

An Interview with Jane Cooper

—New York City: July, 1994

Eric Gudas: *Green Notebook*, *Winter Road* seems to be your most *American* book so far, in terms of its concerns and even of the forms you've chosen to write in. Do you agree? What do you think has made it possible for you to write, in a way, as a *citizen*?

Jane Cooper: That's a very complicated question. But yes, you're right, I do think this is my most American book. First of all, it's a book that's very much concerned with history, and how the sense of history extends an individual life, both as you look back and as you look ahead into the future. I used to think that what was most important for Americans was to focus *outward*, to accept internationalism; this was the legacy of World War II for me. At the same time, three-quarters of my ancestors came from what used to be called "old American families," from Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Delaware. What's changed is that in the "Family Stories" section of *Green Notebook* I've consciously explored that legacy, rather than turning away from it, toward internationalism, as I did earlier. But both these attitudes are aspects of my consciousness of being an American, and of being a citizen, if you will.

Then, I've always been very interested in imagining what the task is for an American writer, an American artist. In this book there are two extended meditations, on Willa Cather and Georgia O'Keeffe, and the American landscapes they chose as their signatures, and that's obviously a very different focus from writing a long poem about Rosa Luxemburg. Cather says at one point—she paraphrases Virgil in *My Ántonia*—"For I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." Of course she's leaving out the Native Americans, which points to a central flaw in her, but, you know, this too is part of our legacy, that until quite recently someone could still feel that way. . . .

EG: That she could be the first one—

Eric Gudas was the interviewer.

JC: That she could be the first one, that no one had ever written about Nebraska and the Great Plains. Obviously, you're never going to be the first one to write about the South, but still she gave up trying to write like Henry James and decided she could write about Nebraska.

EG: It seems you made a real decision at some point to try and write about the South.

JC: Well, I've always had it in the back of my mind to do. Lately, I've been going through old boxes of poems and poem-drafts with my assistant, Beatrix Gates, and there are a lot of attempts at writing poems about the South, most of them not much good. It's not that I never thought of doing it, but with this book it's as if I'd made a promise to myself.

EG: I'm wondering if you'd talk a little about your family background, to give interested readers an introduction to some of the people they'll meet in the "Family Stories" section of *Green Notebook*.

JC: I'm half-Southern, by upbringing and inheritance—or, let's say, by geography and inheritance. I spent my childhood in the deep South, until I was ten, and my father's family is Southern from way back. Up till this book I'd written a good deal about my mother, but not about my father, or when I wrote about the Southern part of my life it seemed unsatisfactory. I think now that one reason I didn't write more about my father's family earlier is that they seemed so powerful. I really needed to find out who I was apart from them. I think we know this can be true of boys who have strong paternal figures, but I wonder how much is understood about the effect on young women?

My father, who had been a lawyer in an old family firm in Jacksonville, Florida, became, through a series of surprises, one of the world authorities on aviation and space law—someone who in his fifties began to lead a very international life. And my uncle, his younger brother, Merian C. Cooper, was a pioneer in documentary film-making, and later, for many years, John Ford's partner in Hollywood. He had had a very romantic youth, and was the original genius behind *King Kong*. So as children we breathed the air of romance! And then there was a lot of family mythology, a lot of old stories that we were brought up with. The story told in "How Can I Speak for Her?", for instance, which took place right after the Civil War, was one of

the most memorable stories of my childhood. Who knows how much is true?

What seems important to say is that I'm not using family background to create a domestic sense in this book—I'm using it to extend the individual consciousness through history and mythology. And a lot of it is mythology. Also, it was important to me not just to get down the old South in its romantic or terrible aspects, but to get some sense of the honky-tonk South of my childhood during the Depression—that is, the cousin who painted on spider webs and got to the Hobby Lobby of the 1939 World's Fair! And the children in my rural public school—the kind of South that left me with a social conscience. Both those things were very much a part of my life—there was a lot of romantic stuff, and then there was the everyday reality that we lived with, some of which was very funny.

EG: It seems you've been able to get a real mix. . . .

JC: Who knows? I hope so. Marilyn Chin read the manuscript just before it went to press and found a kind of nostalgia—nostalgia for a South of stable families and what she called an “old-fashioned American compassion.” That was a shock to me, because the last thing I imagined was that I was feeling nostalgic. But probably there are things here I don't even see yet. I would never underestimate the tremendous charm that the South has for me, the giftedness of many people who come out of that area—and their courage. But it's just such a complicated heritage.

EG: One of the things you really seem to be trying is to balance the complicatedness of the heritage with the charm. Especially in “Hotel de Dream,” you get a quite jaunty feeling of being out on the docks. . . .

JC: I wanted to get a jaunty feeling. . . .

EG: But the poem ends by asking a really difficult question—how to “relish yet redress” your “sensuous, precious, upper-class, / unjust white child's past”? How to balance those two verbs against one another . . . ?

JC: The “relish” is also real.

EG: Whereas to just have “redress” would be, in a way, to say, “This is something I’m obligated to do.”

JC: That’s right. . . .

EG: Your poems have always been concerned with the act of writing itself, and in your new book I see a new concern with the act of narrative. For instance, an early draft of “How Can I Speak for Her?” began with the line, “This is a story I have known all my life, but how can I tell it to you if I don’t know whose story it is?” The poems seem to be asking, How does one approach a story? Whose story is it? Who can be spoken for, whose memory? Does this seem accurate to you?

JC: One of the things that always struck me, even as a child, is how the same stories got told differently by different people in the family. When I first saw *Roshomon*—this was years before I’d ever heard of deconstruction—I was knocked out by it, because I thought, That’s just how it is, each of these people is convinced that the story he or she is telling is *the story*. It was just impossible for me as a child, or even as an adult, to know what was true. My aunt, for instance, always said that my grandfather’s grandmother, “the Castilian,” had been married off at fourteen, and then her North American husband brought her back to this country and sent her to boarding school. But my father, who was a much more austere storyteller than my aunt, said nonsense, their first child was born before she ever left Cuba. Well, in that case I believe my father’s version, but I had originally called “How Can I Speak for Her?” “What Each One Saw,” and I had wanted to show the same story from three different points of view, starting with my grandfather as a little child, and then his grandmother telling what she saw, and then the black woman. And as I got deeper and deeper into this material, I realized that I simply couldn’t do it—I had no right to say what the white woman saw, I couldn’t imagine what her life was like, given both the arrogance that she obviously had and the experience of repeated uprootings and suffering that she had. And if I couldn’t write about her I certainly couldn’t write about the African woman, with her history of slavery, all those years on a plantation, and West Africa before that. . . . And finally that inability became the point of the story, along with the desire still to bring those women to life somehow.

It was a very important story for me as a child, that that great-great-grandmother knew at least two African tribal dialects, which she had never revealed to her white family. Until that moment—the moment of the poem—they never knew. It was pretty rare, I think, but she had grown up with people who had themselves been taken out of Africa and still spoke those languages, and from the time she was eight she ran the plantation in Cuba, and she knew the languages, I presume, first as a child at the breast, and then as a boss. It was such an evocative story for a kid to hear. Throughout the Southern poems I keep finding little things that are inaccurate, or speculative, and yet I don't think that changes the truthfulness of what I'm trying to do, because I think that those embellishments too have become a part of what happened.

EG: You're seeing the story inside time, as something that's still evolving, that's evolving in your own version of it.

JC: That's probably so. *Time* is very important in this whole book. When I taught fiction writing I used to tell people that time is the unseen character, and part of my wish in writing longer poems is to move through time in a way that the lyric doesn't always do, or doesn't *need* to do in the same way. The tale of these stories, the meaning of these stories, changes as the generations change.

EG: And you're not trying to deny that as an element *in* the story itself.

JC: I want not to. I'm sure I fall on my face sometimes, like everybody. But many people read "How Can I Speak for Her?" as it evolved. Jan Heller Levi, for instance, was very helpful to me, because she kept saying, "You can't say that about the African woman, you can't even say 'they embraced,' thinking that the embrace was on her side as well. How do you know how she felt when they embraced?" I was always told the two women embraced, but Jan kept saying, "What does that mean?" And it was out of that question that the title came.

EG: So there's a tension between trying to tell a story and not assuming anything about anyone in the story?

JC: I really want to have characters who are not myself, and at the same time not to be any kind of authority over them. It's interesting to try to do that—but it almost drove me crazy!

EG: How do you see relations among the various forms you use in your new book—prose narrative, lyrics in long lines, poems in regular stanzas and even rhyme, blues . . . ? Given the multiplicity of concerns in the book, how conscious was your choice of what forms to work with?

JC: I've always felt that poetry vibrates between the two poles of speech and song, or you could say that the poem has to find itself somewhere between singing and telling. Short, regular lyric forms were always fairly easy for me—it took me a long time to learn how to write free verse. This book is different in that I played around with long lines in a number of poems in a way that I had never done before, and I began to explore the use of narratives which aren't in verse at all, but which I certainly think of as poems. Mostly the prose narratives, like "From the Journal Concerning My Father" and "How Can I Speak for Her?", were narratives that contained so much historical detail that a lyric form would have been wrong for them, it would have been impossible. And I wanted the detail, so the form had to be reinvented. I wasn't conscious of varying forms particularly as I went along—the necessity preceded the choice.

Take "From the Journal Concerning My Father," for instance. I had the idea a couple years ago that I wanted to write about my father, and I started putting down a few notes. Then one day I was looking through a box of old drafts, and I found that I had really written most of this poem in the early '80s and forgotten all about it. But what was most interesting was that there were originally three or four separate poems, and the finished piece only came together when I realized that some lines about myself, about saying goodbye to the natural world of my childhood, were intimately connected to what I was saying about him. So it's been an incremental matter for me rather than, most of the time, a deliberate one.

EG: And you wrote a blues poem . . . ?

JC: Yes, "Wanda's Blues." I went to a rural public school outside Jacksonville when I was seven, eight, nine, and many of the kids were the children of shrimp fishermen or white sharecroppers. This was during the

Depression, and their poverty seemed bottomless. Later, looking back, I always wanted to write about those children, but I'd lost their language. Somehow the blues form gave me access again to something like the sound of their lives.

EG: What was it like to work in longer lines?

JC: A challenge! The year that I had the Bunting Fellowship I was stuck at one point, and Marie Howe said to me, "I'll give you an assignment. I've just told my freshmen to write a poem in long lines, and so I suggest the same assignment for you, too." And out of her assignment came the elegy called "Long, Disconsolate Lines," which I'd been trying to write in other ways. . . . It's not that I had never used long lines—"Estrangement," written earlier, is in lines that are just as long—but suddenly this became something to really experiment with. I think playing around with long lines then gave me permission to write in prose lines, or speech lines. I like the idea that this whole book is a kind of counterpoint of song and speech, of singing and telling. Musically, I'm always interested in getting different effects and juxtaposing them one with another. I tend to say "compose" rather than "write" when I think of my poems, and in the Willa Cather poem, "Vocation," there's actually a slightly different music for each section. And in the same way in the book as a whole I wanted to keep setting different kinds of tonalities against one other, so that right after "Long, Disconsolate Lines" you have the poem "Bloodroot," which was written the same winter but in very short lines. I didn't want to give up anything.

EG: You were just speaking about thinking of composing rather than writing your poems, and I'm wondering if you feel the same way about putting a book together?

JC: When I say composition, I think both of music and of composing a painting. I had a remarkable painting teacher when I was between the ages of ten and sixteen, and she really taught me more about composition in art than any poetry teacher I ever had. So I still have that sort of spatial sense.

EG: Speaking of music, the four parts of the book really feel like movements to me. Could you talk about what you were thinking of specifically when you put *Green Notebook* together?

JC: I know that this is not going to be an easy book for some readers, because the parts are so different from one another. People are used to books where there's an increasing underlining of a few main themes, and this book really has four very separate sections, so it requires a willingness on the part of the reader to keep starting over. Of course, in the end, for me, everything is related. . . .

The first part, "On the Edge of the Moment," is made up of lyrics that look at friendship, aging, dreams. And there are also poems about my parents in which they're scarcely my literal parents any more, but out of some mythology of parents. I do think that as you get older your parents become almost mythological figures to you. It doesn't mean that you forget who your actual parents were, but if anything they loom even larger than they did when they were alive.

"Family Stories" is the second section, and here there's not only a variety of forms but a variety of different characters as you move back and forth through time. That pleases me very much—I wanted the book to have a more peopled quality than it had in earlier versions before these poems were written. And "Family Stories" is also of course acknowledging what the Southern legacy has meant to someone of my age who then didn't go on to live in the South, who just had that memory.

"Give Us This Day" concerns illnesses, but specifically what I would call the "culture of illness," that is, the communities that ill people make for themselves and how they think. Incidentally, "The Children's Ward" is the one instance in the book where prose is used as it would be in a short story; this is *not* a non-verse poem—it's too "written out."

And then finally "Vocation: A Life" contains the long sequences on Georgia O'Keeffe and Willa Cather, which are examinations of the experience of an American woman artist at different ages. Age is very important to me, how our experience of the same phenomena changes as we get older—and how it doesn't change. And this is of course another aspect of the fascination with history. I think it's important that in both the "Family Stories" and the "Vocation" sections, the poems keep going back to the nineteenth century and even before that, at the same time that there's a lot

of imagery of moving forward into outer space, which is part of the legacy from my father. I really was brought up with questions like what constitutes outer space, and what can we do with it. I had a strange background, I think, in the sense that domestic life in my immediate family was very much what I imagine life in a nineteenth-century family to have been, yet all the time the thinking was extremely pioneering, daring and theoretical. Both Cather and O'Keeffe were born in the nineteenth century—O'Keeffe in the same year as my father, 1887, which I find oddly interesting.

EG: Throughout the book there is that question of the speaking figure being between two eras, of being almost able to touch the nineteenth century and at the same time looking forward to the twenty-first.

JC: I wanted to get that. I wanted to get that enlargement of the self, that sense of continuity. Partly because I think it's what Americans lack right now, a sense of their history, and that gives them a very uncertain sense of destiny. Kids don't study history in school the way they used to, they don't see much that's accurate on television. What do you have to anchor *Star Wars*? I hope I'm not only looking backward, I wanted to be looking forward, too.

EG: Do you feel that there are any other concerns that thread throughout the book's four sections?

JC: Concern with friendship. Concern with solitude—equally. Concern with survival of life on the earth. A sense that our experience includes our dreams as much as our daylight lives.

EG: Have dreams always been a great source for your writing?

JC: Absolutely. I think I use them more freely now, but there have always been dream-poems. Not all dreams make good poems, of course, but periodically there will be a great dream and often I can work that in, and even if it's not the whole poem, if it's only two-and-a-half lines, it's there nevertheless. I like poems that are not just about one thing but that are layerings of different parts of my experience. For instance, in the poem "Ordinary Detail," there's a dream in the third stanza about a locked door

which was very important to me, and when I had that dream I thought it was going to be a whole poem. Instead it turned out just to be that little sliver—but it certainly changed the poem.

EG: We started talking about longer poems earlier, and maybe we could talk some more at this point.

JC: Basically, I've always thought it was a big mistake for people to think of poems as only, or essentially, lyrics. If you look at the history of literature, the novel doesn't turn up until quite late, and before that it's epic poems, dramatic verse—everything that we consider fiction was originally poetry. And I've always wanted to go beyond the confines of the lyric without losing respect for what the lyric can do. For many years I taught a course called Long Poems. (At one point it was Long Poems and Short Stories! I mean those were my two courses. . . .) What interested me particularly were American long poems, because I've always thought the long poem attempts to put a community on paper and Americans seem to have had an exceptionally hard time doing that. Whitman is the central figure for me here—the Whitman of “Song of Myself.” But I also loved teaching the first two books of *Paterson*, and Frost's *North of Boston*, which pretends to be a book of longer poems, but I think it's really a village, and it's as full of solitudes as any village could ever be—nobody can talk to anybody else. Muriel Rukeyser's long poems were very important, and parts of *The Bridge*, and Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*, Jean Valentine's “Solitudes.” And Adrienne Rich's longer poems and sequences, especially “Twenty-One Love Poems,” and the one about pain—“Contradictions: Tracking Poems”—and now, recently, “An Atlas of the Difficult World.”

EG: But what about your own practice?

JC: As early as 1953, I was trying to write a longer poem, but I couldn't sustain it yet. I had more luck with sequences. There are three sequences in my first book, *The Weather of Six Mornings*, and another in *Maps & Windows*. Finally, in 1977-78, I wrote a long poem in three parts called “Threads: Rosa Luxemburg from Prison,” based on letters Rosa Luxemburg wrote to Sophie Liebknecht when she was a political prisoner in Germany toward the end of World War I. This was very different from

anything I'd done before, and I got excited by it—the momentum that builds up as you move through time and yet details, lines, moments of feeling begin to overlap. . . . The poem is a collage of many of Luxemburg's own images and quotes her actual words, but as I immersed myself in her *Prison Letters*, it was as if I was carrying on a dialogue with her. The Cather and O'Keeffe poems in the new book take the same techniques further, to different ends.

With "Threads," I simply read the *Prison Letters* over and over, and talked to May Stevens who was using the figure of Rosa Luxemburg in collages and paintings, but I didn't read a full-length biography of her till I was through. It took me a year and a half to finish the poem. With "Vocation," I did a great deal of research and it built up incrementally over a period of, finally, ten years! It all started with my realization that for Willa Cather the experience of the Southwest was profoundly connected with declaring herself a writer and nothing else. But to understand her the way I wanted to, I not only read the novels and short stories that deal with New Mexico and the Four Corners region, I read everything she wrote and a good deal that was written about her, especially by contemporaries who had known her personally. No doubt this slowed me up. But the design of the poem is ambitious.

There are four parts, and basically, through Cather, what I wanted to do was explore how a woman artist feels about her art at different ages—in youth, childhood, middle age, and old age. Having been a marvelously vital young woman, Cather became quite an ungenerous person as she grew older, and at one point I began to think I'd never get her through middle age! So this too slowed me up. She really had to face her solitude—the poem has to face it—and what the poem calls "coldness at heart." The O'Keeffe sequence, "The Winter Road," was a kind of spin-off from the Cather, because I had been looking at O'Keeffe's paintings of the Southwest in order to open out my own fairly limited experience of New Mexico. Then, instead of continuing with the Cather poem, I found myself writing the O'Keeffe poems. Originally there were a lot of them—maybe ten or twelve—but I cut down to just four. I think of them as an addendum to the Cather, part of my thinking about the same subject.

EG: Do you see them moving through time in the same way the Cather poem does?

JC: Not really, because they're all old age poems. They move through time a little bit, but all of them bleakly face old age as a kind of abstraction—the abstraction of being very old—which is not something that's much written about but which I feel in O'Keeffe's very late work. And then there are certain things that I personally felt when I was in the Southwest. For instance, I felt that the landscape around Taos, where I was staying, was simply not human-centered. In the Northeast, in New England, everything is more or less human in scale, but then you go to the Southwest and the scale is monumental. I think the Native Americans are related to that landscape because they never tried to possess it, but white people are not particularly related to it. Someone said to me, Every time an Easterner comes here they try and rip us off, take things away, so the poem ends "I was meant to take nothing away." I also felt, profoundly, that this was a landscape that didn't belong to me, it was just there for profound respect, absolute hands-off. So those ideas got into the O'Keeffe, although they are in the background of the Cather, too. A lot of the Cather poem concerns conceptions of property.

EG: The first section of the Cather poem is an evocation of one person's physical experience of a Southwestern landscape. . . .

JC: Right—that's "Desire," the youth section, and it's much the easiest section. I think "Vocation" is a difficult poem for anybody. It's a poem that reads well aloud because it's closely scored musically, but it's hard to follow on the page. And I have no answer to that. Whereas "Threads" is I think a very accessible poem, humanly speaking, even if you don't know much about the actual history. Cather protects herself, she does so even in this poem.

EG: Do you think you were working to protect her, too?

JC: I think she protects herself, I think she's very guarded. In "Threads" what I wanted to explore was the nature of a woman who is a political activist, especially as she grows more and more cut off and vulnerable because she is in prison. I was also very struck by Rosa Luxemburg the scientific thinker, the original ecologist. My Luxemburg probably isn't anyone else's, and she is certainly not a comfortable character. Nor are Willa Cather and Georgia O'Keeffe, who seem to have worked in increasing fame

yet isolation. There is a paradox here. These women are absolutely not myself, nor would I have wanted to be any of them. But through them I was able to meditate on some of the themes that most concern me: the survival of the earth, the importance of relationship, the nature of solitude, whether enforced or self-imposed, what it means to grow older, what it means to be a woman who breaks the mold. . . .

EG: In the Foreword to *Scaffolding* you wrote of your “urgency to explore a woman’s consciousness,” specifically in relation to “Threads” and what must have been certain poems from *Green Notebook* still in manuscript. Could you talk about this urgency in relation to your new book?

JC: I had already started the Willa Cather poem at the time I put *Scaffolding* together, so I was thinking of that, but I believe I’ve always had an urgency to explore a woman’s consciousness. After all, my earliest poems were attempts to write war poems from a woman’s point of view. And while I think my definitions of women’s roles have changed over the years, I don’t think my feeling that I can only write as a woman has ever changed. Maybe it’s important to say that the new book is not only full of a woman’s consciousness—it’s always a female “I” who perceives and puts the individual poems and the book together—but also, there are women characters all the way through. There are friends, like Muriel Rukeyser, there are the various women artists, then there are made-up characters like the young woman in “Ordinary Detail,” who’s not me and is not anyone I know but is someone that I could imagine quite well, who wants to make everything nice for everybody—her life has come to the point of betraying her. And there’s Wanda, Clementene, Maryanne from the Infusion Room, the two women in “How Can I Speak for Her?” Women’s lives interest me very much. It’s not that men’s lives don’t interest me—but I feel I can write with some . . . intimacy about the kinds of things that women run into.

EG: I know you’ve had a long-standing interest in biography. Could you talk a little about that?

JC: Biography and autobiography both attract me because, again, they reveal the intersection of the individual life with history, the way individuals have of being in the world. I think I’ve said enough about what I wanted to do in “Threads” and what I wanted to do with Cather. Certainly

I was influenced by Muriel Rukeyser's concept of the "Lives," both prose and verse, to which she returned throughout her career. But I think this kind of work was important to me even before I read *Willard Gibbs* or "Käthe Kollwitz." The two questions overlap, of long poems and biography, because the long poems I've written turn out, in some real sense, to have been biographies. It's not that I might not write another kind . . .

EG: But right now. . . .

JC: Well, at the moment I'm glad *not* to be writing a long poem!

EG: Could we talk about ways in which you've been able to incorporate awareness of race and class into your new work?

JC: I think you once made the point that I hadn't really dealt with race and class much before, which startled me, because these have always been such passionate concerns. But I was looking back through *Scaffolding*, and I must say I see what you mean. Perhaps the original shape of *Maps & Windows*, my second book, showed a political awareness that is somewhat dissipated now that the poems have a different order in *Scaffolding*; or perhaps some of the still unpublished poems would be revealing. Anyway, there's a small poem from *Maps & Windows* called "A Nightmare of the Suburbs" that you might take a look at. It concerns an upper-middle-class woman in Westchester, time the late '60s—as I imagined her—who thinks there's going to be a black revolution, and so she keeps a pistol in her bedside table. And because she has a pistol, someday she is going to shoot it. I'm convinced, if you have a pistol, you're going to shoot it. . . . So she's the one who will start the revolution. That is a poem about both race and class, but it's also a poem that was considered racist by several early readers, which was obviously not what I intended—but it was a reading I had to deal with. I think that in *Scaffolding* "The Flashboat" is not only a feminist poem and a poem about work but a poem that is conscious of race and class. At the point in putting *Green Notebook* together when I really set myself to write about the South, I not only had to write about race and class, but also about the sexism and militarism that were endemic in my childhood among people of my generation and of a certain kind of family. I think my father fought all those things as well as anybody ever did, of his age, but they were there, all

around us, just the same. And militarism—perhaps people particularly forget to include militarism as somehow part of the whole syndrome.

EG: So it's obviously not a new awareness. . . .

JC: It's not a new awareness, but I do see—in looking back through *Scaffolding*—that the poems might appear to be more limited to the personal than I'd meant. And to be written out of, almost, certain assumptions of how one lives and how one was educated—which I'd rather not feel I was always going to do.

EG: It seems a conscious task of much of this book to get at the root of certain assumptions.

JC: I think that goes back to the ethical idea of whose story is it? Probably it's not quite the same thing, but they are related. Another interesting, related question would be how it's possible in the same book to be writing the Southern poems with their clear social concerns, and writing a poem as inward as "Vocation," which is about an artist who cut herself off increasingly from the daily lives around her. The juxtaposition seems difficult. You asked if I had definite things I wanted to accomplish—and I guess I really needed to do both those things. But even to write about an artist—one doesn't want to be totally self-reflexive.

EG: We've talked about your family and about the South as major presences in the book, and I think a third major presence is that of Muriel Rukeyser.

JC: She was threaded through my life in so many different ways. . . .

She used to ask audiences, "Who was your first living poet?"—by which she meant, At what age did you realize that poems weren't just locked up in books written by dead people, generally men, but that there are living, breathing poets walking the streets around us? And while Allen Tate was the father of one of my schoolmates, and I sort of knew him, Muriel was my first living poet. When I was twelve or fourteen my sister brought back her first two books from college, and I suddenly had the sense that there was this quite young, energetic woman out there in the world writing poems. Of course I didn't understand much of what she was doing, but it was very moving.

And then soon after I went to Sarah Lawrence to teach, in the early '50s, she began to teach there, and we became fast friends—no two people were ever less alike. Her work was important to me, but at the same time it was so different from my own, and especially the work she published before about 1960, that I think I was not much influenced by it and even consciously rejected some aspects of it. Her way of making images flow into one another, for instance, leaving them apparently unfinished, and rushing from one thing to the next, was absolutely what I didn't want to do. I wanted everything I wrote to be very fully fleshed out, very finished and exact—I was still working in another tradition. Eventually, as I've said, I was influenced by the "Lives," and by her concept that this was something poetry could do—work with lives that hadn't been written about before, that had even in some way been "lost."

Recently, I realized something else. You'll remember that in her Preface to the *Collected Poems* she talks about "two kinds of reaching in poetry, one based on document, the evidence itself; the other kind informed by unverifiable fact, as in sex, dream . . . where things are shared and we all recognize the secrets." It's taken me till just now to see that the mix I've tried for in *Green Notebook* is, in spirit if not in style, a Rukeyser mix.

EG: And since her death her work has been out of sight, out of print. . . .

JC: Yes—but before I comment on that, let me say that I believe her to be one of the absolutely central figures in twentieth-century American literature. And I'm delighted there is now such a revival of interest in her work. We need her power of making connections, we need her power "to know that I am *it*," her courage, wit, music that comes from writing out of the very center of your body.

All of which makes it seem insane that her *Collected Poems* was allowed to go out of print. And for years she was barely, or badly, anthologized, so it was difficult to teach her work. In any case, she has never been easy to teach. Students often can't deal with the rush of images and the generalizations, though as Jan Heller Levi says in the new *Muriel Rukeyser Reader* (Norton, 1994), it helps if you start at the end, with her last three books, and then work backward. . . . I used to teach some of her long poems, and always, both at Iowa and Columbia, I had a struggle. I think it would be easier now. I think the world is coming around to her—that people can read

her now with pleasure who ten or fifteen years ago might have drawn a blank.

EG: She's in many ways that kind of writer, one who people are just now catching up with.

JC: Well, she really wrote out of what, for her, was the present, which means that she was ahead of most of us. Also, she's a Romantic writer—or, as she would have said, a “poet of possibility.” Which doesn't mean that she's eternally optimistic, but does mean that she doesn't give up on salvation. And that's hard for some people to address, especially politically. But what you can't get around is her vitality; there are a lot of more obviously perfect poets who don't give out the same vitality.

EG: It might be important to balance that kind of criticism of her work—that it's not always as perfect as it could be—with a feeling of what it's trying to do in the world.

JC: It's not only a feeling of what it's trying to do in the world, though you're right to bring that up, but it's how the body of poetry and prose adds up, fits together. Here's this enormous body of work, and you can't leave out any of it, if you're really going to do her justice. The more you read of her, the more valuable she becomes. If you simply excerpt a few short poems, you're going to have a hard time, because people are going to see small flaws and think, How did that get there? Why didn't she finish that? Not in every poem—there are some that seem just wonderful from beginning to end. But I think if you think of the *scope* of what she accomplished. . . . She's an enormous figure. Never having been a writer of a lot of scope myself, I profoundly admire that quality in her.

EG: On the question of scope, you're a writer who, despite a lifelong, passionate commitment to poetry, has published only about a hundred poems in four books. Could you comment on that?

JC: Well, it's true—clearly. I was forty-four before my first book came out, which means I had already been writing seriously for over twenty years when I finally got a book published. So it was in a real sense a “selected poems,” and in fact all three books before this one were “selected poems.”

In going through the boxes of old manuscripts that I mentioned earlier, I was startled to find that there are probably a couple of hundred more poems that have never been published. A lot of them *shouldn't* have been published—those decisions were perfectly sound. But some are quite decent, and I don't know what to do about them. It's very odd to consider publishing a *Collected Poems* that would include old poems that have never been seen before! You want to be concerned with what will happen next, not with what you did in some kind of silence twenty or thirty years ago. Still, even I believe that I've made something a bit larger than can be found on the library shelf.

EG: Could you talk about the way the support and guidance of other writers have shaped your work, and your vision of it?

JC: I would be just nowhere as a poet were it not for my friends—that's what I really believe. This book is dedicated to my three oldest friends in poetry, who were friends from the early '50s: Muriel Rukeyser; Sally Appleton Weber, a poet with a unique sense of science, theology, and the natural world; and Shirley Eliason Haupt. Shirley, who died in 1988, was primarily a painter, but she was also a very gifted poet. Phil Levine mentions her in his essay, "Mine Own John Berryman," about the Iowa workshop of which we were all three a part. And I'd be glad to dedicate another book to my friends in poetry from the '60s: Grace Paley, Adrienne Rich, and Jean Valentine. I imagine using the same epigraph on the dedication page, from Emily Dickinson, "My friends are my 'estate'." And then there are younger poets who these days are very important to me, including a number of my old students, both graduate and undergraduate. My friends have not only been willing to listen to my endless drafts of poems but have shared their own drafts and shared their lives, and given me extremely good criticism—and have given me patience and fortitude, and put up with the fact that I'm a slow writer and that I keep going back to revise, hoping to make the work more truthful. Of course we've had our disagreements, but that is the breath of life.

EG: Do you think the idea of a writer-mentor is important for younger writers?

JC: Important enough—but not as important as peers. My own experience at Iowa—I really admired the work of both Cal Lowell and John Berryman, who were our teachers, extravagantly, and often they touched me as human beings. But they were not role models for me, nor could they be. Who I learned most from were the other people in the workshop. I had been living in Princeton in the years right after World War II, and there, in order ever to think you could send out a poem to the littlest magazine, you had to believe it was perfect. So I wrote every single day, and never sent out a single poem; writing became my secret life. Then I went to Iowa in 1953, and there were all these young men sending poems out, getting them back, sending them out, getting them back, and it was just a much more daily way to deal with being a poet, a more democratic way. It was a hard time for someone like me to be in a writing class, because there were almost no women. I was lucky to have Shirley. And I don't think I wrote well that year; I got very self-conscious about my work and maybe rather precious. But it was a year that started me writing again, after a painful silence, and started me thinking about my work more professionally, and I believe that came from the workshop members, as it has continued to come from my friends in poetry over these years, all these years in New York.

EG: How have the recent changes in your health affected your work as a writer?

JC: This is a tricky question for me. Probably I need to say, right from the start, that I have primary immune deficiency, and that I've always had it; I lack gamma globulin. But it's not AIDS, thank God, which is an acquired immune deficiency. About five years ago, there was a period when my health began to go downhill, but I got sent to a doctor who pioneered the use of intravenous treatments in this country for people like me, and these treatments have changed my life. Still, what may be most significant for my writing is that I see illness as *ordinary*. I would like to include it within the daily, ordinary world.

"The Children's Ward" is the oldest piece in *Green Notebook*, and it was very important for me to write. I had my life given back when I was five years old, and I never forget that. It's through all my work in various ways. There's a lot of death in my work, but there's also a lot of the opposite—what Mark Doty calls "joy in ongoingness." It was this that I tried hardest

to get in “The Children’s Ward”—an unexpected vigor and humor that go against everything the story seems to be “about.”

In an odd way, I relate “The Children’s Ward” to the long prose piece that first appeared in *Maps & Windows* and now is part of *Scaffolding*, “Nothing Has Been Used in the Manufacture of This Poetry That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread.” In both cases, I felt that I would never be so directly autobiographical unless the material could be useful beyond myself.

I wrote “The Children’s Ward” because I wanted people in our relatively protected society to understand how it is for children who know they are dying. We’re freaked out by the idea that a child could know he or she is dying. Well, there are a lot of children in the world who do know that. They don’t handle it quite the way adults do, of course, but in some ways they handle it better—anyway, remarkably well. For a long time I worried that “The Children’s Ward” would seem like a totally separate experience, apart from the rest of the book. But then I wrote the poem “The Infusion Room,” which is about the treatment program I’m in now, and I thought, Ah, that too is a culture of illness.

I’m very interested in the people I meet in the real-life Infusion Room, people who also have gamma globulin deficiency and often other serious conditions as well. There are some young children there, too. I have no desire to write a book just about illness; the point is always the people.

The first six months that I had the IV treatments I was very allergic to them, so I would be quite sick. But I would also come home and, you know, rush to write it all down in my journal, because the experience of the Infusion Room seemed so . . . exemplary to me. That poem really came out of my journal entries from the first few months. Even now the people make a strong impression on me, but I no longer have the same clarity. I think with the hospital I was in as a child it was the same thing—I still remember it so vividly.

EG: In introducing your poem “Ordinary Detail” at a reading once, you said that one of the jobs of poetry is to give people the words for what we’re feeling *at this moment*. Could you say more about this?

JC: Poetry gives the poet words, as well as the reader or hearer words. That poems starts out, “I’m trying to write a poem that will alert me to my real

life,” and I think that’s what poetry must do. Too often what we think we feel is what we were taught to feel, or what we felt last year; we click into a familiar complex of feelings. But it’s very hard to sit down and think, What is the truth of my life at this actual, passing moment? And if you can do that. . . . It’s what you have to try for.

EG: In the jacket copy for the White Pine Press edition of James Wright’s *Two Citizens*, you wrote of the value you place on “the poetry of renewal.” Could you say more about how you envision such poetry and why you value it?

JC: Well, what I actually said on the jacket blurb was, “As I get older, it seems what I care most about is the poetry of renewal, or rather, of the gallant effort at self-transcendence.” Cather has a line I love—it’s quoted in “Vocation”—“Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness.” And I’ve always been very interested in people who keep pushing themselves, keep transforming themselves, keep trying to get a little nearer to the truth, and at the same time reach beyond what they have done before. I think Adrienne Rich, for instance, is preeminently this kind of poet. I just think that if you can write so that every stage of your life makes its own contribution, has its own wisdom—that’s wonderful, it’s a wonderful gift. I would like to be able to do that. I would like to think that I’m writing now things that I couldn’t have written any earlier.