A Discussion with Christine Brooke-Rose

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I.

**KL:** As I have read your work over the years, I have been struck by a continuous element in both the fiction and criticism—an interest in the phantom and a certain kind of loss, beginning with the short story, “The Foot” and continuing in your complex and brilliant essay on *The Turn of the Screw* in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. This interest continues as a broad theme throughout *Textermination*, with the disappearing or missing persons, and into *Subscript* as well.

**CBR:** Everyone is dead there. Every chapter is called something like “Five hundred million years later.”

**KL:** That’s true. And the collection of short stories in which “The Foot” appears, *Go When You See the Green Man Walking*, seems posthumous. The stories are ghost stories. So you started with a ghost story and this phantom quality is carried forward in your work. What I would call “the unbearable lightness of being” is a thematic, from this ghost story on. It is found as well in your idea of the “dissolution of character.” You deal with so many deaths
in your fiction—the death of the author, the death of the novel, the death of the narrator—and some of them intentionally are part of the constraints, which can be regarded as grammatical absences.

CBR: Thank you, that’s wise. I haven’t been all that conscious of this as a continuous theme but I enjoy your insight.

KL: In your work there’s a continuity that bespeaks life and survival and living on. But there are a lot of disappearances as well.

CBR: The death of the author is on a different level. I try to tackle this problem in “The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author.”

KL: *Subscript* is the last novel. Are you writing anything else? You had told me you weren’t writing any more novels.

CBR: Well, I have been hesitating the whole of this visit whether to tell you or not.

KL: You have another?

CBR: Not really. During the earlier parts of my illnesses, last autumn, I wrote a kind of therapeutic text. First of all I couldn’t write, but discovered a writing-board for an armchair position. And I felt the need to write and something came into my mind, and I found myself being funny about the movements I couldn’t make and things like that. There’s an article I read, by a friend, on the handicapped, one of them said it wasn’t the handicap that caused problems—one learns to cope and adapt—it was other people. So I called them O.P.s. And that’s sort of nasty of me, because I don’t come out very well either. I fuss too much because they are being thoughtless, you know as you saw in my e-mails. Losing one’s physical abilities is like learning to belong to another human species. That’s why real friends become so precious; you can keep on the same thought process. But there are very few, they have their own problems, after all. I used to know hundreds of people and now just a handful. But there are advantages in that too. But I’d rather not talk about this text. It’s very short. It’s called *Life, End Of*. Or LEO. The process was interesting and quite funny.

KL: Have you completed it?

CBR: Yes, and if you want an offprint, I can do one.

KL: You have it on the computer?

CBR: I have it on the computer. But I have trouble getting diskettes.
KL: I don’t even use diskettes anymore. But if you send it as an attachment to someone, then it’s there.

CBR: What a lovely ambiguous sentence.

KL: Let me look at your computer. Your executor should have a copy of your manuscript.

CBR: I want Jean-Michel [Rabaté] to have it, so that he can decide posthumously whether to publish it or not, for instance there’s no point if I’m forgotten.

KL: If you send it to him as an attachment a copy would exist and you could work on it. On the computer it could get lost any time. I’ll show you. As I told you I’m a technological illiterate, but I know how to create an attachment.

CBR: And I’m a technodunce. I mean the *techno* from Greek *techné*, skill. They often merge, art and science. Today they’re split again. All writers can press a button but not always understand what goes on inside the machine.

KL: Of course.

CBR: I think there’s an age when one can take in with pleasure but not retain. Twenty years ago I wrote a novel about a computer. But he is a rock, even if he had an internet. So I loved him like a child, but then went on with other experiments. Seven books later I tried to catch up, in vain. It’ll be funny to change from being neglected as a difficult experimental writer to being dismissed as an old has-been. Nathalie Sarraute has written well of this.

KL: As I read and reread each of your books, I was struck by how much learning was involved in each one, how many different sets of concepts and vocabularies you used—astrophysics, structuralist and poststructuralist theory, computer technology, evolution. It has taken me so long to write this book partly because I needed to bone up on all these areas of knowledge!

CBR: Everything I’ve learnt in addition—psychoanalysis, philosophy and such—are the first to drift off. And technical linguistics, well, generative grammar is a bit as maths must be, you’ve got to do it, not just learn it passively, you’ve got to climb up and down those trees. I went to seminars on it because I was interested. But I never really practiced it in this way. I learnt tons of stuff, well, that’s all gone.

KL: My father has Alzheimer’s and almost everything is gone. But it’s strange—he can remember every lyric of every song, so there’s something about that kind of memory that’s intact. Something Proustian.
CBR: Yes it’s all together, you’re right. The long-term memory—the childhood and all that—remains. What goes is remembering what you went into the other room to get.

KL: He’ll ask something and then forget what he asked. My parents are afraid because I’m here for three weeks even though I talk to them everyday. My mother just said, “I don’t know why you’re not coming home.”

CBR: That’s something that happens. The self-centeredness of age which I’m fighting against. My favorite aunt was like that. She died at 94. She was my mother’s sister. My mother a Benedictine nun, my aunt a Protestant, but I went to see them regularly.

KL: I’m traveling with my children but she still expected me to return home. And Andy is staying in Paris to study French until he begins his job.

CBR: Is he the one who likes tennis?

KL: No, that’s Jeff, our youngest son. He is playing tennis at Amherst. Jeff is working for Michael Wood at the Breadloaf School in Guadalajara. You know him, I think.

CBR: From Princeton. I sat next to him at lunchtime during that conference in Utah. Is he the same Michael Wood who does those television shows?

KL: No, he isn’t. He writes about Latin American fiction . . . the movies. Nabokov. He writes for the London Review of Books. I chaired a panel at the recent Joyce conference and he participated. He gave a paper on Coetzee. Have you read Elizabeth Costello?

CBR: No, not yet.

KL: In the book there’s a fictional novelist named Elizabeth Costello who writes a book called The Lives of Animals. Michael gave a talk on that. Coetzee gets into imagining the other through fiction, which is something that you talked about in your experience during the war as a young girl, dealing with German codes—not decoding, as has been said, but reading decoded German messages. As an Intelligence Officer.

CBR: I quietly left the panel he was directing in Utah because there was a student doing a paper on Christine Brooke-Rose and Pynchon. The theme was the outsider and he took Out as example, versus V and Gravity’s Rainbow, it seems. Way above me. That’s what I’m always so aware of. People take on a themelet—which is all the two writers have in common. It’s already content criticism. It’s the same with that fashion publishers had for a while, and maybe still do, of lumping three authors together simply to save money. There are one or two on me like that.
KL: Are you thinking of Judy Little, who wrote on Virginia Woolf and you and Barbara Pym.

CBR: No, that was real criticism. I’m sorry, I’ve gone astray. What about Penelope Voyages?

KL: Yes. In Penelope Voyages, I wrote a chapter on Between and Brigid Brophy’s In Transit. It discussed your “postmodern” travel, and is more about narrative than travel.

CBR: Yes, I remember that, it was very unusual. I must reread it. Of course I remember now. I was very pleased.

KL: Did you think that I “lumped” you with her when I discussed you both?

CBR: No, of course not. In fact, there’s a logic you have on the two novels. They came out together, and many years later, after her death, I wrote a Preface for the Dalkey Archives. They asked me for an Introduction two years ago. I even asked their permission to compare In Transit with Between. They gave it.

KL: I didn’t realize that.

CBR: They were pleased with the result.

KL: My new book—should I ever finish it, which I’m planning to do—is about you but not in comparison . . .

CBR: I wasn’t asking that.

KL: No no, no, I know. But the panel I served on in Texas, when I e-mailed you about your papers in the Ransom, was held at a modernism conference. The topic of the panel was “the fate of the single author.” And they asked me to be on the panel because they discovered that in soliciting panel topics, they realized that there were no panels on single authors.

CBR: Well, that was a conference, that’s understandable. I’m talking about publishing. You’ve got to think of the buyer.

KL: But this was about publishing too. It was called “the fate of the single author” because the publishing business has changed even at university presses and there are fewer monographs than there used to be. This is partly a function of economic necessity and partly a change in critical fashion. So the conference organizers invited a few people to be panelists who had written books on single authors, in my case Joyce, and one of the organizers knew I was writing a book on your work. I discussed you and your work as well
as the demise of the monograph on one author. It’s even rarer to have dissertations on one author. Not “marketable.”

But, Christine, I would like to return to discussing the trajectory of your own work. I’d like to talk about your development of the female consciousness in *Between*, after using mostly male narrative consciousnesses up until then. In fact, in my book, I am playing off the idea of the “dead white male” who comes back from the dead in *Such*. You might say the male narrative consciousness dead-ends in that book. You read the chapter on *Such* and took issue with some of it.

**CBR:** No, I’ve said all I feel about that chapter. It’s very impressive. But I’m wondering whether the “dead white male” applies to all of my novels. I mean, Xorandor isn’t a dead white male. Still, you’re right, he does disappear, as computer-rock, to Mars.

**KL:** *Such* is about a dead white male, so to speak, but in much of your work, as I said before, loss and phantom existence is a consistent theme. The early fiction is told from a male point of view—“The Foot,” and *Out*, as well as *Such*. In “The Foot,” the narrator is the phantom limb, a male consciousness severed from the female body of a woman who has lost its leg.

**CBR:** I’ve just realized that this phantom of a female leg gives a weird bisexuality to the phantom.

**KL:** Well, I think of it more in terms of abjection, but I see what you mean. *Out* is about a dying white male, and is about race and other things

**CBR:** The color reversal.

**KL:** The color reversal. So, *Such* is the death and resurrection, one more time, of the dead white male, or how to die laughing. There is a kind of joke behind the seriousness. And then in *Between* the central consciousness becomes female. And that’s true in *Amalgamemnon* and in *Textermination* although that female consciousness wanders in both. It doesn’t apply to Xorandor, which is wholly in dialogue.

**CBR:** Between two whiz kids.

**KL:** Let me go back to “The Foot,” which generates narrative out of loss. Even the constraints are in some way about losing things, about doing without certain things. The constraints cross discipline with loss. But in “The Foot,” the conceit is that the narrative is generated from this discarded, abject phantom limb . . .

**CBR:** I’m so glad. What is interesting about such texts is that I was a slow developer. In my twenties, I would write a poem every day. What happened to me as a writer is that I just realized I wasn’t a poet, and I stopped writing
poems, just like that. And I found myself in the novel, but even that took me time, and I had to write four traditional novels to find out what I really wanted. And, you know, when I tried to turn to short stories, I wasn’t very good at it. I was a very self-critical writer, so in fact I tackled the novel as a result.

But do tell me more about “The Foot.” No one else has ever talked of it so well, or will, so might as well feast.

KL: Well, I do like it very much. I think the genre of the novel is the genre you discovered most suited to you—not because it usually encodes change, but because it is such an arena for experimentation. But your collection of short stories, in which “The Foot” appears, seems to me to test out a number of things in shorter form. A narrative told, as it were, from the other side. You have a number of such stories in the collection, “George and the Seraph,” and other stories of hauntings. And actually “The Foot” I think is the best of the group.

CBR: It’s over forty years ago. But you’re right. I think there’s a strong link with Such. I was quite unaware that an early story could so pre-echo later ones. They must have been written close together and both when I was close to death from my serious illness. I was quite astonished to recover. No, that’s true of Out, but affecting what came later.

KL: Did anyone single out “The Foot”?

CBR: Not at the time. I was very much out of things. But not anyone later either, except, oddly, Derrida, who asked his wife Marguerite to translate it, but that didn’t come off. It was translated some twenty years later by a professional French translator. But I just thought of something that connects “The Foot” and Such—a sort of treble voice.

It’s the closeness yet deep difference of the two texts. They both have three levels. Not levels but a sort of tress. After all the beautiful things you said about “The Foot” and Such, I feel they must be closely linked, even though it happened some forty years ago, and it was astute of you to see it. And it’s in the style, a sort of treble language, idiom, or discourse, as the French would call it.

KL: How do you mean treble?

CBR: Well, sometimes double. But the feel of it is often treble.

KL: Example?

CBR: I’m just thinking aloud. This has to do with a treble discourse idiom I was inventing without being all that conscious of it. Two of these idioms are, first, the presence and tone of a death idiom, the second, scientific—and not necessarily true—all correct, in fact wrapped up in the third.
**KL:** Which is?

**CBR:** Poetry, opens up the first two into a magically unreal world, which isn’t real. I’m trying to remember. In both those texts but especially in *Such,* to recall a straightforward example, a law of astrophysics is turned into a metaphor. Oh I know science fiction writers have been doing this kind of thing for some time but very differently. Why? Because their science is “true.” I think that is the essential difference. And this description may not be “true.” But it’s the difference between science fiction and what I’m trying to do. You’ve been very patient, but if you allow me two little anecdotes you’ll feel what I mean. Okay?

My husband was Polish so we had many Polish friends. I showed “The Foot” to a Polish doctor friend we knew whose wife was our dentist. He ran the amputee department at Roehampton Hospital. He loved to talk about his speciality, phantom pain, familiar to patients and doctors. Excited, I found out more about it. The result was “The Foot,” which I gave him to read. He loved it. “Extraordinary,” he said, “there’s nothing wrong in it.” Enthusiastic, he tried to get it published in a medical journal.

**KL:** Really? And they didn’t? But you had captured the sense of sensation, sensation through absence.

**CBR:** That’s very well put. Though I don’t remember doing it.

I was delighted with his approval, but the way I see it now is that he didn’t feel the “poetic” part of the tress, let alone the death one. His idea of approval was “there was nothing wrong.” Of course, I’m being harsh. He was being very kind. That’s my point.

The other anecdote is at Jodrell Bank, the British astrophysical center, much in the news then. I sent a typescript of *Such* to the director, asking if someone could help me. He gently passed me on to his assistant director, who was very charming, took me round, and said I was at the second level in astrophysics, but he was glad I hadn’t asked him to be a literary critic. Joke probably. So nonscientists are very well treated as honorable visitors but not, of course, given a tutorial, naturally enough. It meant, however, as in the first anecdote, getting no help at all except for the general introduction as it were to all friends and visitors. That’s no doubt how it should be.

**KL:** You mentioned Jacques and Marguerite Derrida. Did you read Derrida in the ‘60s, when his work was published in France? Three of his works were published in the same year.

**CBR:** Nineteen sixty-seven. A year before my arrival in Paris. But I had very little time then, though my attention was irresistibly drawn. *Speech and Phenomena,* *Of Grammatology,* *Writing and Difference.* People forget all those who were sort of antistructuralism before poststructuralism, they are treated as though it happened consecutively—George II, George III, George IV, and such. In fact they ran concurrently, like those three works. But Americans
wouldn’t feel that, since translation came later I think, at different dates. I immediately tackled one, I can’t remember which, and they speedily influenced Barthes out of pure structuralism into S/Z. I was teaching structuralism to first-year students and poststructuralism to graduates. And learning it all myself. At least at the beginning of this new university at Vincennes, it was difficult. I also learnt that a good teacher is someone who can reimagine his own ignorance. I didn’t have to, it was there.

KL: And Derrida’s *pharmakon* discussion that you talk about in your notes on Pound was published in *Tel Quel*, so you must have been reading it at that time. You wrote in your Pound book about this idea of literature as a cure and a poison.

CBR: I was cheating a bit. The book was actually finished. I had written it in the Pound castle, and I was revising it and plunged into Derrida later. I said, oh, this is exciting. So I put it in there, but it didn’t really fit so well.

KL: Was Derrida an important . . .

CBR: To me?

KL: Yes.

CBR: Very important at the beginning. But I became ultra-busy at first, and went on reading voraciously, Foucault and all the rest. In fact later I became rather disappointed in him.

KL: You did?

CBR: Maybe it’s me turning against my masters, or against French philosophy, or simply too interested in other, linked aspects. And whenever I tried him again I feel a new distance. He did these weird interviews with that Romanian woman, for instance.

I think he’s had a little bit of head-turning from his star situation. But I don’t know. Not as much as Lacan, who once said “je cogite, éperdument”(funnier in French, where cogiter is more restricted to philosophy, and éperdument a wild contrast). Derrida had great charm. But I don’t really know.

KL: There have been two films about him. The first, by an Egyptian woman, was actually quite good.

CBR: In fact I later used his deconstruction in several essays. It was great fun. Anyway I stopped reading philosophy, sociology, linguistics (only about them) when I began my retirement in ‘88 and I was just concerned with my own books, which seemed to have nothing to do with such disciplines. Seemed, I don’t know, you’ll have to tell me. I wrote five novels since retiring and two critical books. It was rather nice to read just for pleasure. Not for a seminar or panel. The way children read.
KL: I know.

CBR: Of course, I forget all the reading I did, after retiring, for Textermination and the reading I did for Subscript. Pleasure or work? I’m still fascinated with prehistory and ordered a book that’s just come out. But I’m not reading for anything except my novel, and this is lovely. And I’m glad I gave up theory, because, yes it was important to me, but once it had ceased to be important, I didn’t want to get mixed up with all those quarrels, you know?

KL: But when one looks at your notebooks for the novel, each one is almost a tutorial on another science—you took on huge subjects—just look at the notes for Subscript.

CBR: Yes, they’re not really notes contributing to a science. They’re just notes of my reading. To learn.

KL: But most people don’t go into the depth. There are notebooks, even for “The Foot.” You know, what you did about the brain and the autonomic nervous system.

CBR: That’s just books, not treatises. That’s hardly depth.

KL: That’s great. I look at this and my head swims because it’s not my area. But to look at . . .

CBR: I kind of swept into one particular thing. That’s when you know what you’re looking for. That’s what I call cheating. So the realist novel—and I’m not a realist novelist—cheats just like anyone else.

KL: But realism as a kind of cheating. Meaning what?

CBR: George Eliot says somewhere that the author need not be in the workshop, the door ajar is enough. After all, look at the fuss we make about identity. Identity is formed in a child very young, repeated blindly by his parents, his teachers, his religious guides, and is a dead loss when something goes differently.

KL: You’re generalizing again.

CBR: From highly personal but more or less free experience. I’ve always hated belonging to a particular party or religion or whatever. Like a club. Which reminds me—Peter had a lovely joke yesterday. We were talking about the early part of Subscript, the prokaryote cells—no nucleus—and the eukaryote ones—with a nucleus. I asked him what he felt about how they evolved from one to the other and he said: “They form clubs.”

   Every single person seems to be having trouble with this word identity.
A fairly recent concept—eighteenth century I think. It was from Locke and Hume, it was called the self. I have always loved the etymology of identity as *id* + *entity* (the wholeness of the *id*).

**KL:** I never thought of that.

**CBR:** Well you were right, because it was wrong. Incorrect. The *OED* says identity is “peculiarly derived” from *idem* [same] + *atis* [ness] in Low Latin, in other words, far too early to acquire my invention, my modern *id* + *entity*, which I prefer. My modern *id* + *entity*, with *id* as not necessarily Freudian. The word “*id*” for me is a way of concentrating on specific cases. Here “*it*” may be a black hole producing sudden violence in those who go out and die for identity.

**KL:** But identity now often refers to social, group identity.

**CBR:** Clubs again. It always has been. In the class system it was very very strict. Perhaps it was less so in America. I think they had a class system too, one feels in James.

**KL:** Yes, it is not always talked about in America, but it’s true.

**CBR:** I didn’t think that a society can exist without these groupings. They are essential. But not as used.

**KL:** I think many discussions are about those kinds of identity groups, as opposed to Freud or Erikson who stress the individual stages of identity formation.

**CBR:** So in that sense, I am a Freudian.

**KL:** It’s in terms of group identity that the concept of identity has become a part of contemporary political discussion. It’s a real issue. Also sometimes about language.

**CBR:** Yes. Someone even came to interview me about bilingualism.

**KL:** Oh, who?

**CBR:** No, no namings. It was very strange. The questions seemed so naïve that I assumed they were way above my head. Still, I think Freud has been really overrated. Of course he’s important. But he also comes out with bizarre primitive ideas. I mean as if the *id* and the *ego* were physically there. With a map. Lacan used this too.

**KL:** Which reminds me of the way you play with the idea of drives in *Such.*
Someone and Something are in vehicles. There is almost a pun on drives. It struck me that the drive—the Freudian drive—was part of what was being played with there.

Of course, people are also remembering that Freud was a Victorian, that his “mappings” were not separate from his time.

**CBR:** It was a sexist period and men have taken a long long time. Lean to the left and live to the right.

**KL:** I was invited to give a talk about administration and I asked my fellow deans whether they thought gender made any difference, whether it was a marked sign in terms of administration. And all the men, except one, said, “no,” and all the women said, “yes.” The men thought women might have a tougher time, but they didn’t see themselves as part of a system that privileges them. They just saw women as potentially thinking about it. I think that’s still true.

In that vein, I wanted to ask you about your novels—“The Foot,” *Out,* and *Such* all have male narrators, not narrators, but central consciousnesses. Without the sign of third-person narration, but central consciousness. And it does seem to me with everything you’ve said about starting *Between* with an androgynous consciousness, writing *Such* instead, which has a male physicist and psychiatrist in the first person but as a central consciousness. You were working through these things . . .

**CBR:** It took me a long time to realize that translation is in a sense a female activity, the idea that you have no ideas of your own, you’re translating others. And this realization began to surge in Oslo, where I gave a short speech on something semantic—I forgot what. I showed the English text to the French translator in his cabin and that gave me ideas. He translated it well. My husband didn’t want to go up to the fjords as I wanted to, so we ended up in Portugal. And then I started writing from a translator’s viewpoint, but it didn’t work out.

**KL:** With *Between*? You mean with that novel?

**CBR:** Yes.

**KL:** Okay.

**CBR:** And I don’t remember how long all this took. But I wrote *Such* instead, which starts “Silence says the notice on the stairs”

**KL:** Which is in Portugal, right?

**CBR:** And this went off in a completely different direction, not translation as a theme anymore. And then I realized . . . the following year we went off on a long, long journey. He had a sabbatical term at last from the Slavonic
School and added the Easter plus the summer vacation to make six months. We went all round Eastern Europe, still communist, by car. Hardly any tourists. I started collecting those mineral water labels.

**KL:** Wasn’t Vichy one of them? I noticed that one in particular in *Between* because of its historical resonance.

**CBR:** I’d collected lots, Bulgarian, Turkish and so on. I had all these labels and also notices in the hotel rooms, also in odd languages, about this and that and the other. And then I realized that the central consciousness had to be a woman. But it took me a long time. Why? It seems to me a very obvious idea, at least as an accompaniment. And picked up the pronounless narration of *Out*.

**KL:** But you went on in all of the subsequent books.

**CBR:** Yes once I’d hit on it. But with variation. It’s closer to my own life. I’ve never been an interpreter, but I have always been bilingual, partly tri—so I could understand the feelings and the problems. I was in a way dealing with that, so she had to be a woman.

**KL:** But we’re localizing this more around the problem of translation, which I think was part of the discovery, of course

**CBR:** Hence the planes, the constant travel.

**KL:** But what I’m getting at is that once that happened in *Between*, all of a sudden, there was a sense of discovering the centrality of the woman as the main consciousness.

**CBR:** Absolutely, and I wrote *Between* in flowing sentences. We ended up at the Pound castle, which we visited before in the Italian Tyrol.

**KL:** We? Who’s we?

**CBR:** My husband. Plus me. Our last complete year, 1967.

**KL:** And that was Mary de Rachewiltz, Pound’s daughter?

**CBR:** We became deep friends and still are. Anyway, that summer I finished *Between*. Even had a photograph of me in Milan or somewhere writing in a café. That was where we did all our writing, cafés. And I knew it was okay. It’s one of the few novels I felt certain about. Usually I would keep it back and look at it the following summer. Then all the wrong things leap out at you. But this I never needed to. And it did me a lot of good. It was best of all so far, and I knew it was a very original idea, so there we are.
KL: It seems to me very important that *Amalgamemnon*, too, has a woman consciousness.

CBR: Yes. Once I was on to this female thing it was all I’d hoped. I was out of the third person narrator and the squeamish wriggling first. I think a woman writer should be able to be a man and vice versa. But it’s true, I feel more at ease with the woman in *Amalgamemnon*, in fact, so much so, it’s more personal that I go into the first person again. I slide back into the first person, still nameless and subjectless, because I do other things, difficult things with grammar. I don’t stick to my experiment but discover other ones.

KL: Your constraint.

CBR: Is a very different one. Tenses.

KL: First person plus future.

CBR: The first sentence is . . .

KL: “Soon I will be obsolete.”

CBR: Yes. I think the word is “redundant.” Anyhow, it’s about her obsolescence.

KL: Right, as a humanities professor. But the constraint is the future.

CBR: If you look at the use of the future as a constraint, yes. You can’t do too many things at once. One has to keep in control with the constraints. And some constraints, one doesn’t really see the point. I’ve never understood the point of writing a novel without the letter e.

KL: And Perec did that around the same year you published *Between* without the verb “to be”? But you wrote this a bit before.


KL: Well it is a challenge to think of French without an e.

CBR: Yes, but English has a lot of e’s too. To me, a constraint must be a grammatical or a syntactical constraint, part of the syntax, not a letter. But that may be a prejudice, about form. Because that becomes going through dictionaries and looking for words. I mean, I like him. But I don’t see the point.

KL: Do you think that when they read *La Disparition* . . . is that the title in French? It was translated as *A Void*. 
CBR: Yes, that’s very good. I couldn’t have found such a title myself.

KL: Is it “disparition”?

CBR: *La Disparition*. And you see there’s a kind of semi-plot about a person disappearing.

KL: I read it. Can you tell as you read it that in French there are no e’s? I thought you might be able to . . .

CBR: He announced it loud and long, so it was known. I didn’t say anything about no verb “to be” until much later. And then it did get repeated, but without further comment and once it was attributed to the wrong book, *Such*, I think. But I forgive them all. Because I used to be a reviewer, with deadlines, space limitations. In fact the only serious article about this aspect of my work is Jean Jacques Lecercle’s, on *Amalgamemnon*.

KL: That’s a great article.

CBR: He analyzes my use of future. As with you, he taught me things I didn’t fully understand about what I was doing.

KL: He analyzes the use of the future in *Amalgamemnon*.

CBR: A long introduction.

KL: About Heidegger.

CBR: Yes, which seemed alien to me. At least that’s how I felt. But once he gets into the text he does some very interesting things, which I was unaware of at least as to their effect and meaning. And that’s amazing, that a critic should know more about the technique than the writer. He showed me that I was, as I knew, indeed using the future, but that was not a constraint. The real constraint I had chosen was all the other tenses.

KL: And *Amalgamemnon*, you saw as a constraint of not using the present and the past?

CBR: Yes, but not so clearly. I thought of it as using the future and other nonrealizing verbs, but I must in practice not have used the other ones, and he analyzes that twist in the use of the future in terms of illocutions. Very well.

KL: It is a great essay. Do you know him?

CBR: I used to know him quite well, and his English wife, in Paris. He taught at Nanterre, and did that paper on me in a seminar there. I saw his name
connected with Bristol but it may be temporary. Or not. It’s amazing how many French academics are leaving for America.

KL: Are they?

CBR: Well, Jean-Michel finally chose Philadelphia. The Americans don’t take away money and staff and so on. Perhaps I’m prejudiced.

II.

KL: In my manuscript, I don’t discuss your early novels. Can we talk a bit about them? Although you have described them as conventional.

CBR: I was very much dissatisfied with *The Sycamore Tree* after my delicious first novel, *The Languages of Love*. These are conventionally written. Then I got involved with what I discovered, in the fifties, about my father’s shame and prison in 1898. Twenty years before he even met my mother. I decided to do research and wrote about it in *The Dear Deceit*. Quite funny in fact, people still like it. And I began thinking about experiment around then because I wrote it backwards, the first time to my knowledge anyone had done this. In each chapter you want to know what happens next but no, you go back in time. That’s not always very clever. There have been two novels written backwards since.

KL: Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*.

CBR: Very interesting. In this experiment, though, you can’t go beyond a certain point. He included dialogue, when all you have to do is to read the words backwards. If you pursue that and do it with letters it merely becomes unreadable. Of course the unreadable is also part of some experiments. I don’t think he went that far. I can’t remember. I’m looking at it theoretically. Sorry, none of this is relevant for you.

KL: It’s all interesting.

CBR: Okay, then I wrote *The Middlemen*, back to satire. And that was the real change. I had slowly realized, after my backward writing, that I couldn’t write that sort of novel any more, either easy satire or joke direction, and I started writing *Out*.

KL: But you became ill, didn’t you?

CBR: Yes, in the South of France, at my favorite aunt’s. My husband had gone to Italy to write. Kidney trouble, as usual, and I lost one. Complications and it all lasted longer than it should have. Slowly I wrote one sentence and fell
back on the pillow. And it was completely different. And that was the one that owed most to Robbe-Grillet.

KL: Right. And that was around the time you were translating *Dans le labyrinthe*?

CBR: Well, I don’t remember. But I wanted to get away from those obsessive detectives and such. His topics didn’t interest me. So I tried to go beyond him, using his startling syntax to do something more original, or interesting for me. I mean my plot—well there wasn’t one really. But the ideas I explore are quite original. What do you think?

KL: Very original, and taking his method for something that seems to me to be quite different. Robbe-Grillet’s experiment was fascinating, but very claustrophobic, very individual.

CBR: Funnily enough, the method I’m talking about is fully used (I think) only in one novel, *Jealousy*. No first person, of course, we’re inside the unknown consciousness and we have to reconstruct him solely from what he sees, hears, thinks. Anyway, I think I got out of this direct influence but still going on with the method. The real freedom was *Such*, as you happily suggest. And then there was *Between*. But you’re right, I was always suppressing something. People don’t notice, why should they?

KL: I was looking back through your papers in the Ransom library—all the reviews. Don’t you feel most of the novels did receive attention? Lorna Sage was a particularly good reviewer.

CBR: Yes, she was. But don’t get me wrong on this, I’m not complaining. The only plaintiveness I ever felt (if I did) was early on, during my beginnings in experiment, that men experimenters seemed to attract more attention. But I soon got used to that, familiar still in many domains, the university, for instance.

KL: Who, for instance?

CBR: No, I won’t name anyone. Some of them vanished anyway. But don’t forget I was also a critic, of myself as well as others. As well as a professor judging theses, and it’s easy to don the don’s robe.

And when I was a reviewer for instance we had eight hundred words for four or five novels out of ten sent. And now fewer and fewer get reviewed, but get a longer, later, and more individual space. That’s good, I think. *The Sunday Times* review of *Amalgamemnon* came a year later. One loses the immediate expectation.

KL: You talk about that in *Invisible Author*. 
CBR: I can’t remember.

KL: I’d like to go back to *Such*. I wanted to return to our discussion of Freud.

CBR: The Freud fraud.

KL: I know that Canepari-Labib calls it an attack on psychoanalysis or on psychological theory.

CBR: I was glad of that book on me, but barely remember it . . . I was already detached.

KL: That’s just a way for me to introduce some questions about *Such* and psychoanalysis—because I disagree with Canepari-Labib’s way of characterizing your relation to Freud and psychoanalysis. In *Such*, there is certainly criticism of any ironclad system for codifying the human psyche. That a system could specify, for example, *five* of anything to explain the psyche, is satirized.

CBR: But these are the character’s ideas, his reborn phases as kids, not the author’s.

KL: Yes, nevertheless, it seems to me that despite the satire of systemization and the way Freud has been misused, the work of language in *Such* owes much to Freud’s analysis of the language of dreams and jokes. And this kind of language was important to you.

CBR: Yes, it’s a question of how it’s used. I’m sure excellently in your case. There’s quite a lot of Freud in my work, but it’s not sort of exclusive. I float on phantoms.

KL: In *Such*, in particular, I found it very fruitful to think about the work of condensation and displacement in terms of verbal play—a joking quality that includes the motif of dying laughing. The protagonist is both a physicist and a psychiatrist, right?

CBR: Yes. I was involved in psychoanalysis but more Jungian than Freudian at the time.

KL: At that time? I’m very interested because this seems like confirmation of my hunches about the language.

CBR: No, you’re right. I did have a brief analysis by an Austrian lady. Someone, a friend of mine, who was a psychoanalyst, sent me to a Jungian analyst living in Hampstead, and it was all very difficult. But it didn’t last more than
a few months. Resistance, they call it. She blocked me with her heavy accent and grammatical errors.

**KL:** So when was that?

**CBR:** The late fifties it must have been, because out of it came the book about my father. So she obviously did help. But *Such* was not written until 1963, published in ’64. I must have got more interested in Freud than I thought. But found Jung uselessly fanciful.

**KL:** Actually, me too. But Freud remains still fruitful for literature.

**CBR:** Yes, of course. The important thing for me is not to get caught up in them, however deeply I may have studied them—or not. That’s the trouble with everyone. I fear being labeled as Freudian merely because I use him. Not by you in your book but by others using you. After ten years of my life working on Pound, nobody has called me Poundian. I might as easily be called Hopkinsonian or Mallarmian. Reminds me of an old sad funny Turkish story about most Armenian names ending in ian. An American lady-tourist mistakenly wrote her profession where the name should be. The profession was librarian. She was swiftly taken away.

**KL:** But I thought Canepari-Labib took your satire of Freud as a wholesale attack on psychoanalysis. I think it ignores the relevance of the language you use that draws on Freud. Did you read *Jokes and the Unconscious*?

**CBR:** Yes, of course. And the dreams book.

**KL:** There are dreams, but the connection between the way language works in dreams and jokes seems to me important for *Such*, because part of it is like a stand-up comedy routine. There are some “one-liners.”

**CBR:** Yes!

**KL:** Even in the beginning . . .

**CBR:** I’ll tell you what I suddenly remember now. I went through a period of several years when I had learned how to jot down my dreams and to remember them—literally in the dark. I would wake up from a dream, and I had a two-page notebook: a dream on the left page, leaving the right for the next day’s interpretation, well, my free association. And I think that helped me very much. I think I must have thought that after going to this woman that this is something I can do on my own.

**KL:** So she became obsolete, and you continued.
CBR: She did release me in some way. And there came a point where I stopped remembering dreams, so I took it that my unconscious said “basta, you know, I don’t want to tell you anymore.”

KL: Or it’ll come into your conscious . . .

CBR: Not that it effaced my faults. I just recognize them better. All this is very Freudian of course.

KL: And was this contemporary with working on *Such*?

CBR: It started earlier, before the publication of that book about my father, written in ‘59. But published in sixty I think. It was all very intermittent. Then I went to Paris, end of ‘68, and plunged into Structuralism, but also Derrida and Lacan, who brought Freud more alive to me. I went on jotting dreams but ceased when I became far too busy. I can’t remember whether I was doing it during the writing of *Out* and *Such* and *Between*.

I know it’s very much part of me. But so are other things. You’re pinpointing my id, but it doesn’t mind.

When you wrote to tell me about some of your thoughts on the “children” in *Such*, I was simply frightened that you would take these . . . what I remembered about these planetary children that represented psychological states of the psychoanalyst. And I thought you were perhaps inventing a whole biography.

KL: No, no, no, but it’s not so easy to see. I actually had figured out that they doubled in age, but wasn’t sure what to do with that. So I didn’t do very much with it, but it was clear that these children were parts of his psyche. . . . I appreciated getting your letter about that, especially since it confirmed what I had deduced about the relationship in their ages.

There’s a line in *Such* about “energy passing through matter” that I thought might almost be an epigraph for what I want to talk about in your books. My project is not just one of looking at theory separate from its fictional working out. The theory materializes in language and linguistic experiment. What I am interested in is how much the fiction is an embodiment and wrestling, both intellectual and material, with a particular problematic.

CBR: Oh, lovely. I just wanted to make it clear that all the adventures in *Such* and its sequels—well except *Remake* obviously—are not consciously out of my dreams, but invented. I realize this makes no difference in psychoanalysis.

KL: Well, of course. But for me to say “theory” sounds very abstract, and what I’m interested in is the concrete as well. These are novels, so it’s concrete in different ways that each novel works out a particular problem, and not necessarily the same one. In the process, there are some important issues that get taken up that form a kind of intellectual history. In each fiction, the constraint helps you work out that problem linguistically. For example,
reversing the color bar in *Out* is connected to the way you use the narratorless narrative. Unlike Robbe-Grillet, you use the technique to deal with what are also social problems.

**CBR:** That’s good to hear. Indirectly you mean. I never sort of look back biographically at my novels as I’ve been doing here. But once I start talking to someone who’s interested it’s true, things do come back and seem relevant. My early war experience for one. General reports on me say I was a Decoder. No, of course not, I’m not clever enough. But all day I read the German messages that were decoded, masses of it, and the experience, slowly, or fast for my youth was seeing the whole war from the enemy’s viewpoint. *Der Feind*, was us. That does something to one’s imagination. Like inventing characters in weird situations for example.

And the second thing is how, before I started writing novels, I was a medievalist for some eight years. A visitor once commented that the characters in my novels don’t seem satisfied with whatever they happen to know and they don’t *learn*, you know. Well, I’ve never been interested in the *bildungsroman* and it seems to me that the novel was rather badly influenced by this idea. But I think there are other reasons, and they do involve my own experiences as a medievalist. Poetry mostly anonymous, and when a name is attached biography is more or less impossible, and even irrelevant. And so my interest in literature was much more through allegory, and it’s a very static literature. But I obviously didn’t learn, or wasn’t interested in change. I don’t really get that until the picaresque, you know. That is change; I mean, for instance, in one thirteenth-century French manuscript on the Grail, you follow all the knights looking for this Grail, and at one point Lancelot is found as a hermit in a hermitage. He is full of repentance of his adultery. I was so surprised; it’s not like medieval literature at all. Even in Chaucer, people are fairly static. The idea of *learning* something . . . of course I think my characters *do* learn something, but I don’t announce it. So these things that one does that in themselves have nothing to do with what one intends to write do influence one. I must stop saying it has nothing to do with what I am. Of course it has, but not in the way most people ask.

**KL:** Let me ask you about the role of grammar in your work. Both in the work you did on the importance of verbs in the use of metaphor in English poetry (in *A Grammar of Metaphor*), and also your work on Pound, there seems to be a point when semantics becomes less important and you shift the discussion to grammar.

**CBR:** Absolutely. That’s really my upbringing. In a trilingual family, you get really grammar conscious very early. And you get all those bilingual puns . . . which I went on doing automatically and come up in *Between*. There’s one I remember there: *lecheria* (milk shop in Spanish). But of course, in English means lechery. French keeps the latin, *luxuria*.

**KL:** So there are wonderful puns that have to do with nouns, but then it
seems to me that there’s also an increasing interest in relationships—prepositions—and syntax and verbs. In other words, how you get from one thing to the other. Increasingly in your novels . . . ”out,” “between,” “through” are words that are not nominative, and that are about direction or interstices, moving away from a state of something, or a noun. Structuralism puts less emphasis on the actual nouns involved than it does on the relationships, the links.

**CBR:** In fact in that book, *A Grammar of Metaphor,* which I worked on through the fifties, I go wild about verbs, which create this movement. And as Latin verbs slowly lost or weakened their declensions, prepositions grew stronger and stronger. They’re functional, not independent, and three of my first experimental books use one as title. Except *Such,* which is pretty near but more static than a preposition. In old-fashioned grammar, I think it’s called an indefinite adjective. I’ve forgotten its status in modern grammar.

**KL:** I was thinking of the meaning of *Tel Quel,* it means “as such”?

**CBR:** As such, yes.

**KL:** So I was wondering actually . . .

**CBR:** It’s *Tel Quel* that gave me the title.

**KL:** Very good! I’m glad to hear it.

**CBR:** I got it from *Tel Quel,* which I was reading. And it’s not easy because I say once or twice, “interested in things as such.” There’s a character who is “not interested in things as such.” But otherwise, it’s not underlined.

**KL:** No, I’m so glad. I was also trying to think about what to make of my conjecture that *Tel Quel* was a source for the title.

**CBR:** It must have influenced me strongly because I was determined to go to the prepositions and “such” wasn’t a preposition.

**KL:** But the reversible “as such” and “such as” are so interesting as locutions. Because if you say “such as,” then it creates a simile or comparison, right? In one part of the novel it says something like, “define presence such as a banister,” where you take something abstract and create an analogy. So “such” can also be “such as,” as in looking forward to a new analogy. Or it can be “as such,” which has more to do with a kind of etcetera or predictable path.

**CBR:** Things as such.

**KL:** What does that mean?
CBR: “Such as” would be _tels que._

KL: I would like to ask you about your autobiography without pronouns, _Remake._ You have said that you wrote a first version of it, didn’t you, that was close to your life, and perhaps, more standard, but then you rewrote it with a constraint on pronouns. Is that accurate?

CBR: More or less. Most of my books were written in one summer. But I would put them away, not satisfied, and I’d pick them up the following summer. Or usually in the Pound castle. And everything wrong sort of leaps out at you. So it’s much easier to rewrite. But _Amalgamemnon_ took four such summers, so I never know what to say when they ask me how long does it take to write. Is it eight months or is it four years?

But of course it keeps working in you. Because I could never write during the academic year. Too much is going on at different levels. So I have to have this concentration. People have such little understanding about concentration. They can interrupt you at any time, and so on. You find that . . . as a Dean. But that’s your job, you know. But with writing a book, I need to be in it morning, afternoon, evening and for no pay. And I don’t want to be interrupted. Here, for instance, when I have any job to do and I have a physiotherapist who comes anytime in the morning between nine and twelve, I won’t sit around for any kind of writing, or even a letter or anything that needs concentration, because I know I’m going to be interrupted. So one gets quite absurd and neurotic about that.

KL: I think that is the essence of administration. You put yourself out there to be interrupted. When I had small children and was doing administration, the two activities seemed very similar in some ways. A little child has no compunction about claiming your attention.

CBR: They all want attention.

KL: It was such a great pleasure to go to Texas for the modernism conference. And then I stayed two extra days, and I just worked from nine in the morning until five, and looked at your papers and read all the materials. And it was such a treat to be back in the library and to be doing work on the project that I wanted to be working on.

CBR: That’s why I isolated myself here. A mistake, I guess, with some advantages.

KL: Do you still have students who are writing to you who are reading you?

CBR: No, I’ve stopped. I’ve really lost touch. Partly my fault, can’t be theirs, you know. I’m too ill to cope with this kind of perpetual thoughtlessness. I
really can’t. That’s why I dealt with this problem. But I usually drop them myself. I can’t explain to people why you can’t take this kind of behavior anymore. So they drop you and feel good about it and that’s fine.


CBR: Yes, I subscribe to that. And the TLS. And the London Review of Books. I’ve spent all my week reading that, no time for other things. I’m reading the TLS on Shakespeare. You get that when you subscribe. The early ones were anonymous. And I’ve had lots of books I ordered even the Potter, the Harry Potter books.

KL: I haven’t read those yet.

CBR: I wanted to see what the success is about. Curious, not jealous—just curious.

KL: Have you read it?

CBR: I have read it, and I must say. It was a book you didn’t put down, you wanted to know what happens next. But from the point of view of structure, she uses all sorts of subgenres, repetitively mixes them up. The vampire or the monster. Substory, etc. . . . that thing in the first book. The villain is discovered so you forget the actual adventures. Turns out to be someone that was never even introduced before you got to that. And that’s not a good story. You’ve got to introduce everyone. In the end the readability is spurious.

So it’s kind of strange and patterned always. Every book starts with his horrible family. And then he manages to get back to his school, so it’s also a boy’s adventure story, which she does very well, oddly enough. But it’s always some danger or adventure, or something goes wrong, and then solution, and then another . . . all the time. You get bored with that structure. But that’s obviously what people want. But I’m still very puzzled. I think the only original thing is that wizards are usually old men. To make the boy a wizard, that was quite original.