

Stephen Ratcliffe:  
**Listening to Reading**  
SUNY Press, 2000.

**Idea's Mirror**  
Potes and Poets, 1999.

**Mallarmé: Poem in Prose**  
Santa Barbara Review Publications, 1998.

To twist a familiar phrase, one might say that Stephen Ratcliffe conceives his work as “left limit poetry, right limit criticism”—he gets infinitely close to both extremes, but finds infinite points in between. And when I use those terms—poetry and criticism—I’m thinking of them as they’re most popularly defined, for another way to look at Ratcliffe’s work is as a redefinition of these terms in ways that stretch them and push their limits outward.

Three of his recent books illustrate this point. While they remain distinct, their boundaries are porous, allowing themes and even specific phrases and words to pass from one to the other. His recent book of criticism, a collection of diverse essays titled *Listening to Reading*, opens with the very phrase twisted above, thus signaling his affinity with the Zukofsky lineage and specifically that lineage’s attention to “the visual/acoustic shape of the poem—on the page, in the air—(which) is never apart from its meaning.” The ensuing introduction defines the impetus of both the essays and his own poetry: “that a poem is less a representation / evidence / likeness of the world than its sound (echo), an event in which the world takes further shape.” He remains committed throughout this collection to the notion that the word must be experienced as a real object, both visible and audible, in a real world. The writers he reads and hears in these pieces—from Mallarmé and Stein to Larry Eigner and Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge—are all ones whose works support these tenets or ones allied to them.

Many of the more recent writers that Ratcliffe discusses are also people who’ve worked in the sort of hybridized critical forms that he employs here, and one of the things that makes this collection so successful is the variety of hybrids he develops. Some of the essays, such as “Idea’s Mirror,” which discusses Susan Howe’s

work, function as homage and elucidation on the one hand and as freestanding, and stunning, pieces of creative writing on the other. It’s as if what begins as a secondary source is transformed by its end into a primary one.

The article “Idea’s Mirror” is additionally interesting because it’s connected, particularly through its title, to his recent book of poetry *Idea’s Mirror*. The book can be read either as a single poem or as a book composed of one-line poems, and he keeps the syntax just jumpy enough to prevent any patterns from forming, just disrupted enough that the reader’s assumptions and reading habits must be constantly and consciously revised. But there’s no doubt of the affinity of these independent lines for each other. They accumulate into a structure, but it’s not a predetermined or even a particularly recognizable one. Instead, he replays his vocabulary, images, and evocations so that each gathers volume and weight until we find ourselves in increasingly familiar territory, among familiar characters such as bird, telephone, airplane, bed, the second person, the first person, car.

And though these characters never tell a story, we begin to realize that they might be part of a play, or perhaps somehow part of a movie, a video, a painting, and/or a house by the sea. He gives us a seamless field that fuses experience and representation, both equally real, one the mirror image of the other—which is the idea that opens the essay “Idea’s Mirror”: “as if work and history were images of one another.” The long poem *Idea’s Mirror* presumes just that: the recounted story is the lived experience, and vice-versa. This mirror structure is further emphasized by the recurrent images of falling asleep and waking up; not only are these two the flip-sides of each other, they also constitute a marginal state of continual transition. Throughout the book, we’re more often waking up—it’s an awakening from which we soon awake, and then wake up from. Whether it’s waking up from or into representation or reality is determined only by perspective.

The crucial role of point of view is underscored by the recurrent theme of sight—this is all about looking, and thus also about being looked at. The words watching, window, glass, mirror, eye, and light come up again and again. And looking, as it gets more and more con-

stitutive, gets converted into hearing. For instance, we suddenly realize that we've only heard the birds that appear on every page. Toward the end of the book, there is more and more that we only hear—which again brings us back to the thesis of *Listening to Reading*. The connection between the two texts is reinforced by his using the title as a phrase in the poem: "like an idea / inside the body, his heart / enclosed, as if listening to reading / wasn't beginning to wake, bird / sounds." There's an accuracy here, an acute precision to his recording that keeps even something as potentially loaded as birds from becoming sentimental; they can't because they're always real birds—simply the ones that happen to gather outside his window every morning. It's a reality so pervasive that it leaves no room for symbol, emblem, or metaphor. This same reality attends all the nouns in the book; through their repetition, they gradually and meticulously build to a surround, an environment, a place to live.

A earlier book (published in 1998, but written in the late 80s) *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose* shares much strategy and structure with *Idea's Mirror*. Like *Mirror*, it's informed by a much earlier text that never shows up on its surface. In this case, it's Mallarmé's *Le Livre*, his attempt to establish or to track the book that everything in the world exists in order to end up in. In a sense, Ratcliffe's attempt is more direct than Mallarmé's. Into short lines that, as in *Mirror*, form units at the levels of line, page, and entire book. Ratcliffe packs as much of the flickering, piercing, specific detail of days as he can manage. The point of view is closer here than in *Mirror*, keeping the reader's focus too close-in to discern character or scene, but through a weave of repeated words—face, voice, arm, instrument—he again constructs a world entirely present on the page and entirely real in its own terms. The environment he creates is so self-consistent and so solidly built that by the middle of the book, passages that would be lovely to hear in any case—but that would in most lack concrete sense—come to be perfectly sensible, entirely fitting:

in no way the child, reading poems  
 whose bloom in the window  
 leaves that way, light  
 as it was in the ear of its refrain

Out of context, it's striking, but when read after 70 pages, it's somehow also entirely logical, even inevitable.

If the world ends up as a book, so does the writer, and this text is full of oblique equations between text and self: "...a pause 'The Pen' / sound snapped as I continue myself / meaning the last syllable...."; "how-

ever it breathes the first l / as reading, paint a hand in the window / of an instrument light has made." The recurring use of "instrument" evokes Mallarmé's piece "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument" and, in its repetition, spans the distances between scientific device, musical apparatus, and the collectivity that amounts to spirit. Words, for Ratcliffe, have a magnetic capacity; they act as nets pulling diverse meanings into them, getting huge without ever losing integrity or specificity.

*Mallarmé*, like *Mirror*, is also intertwined with the book of critical essays. And it, too, keeps turning our attention to the audible. Two of the words that recur most frequently are "voice" and, above all, "ear": "(that is all) the ear" (34); "ear level / the whole time..." (80); "I turned in the ear's / flight..." (94). Phrases such as "(content) reading speech" (7) and "in the other exhibit of metaphor / clarified as speech..." (25) seem to move even more directly toward the themes of *Listening to Reading*. But the clearest link is through the essay titled *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose* that appears in the collection. Written a while after the poetic text and planned as an element in the critical collection, he then borrowed it back to use as an introduction to the poetic text. The note at its end informs us that certain passages are from Mallarmé's texts while other passages are from *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose*. Thus the new text by that name is permeated with a variety of Mallarmés, both processed and unprocessed, and none sounding at all like Mallarmé—but all following a principle of composition that reveals an understanding of the connection between life and work, world and book, and—so evident here—book and book that Mallarmé would have recognized at once as kin to his own.

As is true of all of Ratcliffe's work, these three books are rooted in an affection for the daily world and in a solid belief in its infinity and integrity. By entwining his critical voice with his poetic one, Ratcliffe displays that, far from being contradictory, the poetic and the critical are two complementary modes of inquiry, mirroring each other into a seamless continuum.—COLE SWENSON