I

KW: Claude, we'd like to talk about two things. One is the present intense rapport between French and American poetry that we think you helped start. But first, I would like to ask some questions about your own work.

We know that your books are not structured as collections of poems, but as books. Your first, *Le renversement* [Reversal], has smack in the middle the section "Milieu de dispersion," which consists of the ore-line manifesto: "will we escape analogy." In *La notion d'obstacle*, the middle is not clearly marked. But in your third, *Les Objets contiennent l'infini*, the middle is a long prose text, "L'amour dans les ruines." Does this mean prose is getting more important for you? And do you already know what will be the center of your fourth book, which you are working on?

CRJ: I've always seen my books as it were in suspension along the fluid periphery and at the same time linked by a shared center. Something of a fiction, of course, since I don't believe in a center any more than in origins. But, if you like, there is something physical—yes, physical—about the middle of a book, a kind of weight, a geometric locus for the book's structure. And I've realized that my books form an "X," that my third book, *Les objets...* (with the prose, "L'Amour dans les

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ruines,” in the center), structurally rejoins, and is on the same axis as, the first, Le renversement. The latter also contained a prose, but rejected, and not in the middle.

But the center that unites all four is always something in process of dissolving, of coming undone. This prose, in fact, only shows up the poem before it, “Le deuil période d’invasion.” I am trying to show that the true récit, the true narration is in this poem, not in the prose, which is part of the long prose I always write before—before making the “poem” (in quotation marks).

But to come back to my “X.” In Les objets..., each section has a different pace, a different rhythm. The book is structured rhythmically, whereas the second, La notion d’obstacle, is rather structured like an arrow, a linear trajectory... And I’d never have believed it, but I think the fourth book is going to be like the second. So the four books are in this relation:

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  1  2
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    X
  4  5
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This question of the center interests me much, provided we understand that it’s a center in spite of everything, and always shifting. It’s a center which is also a hole. Like what Michael Davidson told me: George Oppen used to put pages on top of one another on a wooden board and then took a hammer and nailed them down. He nailed the pages so they wouldn’t fly off, you see. My “center” is no more of a center than that. It falls where it may, it tears the paper, and a few things disappear. It goes with an idea, if you like, of rhythmic diffusion or with Charles Bernstein’s concept... You know he wrote a text called Artifice of Absorption, and I like this idea of the play between what is absorbed and what is impermeable. There is no pure surface any more than a pure center...

CRJ: Oh, reader identification I reject violently. This is why I find it problematic to allow prose into my books at all. It allows identification in a more flagrant way. But the idea of absorption interests me in my trying to have a syntax or rhythm that could circulate what we see, what we think, in a kind of simultaneity of perception. This is a matter of absorption different from “being absorbed by a book,” by Moby Dick, for instance. It’s rather the ability to note a multiplicity of perceptions: mental, physical, visual, etc.

RW: So “absorption” to you means absorbing this multiplicity into a rhythm?

CRJ: But impermeable doesn’t mean indestructible. It means you can constantly set different planes, different stories into play, and at the same time it’s impossible to stop and arrive at a definite meaning. Well, this is banal, you know the problem...

RW: I’m still impressed, though, that prose made its way from a marginal position in your first book, to center position in the third. Of course you just explained that this position is contingent on following the poem “Le deuil periode d’invasion.” Even so, did you not also want to foreground the writing process which, with you, always begins with writing a long prose text?

CRJ: No, what I wanted... let’s say I saw the sections of the book fall into line and said to myself, I need something that destroys what I am doing or I’ll end up getting something—not “perfect” (or only as we say minor poets are perfect), but something where the direction is a bit predictable. So I wondered, what could make a hole in the book? What could play the role of, not a pile of shit, but something that would take us out of that mental plane where the pacing of sections and such things matter. I looked for something to destroy the harmony and balance that was forming, and one possibility was to use some of the passages in my notebook that I had used to write this poem. Of course, there were hundreds of pages, not just: the few I extracted.

My initial prose, as I've always said, is totally without literary interest. I was in Greece, on the island of Symi, and after six months of working wasn't even approaching a poem. I came back to Paris, still without the poem. I was furious. I said, what an idiot, I go to Greece to write—like everybody else. I look at the sea, the sky, I write every single day, and six months later I come back and have nothing.

But then I started to work from these notes and when I got the poem “Le deuil...” I knew it hadn't been in vain. Of this process, it seemed I could isolate certain moments because I also am fascinated by the idea of a prose that would be more than prose, that could capture both the mental and physical—and have room for landscape on top of it. Where you could say everything at the same time.

So I said, this prose is so big in relation to my poems that it will dismantle the structure of the book and I'll have to write the following sections in a different way. And sure enough, the next one, “Je vois une tache se rapprocher de plus en plus de l'endroit où je l'attends” [I see a spot coming closer and closer to the place where I expect it], that's another Wittgenstein quote, is very different. It's neither prose nor verse, but a kind of hesitation between the two. And that freed me to finish the book with two sections that can actually be called poems.

But it's true people were always saying, why don't you show the prose you write... And Wittgenstein's motto, if you like, don't say but show... so there was some pressure to show where things came from...

KW: As long as I can remember, you have been saying that your work is a tetralogy, that there would be four books. I wonder when you decided, or realized, this. I mean, you always say you don't know what the book is going to be about until it's done, and yet you seem to know it is a tetralogy. How do you know it isn't going to be seven volumes instead of four?

CRJ: You are thinking about Edmond Jabès! But Edmond started out with the idea that The Book of Questions would be a trilogy!...

RW: So you wanted to go him one better!

CRJ: (laughs) No, I can't really explain it. I should never have said it in the first place because I am so slow in getting the fourth volume together that it's the only existing tetralogy in three volumes! But it's a silly idea I have, a little Mallarméan, about four walls. Like what Alain Veinstein means when he says, “between four walls.” When there are four, the poem is done. This doesn't exclude that I might still write something afterwards.

KW: But you are not going to do a floor or a ceiling.

CRJ: (laughs) Do I have to answer this? My house will certainly be without roof. Well, here we are joking and talking out of the affection we have for Edmond [Jabès] and with all the energy and stimulation his books give us, but I would connect the idea of a sequence of books as much with Roger Laporte as with Edmond. The idea of his Fugue, Fugue: Supplément, Fugue 3. You never know what is going to link together as long as the books are not done. Roger Laporte, I think, uses the word poursuivre [pursue, follow] to end a book... This sense of not knowing when it will stop... But my fourth book will start with the poem, “A Descriptive Method.” There is the word “method,” which is also hodos, search, way... I should check that etymology.

RW: There is the word “hole” you keep bringing up in relation to writing.

CRJ: Yes, that's a quote from Joe Bousquet. And what I said was: “this paralytic—you know he was paralyzed—has made a hole in space. Writing is to make this hole in space.”

RW: This interests me because, as you know, I've worked on the “empty middle” also. But I think of writing as gathering energies around this emptiness, rather than making a hole.

CRJ: But I feel, before the moment of writing we live in a permanent overload (surcharger) where everything is excessive, is much too much. To write, you have to be able to see; and most of the time, we're totally blind and deaf. So we first have to clear a space, create a weightlessness, so we can see a little, feel, love... The book is a kind of mental space for me, rather undefinable though...
RW: So this hole is a moment of attention, of concentration, silence, emptiness?

CRJ: It’s the word silence I’d have most to say about. It’s important for me. I say (in "A Descriptive Method") “silence is a form.”

Maybe “hole” isn’t a very felicitous term! But there is all that preliminary work I have to do. The hole is really the book, this indensible mental space. An object and an absence of object, not knowing more, but knowing less.

RW: Can you say a bit more about this “knowing less”?

CRJ: I even called the talk Manuel Hocquard and I did in San Diego “A Craft of Ignorance.” I think poetry has its own, different, relation to knowing because in this pursuit (Laporte’s poursuite) you cannot define the object of the pursuit. The way I sometimes see my books as detective novels. Because for me there is a story, even a crime, but you can never define the body. One has the sense of murder, but cannot find the victim—apart from the reader!

RW: This is curious, this murder without body. Because the body, specifically the writing body, is so present in your books. There is always the hand, “legs carry the alphabet,” etc.

CRJ: What intrigues me about the detective form is the question of clues, the process of investigation. Or take paleontology, Claudine Cohen’s book, Le destin du mammoth (Ed. du Seuil, 1994). Of course, we can never find an entire mammoth, so all there is is the investigation.

But as for “legs carry the alphabet,” I was thinking of Aristotle saying you can write a comedy or tragedy with the same alphabet! (laughs) Don’t forget that the reality principle is very tenuous in all this, it’s the same letters, so everything depends only on their placement. I always quote St. Augustine: “place there is none; we go forward and backward, and there is no place.” Only in a book, definite placement becomes possible. This is why I get angry when my poems are printed without attention to the precise spacing. The spaces are part of the text. Blank lines are lines, they are entire verses. They may seem nothing, but they are something.

RW: But since words are not material, you may place them “all right, but they’ll immediately take off again.”

CRJ: Oh, but I’m not talking about words, I’m talking about verse, about lines. I’d never talk about words, they don’t exist. What exists is the syntax or the verse. I don’t care about words. I may look up an etymology, but only to find other forms of surface, not dig down into the depth of the single word. I admire, for instance, the way Jabès pays no attention to etymology—as against Francis Ponge’s work with it, which may be fictitious all right, but always has such a claim to truth about it. When Jabès says “dans le poison il y a le poison” [within the fish (poisson) there is poison] he is working strictly with the sonorous and visual aspects of the word. But even this does not interest me for my own work. I want the most banal, most anodyne surface possible where, in contrast, the relation between words is everything.

KW: I’ve often heard you say that you’re not interested in sonority and all that—and have
thought I'm somewhat betraying your books in English by increasing the sonority, which I find impossible not to do! At the same time, you do read your books aloud, and they sound very good, and there is also always an aspect of theatricality that seems important.

CRJ: Yes, theatricality is more apt than the detective metaphor because it includes the idea of placement. Words play roles, pronouns are characters, but what really matters is the relation in which they are placed. If you place an actor downstage he is not upstage. If you try to avoid all that is assonance, alliteration etc., it doesn't mean you get a language without sonority. But if you also try to avoid tying the text to images, metaphors, it frees the word-image up to become a character... You know poetry is often defined by a certain sonority, which to me seems close to facile. The same with metaphor—it's funny to think that we supposedly touch reality through metaphor. That seems a paradox to me... But to come back to my image of the wall: I don't want a wall with a fresco on it. I want a plain wall... As in the Zen story where one monk asks another what he sees on the wall he has been staring at for years. He asks, do you see this, do you see that? And the other monk says: I see a wall.

II

KW: To come to our second part: You seem extremely interested in and influenced by American poetry. I wonder first of all how that came about and what it is in American poetry that becomes important for you.

CRJ: That's a vast subject... there is a long history, almost a love story, I think, between French and American poetry. It can be found in every generation. But for me it all started with the Objectivists, in the sixties, when Anne-Marie Albiach translated Zukofsky's "A 9," one of the most fascinating and difficult parts of that epic. Anne-Marie's poem "Etat," which you translated, seems to me inseparable from Zukofsky. There is in "Etat," well this may be exaggerated, but there is almost a political intention, starting with the title, a reflection on what is real, on what could be a simple definition of the political, the social. It's curious that nobody has seen this. I'm thinking of Zukofsky's relation to Spinoza, Cavalcanti, Marx, and how it has informed the sensibility behind "Etat." This is what I mean when I say things are happening between French writing and American writing... It was happening at the time of Wallace Stevens and is happening now. I think it's a matter of individuals and encounters. I've had the impression that we have mysteriously read more or less the same books, even though we were writing in different languages.

You know, in the sixties, all of France felt obliged to read the Beats. But I was much more interested in the Objectivists and in Olson and Ashbery, and then you, when you arrived [in 1970], were reading the same writers. Another encounter fraught with emotion was with Michael Palmer's work, with Norma Cole's. But these encounters do not happen with other languages. I see anthologies of French poetry appearing in Italy or Germany, and there is no echo. Whereas—but I could turn your question back to you and Rosmari: why have you been translating all these French poets, and why are there now so many young American poets eager to continue this work, no?

RW: Yes. All those French issues...

CRJ: There seems to be a kind of complicity, if you like. For instance, when I was reading Wittgenstein in the sixties and seventies I had

the impression that he was of no interest to other poets. Then I discovered that I was completely wrong, that all the American poets I liked were reading him. It’s a matter of filiation, of consanguinity.... The same way, Jacques Roubaud was translating and touting the Objectivists and Gertrude Stein at a time when it seemed American poets weren’t paying any attention. (You know he claimed that Rosmarie was the only one who knew who Gertrude Stein was!) But today we know there is a whole facet of American poetry that derives from the Objectivists and Gertrude Stein, rather than from, oh, I don’t know, Ezra Pound, Joyce... So spiritual families define themselves—or call it complicity, theoretical stakes—and it is very stimulating, very moving to discover them. With me, it may be dumb, but it’s always a matter of emotion. Keith, I’ll always remember your “The Concept of Through” in The Garden of Effort: I read it and knew I had to go and write...

RW: But as for the Objectivists, it seems to me that you, the French, were ahead. It’s only recently that...

CRJ: When you say “the French” you mean?

RW: You, Anne-Marie Albiach, Emmanuel Hocquard, Jacques Roubaud...

CRJ: No, it’s the same. Today all sorts of young French poets are ready to explain the Objectivists to me. But in the sixties, when Anne-Marie [Albiach] was translating Zukofsky, nobody was interested... Now there are people doing really serious work. For instance, Jacques Roubaud and Emmanuel Hocquard have made people understand the importance of Reznikoff. And now, if you like, there are young French poets who lay claim to the Objectivists, at least so it seems to me...

RW: Can you name a couple?

CRJ: No... well yes, I could, but I don’t want to! You see, there is a problem of interpretation (traduction). You know the people whose reading of the Objectivists I understand, but with others I’m a bit at a loss. There was even a magazine issue on the Objectivists that refused a text by Jo [Guglielmi] because he said something about Rakosi that didn’t fit their ideas and...


CRJ: We were living in London and had the good fortune to meet Anthony Barnett and have the use of his library. He had for instance Bottom on Shakespeare, which I couldn’t afford to buy. And he had the A 1-12 published by Jonathan Cape, and all those Fulcrum books: Robert Duncan, Larry Eigner, Lorine Niedecker—all poets I like very much—so we had access to books of American poetry. The dialogue with Anthony Barnett played an enormous part. Anthony talked much about... this is a long time ago, in ’63 or ’64... I was absolutely taken by George Oppen to the point that I translated him—without wanting to publish. I published those versions 15 or 20 years later, actually because of you, you remember...

RW: I remember I was scandalized that you had done these very good translations and just sat on them.

CRJ: I had in fact destroyed many and kept only the few you saw, which then went into Jacques Roubaud’s anthology.

But for my own understanding of Zukofsky, Anne-Marie [Albiach]’s translation was absolutely essential. She was translating in a strange way. She first translated about a hundred pages of A without touching “A 9.” This went on for months, a rapid, not very precise kind of translation, sort of floating. At the same time she read Marx’s Capital, which I don’t think she would have touched if it hadn’t been for Zukofsky. Then after I don’t know how many months, snap, “A 9” came very quickly—and as you know, the constraints are enormous: not just rhymes, but whole words repeated in the second part, interior rhymes, etc. etc. Many anglicists didn’t understand what she was doing, but luckily poets like Jacques Roubaud, Jean-Pierre Faye, Alain Veinstein,
Jean Daive did... But there were older translations of Zukofsky. I even found his text on Ezra Pound, translated back in the thirties.

Then there was Serge Fauchereau's book, which told us much about American poetry. Even if I don't always agree with him, the book has an enormous amount of information. But Anne-Marie's "A 9" was a kind of language concentrate. Zukofsky himself was very intrigued by it. They corresponded. He was sorry she did not keep his 11-syllable line. But she very consciously wanted the line longer, a kind of running over which she called "puffing it flat" (gonflure plate). But on the other hand, she translated the entire phonetic tissue of assonances and alliterations, the sound of the poem... and this Zukofsky understood and appreciated, this attention to the physical aspect of the language. I think he even said she discovered a few correspondences that had escaped him.

Joseph Guglielmi translating Larry Eigner and Clark Coolidge. And Spicer. I remember discovering Spicer, also at Anthony Barnett's. Then meeting you two played a great role, your Burning Deck books; and Emmanuel Hocquard, who has done gigantic work translating and bringing American poets to Paris; and Jacques Roubaud's anthology of American poetry from Gertrude Stein to Rosmarie Waldrop!

You know, here is another example of French-American communication: that anthology used only poets as translators, and it is where Paul Auster got the idea of doing the same in his Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry. (I hope I haven't made this up!) Of course, when Emmanuel [Hocquard] and I put together our two anthologies of American poetry, we did the same. We saw them as continuations of Roubaud's—which is why you are not in them, Rosmarie.

RW: But as for Oppen, why was it actually that you did not want to publish your translations, and why did you not continue?

CRJ: Because I was not happy with my French. Also, if you like, there is something deeply enigmatic in Oppen's poems, a real mystery about his line-endings. In the space between the end of one verse and the beginning of the next, he has a lightness which is extraordinary—and impossible to define. The poem is there, but you can't exactly define what links one line to the next. The translations always sound more continuous, whereas there are all these breaks... But it's also because I don't feel at ease in my own language, I write out of accidents, wounds... I lack the fullness, the strength one might need to translate.

RW: So in a way, it was more your role as editor of Siècle à mains...

CRJ: No, but my role is not editorial, or only by circumstance! I think my role is that of a reader. I have a need to read American poetry. I find it less tiresome than most French poetry. It's essential and stimulating to me. Even when I published John Ashbery in Siècle à mains, in 1967 (at the same time that Denis Roche published him in Tel Quel), it was because there had been an extraordinary encounter between his poem, "Fragment," and a poet I admire enormously, Michel Couturier.

RW: So it was you who put Couturier on to the text?

CRJ: No, it's more beautiful than that. Couturier came across "Fragment" (a poem of 50 ten-line stanzas) in Poetry (Chicago). He was very interested in Maurice Scève, in the form of his ten-line stanza, and so got enthusiastic and began to translate. He talked to me about it, not for the magazine—but we were always talking about our reading. And as his version was incredible, I asked him to do more. There would be much to say about this translation...

RW: Do say it, because the book version (Fragment, Clepsydre, Poèmes français, Editions du Seuil, 1975) is different.

CRJ: Yes, compared to the book version, the text I published seems overwritten... it came out of a fusion of Ashbery's work, Scève's, and his own... Later, for the book, he revised it in the direction of greater simplicity because he realized that American poetry is closer to the spoken language than French is. So he went from the more intricately worked to the simpler, rather than the other way around.

Discovering Ashbery was an immensely moving, important event for us. Overwhelming. Now of course, there is a huge critical reception and all that, but back in the sixties, his poetry was a shock. Almost physical. And magnificent. Moving, in the way I've said earlier: you feel you must write in response.