

Robert Racine

Crystals' Other Side

It is snowing. Every year, it's the same thing. This snowfall takes me back to a short text by René Descartes : the sixth discourse of the *Meteors*, "On Snow, Rain and Hail".

February, 1634; the philosopher is in Amsterdam. He is describing his observations of snowflakes. He is outside and he extends his hand to catch several crystals. Then, he scrutinizes the thin geometric form that melts in his hand, memorizes it and draws it in his notebook.

This image is what Vladimir Jankelevitch calls a "disappearing appearance".



Several years ago, an older person came toward me and asked in a detached, somewhat sceptical tone, "What's the idea behind that?" pointing at a *Page-Miroir* with her chin. Her eyes were riveted on the finely cut-out, annotated page of the dictionary. She awaited my response. I observed her in this pose for a few moments. The words "behind that" resonated in my mind. I considered answering : *Le Jardin de la langue française* : your face; the gaze; a prayer; God. I responded with a barb of irony : "Nothing". She looked at me, "That's what I thought", and she moved away gently.



I spent fourteen years illuminating my reading of this *nothing* : *Le Petit Robert* dictionary, 1979 edition. "Behind that" there is a thousand and one nights of the French language. A thousand and one nights I passed in a tête-à-tête with a text, a light and its mirrors.

Beneath snow crystals, there is the hand of Descartes. Behind the dictionary page, there is the mirror. Hand and mirror come together to grasp, evince, the whiteness of the image, the witness of the night. Page and crystals turn into the veil that must be lifted to let the face of the self finally appear.



This tenuity of the support, the image of disappearing snow, the page that is erased, gradually unwhitened, is the thread upon which I ventured in making *Les Page-Miroirs*.



The state of wakefulness is propitious to contemplation. The state of embellishment. Appearance. The tenuity of dreams to come. Wandering postponed, put aside in favour of meditation. Doesn't looking at an image offer one a way of meditating beyond it? Being there, so close to the real, but not entering it. From the threshold to the edge, through the lapse and the *blink*, there is the infinitesimal duration of a gaze. The pores of space, of time. The image in oneself toward the other. It appears, offers itself to us insofar as we shall forget it. So we must give it space, its place.

The space of the image takes the form of a vibration, an undulation of light carrying features. Here, the words in the dictionary — while immobile — animate the space. Reading creates movement. Such is the page before the mirror. Signs and reflections participate in the "said" and "seen" of the support, celebrating the duration of surfaces.



Les Pages-Miroirs arose from an initial image : *Le Jardin des mots de la langue française*. A vast terrain, an open and permanent space, landscaped in harmony with the surrounding nature, where all the words of the French language and their definitions, printed on little panels, would be planted in the earth, divided into word-zones; each class of words identifiable by a specific colour.

A public space where, to learn new words, the walker-reader would have to move physically through space, from one word to another; from the "L" zone to the "I" zone, the "R" zone to the "E" zone, for example. This makes the dictionary a geographic site where everyone's reading becomes a path by which one literally makes one's way into the heart of a text.

This garden has not yet been realized. It has, however, generated a number of images : *Le Terrain du dictionnaire A/Z* and *Les 2130 Pages-Miroirs*. These two works were produced over a period of fourteen years, from 1980 to 1994. The first thing was to present a maquette of the future garden. So I spent a

year (using two dictionaries : one for the recto pages, the other for the verso) precisely cutting out the 60 000-odd entries of the *Petit Robert* dictionary and the dates these words came into usage. They were all glued individually onto little blue cards mounted on black sticks to be planted into a large white surface. This produced the first image of the garden with its panel-words stuck in the ground.

In the second phase, I illuminated, annotated, underlined, set to music, drew, and gave voice to the definitions from the 2 130 dictionary pages used in *Le Terrain du dictionnaire A/Z*. These were *Les Pages-Miroirs*.¹

Each page, painstakingly cut out like lace, is then individually mounted on a little mirror and framed. The page and its reflective surface are set only a few centimetres apart, in order to bring them closer together. It is this space, this void between the recto and the mirrored verso of an image, that is at issue here.



September, 1647; Descartes meets Pascal in Paris. Their conversations concern the void. There is disagreement between the two men it seems, since Descartes denies the existence of the void. The author of the *Discourse on Method* is nearing the end of his life; the author of the *Pensées*, just beginning. Between these two infinities lies reflection.

Les Pages-Miroirs, echoing the image of the two philosophers' encounter, show illuminated conversations where, among other things, the top surface of an image and its underside, the front and back, are presented. Here, the front of the mirror is the other side of the dictionary.

The image of *Les Pages-Miroirs* was modified over the years. At the beginning, each individual page had the dimensions of a human face. In their final presentation (1994), they were displayed in groups of eighty pages, each one the size of the human body. *Les Pages-Miroirs* both embraced and rebuffed the body simultaneously. The ebb-and-flow is constant here.

Standing before this work, the spectator gets the impression of flying in the night sky over a city woven with lit streets, where thousands of homes and lives call for encounter. Words and their mirror-houses await the ultimate tête-à-tête.

To contemplate, read, scrutinize, examine, look at, visit, travel into, stray from the gaze of this image, we must get closer to the page. As though we wanted to smell a flower. Hover around the scent to meet the shining eyes of

the gilt letters. Their sparkling makes us hold our breath, otherwise a thin exhaled mist would settle on the glass protecting the words. As thin as the page between the glass and the mirror may be, some images are impenetrable. Their fragility is equalled only by their density. Here, we touch the boundary of thresholds, the slopes of shadow and lightfall, the time-space between this side and beyond. It is the *almost-nothing* of the image, to go back to Jankelevitch's words.

One must learn to preserve the *almost*. There resides the secret, poetic side of things and beings. At the very edge of words lies the image. At the very edge of images is sound. From there, an endless vibration sparkles and wavers between the obverse and place of a work. The vibration from the eye returns to the eye, rebounding off the reflective surface where the shadowing of words and the space left behind them are mirrored.

Memory always occurs in the present.



What happens on a page, in and around the words, that makes a disappearing image appear?

The flake melting on the hand of Descartes joins the font printed on the page of the dictionary. The multiple ramifications of meaning that make up the definition of a word develop by crystalization. Whether it is our fingerprints that touch the page, or the crystals resting lightly on the hand of the philosopher, an imperceptible drawing, almost weightless, allows another form, another dimension and sensation, to blossom.

In making *Les Pages-Miroirs*, I inscribe my reading of the dictionary upon itself. The book is both stage and actor. From there on, the set dies, broken from being seen. We must literally listen to its breathing, take its pulse. I touch, blow upon, underline, gild, mark, cut out, colour, delimit, circumscribe a text that looks neutral to make it unique. It is the actor's role. Before this choreography of didaches, one thinks : someone passed by there. Descartes and Pascal in endless discussion are like page and mirror united by the void, the space of a hand. The distance separating these two objects is, effectively, the thickness of a flat hand.

The call and echo of touch.



The face was the privileged witness of the early *Pages-Miroirs*. The face is there before the image. The page, placed between the mirror and the face of the reader-spectator, offers its verso side to one, its recto to the other. The work changes, becoming a mirror-face, a memory-page. The recognition of the self and of words is filtered by a constellation of graphic signs not usually found in a dictionary : notes of music (quarter- and eighth-notes); vertical, horizontal, oblique lines drawn with coloured and lead pencils; red, green, pink, blue squares; white ink circles; perforations; fine undercutting; gilding; handwritten letters; black and saffron-yellow rectangles. The page is full of them, like skin marked with new freckles, beauty marks, wrinkles and pores. The page then becomes a fragmented face where distance reassumes its vertigo. One thinks of Veronica's veil. There is an echo, a transfer, a carrying-over, a graphic resonance from one face to another. The face behind (thought) deposits itself upon the fore-page. This union is prolonged by the mirror that sustains it, underlies it, whispers it to our eye. There is identification. In this tête-à-tête turned face-to-face, skin and paper, like hand and crystals, touch each other with a new-found freedom : to let go, let do, let pass. "*Faire*" (to make, to do) and "*passer*" (to pass) are the words with the longest definitions in *Le Petit Robert*. They resume in some way our path or passage among the living. Between these two actions are all the verbs of reflection, love and dreaming. In this listening — which is not passive but participates fully in generating a certain tremulousness — vibrates the silence of the image.

Silence is not absence. Silence recalls word and action, and accompanies watching. Despite its apparent immobility, the image is always in motion, like a vision. As our pupil dilates, so wavers the offering.

The trace, the mark, the word and its double, shadow and memory weave a heartbeat, a breath that animates the page before our eyes. Moving closer to discover, one uncovers/recognizes oneself. The text, emptied of white, that lets the mirror appear resembles the musical phrase played in a concert hall. Here, the mirror is the acoustics of the page. Also, as many musicians attest, the essence of music lies not in the notes but in the silences that link them. The reading, the linkage, the musical phrasing of full and empty which constitutes both flesh and bone creates the singularity, the personality of the musical image. The impalpability of the sound meets the elusiveness of the snowflake which disappears in the heat of the hand. The progression from form to formlessness, like the mist on a pane of glass, is the interval of exposition, the retrograde development of the sign. Cold crystalizes and heat de-crystalizes, just as darkness makes opaque that which light renders transparent.

As the snow crystals melt in his hand, Descartes rediscovers little by little the lines of his palm. The freshly deposited drawing, immediately gone, gives way to other imprints : those of the reader. Gradually the page is aerated, the reflecting surface amplified, extended to convey more features of the face that regards it. Hand and face sift imperceptibly through the crystal-pages.

This is what the research in *Les Pages-Miroirs* is about : going through the other to the bottom of the self — here, the words of the French language. The word as image. The word as voice. The word as gesture and movement of the whole body. The word as silence. The word, both screen and projection. At the heart of each one, I wanted to make their eyes shine. To participate in their breathing. During all this work, I held the words in my hands, I celebrated them, I told them : go your own way, go all the way into this diurnal night of language : sensitive eyes and hearts await you to trace the great simplicity of human speech. Despite having illuminated the pages of the dictionary, having literally gone right through it, this quest has only just begun. Each word, every image, gesture, sound or look is the isle of the beginnings of a mysterious world.



With contemplation and meditation come calm and respite. The image, that which is before and within oneself, should be a stopping point, a pause. Ultimately, one should lower one's eyes before it, listen to it, then be silent beside it.

In *Les Pages-Miroirs*, there is reverence, wakefulness, patience, listening, time. Waiting for nightfall for the sign to be illumined. The page is an edgeless sky. It supports and transports a presence, fleeting and imprisoned. Laying an image on a bed of glass. Putting an ear very close to the secret. Getting closer. Distanced from the page, one sees nothing. It is a grey, indistinct zone.

The invisible is blinded by the visible. The day will come when this premise will be reversed. Image and gaze will be but one. Snow in the night. Come from who-knows-where to settle who knows when, the image of a descent is crystalized in the time it takes a form to disappear forever, once seen.

Both veil and revelation, the image shows as much as it hides the thing presented. It captures and transmits that which vibrates. ◆

Translation : Kathleen Fleming

1 Regarding these two works, I refer the reader to my account, *Le Dictionnaire*, Montréal : les éditions Parachute/Galerie René Blouin, 1988.