascribed to the human body. Later, when the woman imagines a life with a different man, she seems to merely reproduce the same desolated atmosphere where she already lives:

> She imagined a dark, heartless parlor,
> a cold fireplace, a man sitting
> writing a letter to a woman
> who had sacrificed her life for love. (32)

From the adjectives selected to describe her imagined house: (dark, heartless, cold) the parlor she depicts is closer to decay and abandonment than to an idyllic desirable place or an Edenic garden where she could meet the man of her dreams. We may be confronted with the idea that she has never known any other kind of scenario and, therefore, she is not able to envision an actual home. Because of their reduced space, the characters in the poem seem to have been deprived of their imagination and they limit their thoughts to the places they know so well. As we have seen from the *topoanalysis* of "The Story of Our Lives", the characteristics of the room and its effects on our perception of the characters aggravate the feeling of absence of the human factor: the reduced space, the anonymity of the location, the darkness and lack of signs of life, together with the unreal atmosphere that pervades the room, create the perfect canvas for the portrayal of disembodiment.

3. Dreaming the Story of Our Lives

Dreaming and sleeping entail bodily disconnection because of a lack of consciousness of our material existence. In his contribution to *The Poetic Fantastic*, Lance Olsen considers that Strand places the speaker in a "hypnagogic state -that state of semi-consciousness that precedes dreams" (90). Those instances between dream and sleep stand as a nowhere place, similar to Hades, the perfect site where the real and the unreal can coexist. Throughout the poem, the actions of sleeping, waking and dreaming not only provide more instances of disembodiment because of this disengagement from the body, but also because husband and wife alternate their periods of sleep so that sometimes when one of them dreams or sleeps, the other is awake. This provokes that they do not coincide in time and space physically, thus increasing their lack of interaction. Dreamlike states provide spatio-temporal indefiniteness so that our perception of reality becomes subject to our own imagination.

In the third section of the poem, when the narrator wakes up, he seems to accept their bleak destiny: "This morning I woke and believed / there was no more to our lives / than the story of our lives" (29). Once the husband awakens, we are confronted with what resembles more the account of a nightmare than the speaker's peaceful waking in his own bed at home. According to Bachelard, "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace"

(28). Strand's scenarios deviate from this since he offers, instead, a place where both dreaming and waking are equally terrifying and evoke similar feelings of dread, much like Kafka's writings, highlighting the characters' experiences of alienation and existential despair. The existence of a bed has never been mentioned in the poem: therefore, we could also infer that they sleep on the couch where they read the malefic book that retells their story. Later, when the wife falls asleep, the husband begins to read again: "You fell back to sleep and I began to read / those mysterious parts you used to guess at / while they were being written" (29). The written characters become blurred with the ones that appear in their dreams. In this sense, Strand adheres to what I consider one of his resources in poetry: the fiction of the dream. Dream and fiction coincide in their being versions of a reality that, in this case, we cannot reach. In the following lines, the speaker tells about the parts that he is reading while his wife is asleep:

> For her love is a sacrifice.
> The part describes her death
> and she is never named,
> which is one of the things
> you could not stand about her. (29-30)

The implications of death and of the woman not being named recall again the concept of disembodiment. The dead body escapes life and degenerates until it vanishes, and the absence of a name turns the character into something unreachable because of its anonymity. Following Drew Leder: "in deep sleep, we discover the radical anonymity of natural existence" (59). This absence of identity that persists throughout the poem projects dehumanization on the characters. We read about dresses, chairs or stones, but we never get to know any of the physical traits of the participants in the poem. The husband-narrator keeps reading while his wife sleeps and he painfully encounters the part in the book that describes her absence:

> Before you woke
> I read another part that described your absence
> and told you how you sleep to reverse
> the progress of your life. (30)

Sleeping cannot reverse the progress of life, except in fictional narratives, where the author can play with the non-linear narratives available in literature, but dreams can also create confusion with the notion of time. Some pages written in the book work sometimes as projections of the couple's own dreams, as when the speaker refers to the man who lives across the street:

> They built a house there,
> and one day a man walked out of it.
> You fell in love with him
> because you knew he would never visit you,
> would never know you were waiting. (28)

Here we have a clear instance of the idea of a love originating only in the mental realm, where physical interaction is impossible and even undesirable. This absence of the spatio-temporal coincidence of their bodies creates a strange conception of desire. She falls in love precisely because of the impossibility of their encounter. At this point we cannot be sure if the other man is just a version of himself as portrayed by the book but without the woman. It could also appear that Strand creates a replica of the house where they are reading the story of their lives. The other man appears as someone with the probability of a different life from theirs when the book as narrator tells: "*Maybe the man who lived there, / the man she loved, was reading / the story of another life*" (32). Nevertheless, the use of "maybe" gives us the clue that the possibility of another book or another life is only a fantasy. Although the sleeping or dreaming characters in the poem remain physically present, this physicality is not perceived by them and, as Leder writes regarding dreaming states: "there is a vivid flow of perceptual experience yet coupled with a recessed disembodiment" (59) since, as he argues: "My own sleeping body is one thing I will never directly see" (58). It seems that neither sleeping nor waking do liberate the couple from the book, since these actions merely mirror one another as if they were identical.

4. The Language of Nothingness

The inability to produce language is another of the examples of disembodiment we will encounter throughout the poem. As Drew Leder notes, "language is a profoundly embodied affair" (121). Destitute

of this human faculty then, the characters appear as less human and more fictional. This disconnection from language pervades not only the written word -in the poem the speaker puts the pen down and the role of the writer is taken by the book- but also the spoken word.

In an interview with Eleanor Wachtel in 1999, Mark Strand affirmed that "Emotional engagement is enhanced by language. There is no love without the language of love" ("American Poet"). This statement reinforces the withdrawal from emotional involvement between husband and wife in the poem, since they never speak to each other and no words of love are ever uttered in their story. Besides, the absence of dialogue emphasizes the absence of interaction between them but also erases one of the most important bodily functions performed by humans, that of speech. At one point, the book as narrator tells:

> *They became silent and did not know how to begin*
> *the dialogue that was necessary.*
> *It was words that created divisions, in the first place,*
> *that created loneliness.*
> (32)

One of the subjects we will encounter in Strand's poetry is that words and language are not useful for representing the world. Because the characters are deprived from the function of speech, it appears that the book has taken possession of their voices, and has therefore prevented them from the ability of oral communication. Although in the following lines we might perceive a glimpse of dialogue, the conversation remains a failure:

> You are asking if I am tired,
> if I want to keep reading.
> I say yes to everything.
> You cannot hear me. (33)

To her questions, he answers "yes" to everything, in an absolute indifference to her words. Furthermore, a "yes" that is unheard has no relevance, and as Harold Bloom puts it, "His indecision binds him ultimately to a life of nothing" (20). Besides, the fact that the wife cannot hear him epitomizes lack of communication and alienation. Hearing and speaking as means of reception and production of language

do not function properly here. Speaking is for them just a shadow of the human aspect of language. On the relatedness of language and body, Drew Leder argues: "In speech, language remains closely wedded to its point of origin in the human body. Speech (excepting the question of recordings) happens in the immediate context of an embodied speaker and listener" (123). Accordingly, every time the book takes the role of the narrator, the couple's disembodiment is reinforced; first, because what we encounter is written language and, second, because the characters are being written instead of writing themselves and, therefore, they become objects rather than subjects.

In relation to absence, Lars Frers has noted:

> Merleau-Ponty states that silence is nothing but an absence of sounds that appears as such because it follows on from sounds that could be heard. Silence appears as an interruption of sounds that have been perceived. i.e. sounds that did not just exist somewhere, but that were actually experienced by someone. (435)

Following Frers's argument, the absence of sounds that pervades the room in the poem undoubtedly recalls times when dialogue between the couple was possible, although it is now interrupted. At times, we have the illusion that the husband as narrator is producing language, but later we understand that this is always an action provoked by the dominance of the book over him. The use of the conditional in the following stanza adds to the resignation of the couple since they cannot participate actively in their lives and can only passively keep on reading:

> We are reading the story of our lives
> as though we were in it,
> as though we had written it.
> This comes up again and again. (27-28)

In discussing the role of repetition and its impact on the poem, Harold Bloom observes, "the story unfolds while we read it, as it unfolds the narrator. The repetition of the phrase 'We are reading the story of our lives' suggests that the action is cyclical and constant" (17-18). Consequently, repetition within the poem amplifies the mechanical nature of the couple, portraying them as automata caught in a tedious

cycle. In addition, the failure of language contributes to a sense of temporal ambiguity, considering that the human body is inherently tied to chronological sequentiality.

5. Absence of the Body, Presence of the Mind

Right from the start of the poem, the actions the characters have performed are those related to the mind instead of the body and their only few movements are those of turning the pages of the book. According to Drew Leder, "My relation to other subjects is, as well, a relation of flesh and blood. In Merleau-Ponty's description, I discover my own visibility and that of the world only through the gaze of another" (67). But, what if this gaze of another is missing? The couple's failure to engage with one another leads to their mutual invisibility both to each other and to the outside world, since a love relationship depends on acknowledging the other person. Following Levinas, "Love remains a relation with the other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, the beloved" (254). The couple feels that the distance between them is widening, but even this physical divide occurs only in their minds which, in turn, are controlled by the book. The sole instance in the poem where the wife is seen reading illustrates the neglect in their shared life: "*She seemed to consider his absence /of no special importance*" (28). We can perceive how irrelevant their lives are since we can envision them as secondary characters with regards to the book: "We are reading the story of our lives / as if we were in it / as though we have written it" (27). The use of the conditional tense here intensifies the idea of their futile existence.

Mark Strand has frequently been described as "the poet of absence" by critics such as Richard Jackson (136-145), Sven Birkerts (36), or Linda Gregerson (6). The experience of absence necessarily needs a previous occurrence of presence to be perceived as such; something, present before, must be missing. Strand plays continually with the tension between presence and absence but favouring the latter, which causes strangeness and discomfort. Throughout the poem there is also an insistence on passivity. The narrator is tired, and he knows that the book is aware of it, but this tiredness does not seem to be connected with the physical but only with the mental or emotional side. The characters never have visual contact; they even look at themselves

through a mirror in order to relieve their solitude, or they read about each other in the pages of the book. Husband and wife are ghostly figures looking at their own shadows and we cannot perceive their physicality on either side of the mirror: "They sat beside each other on the couch. / They were the copy, the tired phantoms / of something they had been before" (33). The couple remains entrapped between past and present, with no possibility of a future that will inevitably dissolve into nothingness once the book is closed. The concept of disembodiment emerges from the idea of body and mind as two distinct aspects that can be conceived of as separate and which, in turn, only when joined may conform to human wholeness. In his studies regarding the loss of body awareness, Drew Leder claims that at times of disturbance we can even feel the body as the "Other", as opposed to the self. This is where his concept of *dys-appearance* comes as relevant; in *dys-appearance*, as opposed to *dis-appearance*, "The body appears as a thematic focus, but precisely as in a *dys* state –*dys* is from the Greek prefix signifying 'bad', 'hard', or 'ill' " (84). As he further explains: "dys-appearance tends to arise when we are away, apart, from the self. Surfacing in phenomena of illness, dysfunction, or threatened death, the body may emerge as an alien thing, a painful prison or tomb in which one is trapped" (87). Leder associates this dysfunctionality with illness; but this illness also includes the mental and emotional realms, which in the case of the couple is materialized in the form of anxiety and emotional paralysis: "Dys-appearance characterizes not only the limits of vital functioning but those of affectivity" (84). In the poem, by means of deleting, not only the focus on the body, but also the human activities associated with the body, Strand increases the estrangement in how we perceive the characters. We recognise that their bodies are never referenced, and we are aware of their lack of perception through the senses. This, together with the absence of interactions between them, heightens our awareness of their disembodied condition. I have already discussed the predominance of the mental aspect over the physical in Strand's poem. In *The Absent Body*, Leder also explains the problematic feeling of the invisibility of the mind as separate from the body:

> The experience of abstract thought thus provides one of the most powerful derivations for the notion of the rational mind as incorporeal. In this activity, the body of the thinker, the body of the sign, the body of the referent,

> are all experientially effaced. This strongly encourages the characterization of thought as a disembodied activity engaged in an immaterial soul. (125)

If we perceive this separation, this duality, the fact that in the poem all physical experience is being erased not only makes us focus on the absence of the body, but also on the insistence on mental activity. As Leder aptly puts it: "*It seems as if the thinker makes no use of a body*" (123) [2] and later he insists on that idea by saying that "thinking simply seems to come, involving no material substructure" (124). Hence, the insistence on mental activities contributes to our perception of the characters' bodies as absent from the poem. Peter Stitt speaks of this predominance of the world of the mind over the world of the body in Strand's work:

> The world of the mind is clearly predominant in the early poems of Mark Strand; reality is capricious, not to be trusted, even unknowable in any certain sense. The question of knowledge for Strand depends upon the question of perception; reality is so inconstant that the observer cannot trust what he seems to see. [...] Strand's major subject, then, becomes the question of human perception and how can this result in poetry. (204)

If we analyse the verbs that signal the actions performed by the couple, they belong to the realm of the mind: hope, consider, imagine, believe, guess, dream, learn or remember; whereas other verbs that could be related to the body, have to do with quiet activities like reading, sitting or waiting. Regarding lack of movement, Drew Leder asserts: "Human awareness can seem most disembodied only when the deep connection between perception and movement is broken" (116). Body and mind are profoundly disconnected in the characters in Strand's poem; even when verbs of perception occur, the actions are shadowed because they have been written in the book and thus dictated by it, because "It would be in the book. / Everything would be there" (31). The book has become the couple's only organ of perception and their only medium to contemplate their reduced microcosm. The figure of the book, which is an immaterial object turned into the controlling

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2 Italics in the original

force to which the characters are subjected to, will also contribute to the feeling of disembodiment.

6. The Book. Nothing but the Book

In "The Story of Our Lives", the figure of the book takes a central position in the development, or anti-development, of every aspect in the couple's lives. It sometimes assumes the role of the narrator throughout the poem, but also that of a perverse puppeteer, since the characters are always in its hands. The book stands as the medium through which the couple can have knowledge of the world, even if this world is as limited as the pages that had been written.

James F. Nicosia stated about "The Story of Our Lives", "that the only thing that is certain is the book created in the poem that creates the poet who writes the book" (45). Hence, a sense of fictionality also contributes to the disembodiment of the characters. The book becomes closely associated with the theme of the inescapability of fate:

> We keep turning the pages,
> hoping for something,
> something like mercy or change,
> a black line that would bind us
> or keep us apart. (Strand 27)

The couple appears as desperate because nothing reveals the possibility of a new life for them. On the contrary, as the husband narrates: "The way it is, it would seem / The book of our lives is empty" (27). Their only shared experience is that of reading the book, and as Drew Leder argues: "In reading I do not attend to my eyes but from them. [...]The rest of the body is often placed in background disappearance" (122). Consequently, when they read, their gaze is absorbed by the book and, in addition, they also stop perceiving their bodies. Quoting Leder, again, we could speak here of what he terms *mutual incorporation*:

> Through a natural empathy, one takes up the affective responses of another. I feel sadness as I witness another's tears and am infected by his or her laughter. There is a further transmission of intentions allowed by the use

> of gestures and language. In *mutual incorporation*, each person's capacities and interpretations find extension through the lived body of the Other.
> (94)

Mutual incorporation is the ability to perceive not through my own organs of perception but via the other person next to me. The feelings shared by the characters in the poem are those of hopelessness and anxiety and this provokes mutual incorporation, since by sharing those negative emotional states, the couple intensifies disconnection from their lived bodies, as if they had been isolated from one another and a contagion of paralysis and inactivity appears to happen between them instead. The husband as narrator feels his enslavement, not only in the room, but in the even smaller space that is the book, since it represents for them an inescapable cage and he finds he can only set the book aside because it dictates that he must. The narrator's yearning for another life -or another book- betrays the stagnancy and entrapment he is suffering: "I write that I wish to move beyond the book, / Beyond my life into another life" (28). Although the male character experiences impulses or desires, he cannot fulfill them. Besides, the book would prevent him from performing any action of his own free will. James F. Nicosia comments on the power of the book upon the couple and their fate by noting that

> The speaker may believe that he is choosing to write the book, but every time he puts pen to paper and consults the book, the words are already there. Even when he chooses his own destiny, this choice has been predetermined as well. Such despair and resignation dominate the poem. Ultimately, we are prisoners of fate: "They are the book and they are / nothing else."
> (47)

The book has a power that exceeds that of man or woman, acting like a divine presence. It can both create and destroy and, as we may see, the husband is not only incapable of writing the book, but he is also watching the woman reading instead of reading himself. This scene implies a somehow perverse voyeurist eroticism. The narrator is passively contemplating his wife reading about her falling in love with another man. Besides, the fact that she is reading about falling in love, instead of

falling in love in real life, is another sign of disembodiment. The couple seems to belong to the book so that they are resigned to admitting the fictional condition of their story where the book appears to know more about the woman's feelings than her own husband. Although we may sense that husband and wife have a desire for things to change, there is also an inherent fear provoked by the possible side effects that these changes might bring: "The book describes more than it should. / It wants to divide us" (Strand 29). The book sometimes stands as a menacing threat with its ability to separate them, but separation would imply change and also movement, and none of these occur. The book appears as a cage, but also as a mirror where the couple meet their other selves, thus producing a duplicate of their disembodied figures. David Kirby argues that in Strand's poem the book "is worse than a mirror, which merely reflects, as the images in the book preexist and cause anxiety by announcing limits that cannot be transcended" (30). This claim is evident in the following lines from the poem:

> The book said: *in these moments it was his book.*
> *A bleak crown rested uneasily on his head.*
> *He was the brief ruler of inner and outer discord,*
> *Anxious in his own kingdom.*
> (Strand 30)

The speaker's illusion of being the owner of the book and, therefore, the ruler of his fate only occurs during the passage where his wife is sleeping. There are no witnesses, and no one can provide evidence of his brief reign. Lance Olsen sheds some light on Strand's technical resources by saying that: "another way Strand disarms conventional notions about 'reality' is through his use of metafiction, a mode of narcissistic narrative that reinforces his key image of the mirror" (93-94). This resource mentioned by Olsen constantly adds to the feeling of strangeness that we perceive as readers. Ironically, the story has already been told to us and, reflecting what the characters have done in it, we are also reading the story of their lives. The book, which has become the speaker's organ of perception, materializes as his only way to interact with his wife, when at one point he tries to "read" the woman's face instead of actually seeing or touching her, when he says: "I looked at your face / and I read the eyes, the nose, the mouth" (Strand 31).

Regarding this action of reading instead of watching or touching her, Gaston Bachelard's insights come to mind:

> it therefore makes sense from our standpoint of a philosophy of literature and poetry to say that we "write a room", "read a room", or "read a house". Thus, very quickly at the very first word, at the very first poetic overture, the reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of some place of his own past. (35)

Bachelard was of course referring to houses or rooms, thus inanimate things, and this is why Strand's resource of turning the woman into a readable thing -an object- brings us to that space of the *uncanny*: the familiar becomes unfamiliar so that we recognize the elements but the way in which they are presented to us is odd. Later, the speaker wishes that they could stop reading: "Each moment is like a hopeless cause. / If only we could stop reading" (31). The characters are reading together as if cursed with a perverse enchantment: they cannot avoid turning the pages of the book. If they stop reading, the man and the woman will cease being characters and will be removed from the book, which will not only cause their physical presence in the poem to fade but also lead to an inevitable and total vanishing that comes with the book's conclusion: "The book will not survive. / We are the living proof of that" (33). Strand has here reduced the couple's life to the space of the book so that the book becomes their story: "*They are the book and they are / nothing else*" (33).

As readers, we cannot either escape disembodiment, since when we read, our bodies, too, tend to disappear from our consciousness. Following James F. Nicosia: "ultimately the book represents humankind's fate" (47). Strand has deliberately given the power to the book as the ruler of a world where written language has a privileged position over that of the characters in it. Therefore, we can assert that prioritizing the written domain -that of the book- also aids in the diminishing of physicality and, consequently, contributes to disembodiment. Additionally, as Drew Leder expresses, "the written word […] has no three-dimensional depth" (122).

7. Conclusions

The different aspects of disembodiment to which the couple in Strand's poem are condemned have been discussed throughout this essay: the small room that they inhabit, and which can neither represent a home nor comprise the story of a lifetime; the absence of their human aspect due to their being deprived of language, movement and perception; their *hypnagogic state* between dreaming and waking; and the fictionality of their lives as being written but also commanded by the book. All this prevents their embodiment as actual beings; on the contrary, they have not been able to write the story of their lives themselves first-hand, and thus eventually govern their own fate. Disembodiment and the absence of love have gone hand in hand, and as Max Picard claims, "where there is no love, there are no objects" (114). Love belongs to the human realm. To be represented it necessarily needs a feeling of connectedness between human beings. Emotional involvement could have filled the absence of physicality in the idea of love that we derive from the poem, but emotions in "The Story" are essentially related to anxiety and despair. Strand's insistence on the absence of the bodies has resulted in the creation of a world that fluctuates between the real and the unreal. In the poem, the few elements that anchor us to an apparently ordinary domesticity, that of the couple, appear as insufficient and unstable. In this way, Strand has told us what we did not expect: the other side of experience; that which we can only reach when we open the book of the unsayable.

In "The Story of Our Lives", departing from what its title may have suggested, Strand elaborates a poem on the painful ending stages of what probably had been a story of love before. The poem deals with love but not in its glorious aspect of happiness and fulfillment, and more with the end of it and with the consequent tedium the characters are experiencing instead. Strand's constant use of absence and disembodiment, when applied to the love relationship, only increasingly enhances the opposite of love. In this case, by choosing to focus on the absence of bodily presence and emotional involvement, Strand reinforces the feeling of disconnection and despair on the part of the characters.

We have read "The Story of Our Lives", and we may feel that we have been exposed to a perverse fairytale where the husband and his

wife will disappear unhappily ever after in an irreversible vanishing act performed by the book and effected by Mark Strand. But, are we closing the book because it told us to?

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