

# CRYSTAL

I speak of bare stones—fascination and  
glory!—that both hide and yield up a  
mystery, slower, more immense and  
more profound than the fate of a short-lived  
species.

—Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*

What I have always found most beautiful in the theatre,  
in my childhood, and still today, is *lustre*, —a beautiful  
object, luminous, crystalline, complex, circular,  
symmetrical.

—Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Papers*

First, the quality of transparency, especially related to  
vision and appearance. Water can be crystalline, as is the  
cornea of the animal eye.

Then, regular geometrical form. Geometry is not fantasy.  
It appears spontaneously in earth.

Next, inner regularity: a crystal is composed of stacked  
particles. The regularity is internal as well as external.  
The visible surface of the crystal expresses the system of  
the internal packing of the particles.

Most non-living matter is crystalline. The crystal describes the qualitative atomism of matter. This is the fourth attribute of crystals: atomist accretion.

Five times in the first two books of *De rerum natura*, the atomist poet Lucretius compares the arrangement of atoms in an object to the arrangement of letters in a word. *Mater* and *terra* share the same letters. “Position” he says, “marks the difference in what results.”<sup>1</sup>

A word is a crystal that reconciles a set of alphabetic entities which themselves can contribute in differing sets and sequences to any other word.

Aggregates and combinations of molecules or atoms are called *concillia*.

Poetry, always a cosmological proposition, is natural philosophical method. The poem introduces the problem of time into the *concillia*.

The crystal, by means of atomic orderliness at various scales, suggests the tiny worlds within visible worlds. It is theatrical. The tiny worlds are discerned by close visual scrutiny, sometimes with the aid of imaging technology, by intellectual imagination, by careful reading, and by cleavage.

When the amethyst geode breaks open a hidden small world shatters into the larger visible world revealing the co-existence of nested worlds.

Tininess, says Charles Bunn, incites the “warmth of meaning.” The effort required from a layman to understand the very small produces this warmth, and without it “we are in danger of being imprisoned in our own scale of being.”<sup>2</sup>

André Breton’s wall of salvaged works and objects; Margaret Cavendish’s vast collection of gemstones and curiosities; George Sand’s amethyst geode; Clark Coolidge’s singular quartz divinatory device; CAConrad’s shamanic distribution of tiny crystals meant perhaps to be swallowed to inaugurate a healing, a protection, a knowing; Ian Hamilton Finlay’s inscription of smooth galettes; J. H. Prynne’s crystalline syntax; Robert Smithson’s crystal lattices: pebbles, pebbles, pebbles.

1. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), II. 1022.

2. Charles Bunn, *Crystals, Their Role in Nature and in Science* (New York: Academic Press, 1964), 17.

However, Esther's Leslie's crystals flow, as does this screen whereupon I write.

Liquid crystals are the contemporary sublime.

Borges said he was afraid of crystals. Because I am afraid of time, I myself am repeatedly afraid to write.

Where the liquid crystal moves between states, courting formlessness, the solid crystal is an aggregation of formal discretion, of potential cuts and differentiations: the cut is the temporal conjugation of the present with the past, or the future.

The liquid crystal conjugates vision with the tactile, surface with depth. "Volcanic action threw out a diamond from four hundred miles within the earth to a shallow riverbed in Brazil and tests found that 1.5 per cent of its weight is water."<sup>3</sup>

In Deleuze's view, the crystal image enfolds the actual and the virtual. "What the crystal reveals or makes visible is the hidden ground of time, that is, its differentiation into two flows, that of presents which pass, and that of pasts which are preserved." Time in the crystal is simultaneous and split.<sup>4</sup>

The split of the crystal is the caesura. It's interior to time.

Clark Coolidge mostly situates the split at the end of the line. Rime might call back or ahead to reveal the hidden parts of the thought. Or there may be a clear statement about an obscure cognitive perception originating in the quartz:

3.  
Esther Leslie, *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (London: Reaction Books, 2016), 262.

4.  
Gilles Deleuze, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, *Cinema 2 : The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 99.

5.  
Clark Coolidge, *The Crystal Text* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995), 139.

"The point at which the crystals grow small enough the turn is away. I could not look at that rate of returned attention to results of saturation, the bend in the glass, the levels of reshuffled breath spurned me. I will return only at termination of such knowledge."<sup>5</sup>

Depending on the composer's cognitive relationship to the caesura, the crystal can be clearer or discontinuous. Mr. Prynne puts the cut into the phoneme, amplifying meaning's refraction:

“Latent discontinuous along host planes, sum  
Weight retort friction; start from single  
Crystal hub knot omitted, strict. Impulsive  
Site bellweather corrie sold salute, mutation.”<sup>6</sup>

George Sand breaks open the amethyst geode and love  
appears; the split is a narrative event originating in a  
fractured image:

“While absentmindedly touching a stone in the form  
of an egg upon which my hand happened to find itself,  
I let it drop. It broke into two fairly equal pieces which  
I hastened to gather up, while asking the merchant to  
excuse my clumsiness.”<sup>7</sup>

Look, crystal: clarity, vision, surface, geometry as  
geology, internal regularity, a conciliation of aggregates,  
tiny worlds, scalar interaction, shattering, facets, the  
cut, flow, time. And: at different scales, change differs in  
kind.

Inside the crystal, time faces its own incoherence. That’s  
what a world is.

“You see here, on the other slope of the vast crystal, the  
charming world of jaspers with changeable veins. No  
cataclysm has sullied and buried, beneath barbarous  
mixtures and brutal confusions, these magnificent and  
patient works of nature. While, in our small troubled  
world, revised a hundred times, the gem is smashed,  
dispersed, hidden in a thousand dark and unknown  
places, here it shines out, it sparkles, it reigns over every  
part, pure and fresh, and truly royal as in the first days of  
its happy formation.”<sup>8</sup>

The idea is not a destination. The crystal is not a  
destination. We don’t move towards it, but within it, at  
once shining and dispersed, sullied and fresh.

Within the crystal, what is movement? Now I, as if a vein,  
must move within the crystal.

The seductive supposed clarity of the crystal, its  
revelation of visible interiority, its shattering visual  
conundrum, fogs up. Gazing into the crystal’s facets, one  
palpates the impossibility of vision. One is called to an  
opacity. Speech begins here where vision stops; averted,  
nested, spurned, flowing and mutated: a melted sum.

6.  
J.H. Prynne, *Torrid Auspicious  
Quartz* (Cambridge: Face Press,  
2020) unpaginated.

7.  
George Sand, *Laura: Voyage dans  
le cristal* (my translation) (Paris:  
Pocket Classiques, 2004), 19.

8.  
*Ibid.*, 37.