

THE LONG SHADOW OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: AN INTERVIEW WITH A.S. BYATT

Mireia Aragay
Universitat de Barcelona

Mireia Aragay - In your second novel, *The Game* (1967), Julia is asked why she writes, and replies that she does so in order to understand events, her own life and other people. What about you? What drives you to write?

Antonia S. Byatt - Partly that, but partly equally strongly the desire to use the language, to make beautiful shapes. I have a much more powerful aesthetic drive than Julia. Julia is the kind of novelist I slightly disapprove of, who is interested in the behaviour of people near her and writes novels as a form of gossip. I think novels *are* a form of gossip, and you aren't a good novelist if you are not a good gossip. But what I really want to do is to make a complicated work of art in which everything that interests me will be arranged in a beautiful shape, like in a poem by Coleridge, or some of Browning, or *Middlemarch*, or Proust. Those are my ambitions, that is what I want to do. I think one does understand life better with a kind of mirror of art. But I don't write in order to change the world. I think if you want to make political changes in the world, almost always you would do better to tackle it directly and write good political journalism and not fiction. I can think of *one* novel which has completely changed the world, which is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but most other social novelists actually come after the changes they were talking about. People say that even Dickens wrote after people had already started changing the things he was complaining about, and if you're Dostoyevsky and have been imprisoned then you will write a great novel about being in prison. I suppose if you live in a country with an extraordinarily oppressive government, then the writer does have a different role, and people who might not otherwise have been writers might find that being a writer is the best thing to be. But I don't live in such a country and I see novels as works of art, and works of art seems to me the most exciting thing about human beings.

M.A. - In this connection, there is another character in *The Game*, Ben, a sculptor, who argues that art is not merely technique, but a means of presenting a vision of life. You yourself have just now, as on other occasions, commented on your love for formal patterning in novels. Do you consciously attempt a balance between the technique, the patterning, and the expression of a vision of life in your novels?

A.S.B. - In my more romantic moments, I feel that the one is the other, and the other is the one: your technique changes your vision, and your vision creates your technique. For instance, I learned from Iris Murdoch that the kind of novel I like is the one in which there are several centres of consciousness and not just one, in which there are several ways of looking at the world, all of which have their own validity. I don't like the kind of single, intense voice, although there are great works of art which are in that form. My

technique, or Iris Murdoch's technique, is to have several people who are of equal value in the structure of the narrative. And in the same way I tend to think my novels are very long metaphors. I find what metaphor it is that is holding this novel together, and that tells me what it is I was trying to do in the first place.

M.A. - A major theme in *The Game* is that of the imagination and the different uses made of it. In her new novel, Julia says she will try to explore the dangers of the imbalance between imagination and reality. Is the achievement of a balance between these two poles one of your own aims as a writer? Could you expand on this in connection with *Possession*?

A.S.B. - Yes, only *Possession* is comic and *The Game* is very negative. When I wrote *The Game* I was very worried about whether one should give one's whole life to art or whether there were more important things. It's a long time since I wrote *The Game*. Another thing I was then worried about was the way if you are in love you construct the loved person with an enormous amount of ferocious imagination and the person you construct has very little to do with the person who is living their life somewhere else. And also, of course, Julia was being disingenuous, because she meant that Cassandra had too much imagination, whereas she herself understood life properly, but she didn't. She used her imagination in order to destroy people by making dolls out of them to stick pins into. She says somewhere else in the novel, 'I like something I can get my teeth into', and her imagination is like a snake with teeth, whereas I see the imagination much more in a Coleridgean way as being that part of your mind which very slowly forms an adequate image of the world outside, as a mirror and a lamp, to use Ambrams's distinction. I was on a platform with Terry Eagleton about three years ago and I talked about the imagination and how Coleridge's idea about how you construct the world by imagining it still meant a great deal to me, even if you correct what you construct constantly. Terry Eagleton became very angry. He said that this idea had been completely discredited, that nobody any longer believed in the Coleridgean imagination, and that he had never thought to hear it referred to in public in modern times in a place like the Institute of Contemporary Art. I haven't read what he wrote about it, but he said he had deconstructed this idea and that nobody should ever mention it again. But I find it a word without which I cannot do still; I need an imagination.

M.A. - The 19th century seems to have a special appeal for you. You have written on Wordsworth and Coleridge, have edited the essays and other writings of George Eliot and her *The Mill on the Floss*, and the range of 19th-century references in *Possession* is impressive, starting, of course, from the impersonations of R.H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte. What are the reasons for this constant presence of the 19th century in your work?

A.S.B. - In fact, I began as a 17th-century scholar and I think that, like many of my generation, I did this because T.S. Eliot talked about the dissociation of sensibility and about John Donne as the beginning of modern consciousness. I wanted to write a thesis about metaphor in the 17th century. So in a sense I am a 17th-century scholar as well. But I think the 19th century interests me so much because I think the ideas that began

then are still alive now. An idea has a very long life, much longer than that of an individual human being, and because Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats are dead it doesn't mean that the things they were thinking about are not still the things which at some level trouble modern people. I think Victorian ideas about religion, about the relations of life and art, about the relation of humanity and science, are still very much alive in our world. When I try to think them out it isn't for decorative purposes, it is in order to understand what they have made of us and what we have made of the ideas the Victorians had. The book I finished last week, which is called *Angels and Insects*, has two novellas in it about Victorian people. One is about Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Arthur Henry Hallam and Tennyson's sister, who lived with Mary Hallam because A.H. Hallam died. The story is about the fear that there is no life after death, the fear that there may be no God. It's about Victorian spiritualism and religion. It's a kind of ghost story, really. The other story is about a Victorian entomologist who makes mental images to himself of human beings in terms of insects and insect societies. Both of them are about metaphors for the human condition -- are men going to become angels? Is God a father? Or are we no more than social insects? As I was writing these two stories there began to be a huge debate on the British radio and in the British newspapers between the Archbishop of York and Richard Dorkins, who is one of our great scientists, a genetic biologist. The ideas are just the same as the debate around Darwin in the 19th century. So the debate goes on, we haven't resolved our idea of human nature which started then. Darwin's ideas seem to be becoming more and more important recently and people are increasingly thinking about what human beings are.

M.A. - What about your own style and aims as a writer? Would you object to being described as a novelist in the 19th-century tradition?

A.S.B. - I think what I am is a novelist who feels there are things to be learnt from certain technical 19th-century ways of writing. What I am *not* is a novelist like C.P. Snow, William Cooper, or Kingsley Amis in the 1950s who made a great cry of joy and rejected James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and said modernism was rubbish and experiment was rubbish, and that they would go back to writing like Trollope, in a decent, realist, unreflective way. Those people made me very angry; in that debate I was on the side of the modernists, and the writers I most admire in my own time are not those writers, but people like Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing or Anthony Burgess, who have understood that you can learn certain things from the big 19th-century realists and who have also learnt something from Proust, Joyce and, in our time, from Calvino. But what I dislike just as much as I dislike Snow's pontifications is the remarks of people like B.S. Johnson, Robbe-Grillet or Sarraute, who say that Balzac's realism is a very simple narrative form which has had its time and goes with a society which is gone and is impossible for us to think about now -- a kind of disgust. B.S. Johnson wanted to be the British experimental novelist, he wanted to be the man in the tradition of Joyce and Beckett. He wrote several I think very inconsiderate, sneering articles about Balzac and George Eliot. In fact, if you look at Balzac, he is not the solid block described by those people at all. His narrative technique varies immensely from novel to novel, he makes the most immense and peculiar jumps of consciousness, he changes style. Some of his books are religious allegories, some move very fast, some very slowly, some things are described,

some are not. If you actually look at the technique very tightly, what you get is nothing to do with merely photographing reality; he wasn't interested in photographs at all. So in a sense I feel I can put together something that learns from anybody. I don't think I am a writer who rejects. I have friends in England, experimental novelists like Gabriel Josipovici, who really believe that it's morally wrong to write a book in our time with a plot, with characters. I have letters from him in my possession saying, 'how can you bring yourself to invent characters and give them names in our time? It is impossible!'. But I find it is perfectly possible; it's just not the same now as it was then. And I certainly know that a character is a hypothesis, a kind of construction. I know that, as well as you know it, but it doesn't stop me from doing it. So in a sense I am in the 19th-century tradition, but very self-consciously, and choosing what I please, not polemically saying, for political reasons, these writers were good, writers since then have been bad, which is what Snow said. Anyway, I quite like Snow's novels, I like them more than most of my contemporaries do.

M.A.- What about your view of the English novel today?

A.S.B. - I think the English novel at the moment is terribly exciting. One thing that I think is important about the English novel now is that there are very many good novelists. There are one or two *great* novelists. I think Iris Murdoch is a great novelist, and Doris Lessing, Golding, Burgess*, they are all great novelists and they're still alive. But in a sense this is not their time. Equally the young are writing in an enormous variety of forms and then you can count about twenty or thirty writers who are very good without much trouble. A country in which that can happen must have a very healthy literary life. The English are lately getting to moaning and complaining about themselves, and saying 'Europe is very exciting', or 'America is very lively'. We have a very tedious young critic called James Wood who writes grumbling articles about what novels ought to be like and how nobody in England is writing them. But the truth is that if he just looked at what people are writing, all sorts of experiments are going on, all sorts of subject-matter is being used. You have everything, from fairy stories to densely realist texts, very long books, very short books. What you *don't* have are enough young women. I think feminism has been extremely bad for British women writers. Mostly you have men -- McEwan, Ishiguro, Amis, Mo, Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Julian Barnes, Christopher Hope, D.M. Thomas, whom I don't like and also he's older than I am. If you take him in, then you also have me and my sister [Margaret Drabble] and Angela Carter. Whereas after that generation, there is only Jeanette Winterson, and all the rest are men. There are some good women, but they are older. There is Penelope Fitzgerald; nobody has understood how good Penelope Fitzgerald is yet. I think everybody from foreign countries should now be writing theses on the works of Penelope Fitzgerald and they should all stop writing theses on the works of Anita Brookner. I like Anita Brookner too, but I do think Fitzgerald is wonderful although nobody's understood. Anyway, there aren't the young women coming along.

*William Golding died on June 19th 1993; Anthony Burgess on November 25th 1993.

M.A. - Why might that be?

A.S.B. - I think they got side-tracked. This is a thesis I am beginning to advance in public. I think French feminism and American feminism both came out of societies in which there were not many good women writers and those there were felt themselves intensely disadvantaged. America has produced great women poets, and not many good women novelists. There is Willa Cather, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and now Toni Morrison. Beyond that, the women novelists are not major. France has George Sand, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Simone de Beauvoir, who is not a great novelist but a great writer, and beyond that it has nobody. We have a huge depth in the 19th and in the 20th centuries of really good women writers who are equally as important as the men and equally important in the canon. And then British feminists took over feminism from America and France and they started claiming that women writers had always been understudied, discredited, without respect. It simply wasn't true; they were telling themselves a series of lies and they persuaded themselves of this, and then a lot of writers started writing books within closed groups of women, for women, about women, which is what the great English women writers have not done. And of course they weren't as successful: it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I find that really very depressing. In the generation before me there was Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Penelope Fitzgerald, and just before that there was Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth Taylor.... Nobody thought these people were not as good as the men. Neither men nor women thought that. There were men and women writing on Iris Murdoch, on Doris Lessing, as the most important writer of her time. There isn't one woman now under 40-45 that people could honourably be writing about as the best writer. I'm quite sure the women discourage themselves, while they were meant to be encouraging themselves. It is a kind of disaster. When they *do* write, they write about small things, like the problems of women, whereas Iris Murdoch was writing about the nature of the world, and so was Doris Lessing. And yet they both tell you about the problems of women, much better than these small writers, but they tell you about a lot of other things too.

M.A. - Taking up *Possession* and the 19th century again, can the novel be seen as an attempt at 'resuscitating' the Victorians and their age, at bringing them back to life through, for example, the depiction of the intensity of the emotional lives of Ash and LaMotte?

A.S.B. - Yes, it was partly this idea that Browning had that there was resurrection. In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning compares himself to Faust; he says that Faust was not Elisha. What he's saying is that his poem does not bring the dead to life in the way Faust brought Helen to life, which was only a shadow or a figment. It's terribly hubristic; he says he could bring people back to life the way the prophet Elisha brought the dead child to life by breathing his breath into her. I picked this up almost as a joke because one of the things I love about Browning is the way he gives so many different people a voice to speak, and I thought you could write a modern novel which gives to Victorian poetry a sort of urgent modern voice. I think that in my country Victorian poetry, as opposed

to the novel, has never even had a proper audience since its own time, because Leavis said it was all very bad poetry and nobody should study it, and he sneered at Tennyson and Browning, so that there isn't almost any good Browning criticism. Bringing them back to life was important from that point of view too; they needed to be understood, to be terribly urgent, interesting, complicated poets, because Leavis had seen them as dead, respectable, boring figures. T.S. Eliot also rejected them because they were his immediate ancestors, and it's time now that somebody sees they were very great, complicated people. In a sense, it was hubrious on my part to try and invent a poet in a novel, but it has worked --a lot of people have gone back to Victorian poetry because of my book.

M.A. - So you were inspired, then, by particular 19th-century figures when creating Ash and LaMotte?

A.S.B. - Yes, though they are a mixture of figures. Christabel is a mixture of Christina Rossetti, and particularly Emily Dickinson and also Charlotte Brontë. Mostly those three. Bits of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ash is a mixture of Browning, and a bit of Tennyson, and a tiny bit of Matthew Arnold, and a bit of George Henry Lewes, too, all the scientific bits came from there, really. In a sense they both are composite archetypal figures.

M.A. - *Possession* includes quite a gallery of characters from the academy, and the action centres round the discovery of a literary mystery. However, I don't think it would be accurate to describe it as an academic novel in the line of, for example, David Lodge's work. What is your own view?

A.S.B. - It isn't, it isn't. In David Lodge's *Nice Work*, really for the first time, you get an image of the fact that people in universities do study something. In most academic novels the one thing nobody ever does is read a book, let alone *think* about what they've read as though it mattered. In Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* you get little images of it. But I think if I wrote an academic novel it would have to be about people to whom their work really mattered, people who were in the academic world because reading was the most important thing in their lives, which you would never think from the standard campus novel. Yet in a sense *Possession* is an academic novel, because all of the academic characters are slightly caricatured in a way the Victorian characters are not. That was partly a question of space, partly a question of inclination. I was rather pleased to find that on the whole American readers liked the American characters, they're flattered by them: Cropper and Leonora. I think if it is an academic novel, it's trying to correct the usual one which is about people's sexual behaviour and about power struggles in departments. It is about those things, but it's really saying that reading ought to be at the centre of studying literature or why bother. Increasingly one feels reading doesn't matter. One thing about literary theory is that it has become a power game between institutions rather than a way of reading texts. This has its own interest, it's something that happens, and I find it quite fascinating, but it isn't to do with reading.

M.A. - In fact, judging from *Possession*, you seem to be more sympathetic towards a more intuitive, although scholarly, approach to literature, such as Roland's, than towards theory.

A.S.B. - I like theory. My attitude to theory is very complicated, because I have a naturally theoretical mind and I can read theoretical books with a kind of intense pleasure. What I don't have is any capacity to believe what other people say. In the last few years of my teaching career I began to have students who treated Barthes and Derrida and Terry Eagleton as priests of a kind of religion, and everything had to be interpreted as though it was a religious matter, in the light of the vocabulary provided by these people. And whereas I enjoy reading the people, Barthes and Derrida more than Terry Eagleton, I didn't enjoy reading the work of my students who tried to use the vocabulary of the people. I found it intensely boring. I also think that it was stopping the students from having any ear to how the language works in texts. The thing I think you shouldn't do literature without is a sensuous response. If you can't hear the singing of the language, you ought to be doing something else. If you can only read a text for its political message, then you ought to be in a politics department, not in a literature department. This is just what is wrong with Terry Eagleton; he has no ear. He can ferret out hidden meanings, sometimes with remarkable skill and illumination, but the one thing he *can't* do is give you any sense that he feels the shape of a book or a poem as it sits on the page. He reads against the grain all the time and I believe that one owes writers the respect of hearing them speak or reading what they wrote before you start the critical dissection.

M.A. - In your own experience as a university teacher, then, that is what you would encourage your students to do?

A.S.B. - Yes. I would say, always, 'now you've read one novel by Dickens, do not suppose you can hear Dickens properly until you've read two, or three, or four. Do not read what other people have written about Dickens until you're sure you can hear how his language works'. But you can't do that any more. Students won't do it. My students would read about ten theoretical books for one text. I once marked a feminist thesis about female prose in *Villette*. In its bibliography it also quoted *Jane Eyre*. The bibliography was extremely long and it was full of feminist texts about female style. There was Cixous, Irigaray, and mostly Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The thesis applied *The Madwoman in the Attic* to *Villette*. And I said, 'this is not true about all women's prose in the 19th century; George Eliot proceeds quite differently; you can't just say that women's prose is irrational and that the structures of reason are alien to women'. This person was doing a master's degree on 19th-century women's writing and she hadn't read a book by George Eliot. That does seem to me to be wrong, in the sense that you can't reach Charlotte Brontë without knowing how George Eliot wrote, and you certainly can't talk about 19th-century women's prose. She said, 'I didn't have time', and that was a perfectly acceptable argument: she didn't. But everything she said was wrong because she simply hadn't read enough books by other people. I also met somebody else who did a theoretical comparison for their master's degree of one paragraph of Balzac and one paragraph from *Daniel Deronda*. This person had proved

that Balzac saw reality as little blocks of solid objects and that George Eliot was a mystical writer. This is because they'd taken the paragraph in *Daniel Deronda* where Mordecai looks down the Thames and has a vision of Jewish truth. But I said, you could take a paragraph out of *The Mill on the Floss* which would resemble exactly the Balzac, or you read *Seraphita* and you will see that Balzac was a mystic. 'Oh', she said, 'I hadn't time to read more than one book by each of these writers'. And what she had written was nonsense because she had not read enough. That's what I think about English departments at the moment. It's all right reading Gilbert and Gubar, but if you haven't read the texts they're talking about and more to see if what they say is true, then you're in a mess. In my generation you didn't answer an exam question on Browning if you hadn't read most, if not all, of his poems. In an ideal world, theory would be for postgraduates only and it would be introduced to undergraduates as an optional seminar in their final year. An undergraduate at the beginning of his or her career should be required to demonstrate wide reading among primary texts. I don't think you can study theory and secondary texts without that, because you can't tell whether the theory is true or not. How can you read narrative theory if you've never read a narrative? When you have read a lot of narratives, then newspapers become as interesting. In England now they're beginning to put popular literature on exams for school children. They're setting Frederick Forsyth. Now, I find Frederick Forsyth fascinating, I'm very interested in his narratives. I think that *The Day of the Jaguar* is a most interesting text, but it is *not* interesting if you haven't read other sorts of novel. It is not interesting to teach it to a 15-year-old child who has only read that book. It's all gone wrong, somehow. I did have undergraduates in, say, 1983, who had read both the whole of Wordsworth and a lot of theory, but what they were writing was extremely boring, because it was regurgitated theory, and the reading of Wordsworth was not demonstrated because the theory is always the same as itself. They were not good enough to be adding anything to the theory, so they were simply parrot-writing. When it came to the crunch, I just found my own teaching life infinitely more boring than it had been when I had students who had read a lot of poetry, with whom you could discuss nuances of words, and say, 'this is amazing, why did he choose that word there?' Students then also tended to have some historical knowledge, whereas now they don't. But as I say, I myself find the theory absorbing, I get very excited. As for students, they should get a wide reading first, because otherwise everything they say is not true even if it is true. I marked the MA in English for a university in England, and almost every student wrote the same sentence about Balzac seeing reality as a solid block which he supposes he can describe like a photograph. In fact, (a) that isn't true, and (b) not one of those students had ever read a word of Balzac. All they had done was read Barthes saying that about Balzac. Now, Barthes knew his Balzac backwards; he had a perfect right to say that. But they didn't. They should have had some kind of intellectual integrity. They knew they ought not to do that. When I went up to Cambridge to be interviewed to see if I could go to the university at all, they asked me what critics I read. I answered that I didn't read critics because I didn't know what I thought myself yet; I must go on reading poems.

M.A. - Going back to *Possession* now, another trend in contemporary fiction which it brings to mind is that of the historical novel, particularly Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Do you see any links there?

A.S.B. - *Possession* is written both in gratitude to and against John Fowles. Recently a great many writers in England have started writing in the past, I'm not the first. Fowles almost was the first, although one has to remember that there was William Golding. One doesn't tend to see *The Spire* or *The Inheritors* as historical novels, but they are. They are modernist novels, but also historical. Then there was Fowles, who was playing with the form of the Victorian novel. I didn't like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* because I felt Fowles was patronising his characters and his remarks, for instance, about Tennyson, were written as though he knew he was infinitely more intelligent than Tennyson and understood the world a lot better than him, whereas I think Tennyson was a lot more intelligent than John Fowles. So in a sense, *Possession* was written against him. Then there is Peter Ackroyd, whose best book, I think, is *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*. Ackroyd is interested in ventriloquism, in picking up voices from the past and doing something new with them. I don't quite understand why this is happening. It isn't like the historical novel written by Sir Walter Scott, in which I am and always have been very interested. I think Scott is the most underrated great British writer now. We seem unable to see what his achievement was, that is, to make paradigms of whole societies at moments of historical change. I don't think the modern historical novel is doing that. I think it's much more to do with form and with forms of consciousness. A friend of mine, who is actually a film critic, interviewed several writers, Golding, Ackroyd, Timothy Mo, and I think even Fowles, about why they had decided to write in the past. They all gave the same answer, which really surprised him. They said they were very bored with the sentence structure of good modern prose, and they wanted to write something elaborate and decorated, with dependent clauses. I wanted to do that, too. I wanted to write this highly ornamental language, with a huge vocabulary. One has the sense that the really good modern sentence is very simple, very provisional and not highly decorated with lots of luscious adjectives. Yet I love language that is highly decorated. *Possession* was a way of letting those kinds of writing come alive again. I suppose the last really decorated writer in England was Durrell, and he wasn't writing in the past. Then there is Burgess's *Abba Abba*, which I think is one of his best novels. It's set in Rome just before Keats died. Keats discovers the Roman poet G.J. Belli, who wrote obscene poems which Burgess's Keats begins to translate. But in fact it's Burgess himself translating them. The title is *Abba Abba* because that's the Hebrew that Christ cried out on the cross, 'Father, Father', and it's also the form of the sonnet, a-b-b-a. I love that book. In fact it's quite old now, it goes back to the seventies. So there is a continuing interest in the past and in a past language. I think it's nothing to do with the escapist historical novel that we were brought up to feel was terrible when we were young.

M.A. - And I suppose there is also the thematic interest in the past which you mentioned before, seeing that the debates of the past are still alive in the present?

A.S.B. - Yes. One of the things I most admire about Iris Murdoch is the way she understands that modern ethical debates about what is good, and whether it's possible to have any idea of good in an agnostic society, all our debates actually depend on the presence of the structure of Christian society in our world, whether or not we believe, whether or not we believe we have rejected Christianity. Our ideas of the nature of

goodness depend on Christ or on Plato or on both. In a sense, a historical novel can go back to times when the things we now believe without asking were being agonised over. In the 19th century, people began to think the unthinkable, that the Church might be simply about nothing, that the whole Christian ethics, religion, cosmogony and eschatology was nothing. They were face to face with a kind of void. Iris Murdoch has written novels about this void. In *The Time of the Angels* you get a priest of no God whose brother is writing an ethical treatise. He comes to realise that his ethical treatise depends on there being people who have Christian beliefs even if he doesn't, because if not all is permitted. That is the ethical problem I have, but I understand it if I take it back to those people in the 19th century who were beginning to lose a faith which was real to them. So I think that kind of reason also exists for writing in the past. I also think that biography is a form of ancestor worship. It is a human need to keep your ancestors alive, and I think the historical novel is a much more subtle form of ancestor worship. You carry your grandfather's genes in your body, and your great-grandfather's, and I actually think culturally too, you carry several generations in your consciousness. I find it so impoverished to hear modern writers saying we must write novels which are about Mrs Thatcher's Britain, or about the fall of the Berlin Wall, because so we must, but these things are connected back. The Berlin Wall goes back before Hitler. I had a colleague at University College called J.P. Stern who wrote the most wonderful book about Hitler's rhetoric, and that looks both ways. It looks back to where Hitler got the forms of language he thought in, and I also thought about what that said about German culture and society when the Wall came down. I think one should think in pieces of time that long, or you don't understand anything. Martin Amis makes an enormous noise about how his generation lived in the fear of the bomb and that you should write about terrible things that are happening in modern Britain. I see that, and I think you should, but those things have histories and there's more than one way of understanding them. I hate people who say that at schools you can only teach what is written now because people can only understand what is written now. It's not human nature, human beings have always understood things written in the past. Why has Homer been kept alive in so many societies for so many centuries? It isn't because somebody told people they ought to read Homer; they *needed* to read Homer. Some things do die, but Homer has not died. In Britain at the moment the Educational Department of the Royal Shakespeare Company has got a lot of money, and it sends a group of actors to all sorts of parts of England to work with 150 young people in different places on modern versions of the *Antigone*. They're having terrible trouble in inventing a plot in modern Cornwall that bears a relation to the *Antigone*. It seems to me if they'd made all those young people try and understand what the *Antigone* meant in ancient Greece and change themselves by becoming ancient Greeks instead of changing the play, they would actually understand modern Cornwall better. I do believe they would. There was a wonderful piece of journalism in *The Independent* which described the awful efforts of all these poor children to try and think of something in modern Cornwall that would correspond to the *Antigone*. Whereas if the actor had said, 'you must imagine that it is really the most terrible thing to you that your brother should remain unburied', they would have done it, children can do that...

M.A. - The imagination...

A.S.B. - Yes, the imagination will do that. If I could read the *Antigone* at their age and get a sense of the horror of her position, they can. But I think they can much less if you try and make them set it in contemporary Cornwall. That's just bad and cynical. Why don't they go the whole way and take it to ancient Greece? If necessary, why don't they give them a mask and say, 'what does acting feel like behind a mask'? I have a Turkish friend, a Professor, who actually did put on a bit of *The Bacchae* with his students with masks. I've got a bit of film of his about a really good actor doing the Dionysus speech with a mask and then out, and I understood something terribly deep about the whole nature of acting from that. And Dionysus is still alive, but I think you have to give him a bit of respect as what he was and then you can see what he is.

M.A. - I'd like to take up *Possession* again and ask you about its subtitle, "a romance". At the start of the novel you appeal to Hawthorne's definition of the genre as one which seeks to connect a bygone time with the present. This is one of the things that *Possession* clearly does. Are there any other meanings of the term "romance" which are relevant to the novel?

A.S.B. - I will be completely truthful with you. I put the subtitle in at the last moment because I was already beginning to panick about my editor at Chatto & Windus, who I knew would not like what he would see as the frivolousness of this novel and the improbability of the plot and he wouldn't see what I was doing with the genre. I thought if I put in "a romance" he would see it as not meant to be a realist novel and at least we should start off on the right foot. So I put in the Hawthorne quotation. At that stage I had forgotten that David Lodge had used that subtitle in *Small World*, but later David and I did a very good platform together and discussed both books and what we had made out of the romance. I think I had written quite a lot of *Possession* when *Small World* came out. I remember talking to David about it when he was writing it. He was talking about how much he had been excited by using medieval romance. I asked where the idea had come to him from. He answered it was from seeing John Boorman's film *Excalibur*. He realized then that his novel was a quest and everything just fell into place, and he read an enormous amount of medieval romance. I was excusing my historical novel along Hawthorne lines, but I think probably owing to this conversation with David Lodge I also saw that Christabel's "Melusina" poem is medieval romance, and the novel is also a love story in the vulgar Barbara Cartland sense. It is like Shakespeare's last plays, too, which are called the romances, in the sense that you think it's going to have an unhappy ending and it has a happy ending. It's also a quest. So I found that I could play with about twelve more genres than I thought I was going to be able to when I started the book. Anyway, the subtitle, although I can give a good critical account of it, was an afterthought.

M.A. - Discoveries -- of the self, of facts -- often seem to take place in the north of England in your novels. In *The Game*, it is Nothumberland. In *Possession*, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. You yourself were born in Yorkshire. Does this part of England have any special significance for you?

A.S.B. - I was actually born in Sheffield, which is a big industrial city, a steel town it was, and I went to school in York. We spent our holidays after the War on that bit of coast that I always describe. When I was beginning *Possession* I was reading George Eliot and how she went on a journey to find the right mill for *The Mill on the Floss*. She went all through Lincolnshire. She ended up writing the book in Warwickshire dialect, but she tried to get the landscape to be Lincolnshire. I told my husband that George Eliot had gone on her honeymoon to Tenby and we ought to go to Tenby and look at the sea-shells. He asked me why I didn't send them to North Yorkshire. I said all my novels took place in North Yorkshire, but he told me I could do it. And I suddenly saw that it was deep in my roots that it ought to be North Yorkshire. So we both went back there and looked at it. I think probably it's like Constable's paintings. The landscapes of your childhood become the archetypal landscapes in the depth of yourself, like Wordsworth and the Lakes, Coleridge and Nether Stowey, and the Brontës and those moors. I didn't live on them, but they're just slightly more real to me than anywhere else for reasons not literary; it has nothing to do with the Brontës.

M.A. - Your impersonation of Christabel has been praised above that of Ash. What are your own feelings about this? Might it be related to the fact of her being a woman?

A.S.B. - In all my novels there are several people who the reader is allowed to be inside and there is always one person whose thoughts you're never told directly. In this novel that in fact is Christabel, and in that sense she's the most distant from the narrator. She's a complete structure from outside. Ash is more shadowy partly because the reader is made to share his consciousness at several points. In the bit where it suddenly begins to be a Victorian narration, when the two poets are in Yorkshire, the reader identifies with Ash, which means that what the reader sees is Christabel, which means that Christabel is clearer. Christabel's psychology is more extreme and slightly madder, more striking, and in a sense everybody in the book is trying to make an image of Christabel, that is the centre. I think for that reason she comes out more strongly. But Ash is just as real and much more sympathetic, which means he becomes more shadowy paradoxically.

M.A. - In January 1990, you published a review article in the *Sunday Times* on Ruth Brandon's *The New Women and the Old Men*, a study of a series of women related to major male writers and thinkers at the turn of this century. Your article was entitled "How was it for them?". Was there an impulse of this sort in your creation of Christabel, Ellen Ash and Blanche Glover in *Possession*?

A.S.B. - Yes, there was. I was quite interested in imagining what was never described, what was not known about Victorian women. I think we've had a very wrong image of the sexuality of Victorian women for a long time. We all believed Lytton Strachey, that women had to lie down and think of England. On the whole the people who told us all that were men. If you read people's letters this is obviously not the case. It is obvious that George Eliot was an intensely passionate woman. Of the English novelists, George Eliot is the one who describes female sexuality, most of all in *Daniel Deronda* -- I think the way in which Gwendolen's sexual terror is set up is brilliant.

M.A. - You create three very powerful women characters in *Possession*, Christabel, Ellen and Blanche.

A.S.B. - And they're all different. I wanted people to have sympathy for Ellen. She's in a sense the archetypal Victorian case of the woman who was told nothing about sex. She's also a bit like Tennyson's wife, who was required to wait so long to be married that it must have become very frightening. She might not have been frightened when she was a girl, but when she'd lost her beauty.... The other person I think of in this context is Jane Carlyle, who was examined just before her death when she had her accident and was found to be *virgo intacta*. The whole of the Carlyle's marriage had existed without any sexual relationship. Of course, the theory everybody has formed is that Carlyle was impotent, but *my* theory, or at least a possible theory, is that Jane Carlyle simply couldn't face it. I think there may have been a lot of Victorian women in this position and I wanted to write about it. One of the things about modern life, at least in England, is that the one thing everybody has to have in order to be at all a successful human being, is a good sex life. There are endless articles in newspapers about how to enjoy sex at 80, sex need not stop with the menopause.... It's completely obligatory to have a good sexual life. There are no people any more who like to live by themselves and don't want a sexual life. There are no bachelors, only covert homosexuals. Whereas there *are* people, I think, who don't function primarily on that front. Blanche was a passionate woman who liked women. There are a great many of those all over Victorian life and indeed there are now. Christabel was a passionate woman who needed a sex life, but thought that marriage might finish her off a bit like Queen Elizabeth I knew that marriage would take away her control of England.

M.A. - There is a contrast created in the novel between the reticence about sexuality in the Victorian characters and the opposite in the present, except in the case of Roland and Maud.

A.S.B. - Roland and Maud are exhausted by modern sexuality. It's not that they're innocent of it, it's just that they've been battered to pieces by it. I felt very tentative about writing that because very few novelists write well about people younger than themselves, and those are a generation younger than me. But they belong to a generation I used to teach, and I did have women students who felt that now all is permitted, they had no method of saying no, they had no protection, and they were exhausted. I also had male students who became responsible for a girl when they'd been in the university for about two weeks, like Roland and Val, and they suddenly became married, I noticed this. People shouldn't suddenly become married at 18. Some people can, perfectly happily, but most people had better not. Most of my students in the late 70s did. They very rapidly set up these very domestic households and they couldn't get out. Ten years later they broke up with terrible anguish and pain. They didn't know how to live without the other one, although they couldn't go on living with them either. They had no independent self. So all those things are in *Possession*. Then there's Leonora, who is as it were the voice of the modern belief that a good sexual life is the only thing you absolutely have to have, and it doesn't matter which sex or anything, the only important thing is to have it. Fergus believes that in a way too, but his is a power game, whereas with Leonora it is just bounce.

M.A. - Is there any connection between your work as a critic and your creative work?

A.S.B. - I've never thought of myself as a critic. I do think of myself as a teacher, and I have written an enormous amount of criticism, but all of it has been in order to earn money, not because I thought of myself as a critic with a critical reputation. I think it's quite important to say that now. I used to get very angry when I was introduced on the radio as 'the critic'. Then I thought this was ridiculous; I have written an awful lot of criticism, more than many people who do claim to be critics. All of it was written in order to understand how to write, and most of my big critical essays are about people that the writer in me wanted to understand very badly. Thinking of the book of essays I've just published, there is a big essay on van Gogh, two on George Eliot, a big Browning essay, one or two essays about writing. There are the essays on Iris Murdoch. Now I can choose I write more and more about things that interest me, which may be very bad for me because writing critical essays for money you meet all sorts of things you would never have heard about. If I am a critic, it's in the tradition of people like Coleridge and Pound, who had a desire to explain how it happened, which a lot of writers don't need to do, but some do.

Barcelona, 28 May 1992