

*REASONS FOR MOVING: MARK STRAND ON THE ART OF EDWARD  
HOPPER*<sup>1</sup>

Jeffrey Scott Childs

UNIVERSIDADE ABERTA

Edward Hopper's work has repeatedly been regarded by a range of critics as among the most significant productions of 20th century American art and has been discussed in connection with phenomena as diverse as French symbolism (both in poetry and painting), the work of Piet Mondrian and of the so-called ash can school, as well as viewed as a forerunner of both pop art and abstract expressionism. A recent exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art included several of Hopper's paintings under the rubric of "Figurative Expressionism."<sup>1</sup> If this description is less than helpful in critically locating Hopper's work, I hope it will suggest some of the complexities inherent in coming to terms with his art and encourage viewers to look at it from a variety of different perspectives, which, as I hope to show, is one of Hopper's most significant projects.

Mark Strand is the author of numerous works dating from his first volume of poetry, *Sleeping with One Eye Open*, published in 1964, to his most recent, *Chicken, Shadow, Moon & More*, published in 2000. Among these are translations of the poets Raphael Alberti and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, as well as books on painters, such as William Bailey, and painting (which he studied under Josef Albers at the Yale Art School from 1956 to 1959). But my focus here is his writing on Edward Hopper, which began in 1971 with an article called "Crossing the Tracks to Hopper's World,"<sup>2</sup> includes "Hopper: The Loneliness Factor,"<sup>3</sup> and culminated in a lecture series turned into the book length study *Hopper* (1994). This is a relatively long time-span, and part of my concern will be to look at the shifting arena of terms that Strand uses to understand Hopper's work, to attempt to discern whether these

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was entitled "The American Century: Art & Culture 1900-2000" and ran from 23 April 1999 to 13 February 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Poets on Painters*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *Writer's on Artists*, ed. Daniel Halpern (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988).

changes reflect a refinement of Strand's initial perception or whether they constitute a different perception altogether. But I think I should say something first about this particular conjunction. Obviously a discussion of Strand's writing on Hopper would be, at best, mildly beside the point if what is characteristic of his approach did not yield significant insights into Hopper's work. But there is an added point of interest here in that many of Strand's most insightful remarks on Hopper's work are equally revealing of his own work as a poet. In an introduction to one of Strand's articles, the American poet J. D. McClatchy notes "the shades of Wallace Stevens and Ralph Waldo Emerson" in both Hopper's and Strand's work (1988, 339); and I would add that in Hopper and Strand these shades blend with others, forming common palette, significantly distinctive from what they inherited. But shade or light, illumination or concealment? In the work of these two it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to discern one from the other. What this means and, perhaps more importantly, how it is articulated, are emblematic of the task of this paper.

I have borrowed a portion of the title of this paper from Strand's third volume of poetry, *Reasons for Moving*, published in 1968, three years before the appearance of his first article on Hopper. In his book-length study, Strand characterizes Hopper's work as placing its viewer before a dual imperative "to remain and to move on (1994, 3)" and his writing, both early and late, can be regarded as unified in its search to define the figures that make this demand on us. In his first article on Hopper, Strand describes the artist as "a painter of American life at its most hopeless and provincial," capturing the "workaday rhythms" of daily life and salvaging its various figures through the achievement of an "emblematic or pictorial unity" (1988a, 340). He goes on to say that the "formal properties" of Hopper's interiors enhance the isolation of their inhabitants, who are "always in the act of entering a meaningless future" meaningless because it is anticipated in the sterility of the present." We, Hopper's viewers, are made to feel like "momentary visitors to a scene that will endure without us and that suffers our presence with aggressive reticence" (340-41). Strand argues that Hopper's best works "communicate that quality of loneliness and desolation" (342) typical of a painting such as *Stairway* (c. 1925) and also describes these works as transmitting "an oddness, a disturbing quiet, a sense of being in a room with a man who insists on being with us, but always with his back turned" (343).

My contention is that these rather hastily pieced together characterizations of Hopper's work constitute the center of Strand's reflections on Hopper, both the clues that will lead to his best insights into Hopper's work and the limitations that he will have to overcome to see some of the possibilities that this work has to offer. Already we can sense something of an

argument for moving on: a certain narrowness or provincialism, the sheer repetitiveness of daily life, a sterile present and a nearness to others that begs for an act of communication. And yet certain forces urge against this: the hopelessness of American life; a meaningless future; the "aggressive reticence" with which what we see promises, or threatens, to outlast us; and a refusal to meet our gaze that leaves us, despite our desire to speak, flatly where we stand. The dilemma underlying this account of Hopper's work can perhaps best be summed up by the concluding stanza of "Coming to This," from Strand's collection *Darker* (1970):

Coming to this  
has its rewards: nothing is promised, nothing is taken away.  
We have no heart or saving grace,  
no place to go, no reason to remain.

I take it that it is Strand's task in reading Hopper, as well as in his poetry—and that it is Hopper's task in his painting—to discover both a place to go and a reason to remain, even if these must be defined through the formal resources of their art.

In "Hopper: The Loneliness Factor," Strand continues to explore the relation of loneliness to Hopper's work, seeking to define more precisely how the latter depicts or provokes the former. Strand concludes that this feeling is less a result of "narrative elements" in the paintings than to "certain repeated structural motifs" (1988b, 257); these motifs are not the human figures represented in the works but "certain geometrical imperatives having to do with missing or sealed-off vanishing points." In his discussion of the painting *Nighthawks* (1942), Strand names this loneliness "the dominant form of an isosceles trapezoid." In other words, the force of Hopper's paintings comes from what it does rather than represents, or does in representing, and Strand has realized that Hopper places his viewers at the center of a stage without a center. I think these observations begin to explain why Hopper has been assimilated to so many different artistic movements of this century. But Strand goes further yet in articulating the type of affectation that Hopper's paintings operate on their viewers: "We feel caught in a wake that offers no possibility of catching up to whatever has departed." This feeling of being left behind is heightened by certain figurative elements, often also involved in the geometric rhetoric of the paintings, such as roads and railroad tracks. Still focusing on this question, Strand locates a further projection of loneliness in a "kind of refusal," in which the viewer is excluded from the depicted scene and yet at the same time feels no desire to be drawn into it (259). *The House by the Railroad* (1925) and *Early Sunday Morning* (1939) are cited as two examples of this projection.

The major contributions of Strand's book-length study of Hopper are 1) his conclusion that the terms "loneliness" and "alienation" are inadequate for describing the geometric or pictorial strategies traceable in Hopper's paintings (1994, xiii) and 2) his further refinement of the dual imperative he regards as operative throughout Hopper's work (3). In "Hopper: The Loneliness Factor," Strand describes the way in which a series of formal characteristics lead us to share in the feelings of "loneliness" and "alienation," as if these were the endpoints of our participation in Hopper's paintings, whereas in *Hopper* not only do they not represent a culmination of our experience of the painting but cease even to play a significant role in this experience. In this vein, it might be helpful to recall Hopper's statements on *Nighthawks*—"I didn't see it as particularly lonely. . . . Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city" (Kuh 1962, 134)—as well as on the critical reception of his work—"The loneliness thing is overdone" (O'Doherty 1964, 72). I do not claim that Hopper's statements on his art are necessarily definitive but wish to point out his regarding of loneliness as subsidiary to the central activity of his work and to suggest the possibility that failing fully to grasp this activity results in the term "loneliness."

The other main task of Strand's book on Hopper is to formulate the terms in which we are to understand the dual imperative mentioned above. Inevitably, but more directly here than in either of his previous articles, Strand structures his discussion around the question of narrative, of Hopper's paintings not so much depicting as calling for a narrative event in which the viewer is a central element. The barest description of Hopper's paintings as "short, isolated moments of figuration" (1994, 23) conveys a sense of this calling and suggests that this calling is carried out through an act refusal. As mentioned earlier, in his second article on Hopper Strand structures a discussion of Hopper's "loneliness factor" around an opposition between "narrative elements" and geometric patterns, in which it is the latter and not the former that produce the distinct Hopper effect (1988b, 257). In Strand's later writing, the force of Hopper's painting draws on the interaction of these elements, as in *Nighthawks* or *Chair Car* (1965), where "a pictorial geometry should demand an action contrary to what the narrative wills" (1994, 40). This description displaces an earlier one of loneliness and indicates the drift that has occurred in Strand's thinking on Hopper.

Other writers on Hopper have also uncovered the connection between his work and narrative, although often their insights have emerged indirectly or through certain forms of denial of this relationship. An example of the latter is provided by Gail Levin in her *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*. In a discussion of *Second Story Sunlight* (1960) Levin reaches the conclusion that Hopper's paintings "express the psychological pulse of their time" through

a refusal of narrative (64). In *Hopper* (1998) Ivo Kranzfelder bases a comparison of Hopper's paintings and the frames of a film strip on their tendency to break perception down into distinct, discontinuous moments (89). The implication is that duration in Hopper is not so much denied as concealed, much the way many of Hopper's interiors work to insinuate the outside world. In an interview, Hopper states his own artistic ideal as to paint "with such simple honesty and effacement of the mechanics of art as to give almost the shock of reality itself" (O'Doherty 1964, 78). But what is "the shock of reality" if not an interruption in the flow of our perception of it? Viewed together what these comments suggest is that Hopper's paintings perform a temporal cropping very much akin to the spatial cropping often noted in his work. The effect of this temporal cropping is to reopen the question of narrative and to situate the viewer at the center of this process.

But it is important to find the terms that define this process, and Strand attempts not only to do this for individual paintings but also for Hopper's work as a whole. At the beginning of his book, for instance, he notes that "the invitation to construct a narrative for each painting is also a part of the experience of looking at Hopper," and that the involvement of the reader that this demands "indicates a resistance to having the viewer move on" (1994, 3). Later Strand suggests that the degree to which Hopper's paintings engage us in this narrative process depends upon our holding a sense of passage and that the true subject of his work is "the nature of continuousness" (23). He explains: "Hopper's paintings are not vacancies in a rich ongoingness. They are all that can be gleaned from a vacancy that is shaded not so much by the events of a life lived as by the time before life and the time after. The shadow of dark hangs over them, making whatever narratives we construct around them seem sentimental and beside the point." This passage poses several problems. First it imposes on us a double bind: Hopper's paintings force us to construct narratives for them (out of them?), and yet whatever we construct is "beside the point." Perhaps the reason for this is Strand's "shadow of dark," an intimation of (im)mortality, or, as Wallace Stevens might say, "an interpretation of black." There is little question that mortality is a significant feature of Hopper's art but need we take his darkness, as Strand does, as "the issue of our temporal arrangements," a kind of imprisonment in which Hopper's figures, and we along with them, are left with an almost metaphysical "waiting" to fill the gap left by having "no place to go, no future" (25).

I feel that there is at least another possible reading of this darkness and of the waiting depicted in Hopper's paintings, and I think other aspects of Strand's writing on this subject can help us to glimpse it. In working toward this view, however, we need to consider the

"vacancy" Strand describes above. As the quote specifies, this vacancy represents a moment both before and after "life lived"; it is, if not necessarily a waiting, an in-between-ness, and as such its relation to the call for narrative mentioned earlier should be clear enough. Kranzfelder says something very similar to this when he describes Hopper's interest not in the "spectacular moments or events in life" but rather "in the moments that preceded or followed them" (1998, 146). Extrapolating from this we can perhaps regard Hopper's vacancies as nonevents, not so much negations of events as interrogations of the conditions of eventfulness. I thus take the question posed by much of Hopper's art to be the following: in what sense can these nonevents said to be eventful? Perhaps Hopper's art does not represent an answer to this question, but in its artful construction of the question directs itself to the site at which an answer may arise. Of greater significance, however, is Hopper's general cultivation of eventfulness, an eventfulness which seems everywhere on the verge of breaking through the scenes depicted in his work. Perhaps this allows us to perceive a kinship between staying and moving on, as if the interruption Hopper introduces into the structure of both were the ground of our enacting a sense of continuity.

This discussion of Hopper, and of what Strand has elicited from Hopper's work, should not forgo an analysis of individual works, which is where the considerations I discussed above come together in the form of feeling and which enact Hopper's concerns in individually revealing ways. In looking at some of his works, I will focus on a cluster of overlapping structural, figural and thematic issues important to Strand's discussion of Hopper but also, I think, generally representative of Hopper's activity as an artist. In the process I will also hope to show what ties these issues together and, ultimately, how they help to articulate Hopper's work.

*The House by the Railroad Tracks* (1925) is perhaps the most widely-recognized of Hopper's paintings and has consistently occupied a central position in Strand's writing on Hopper. Of the different aspects of Hopper's work Strand takes it to reflect, perhaps the most striking is his description of the house in the painting as "an emblem of refusal, a monument to the idea of enclosure" (1988a, 341). This view, gleaned from Strand's first essay on Hopper, is not without resonance in Strand's poetry. In the same essay, Strand suggests that a quality of Hopper's sunlight, particularly evident in this painting, is that it "illuminates... without penetrating" (341). The secrecy of the house is preserved, even highlighted. But what kind of secrecy clings so closely to the surface of things? In his second essay, Strand elaborates on this: "The house is really a tomb, a monument to the idea of enclosure, a stately emblem of withholding" (1988b: 259). Like a coffin in sunlight "it shines with finality and has no door."

And further: "In its starkness it promises so little that its air of absolute denial cannot be taken personally and can only be trivialized by attempts to associate it with loneliness. True it stands alone, but it does so with rigid, disdainful insularity." What comes across in these descriptions is that the house does not represent anything that can be called content (unlike the similar one, almost certainly inspired by Hopper's, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960]). Rather the house is emblematic of a kind of separateness, of one which, because of its arresting surface, is unassailable. The description "utterly frontal" that Strand applies to *Early Sunday Morning* (1939) is entirely to the point here. Hopper's painting does not so much deny depth – "the shadows on the house and the half-drawn blinds underline this quality" – as deny access to it.

Strand's later writing on this painting adds a significant consideration to his analysis. He notes the house's obliqueness to the various directional elements Hopper built into the painting, such as the effects of the (characteristically absent) sun, the railroad tracks, and the trapezoid suggested by the line of the tracks and that of the cornice of the house (1994, 18). These elements qualify at least one sense of the house's refusal. Hopper's alignment of the viewer with the front of the house, and thus in a corresponding relation to the directional elements in the painting, helps to create the viewer's participation in this refusal. This alignment makes it difficult to conclude with Strand that "the house demands nothing of us (18)," but exactly what it demands is more difficult to say.

Both *Stairway* (1919) and *Chair Car* (1965) also draw perspective together with a sense of refusal. In the former, the viewer is positioned on a descending staircase that leads past an open door toward a dark, indiscernible mass of hill and trees. As Kranzfelder notes, Hopper frequently used the stairway motif as a figure of transition from one term to another of a series of binary oppositions, varying in conceptual degree (1998, 35). The most relevant of these oppositions here is that between nature and civilization, where the dark, impenetrable mass refuses the transition that the other elements in the painting call for. Thus here, as elsewhere in Hopper, the woods stand as "an emblem of refusal," as Strand notes in connection with the painting *Gas* (1940). In his discussion of *Stairway* Strand suggests that the woods darkly deny the paintings directionality (1994, 38) and notes that, rather than performing its usual function of connecting inside and outside, the open door in the painting constitutes "a disturbing link between nowhere and nowhere, the spatial and tangible restoration of a moment that exists between events, the events of leavetaking or arrival" (1988a, 342). Hopper is again confronting us with the question of eventfulness.

If in *Chair Car* nature is all but subliminally absent, the door (rather than doorway) represented in the painting again plays a central role. The door is that of a train car, ostensibly leading out of the car to the next one in line, and directly faces the viewer, who is positioned as if he or she were walking down the car aisle. Strand again notes the importance of the trapezoid, formed by the lines of the car roof, which leads the viewer down the aisle, past the individualized passengers, to the door (1994, 39). The sunlight streaming in the window blocks any view of an outside, thus constituting an "absolute presence" (40) against which the activity in the car unfolds. Strand notes that there is no handle or window on the door, which he describes as indicating "an occluded vanishing point," a phrase which he will apply to a number of Hopper paintings and which could very well be applied to *Stairway*. Unlike this last painting, however, *Chair Car* significantly depicts other people, and, more specifically, other people engaged in activities which do not reflect a central or shared orientation. I do not think that this reflects a lack of articulation but rather articulates them around or through this lack. What Kranzfelder says of the painting *Compartment C, Car 193* strikes me as relevant to this: "The experience of overcoming the distance between two points is no longer conscious; space has become a function of movement, and the train compartment an intimate, hermetic realm" (1998, 169). In *Chair Car* distance is made to echo; the singular destination of the train is made irrelevant; and the "intimate, hermetic realm" of each figure, including the viewer, becomes the center of a new destination or derailment. What also emerges is the acute sense of privation that accompanies this event.

Although present in many of his works, the trapezoid is particularly significant in several, including *Nighthawks*, the painting in regard to which Strand first articulated the importance of this geometric figure. The figure directs the viewer's gaze along the canvas from right to left, its material lines ending a third of the way from the painting's left edge. The painting thus establishes "a directional pull... to a vanishing point that cannot be witnessed but must be imagined, for the simple reason that it is not situated on the canvas but beyond it in an unreal and unrealizable place from which the viewer is forever excluded" (1988b, 258). On our way, however, the "sudden, immediate clarity" of the diner leaps out at us, "momentarily isolating us from everything else, and then releases us to continue on our way" (1994, 6). Strand further describes the diner as "an island of light... distracting [us]... from journey's end," and adds that "this distraction might be construed as a salvation." The slanting of edges of the trapezoid, which approach each other but never join, is what Strand regards as accounting for the general sense of loneliness in Hopper's work (1988b, 258). The effect of this painting also depends upon the blank face of the building, with its deep shadows

and partially lowered blinds, that halts the movement initiated by the trapezoid; and upon the de-centered articulation of the diner's occupants. However, rather than burying the viewer in negativity, as Strand suggests, I think this painting evokes the slightest possibility of turning the corner; that is, of discovering an alternative direction, even if this must occur within the undeniable limitations the painting draws for us.

The trapezoid of *Dawn in Pennsylvania* is similar to that of *Nighthawks*. It too draws the viewer along the canvas from right to left, arresting him or her (even more abruptly this time) before the canvas's edge only to direct the viewer's attention to the bleak industrial cityscape framed by its lines. Here particularly it is easy to agree with Strand's description of the trapezoidal effect as one of "psychological closure" (1988b, 258), which underlines the paradoxical feeling of being "trapped in a place whose purpose has to do with travel" (1994, 10). If, as Strand suggests, we find ourselves "waiting to go somewhere" (9) then it will be a long wait. But perhaps Hopper is suggesting that it is the waiting that needs to get left behind, in turning toward what is before us, in retrieving the here and now from the pull of our own ruthless narratives, and announcing this retrieval with the tenuous dawn that has just begun to suffuse the morning sky. Strand calls this dawn "the cold and feeble light of a new day" (10). One of the subtlest and most inaugural aspects of Hopper's work is the sense in which this "new day" both is and is not simply "another day."

There are many Hopper paintings in which the trapezoid plays an important role, directing or arresting the viewer's movements, as seen above, or emphasizing the articulation or de-articulation of figures and spaces, often through the geometric play of light and shadow. But it is not the only geometric figure to play such a role. Hopper also experimented with the effects created by triangles, and occasionally used the triangle as a counterweight to the directional pull of the trapezoid. Such is the case with *Cape Cod Evening* (1939), whose triangular structure Strand describes as follows: "Instead of being a case of geometric insularity and safety set against the virtual emptiness of a deep space, it is a fragile and momentary arrangement of three figures set against the powerful claims of the familiar trapezoid" (1994, 21). The long lines of the triangle follow the man's and the woman's gazes to the figure of the dog, whose centrality of composition and attention underlines its significance. The dog's gaze is turned away from the couple's, as if continuing their attention to a point beyond the edge of the canvas. As so often with Hopper, the spatial arrangement of the painting's elements is dictated by a source that lies beyond the edges of the canvas. Whereas the trapezoid is associated with movement and duration, the triangle creates a pictorial (and momentary) stability, regardless of how fragile or evanescent. Furthermore,

the juxtaposition of the house and woods, familiar symbols in Hopper's art, (with, as Strand notes, the trapezoid formed by the footing and cornice of the former, which draws the viewer toward the "foreboding darkness" of the latter [22]) emphasizes the foundational character of this moment. Suggested here is thus not only the transience and incompleteness of any foundational act but also, I think, a sense of the necessity of its repetition, as if each perceptual moment carried with it the onus of foundation.

The "motionless" quality of *Ground Swell* (1939) Strand attributes to two intersecting triangles, one formed by the clouds on the horizon and the other by the lines of the beam, gaff and buoy, continued or "locked into place" by the gaze of the people on deck (1994, 19-20). Strand describes this interaction as "each one canceling or stalling the motion of the other" (19), but the difference in vocabulary is crucial here. Whereas the former describes a futility both of movement and of attention, the latter calls forth the capacity of perception to slow or "stall" movement so as to elicit alternative directions. For me it is the latter possibility that occupies the center of Hopper's work; even where Hopper most directly represents a dead-end, as in *Stairway*, it is always readable as a particular dead-end or articulated with elements suggesting alternative directions. This task is not limited to Hopper's work and suggests his entanglement in certain strands of Romanticism, as Gail Levin and Ivo Kranzfelder have noted. Consider also the relationship of this endeavor to a description of (our relationship to) nature in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: "The particular laws [of nature] are as our points of view, as, to the traveller, a mountain outline varies with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles, though absolutely but one form. Even when cleft or bored through it is not comprehended in its entirety" (1997, 259). What is different here is that with Hopper we are not dealing with perspectives but with directions, although Hopper uses perspective or forms of looking to elicit these, and that Hopper represents Thoreau's nature not as solid but as consisting of folds or pockets.

I take Thoreau's statement above to be that there is no central law of nature just as there is no central perception as such; or, stated somewhat differently, there is no central perception but the one we have. As a consequence, our perceptions do not mislead us, but they do not (cannot) tell us the whole story either. Part of Hopper's significance is that he undertakes to represent this visually. His technique for doing this varies considerably, ranging from his presentation of severely cropped or partially obscured scenes to his deployment of represented figures. Examples of the latter include Hopper's depiction of isolated figures, often positioned obliquely with respect to the viewer, as in *Hotel Room* (1931) or *Morning Sun* (1952); of figures engaged in a shared moment of attention whose center is absent or

unrepresentable, as in the paintings described above; of figures occupying a shared space who do not share a common center of attention, as in *Chair Car*; and of figures whose attention centers around a shared activity but who are positioned obliquely with respect to one another, as if to emphasize the tenuous nature of their articulation. A case of the latter tendency is *Conference at Night* (1949), in which three figures, framed, and thus articulated, by a trapezoid of (artificial) light, are engaged in a conversation. In addition to the significance of the light, streaming in through a darkened window, the spatial arrangement of the figures is revealing. The closest figure in the painting, a man in a black overcoat and grey hat, has his back turned to us, as if partially excluding us from the conversation. There is no central figure in the painting, and the figure who is ostensibly leading the discussion is positioned to the right of the painting's center and seated, hence on a plane inferior to that of the other two figures. The compositional arrangement, along with the scrambling of conventional diurnal time, has a striking de-centering effect.

In *Room in New York* (1932), the dual sense of the viewer's connection with and separation from the depicted figures is conveyed by the darkened window frame that isolates the scene. The scene represents one of those "in-between moments" (Strand 1994, 46) that populate Hopper's paintings and involves the viewer in a markedly voyeuristic situation. Among the different elements that work to evoke this feeling is the uncertain duration of the gaze that constitutes the scene: is it glimpsed in passing, or are the figures being more closely observed? Also important, as Ivo Kranzfelder notes, is the combination of an intimate depicted scene with the self-absorption of the characters (1998, 46). Strand's comments on these figures is of particular interest: "[T]hey are alike in their suggestion that one's separateness can flourish in the company of another.... [H]ere something is said about the habit of estrangement, that it not only exists among couples, it flourishes calmly, even beautifully, among them" (1994, 48). Strand's description of a flourishing estrangement in this painting is perhaps at first difficult to grasp; it requires us to marry a sense of freedom to one of privation. What emerges from this description – "and I take it to accurately describe what happens in Hopper's art, here and elsewhere" – is a sense that one of Hopper's main themes is the constitution of privacy, and of the privation and possibilities that derive from it.

A further subtlety of Hopper's constitution of privacy is its dependence on a certain intrusiveness as much as on a withholding. While reflecting on the way Hopper's painting *Gas* (1940) invokes a series of conceptual oppositions only ultimately to evade them, Kranzfelder remarks, "Hopper's pictures truly seem to be located in a twilight zone, an interim condition" (1998, 75). This seems equally to apply to Hopper's treatment of privacy, of the emergence of

a sense of withholding from a communicative or pre-communicative situation. This is clearly the case with *Room in New York*, but Hopper's most masterful instance of this is *Automat* (1927). In this painting, Hopper's lone figure is seated at a table, drinking from a coffee cup. The coat she is wearing and her one gloved and one ungloved hand reveal her to be in a state between staying and moving on, a state Strand describes as "limbo" (1994, 42), which is perhaps a bit too heavy for the scene depicted. He also notes the receding trapezoid of ceiling lights in the darkened window, which "allows nothing of the street, or whatever is outside, to be seen" (41-42). What Strand does not mention is the brilliant play of direction the painting enacts. Despite her averted eyes, the figure faces the viewer, establishing an implicit parallel. This is heightened by the dual directionality of the trapezoid in the window. The lack of a visible outside beyond the glass allows the trapezoid to be read as a figure of interiority, pointing toward the vanishing point of the woman's reflections. Furthermore, as the lights actually belong to the interior of the automat, they can be read as pointing back toward the viewer and toward the viewer's own reflections. Figure and viewer are locked in a reflection whose bidirectionality indicates a vanishing point of interiority, but, as the painting indicates, one that can only be constituted through an initial extroversive act of identification.

A discussion of the role of privacy and privation in Hopper's paintings is incomplete without a discussion of revelation; that is, of light. The importance of Hopper's light has been discussed at length by Strand as well as others. Much still remains to be said, but certainly one of its essential aspects is its role in unfolding a dynamic of revelation and concealment. I touched on this briefly in relation to *The House by the Railroad Tracks* and return to it now in connection with *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947). This painting depicts a man looking up from his raking at a source of light whose rays illuminate the plot of land he occupies and casts the fronts of the houses on either side of him into deep shadows. Typically, the source of light is absent from the painting. Strand remarks: "[The scene] has the feel of transcendence, as if some revelation were at hand, as if some transforming evidence were encoded in the light... [W]e are involved in a vision whose source is beyond us, and whose effect is difficult to embrace.... [A]ll we can do from where we stand is meditate on the unspoken barriers between us" (1994, 27-28). There is something potentially misleading in this description, a slight overemphasis on transcendence and incommunicability, as if we were in the presence of some Cartesian nightmare. True, there is a sense of privation and of revelation, but I think Strand is too exclusionary about where this occurs. To suggest that the viewer is in the presence of a revelation "encoded in the light" to which he or she has no

access is to privilege a certain Romantic metaphor in which the sun, for instance, stands for an ultimate (i.e. transcendent) reality. The representation of transcendence is a complex issue, and I do not wish to underestimate its importance in Hopper. Rather I want to place Hopper among those like Emerson and Thoreau who attempt to relocate (and thus rewrite) transcendence, to predicate upon a perceptual event. This revisionary impulse is consistent with, among other things, Hopper's troping of (as in turning away from) sunlight; not only in his setting us before other sources of light but also in his placing us obliquely before the sun, as if it showed us at least as much when we merely see its effects, among which are its shadows. Like Heidegger (a likeness that extends to the strange yet idiomatic nature of their expression), Hopper shows us that a pure revelation is a redundant nothingness and that revelation occurs through a process of articulation that is simultaneously a concealment.

It is toward a purity of this perception that Hopper is working in such later paintings as *Rooms by the Sea* (1951) and *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963). In these furniture is either entirely absent or present only in the most nominal of senses, an exclusion that Kranzfelder may help explain: "In Menzel's painting as in many of Hopper's, only the furniture alludes to the possible presence of persons in the room" (1998, 42). I take the elimination of furniture in Hopper's later works to suggest a shift in his focus from the manner in which we occupy or inhabit a space to a more radical questioning of the conditions or possibilities of habitation as such. Following Kranzfelder, the elimination of furniture is also the elimination of human presence, but it is a privation that constitutes an invitation as well. This call to inhabit is what I take Strand's comment on *Rooms by the Sea*—that there is "no middle ground or shore" available in the painting (1994, 55)—to be describing. The furnished room, barely visible beyond the white partitioning wall, whose barrenness is illuminated by the trapezoid of sunlight, stands as a promised land for the viewer, who must first learn to inhabit the emptiness of the room before him. That there is no alternative to this is conveyed by the stark contrast between the domestic space and an exterior of sheer sea and sunlight. In *Sun in an Empty Room*, this absence of alternative is even more striking. There are no furnishings in the room, and the sunlight cast through the darkened window is more reminiscent of moonlight, or the streetlight of *Conference at Night*. Central to the painting is the column of shadow, formed by the sunlight against the L-shaped rear wall, which echoes the darkness outside. The painting represents interiority as a kind of fold in the exterior, an attenuation of the inside/outside distinction already present, though less directly depicted, in earlier paintings. In this vein, Hopper's work can be regarded as a forerunner of certain twentieth century trends in painting—from abstract expressionism to pop art and minimalism - that

place great emphasis on a painting's surface; but, while the importance of surface in Hopper is undeniable, his work is above all an exploration of depth. Of *Sun in an Empty Room*, Strand says, "Done in 1963, it is Hopper's last great painting, a vision of the world without us; not merely a place that excludes us, but a place emptied of us" (1994, 58). Kranzfelder describes it as lacking "even a trace of the requisites that would indicated human presence" (1998: 192). But, as I see this painting as an exploration of the condition of habitation as such, I wish to suggest that its emptiness - as irreducible as it is (here and elsewhere) specifically determined - is an invitation to inhabit rather than a grim narrative of (en)closure. A considerable part of Hopper's achievement as an artist resides in his making this an offer we cannot refuse.

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Being a poet, Mark Strand provides his interpretation in the form of beautiful prose. Comprehensive introduction to Edward Hopper's paintings. Being a poet, Mark Strand provides his interpretation in the form of beautiful prose ...more. flag Like · see review. Strand's short ekphrastic texts help us create these imaginary spaces on the threshold of Hopper's art, between the painting and our own experiences. Mark Strand opens this wonderful, slim and competent book on Hopper by saying: It is my contention that Hopper's paintings transcend the appearance of actuality and locate the viewer in a virtual space where the influence and availability of feeling predominate.