

Interview with A.S. Byatt

Tanya Harrod and Glenn Adamson

Tanya Harrod and Glenn Adamson are Editors of *The Journal of Modern Craft*.

Introduction

Dame Antonia Byatt ranks among the preeminent novelists working in Britain today: author of over thirty books (two adapted into films), winner of the Booker Prize (in 1990, for *Possession*), and most importantly, a penetrating and assiduous student of human character. It was therefore a great pleasure for us to find, in Byatt's most recent novel *The Children's Book*, a profound engagement with issues of craft. And it was even a greater pleasure when, one afternoon in March of 2010, she generously granted us an interview in her West London home.

The Children's Book is set at the turn of the twentieth century, and takes the reader through a panoply of sites familiar from that period: the Victoria and Albert Museum; the Exposition Universelle of 1900; and ultimately, the Western Front. The novel is also well stocked with figures who strike resonant chords. There are women in Aesthetic dress, avidly political Fabians, and suffragists. Above all, though, there are crafts. Pottery and puppetry, in particular, animate the novel and its characters. Dedication to skill acts as the still center of the narrative, often in preference to language itself.

In the following excerpts from our discussion, Byatt—a writer who could herself be well described as a craftswoman—shares her thoughts on the relation between storytelling, making, objects, and the ethical life.

Interview

A.S. Byatt: I used to teach literature to artists at the Central School of Art and Design. And you could tell almost



Fig 1 A.S. Byatt. Photo: Sipke Visser.

from the kind of essay people wrote, which department they came from. The potters were not really interested in language. The graphic designers were and the painters almost all were. The jewelers were very wayward and tempestuous and resentful of anything you tried to tell them; they pushed a notice under the door of the liberal studies department that said: “Could liberal studies be made to be more relevant to the study of jewelry design?” The Industrial Designers just weren’t bothered. The textile people divided down the middle—half of

them were very very interested in language and the other half were rather like the potters. I got interested in the ones that weren’t interested in language.

Glenn Adamson: Because it was more of a challenge for you?

ASB: Because it was something I needed to understand. Though I didn’t think that the work was either better or worse according to whether the students liked language or not.

GA: And do you think work changes in your eyes once you personally have written about it?

ASB: I have a theory that anything can be written about. I think language is adequate to most things. I have been reading James Gleick's book on chaos theory [*Chaos: Making of a New Science*, 1987] and I found this wonderful paragraph—that nearly made me cry—about how the brain is almost certainly constructed according to a program of structures like fractals and that we *would* come to understand why the brain worked as it did. I always feel when I'm writing that I am trying to get to the structure of my own brain. I actually think out my writing in the abstract at some level, and I can see that you would think a pot out in the abstract in rather the same way. You would have a sense of what a pot ought to be. One of the people in the early days of chaos theory became very excited about the order you discovered in things like flow and in shapes of waves. I found another absolutely beautiful piece about the growth of leaves and the growth of trees and how, again, you can discover an order beneath an apparent disorder. Nevertheless, you can't describe one particular leaf, which is where, this scientist said, art comes in. Before I got interested in chaos theory I studied the geometry of snail shells. I became completely obsessed by the Fibonacci Spiral. It seemed to me an entirely man-made idea—the sort of thing you would say as a child: take one and then add one and then add two and then add three. It's something you can imagine the brain doing fairly easily, but why on earth should any natural

object proceed in this manner? And then I discovered there are all sorts of trees in which the branches come out in this spiral. Though not all trees. And that snail shells go round in a Fibonacci Spiral.

It's at the edges of one's intellectual capacity, but it's made a lot of difference to me because my upbringing was very narrowly literary. I was at Cambridge under Dr. Leavis [F.R. Leavis, the literary critic] and he had very strict limitations on what was of interest and he was terribly deep and terribly narrow. And he believed that the English department should be at the center of the university. My mind works in such a way that I immediately thought: Why should it? It's a wonderful thing, but it doesn't have to be the center. And he wouldn't let you write about anything that was in translation because you weren't writing about the writing. And he wouldn't let you be interested in other departments or other ways of looking at things. I was doing finals and I had prepared a long essay on Aristotle's *Ethics* and the only relevant question in the exam was: "What interest, if any, is Aristotle's *Ethics* to a student whose primary interest is English Literature?" And presumably Leavis wanted me to say Aristotle was irrelevant. I knew the *Ethics* in their own terms. I could have told you what Aristotle thought you ought to do about anything. I could have told you where I thought his theory was strong or weak. It just was an interest to me, and it clearly wasn't an interest to Leavis. An exam paper is an evil moment to attack a student.



Fig 2 Denise de Cordova, *Old World, New World, Diego & Frida*, 1993, Plaster, 12 in. (30 cm) high. Photo: Sipke Visser.

Anyone who had prepared an essay on Aristotle couldn't write it. I grew up in that kind of narrowness.

Tanya Harrod: And yet, I was thinking about Leavis and his journal *Scrutiny* and his ideas about the organic community. There's so much in your recent novel *The Children's Book* about a lost world, a lost domain, an idea that seemed to haunt the Edwardians and the late Victorians.

ASB: It's interesting isn't it, because it was a world that they felt was lost, but I think

they really felt they could recreate it. I don't think they felt, as I now do, it was lost forever. I am as a writer in mourning for the earth I grew up on, which won't exist for my grandchildren. I am in mourning for walking out in the fields and woods and seeing thrushes on the lawn. We have no thrushes here now. We have no house sparrows. They were here when we came. We had green finches. I have this kind of grief for the earth. I don't know if I have a grief about human societies. But

I think the Edwardians had a hope of making everything a lot better. And many of them believed that if you made humans better you would make the earth better. People also believed that in the 1960s when I was teaching at the Central School. I remember a student saying to me: “You know, when we have the revolution there will be new colours—new colours will just happen because things will be better.” In fact, I think my decision to write about the Edwardians was partly because of having taught that generation of very hopeful students. But I think the Edwardians’ version of hope was better based, they did a better kind of social research.

TH: Yes, they did the hard statistics. Charles Booth and his studies of poverty float up beautifully in *The Children’s Book*.

ASB: He discovered that over sixty percent of people in the East End of London couldn’t afford to feed themselves. They were living below the starvation level. He told terrible stories, which I noted down, of what happened if you damaged your back if you were a workman; how very, very rapidly you became homeless and your wife became a prostitute because this was the only way in which your family could survive. And people like Sidney and Beatrice Webb—they were very very practical about how to make things better for such people. And they got women on all sorts of committees and into all sorts of public jobs.

TH: Yes, that’s a whole theme in your book—the role of women—women appearing in local government.

ASB: I had a headmistress when I was at the Mount School of York, who chose on the evening of the A-level exams to make a speech saying that, of course, some girls thought it was very important to pass these exams. But that actually there were all sorts of other things you could do in your life which were more important. And that she had written books *and* had made tablecloths and she believed that a beautiful tablecloth was as important as a book. I nearly had a breakdown because it was as though the one thing that I could do was of no value. I wept and wept. And I wept because I knew all about the structures of Racine’s verse—and who cared?

When I wrote the story *Racine and the Tablecloth* I put in a great aunt of mine who came from the Potteries. She made extraordinary tablecloths and beautifully embroidered cushions on bridal satin. And I began to see that the crafts were as important as Racine. The thing that interested me more than anything about Racine was the actual structure of the verse. How could anybody think like that for pages and pages? That’s the formal structure of the brain again. My brain had understood Racine, and my brain does not construct good tablecloths. But much later I came to see that a really good tablecloth is like a bit of Racine.

TH: Were you struck by the reviews of *The Children’s Book*? Central topics like ceramics, puppetry, and the Victoria and Albert Museum weren’t really touched on; as if the reviewers were so literary



Fig 3 Ink well in the form of a goblin bought by A.S. Byatt as a young girl. Photo: Sipke Visser.

that they couldn't share your visual sensitivity.

ASB: I think this is true. And several of the reviewers took a run at me and said that I was trying to educate the public. Whereas I was trying to share an excitement about things. Balzac said in his preface to the *La Comédie Humaine* that in the world there were men, women, and things. He saw the things as an extension of men and women. He has some wonderful

images of Paris with absolutely no natural growth in it at all; when you think you see a beautiful dahlia it is actually just a dirty bit of silk dangling from a balcony. He has a bravura passage on the making of paper. And I think we have got more interested in the activities of the mind and the production of things because we no longer live in a religious society. A pot becomes more valuable if it's all that there is.

GA: You said earlier that you felt that during the period you're talking about in *The Children's Book*, and even during the 1960s, there was more of a hope of remaking the world—not just through craft but through many activities. But you also have now said that these craft objects have become more precious to us. Do you think about that sense of utopianism as a lost project, but something that still haunts us?

ASB: I don't know how much it now haunts us. I spent a lot of my student years thinking about the myth of the Golden Age. I wrote a novel called *the Virgin in the Garden* which is about the mood of utopian idealism when Queen Elizabeth II first came to the throne. We were going to have a new Elizabethan age and people were going to write verse plays, Shakespeare was going to come back, and energy and color and beauty were going to return to Britain. Buildings that had been painted green, cream, and a certain dirty brown were suddenly painted a very hopeful pale blue. This was before the Clean Air Act and they very quickly became dirty. And I think I slightly shared in that optimism. I remember when they put on the mystery plays in York, I thought: "Everybody in York is contributing to this work of art as they did when medieval craftsmen had staged the mystery plays." I had my moment of utopianism right back then. After that I came to feel that utopianism was actually dangerous. Certainly in the 1960s I felt it was. I decided that a kind of rather flat skepticism, and making things, making

things well, is better than a utopian attempt to reform society.

GA: So it's the practical side of the Victorians and Edwardians that attracted you?

ASB: Well that's what I believe in. The other thing that attracts me as a writer is how human beings behave. The two characters I particularly love in *The Children's Book* are Philip, who makes the pots, and Dorothy, who has decided to be a surgeon. These are people who know exactly what they want. And they don't want to change anybody else. I don't know that Philip ever thinks about whether pots make things better for anybody else. He just knows that the pots are a good in themselves.

GA: I hadn't thought of surgery and pottery as being paired in the novel until you just said that.

ASB: There is a moment when Philip looks at Dorothy's hands and her hands are exactly good for what she's decided to do and his hands are good for what he's decided to do, and if it was a different sort of novel they would, of course, have fallen in love and it's not certain that they won't—but that isn't what they are *for*, either of them.

TH: What I found so extraordinary was that there are so many objects in *The Children's Book* and that you immersed yourself so deeply in the technicalities of art pottery and puppetry. Were these longstanding interests or did you have to do a huge amount of reading and looking?

ASB: I did a huge amount of reading and looking. It's a longstanding interest in the sense that I'm descended from potters like Philip. My mother's family



Fig 4 Left to right: Edmund de Waal, four beakers on a plinth; Emily Mayer, *Early Bird*, 1998, mixed media, 12 × 9 in. (30 × 23 cm); Adrian Bannon, wall piece; Keiko Mukaide, glass bowl. Photo: Sipke Visser.

came from the Six Towns and we were thought to be possibly related to Arnold Bennett [the novelist, born in Stoke-on-Trent]. I have had an obsession with glass for a very long time and have written a lot about glass. Glass is both a thing and a metaphor in my work. I go and watch Anthony Stern in his studio making glass. I have thought and thought about glass and I wrote a glass-making prince into a fairy story. But I can't write about something if I don't know an enormous amount about it; more, in fact, than I need. The potter Edmund de Waal lives next door to my eldest daughter. He invited me into his

studio and *The Children's Book* wouldn't be the same if he hadn't allowed me to throw a pot even though it went wrong and got out of control. Edmund lovingly fired it for me but I was so ashamed of it that I left it in my daughter's house. But now I know Edmund and so I can talk to him about his pots.

GA: Can you say a bit more about Staffordshire and the Potteries and how they figure in your imagination of the world of productive possibilities?

ASB: When did it become necessary that it should be pots at the heart of the book? It's so far back now I'm trying to remember—because there was never

any question when I was planning the book that it would be about a glass-maker.

TH: No, because glass would have been quite rich, wouldn't it? But perhaps you felt ...

ASB: I suppose I've done glass. And as you get older you look back—and there was a cabinet at my grandparents' house which was full of a kind of pottery called Bloor Derby; and the Bloors were my family. And there are all sorts of myths about them. One of the myths was that one of my great-grandfathers invented a lead-less glaze. And when I told this to Edmund he said, "Oh yes, every potter has somebody in his family who invented a lead-less glaze and never got credit for it." So I had hit on one of the basic myths of the potter's world.

TH: It's interesting when Philip says, "I had to leave the potteries to make a pot."

ASB: I never say I want to write a novel, I say I want to write. When I was teaching with three small children there was no way, really, with any continuity that I could write a novel. There was just no way. And I had this thing in my head, this knot, of a sort of image of a thing that I wanted to make, that I couldn't make. And actually it never was glass, it always was a kind of thing like a pot, a sort of clay thing that would become a beautiful thing if you were only allowed to work on it.

GA: Could you say a bit about the character of Benedict Fludd in *The Children's Book*? Because he is obviously not someone you identify with in the same way you identify with Philip.

ASB: I wanted him older than any of the other characters. I wanted him to be a hanger-on, on the edge of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. And in a sense he has quite a lot in common with Dante Gabriel Rossetti—some of his gloominess and sulking. Because the novel is inhabited by the fairy story about the father who wants to marry his daughter, I wanted that idea to run through all the relationships in the book. I was very interested in communities—I've always been interested in communes and communities. I don't know where it came from—except possibly the Quakers. There's a community that goes badly wrong in *A Whistling Woman*, which was my last long novel before this one. And so I thought about Eric Gill. Fludd's relationship with his daughters is the one case of real incest as opposed to imaginary incest in the book and I got the real incest from Gill. But although everybody says Fludd is based on Gill, anyone who knows about Gill can see that that's all they have in common: a propensity to love their daughters too much. Then I discovered Palissy [Bernard Palissy, Renaissance ceramist] and I gave Benedict Fludd an interest in Palissy. So, Palissy and Gill and Rossetti together make a new person. It's terrible, really, how you get this sort of tunnel vision ... I mean, I couldn't possibly have included everything I knew about Palissy when I was writing the book. But every now and then you find a wonderful phrase or image—about the salt marshes, and how Palissy was interested in salt—and it gets in.



Fig 5 A contemporary Palissy-inspired dish made in France. Photo: Sipke Visser.

And the story of him burning all his wood in order to create a white glaze.

TH: How did the Victoria and Albert Museum enter the novel?

ASB: I started to think about the Victoria and Albert Museum because E. Nesbit [Edith Nesbit, Fabian author] went to the British Museum to look for an amulet for her story *The Amulet*—and I know the British Museum too well. I thought it will be interesting—but I had no idea how interesting it would be. Fiona McCarthy sent me her copy of Anthony Burton’s *Vision and Accident: the Story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*. And I took one look at it and saw that it was, as it were, the skeleton of one of the great beasts in my novel. So I immediately bought my

own copy to write in and mess up and sent hers back again. And a bit later on I bought John Physick’s book about the building of the V&A and I just kept reading it and reading it and reading it. And I had no idea when I started what it had meant to found a craft museum like that. I am not a person out of the crafts world. I am a literary person. But when I got into the V&A I slowly saw just what Prince Albert had done. I mean, it was an extraordinary piece of vision. Somebody should write a sort of hymn in the name of Prince Albert, because you can see it was him, wasn’t it? And then to have all these craftsmen in the “Kensington Valhalla”—not just the painters, but the people who made things. [The Kensington Valhalla is a

set of thirty-five mosaic portraits at the V&A, depicting great artists and artisans.] I suppose my own utopianism is valuing things.

GA: There is something about the use of the life casts in Palissy, taking a frog and directly casting it in clay, that seems like a very powerful metaphor:

ASB: Yes—for people writing stories about people. For sucking the life out of somebody and putting it down on paper as Olive does in *The Children's Book*. It's very very dangerous. Lalique cast from life too, apparently. These two very great craftsmen who created these very lively creatures, mythical creatures, were doing it at the expense of live creatures. Anybody would like that in a novel.

GA: There is the choice of the museum space and also the visit to the 1900 Paris Exposition. As a museum man, I wanted to ask you about that choice as well. Because this idea of confronting an object that is very personal, but doing it in public, seems to come across very poignantly in your descriptions.

ASB: Yes, and I suppose, in fact, the Paris Exposition was a useful thing because it was just at the right moment in my narrative. But again, the Grand Exposition Universelle was rather like all these other utopias I have written about. It was like writing a play about Elizabeth I and putting it on stage in good verse in the reign of Elizabeth II. It was making a world that was primarily a work of art, and consisted of real works of art that are still there, like the Grand Palais. And then, of course, I became completely obsessed with the minutiae

of making this world of artworks to show off artworks. I kept discovering things like Loïe Fuller having been there. And of course the Lalique dragonfly woman that is on the cover of the book was there also. I would have put her in if she hadn't have been—but she really was there. And you read the description of Lalique's boutique where he displayed all these wonderful things. And then, you read that he had designed the decorations for Loïe Fuller's theater. Paris 1900 was like a world in which art had taken over, or in which art was what everything was about and art was part of everything.

GA: But at the price of a terrible self-consciousness as well. You have that wonderful line that the Exposition is like a biscuit tin depicted on a biscuit tin.

ASB: Well, my novels are all like biscuit tins depicted on biscuit tins, I have that kind of mind and so it appealed to me.

TH: What about the puppets in *The Children's Book*? I suppose Kleist's beautiful strange essay *On the Marionette Theatre* was a starting point.

ASB: Yes, and I've known it for years and not understood it. And I kept going back to it and attempting to understand what Kleist meant by puppets being more real than living actors. It is an idea that haunts Rilke and the whole of modern art. Why did I so want the puppets? I think they just came, they suddenly were there. I think it was the idea of a box in a box again. And I put the story of the incestuous father into a puppet play on a stage and the puppets act it out. And in a sense they are, as Kleist said, a pure image

of this image of the thing you've got in your head. I read that there was a puppeteer in Munich—it wasn't my puppeteer because I invented him—but he used to walk through the streets with puppets accompanying him at his fingertips. It is a sinister image.

GA: Like the pots? The pots are sinister sometimes. They're writhing with serpents and lizards.

ASB: Yes. That goes from Palissy right into the Pre-Raphaelites, doesn't it? It goes from Palissy through to De Morgan's dragons. And, you keep getting overcome with ecstasy. I thought, where on earth did De Morgan get these dragons from? De Morgan depicted them as though he were looking at them, with such elegance and grace.

GA: So is there something here about craft being a kind of black magic, a kind of animation of matter that we constantly need to try to constrain?

ASB: I think that's right. And of course, making pots is bringing dead earth to life. Another glorious moment was when I bought a book about making pots in Rye, and it really did say that the best potter's earth comes from the graveyard. It is things like that that put my metaphor exactly where I want it—but it wasn't a metaphor. That's the other glory of writing this book in this time; you can put almost anything into Google and you get—stuff. I put "kiln disaster" into Google because I wanted to know exactly what would happen when the kiln disaster happened in *The Children's Book*. And what I got was a man saying: "Will the bastard who destroyed my kiln and fled away

to Australia please know that he has ruined my life and my craft." Clearly it was some sort of terrible thing that had happened and one man had been left with chaos and the other man had gone. And I never knew the end of the story. Once Edmund saw I was interested he told me exactly how you measure the temperature and where you peep into the kiln. The older I get, the more I find that the people I love the most are makers—*homo faber*, man the maker. Not the politicians, God help us, not the priests, but the people who make good things. And that makes you see the Victoria and Albert Museum completely differently.

GA: Do you think some of the success of your book may have something to do with the current popularity of craft—all these people getting into knitting circles?

ASB: Yes. And I think the popularity of craft has to do with my attempt to explain a sort of society that needs craft the more because we have no belief systems. I think we need craft because we need something outside ourselves as people. It would be awful to sit around in a group discussing your psyche with other people, but if you sit around in a group and make things ... But, of course, there were the women who were forced to make tablecloths and cushion covers and knew that life had more to it than those things.

GA: Yes, because craft can often be stultifying as well.

ASB: They didn't think of it as craft, I think. One of the things which is important in the world we live in, surprisingly



Fig 6 Metal and ivory figurine given to A.S. Byatt on her 70th birthday. Photo: Sipke Visser.

important, is the Antiques Road Show. I watch sport on the television and I watch the news and I watch antiques shows and I don't really watch anything else. I will watch the Antiques Road Show, and every time it comes round I look at the objects. I'm not interested in the people very much. I think some people are interested in the prices. I like guessing the prices, which I get better at. But I think it's the objects.

TH: Is that because objects are extensions of people? Because there is a wonderful tea party in *The Children's Book* where each character's choice of tea cup and plate serves to define him or her.

ASB: Yes, Augustus Steyning defiantly likes Sèvres porcelain and he likes Watteau-like paintings and he knows

that the solid arts and crafts people don't like that and would rather have good solid earthenware mugs.

GA: But you are not necessarily taking sides there?

ASB: I'm not taking sides either for or against. I think I'm an omnivore—almost anything interests me. The people I don't like are the people who want to restrict your interest. And it seems to me absurd that William Morris should have thought that Rococo porcelain was wicked. He might have said, "I don't like that." But he couldn't have taken a moral line against it, and yet he did.

GA: What do you think it means that you have this omnivorous curiosity and yet you have this longing to identify with people like Dorothy and Philip who

have a single-mindedness of purpose and you have a great love for *homo faber* and the person who commits themselves fully to making in one medium for their whole lives?

ASB: I think I saved myself from making rather boring earthenware pots by being an omnivore. I saw that you could use anything that came along. All I want to do is write in prose. Prose is what I care about—the rhythms of the English language. And in order to do the rhythms of the English language well, I will try to learn any other language that I come anywhere near. If I go to a country I try to learn its language. So that's omnivorous but nevertheless it's narrow. I just found that writing was more interesting when you are interested in more things. I am quite bored by people's feelings about each other as the center of the world. When I say bored—I've been there, I've done that. And in a sense it repeats itself because we don't live long enough not to repeat each other's lives. You know, you just work out what you're doing and you die. I suppose it's the same about love—you work out how to love somebody and you both get old. And so everybody starts again. And very young people need to read novels about love. And very old people can read novels about love if the novels are extremely well-written and contain the rest of the world as well as the love. And that's what I want to do—you can't leave love out. But I find novels about personal relationships very tedious if there isn't a world in there as well. What was that wonderful

line? It's Browning. "What porridge had John Keats?" Browning is one of my great heroes because he was an omnivore. He was an omnivore who loved the English language. Anything interested him and nothing shocked him. And if he did paintings he did paintings—you know, he really looked at them.

GA: There is something very thing-ly about the bodies of the characters in the book. So we get a lot of things about the sleepwalking girl and her dead flesh. It reminds me of some of the things we were talking about to do with the puppets and the clay earlier.

ASB: I think you write with the whole of your body. We think with the whole of our body. We have privileged the eye excessively. And I think I invent people, increasingly, with the whole of my body. I sit there and I think their fingers with my fingers. And if they get hurt I feel it. And then there's the other little cold bit that watches so that you can get the right words to do it with. Somebody said, you must have felt terrible when all those people died in the trenches at the end of *The Children's Book*. And I said, yes, but I was enjoying it too because I got it right.

GA: Sexuality is another subject to talk about in relation to craft. It's interesting that in *The Children's Book* you've covered a period that is thought of by many people as a period of sexual repression and you've looked at situations of, almost, free love. And now, for your next novel, you're moving into Surrealism, a sex-obsessed group. And you write about sexuality with

a great deal of frankness and without embarrassment.

ASB: Well, I think that you should look at it like a scientist. I mean, you should look at it like you look at anything else.

GA: I suppose the reason I raise it—because we are meant to be talking about craft, aren't we—craft and sexuality have sensuality in common, don't they?

ASB: They do. Imagining somebody's fingers in the clay is very close to imagining their sexuality. It's tactile. It doesn't need words. I am very moved by things that don't need words.

GA: It's a very interesting subject, that issue of craft mastery. Because Fludd is the great master craftsman in your novel, and he makes these pornographic objects, which are hidden away, which

are perfect. But the perfection of craft can be terrifying in its ... I don't want to say inhumanity, because that's not quite right ...

ASB: Austerity.

GA: Austerity. The opposite of the poignancy that we might find in an Omega pot.

TH: But the Omega pots belong to a later world, when a neo-primitivism held sway. Which is not what Philip was after; he sought some absolute mastery.

ASB: Yes, he had seen the Minton, and Minton is mad. I mean great, big, complicated Minton majolica—he'd seen all that, and he didn't want to do that. But he'd seen that people did things as complicated as that. And



Fig 7 A contemporary ceramic Chinese lion. Photo: Sipke Visser.

- I think he wanted to do something simpler.
- GA: Could you say a bit more about Modernism as a force in your life? Is it something that you felt you had to get over?
- ASB: Well, again, it's being an omnivore. When you say Modernism I immediately think of Wallace Stevens. What is it he says in "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction"? It must be abstract, it must give pleasure, it must change. And I believed all those things from time to time in my life. You think of what is a great object, and you think of a Brancusi. And then I saw a Brancusi the other day and it said nothing to me. I stood and looked at it and thought, no. I would rather have something very complicated, thank you.
- GA: Do you identify with the concept of postmodernism?
- ASB: No, I don't even know what it means. People are always writing essays on how I'm a postmodernist. I think, they think, that *Possession* is postmodernist because it deconstructs, they think, Victorian poetry. The one person, rather perceptively, said to me: you deconstructed it only in order to put it together more strongly again. And I think that's what I feel about deconstructing things. You know, if you really deconstruct Browning, or T.S. Eliot, it's only in order to make them more themselves. You find how they work. It's like understanding how to make a kiln make a pot not come to pieces.
- GA: It's that pragmatism in you again.
- ASB: Yes, I think that's a good word. I like that word. It suits me. I am sort of a pragmatic metaphysician.
- GA: If you were to encounter a young potter, let's say a student at the Royal College of Art, what would you say to them?
- ASB: I would ask them a lot of questions. I would say, why did you choose to be a potter? I would say, "What do you have in your head when you start making a pot? Or is it simply in your fingers?" I would keep asking another question. You know, if they said, "You can make it taller by this sort of movement," I would say, "And then?" I don't think I would try and teach them anything. I didn't ever try and teach students, I just shared enthusiasms and asked questions. You see, you would actually be quite good for the student if you asked them a lot of questions as well. Because they would have to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. I think if I met any of the people who were supervising any of these students, and had a talk to them as I am talking with you, complicated things would get said in the common speech. I think we've done something terrible to language in academia in the last thirty years, twenty years.
- GA: There is also something there about being unmoored from craft.
- ASB: Bless you, yes there is. Being unmoored from your fingers and your body. I mean, you could talk about the body, a lot of language is about the body. One of the things I was taught as a schoolchild was that the word "maker"

is the medieval word for a poet. Philip uses the word “making,” and that’s what I believe in. I believe in making things. Christopher Frayling, the Rector of the Royal College of Art, sent me a huge book of projects of postgraduate work. And I couldn’t understand more than about a tenth of any of the things that were written therein. And I’m not stupid. I actually believe in the common speech. And it may be that they were making things, and were just writing alongside, like two railway lines. I think that is what’s probably happening. But some of them make projects that are concepts. And my temperament is not sympathetic to that. Some may be beautiful, or clever, and I believe you should always try to understand anything you are faced with. But I sometimes end up not understanding. I’d better go back to the College and have another look at what everybody’s doing.

GA: I’m sure they’d love it. I think you would find that many of the students have exactly the same longing for a connection to their own practice, and they don’t necessarily know how to achieve it.

ASB: Well, it should be respected. The practice should be respected, and materials should be respected. And there’s a modern way of doing that. There are people who say, “You must respect the clay.” But you can respect all sorts of very modern things as well. And even if you are making things with lights and space, you must think about light and space—and not in a

kind of secondary language. I always used to envy the people at the art school because they were hands-on. They actually were related to things. And going back to the Antiques Road Show: I’d rather watch those sorts of connoisseurs say, “Look at this!”, than listen to somebody lecturing on the theory of aesthetics.

TH: In your book there are two worlds of things. There’s the industrial world of Stoke, and then there are groups of people who are looking back to earlier ways, to purify the making of things. But perhaps the problem now is we don’t have factories in this country anymore. Stoke is a desert. And everything is made in China. And so everything is pulled apart.

ASB: I went to China in the 1980s and I saw people making things, and it was wonderful. What I like about Stoke in my novel is that Philip doesn’t hate it, although he has left it. I did notice going through the ceramics galleries at the V&A, when I got to the things that had been factory made, I did feel a loss. I had wondered whether it was a sentimentality, and whether a factory-made thing could be beautiful ... but none of them were. There was a loss. There was a loss of identity. The lines were smooth, and you might have thought they were smooth like a Brancusi. You might have thought, well why not be like this? But, in fact, they were a bit deader.

GA: We haven’t talked very much about using pots. Actually drinking out of them, or eating out of them.



Fig 8 Jug and bowl, “Adansi”; design registered in 1874 by George Jones, Stoke-on-Trent. Photo: Sipke Visser.

ASB: It’s wonderful going to Edmund’s studio, because there he is serving you coffee in a slightly sloshy way in a cup that he’s made. And people have around rejects that they can drink out of. I don’t drink much tea, because I hate it, which is why I haven’t offered you any. But I will

offer you a glass of champagne if you would like one, and I will show you the pots I like to drink out of.

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