

A Mirror for What has no Image

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It begins with Edmond Jabès. Not only because his portrait comes first in the series of poets. The afternoon Edmond Jabès sits for his portrait, the first Irving Petlin is doing in a long time, poet and painter talk and talk. Irving Petlin sketches. Erases. Sketches. Sketches. Erases. At the end of their session (Jabès, then 78, is getting tired) Petlin finds he has nothing to show but a ground of smudged eraser lines. Illegible. He has effaced everything.

Then you work like me, says Edmond Jabès.

They agree on another date, a few weeks later.

Back in his studio, Irving Petlin reconstructs Edmond Jabès's face. What eluded the eye yields to memory. And is complicated by it. He is ready to show his drawing. The day of their appointment is the day of Edmond Jabès's funeral.

Erasure and memory. This is how Irving Petlin works on the whole series of poet-portraits.

Erase, from *ex* out + *radere* to scratch. The physical action of scratching, rubbing. Physical. Erasing as well as drawing is a matter of touch, taut power line of physical contact. Not only eye and hand are involved: Irving Petlin brings his whole body to the task. When I sat for him I felt very odd having to sit still while his restless, active body was constantly shifting, practically *dancing*, in his chair. As if he wanted a flaneur's successive, fluid perspectives, without for all that getting up and walking around.

Even more to the point: *efface*, from *ex* out + *facies* face. To rub out the face. To obliterate the face of this moment (even if not as totally as with Edmond Jabès). In

order to prepare for the work of memory which will complicate the vision by starting again from zero (or almost) and allowing the image to unfold over a longer space of time. Just as Moses' Tablets had to be broken to speak.

Arlette Jabès does not consider her late husband's portrait a good likeness. She objects in particular that the ears are too large. But Irving Petlin is not after a good likeness. A photograph could deliver that. He allows memory to filter through what he has seen, heard, felt in the encounter, to search for the essential traits that show something of the mind, the soul. His portraits fit Ezra Pound's definition of the 'image' as that which "presents an intellectual and emotional complex in time." They hold a mirror to what has no image.

Neurophysiological research has shown that the skin and the brain of the human embryo are both formed from the ectoderm; so that "the difference between the brain and the skin is neither originary nor definitive."ⁱ Petlin's portraits confirm that what we think of as a relation of inside to outside is actually a relation of different surfaces. The center is situated on the periphery. The face is the surface of the mind.

Petlin's Edmond Jabès has large ears because Jabès was a listener. Especially to words. And from the ears down his face gets absorbed into strangely webbed lines that might suggest that this face, which was cut off from its roots in Egypt, is growing a new web of roots through language, through the words he listens to, listens for. Roots in poetry, in his books, in his Non-Place.

Petlin too is a listener. To the point that, when Jacques Roubaud at first refused to sit for him, he listened to a reading by the poet and drew him as a microphone that has swallowed the face behind it.

More seriously, Petlin's sessions always involve conversation. He brings not only his eye, working hand, body dancing in his chair, he very much brings his ear. The human being is defined and revealed by language — how much more the poet. Between them, eye and ear accumulate differences that memory, later, will work with. Many of Petlin's works, as Michael Palmer has said, "bring into question the boundary between the abstract and the representational through their sense of field and pattern."ⁱⁱ

His working method likewise seems to home in on the point where drawing is informed by more than the eye, where the visual goes beyond itself into the world of signs and where, conversely, the symbolic turns into image, surface, face.

Hence the many strange convergences between a portrait and the poet's work. Take the birdlike quality of Norma Cole, who published *My Bird Book* a year before her sitting. No doubt she mentioned it. But Petlin took this cue to realize the quality of wary deliberation, quick focus, and airborne lightness that is so much there in Norma Cole — and in her work. Or Dominique Fourcade, who seems to have only one eye, the other being dissolved into fleeing lines. Much later, in *Sans lasso et sans flash*, he writes:

I have an eye in the middle of the forehead — that blinds me
no: I have an eye in the middle of the forehead that blinds what I look at while
digging a hole in my foreheadⁱⁱⁱ

The single Cyclops eye in the forehead that both blinds and turns bullet.

When I saw Irving Petlin recently he greeted me with: you are growing into your portrait. And I said: that's what you were aiming for, isn't it. Aging, like the painter's memory, makes essential traits appear that earlier were mitigated, cushioned by youth, sometimes beauty. And like the painter, it works by destruction. Irving Petlin's work of memory is a memory of the future. That is to say, lastly, of death growing behind our eyes.

ⁱ Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Dunod, 1985).

ⁱⁱ "A Bonfire in the Starry Night," in Irving Petlin: *Le Monde d'Edmond Jabès* (Galerie Jan Krugier, Ditesheim & Cie, 1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sans lasso et sans flash* (P.O.L., 2005):
j'ai un oeil au milieu du front — qui m'aveugle
non: j'ai un oeil au milieu du front qui aveugle ce que je regarde tandis qu'il me
creuse un trou dans le front