An Interview with Alan Burns

David W. Madden

This interview was conducted entirely through the mail from May to September 1994. As I finished rereading each of his eight novels, I would send a group of questions to Burns and he would respond. Often our letters crossed in the mail, and wherever possible I have eliminated redundancies with one significant exception—the issue of his working methods. In rereading the essay he wrote about the evolution of his career in Giles Gordon's *Beyond the Words*, I found Burns delineating a steady pattern of development and change as he moved from one novel to another. However in responding to these questions here, Burns repeatedly invokes Picasso's dictum that "I do not seek, I find." I have left these redundancies in the interview because they emphatically reveal a reigning principle of his aesthetic. I want to interject that Alan Burns is a delightful correspondent—prompt, anecdotal, and delightfully witty, and this interview, despite its trans-Atlantic nature, was a genuine pleasure. To Alan I send my thanks for all his time and patience.

DAVID MADDEN: Was James Joyce much of an influence on or inspiration for you?

ALAN BURNS: Joyce changed everything, made everything possible. Master of all styles, all genres, all languages, all cultures . . . beyond that mere puffery, I'm wary of commenting on Joyce, overwhelmed not only by him as poet and novelist but by his mighty intellect. However, his influence on me was not intellectual but instinctive, which is to say, his achievement seemed to give me permission to follow my instinct wherever it lead. Word-coinage is an obvious example, but it goes beyond that to, say, the structure of *Babel*, and much more.

DM: I ask because of the opening scene in *Buster* in which adults are looking down on the reclining child and talking to and above him.

AB: No, the opening scene in *Buster* was not specifically influenced by Joyce—only in the general terms indicated above. The child, incidentally, is not intended to be "reclining," as you suggest, that's not in the text. I wanted the opening scene to contain the novel's essence and yet be credible in a naturalistic sense. "They stood over him" seemed to me then to do the job nicely. Now I think maybe it's too neat and makes the point too clearly. I still like the way I managed to introduce three generations at the start, the tensions between them, and the child's survival technique: "Who do you like best, your mother or your father?" "Both the same." Also the father's

material and conventional ambitions for his son, sexuality, guilt, beauty, furniture, even the hint of war outside ("A soldier posted a letter").

DM: For many writers of your generation, World War II was obviously a major event, and the spectre of war figures prominently in your early novels. Can you talk about what it has meant to you and your imagination?

AB: I'm typing this letter on 5 June 1994 while D-Day is being recalled. It seems "a quarter million Germans" were killed in Normandy. How many more of them throughout the war, and Brits, Americans, impossible to list how many more, and 20,000,000 Russians . . . I know the grief attached the death of one young man, my brother Jerry. Can human consciousness begin to grapple with what all this means? Life is tough enough. We all die. But deliberately to smash another human being's skull in . . . why am I going about this, no point. Have dreamed since I was nine, off and on, of German paratroopers swinging through the night sky and landing in the garden. The lunacy of war is certainly at the heart of my politics and my writing.

DM: At the time you wrote *Buster* how would you describe your fictional approach? It strikes me that *Buster* is fundamentally a realist fiction, with strains of naturalism and surrealism filtering in.

AB: I had no "fictional approach"! I was grappling with the translation of experience into words. "Experience" includes dreams and lies and imaginings and fantasies as well as "what happened" (if it did). I also delighted in the words-in-themselves for their own sake. I think it's for critics and others to do the categorizing, but I think you've got it about right when you characterize *Buster* in the way you do.

DM: I would like to move to your second novel, *Europe after the Rain*, which works on the reader in strange and unexpected ways. For instance, the reader begins fearing for the girl and sympathizing with her concern over her lost father, only to discover their moral ambiguity. Were you seeking such an ambiguity?

AB: I don't *seek* a quality such as "moral ambiguity" in a character (I doubt that any novelist does). I follow a character and try to find out who she is. That of course is why it is necessary to *test* a character, compel her to make choices, so that she reveals who she is. (When Anna Karenina decides to leave her husband for her lover, Tolstoy has her go upstairs to her child's bedroom, see the child asleep (maybe for Anna the last time) and *still* go through with her flight. Thus Anna, and the reader, are put through hell: we don't merely know about, we suffer through the experience of her "moral ambiguity.") Needless to say I'm not making comparisons between the two novels, still less the two authors . . . Another source of "moral" and numerous other ambiguities in my characters generally is my awareness of *contradictions* within characters and between them. As soon as I become aware of a certain characteristic, I instinctively look for an opportunity to show its opposite. For the brave to show fear, the innocent guile, the timorous courage, and so on. An example of this is early in *Celebrations* where Williams is given one blue eye and one brown.

DM: Could you discuss your view of the connection between the novel and Max Ernst's painting of the same name?

AB: Some months after I'd started writing *Europe* (but before I'd found a title), I chanced upon a reproduction of the painting in a book on Ernst: I instantly recognized the very landscape I was—in my way—"painting." I knew I had a title—and a book jacket too! Beyond that, however, I can't say that I studied the painting particularly closely, though I think I always had it somewhere at the back of my mind. It was not until I was writing the last chapter of *Revolutions of the Night* that I did look intensely at the Ernst painting and made as precise and passionate a word picture of it as I could. Some years after *Europe* was published, I saw the original at an Ernst retrospective at the Tate in London, and was disappointed to see how small and seeming-not-so-powerful it was. In reproduction it makes the impact of a colossal work of art, not so in the original.

DM: A feature I've noticed in this and others of your novels is a slippery quality, even a vagueness about large issues of plot or character motivation (for instance, the reasons for the father's fall from grace) while details of appearance or descriptions are minutely and exactingly precise. Can you explain the idea or purpose behind this paradoxical method? Might this be explained in part by what you described in the essay in *Beyond the Words* as the "distanced technique of writing from the unconscious"?

AB: I like that phrase "slippery quality." Elusive, yes, it's yet another aspect of my wish to avoid any suggestion of an absolute, purportedly "accurate" statement as to what happened or where we are or what role a particular character plays in the novel. Look again, and—see, it ain't so—the opposite may as well be true. As soon as the reader is beginning to feel secure in the world I've made for him, it "slips," he slithers; me too. There's also a strong element of doubt; that's part of it too.[1] Some absurdist stuff as well, yet I temper that tendency with a genuine, even passionate, humanism. With nuclear bombs around, we must be careful not to get too far gone into the irrational—and when I yap about "instinct," I'm also aware, of the fascists' appeal to "gut feelings" and so on . . . so it ain't easy to get it right.

So, for example, and to get back from vague philosophizing to the novels, while I go for the "slippery," I'm concerned by your reference to vague character motivation. I'd want the father's fall from grace to be not arbitrary or author-driven but fully motivated in the traditional sense. In fact, I suggest that his "fall from grace" is largely accounted for by the simple notion that "power corrupts"—see the heavily ironic paragraph that starts, "The father received me in his spacious and magnificent apartment" and later the (probably too bare) statement that the father was "growing senile." Final word on "slippery"—it's close to the "precarious" dream—see my comments on Dali's *A Loaf of Bread about to Explode* in the attached material.[2]

DM: There are no names for any of the characters and thus pronoun references are sometimes vague. Why are identities so deliberately elusive?

AB: I could not find the "right" names . . . something connected with Kafka's "Joseph K." I regret pronoun uncertainties and would want to correct them, but there it is.

DM: Don't you think, though, that this nameless quality is exactly appropriate for this blasted place; it enhances the shadowy quality and the ambiguity that pervades so much of the book? Was this namelessness deliberate on your part?

AB: I think you put it perfectly, and I now adopt your formulation as my answer to your question (I particularly like "this blasted place"—with *Lear* nudging in there). "Namelessness" also reminds me of Wilson Harris—see p. 58 of *The Imagination*. My only quarrel is with your word *deliberate*, as you know. I feel the word is inappropriate, because it implies a degree of control I deliberately (!) eschew.

DM: Explain the narrator's presence in this world of military conflict. He has access to both commanders of the warring sides, yet he is seemingly outside the fray (though it appears he destroys the reconstructed bridge at the end of chapter 11). He talks of his job, but what is it? Is he a journalist, or is his "job" or purpose more subtle and perhaps even metaphysical?

AB: The narrator's uncertain role and status is vital in maintaining the novel's precariousness and ambiguity. Give him a job, and the novel becomes more reportage—everything would have been watertight, rational, the reader would demand it. But I have made a contract with the reader that allows me the freedom to slip in and out of the rational. That has to be established from the start and iterated and reiterated (implicitly, by conduct) consistently throughout. A key passage reads, "I changed my life. I went among the prisoners taken to the camp for labour purposes. I wanted to make certain, I wanted to get inside, I knew the language, I wanted to learn more, suddenly . . . My work was in that place. . . ." Remember, his work at that point is assassination.

DM: John Hall in the *Guardian* mentions Burroughs's cut-up technique as being yours also. Was *Europe* written as a series of fragments "synthesi[zed and] shuffle[ed] . . . so that they form new associations and build up fresh nuclei of meaning"?

AB: Yes, that quote applies to the writing of *Europe* and my other novels. I had not read Burroughs then, nor heard of his "cut-up" technique. I did not actually use scissors, but I folded pages, read across columns, and so on, discovering for myself many of the techniques Burroughs and Gysin describe in *The Third Mind* and elsewhere.

DM: Given Hall's quote and what I see as numerous echoes of Beckett in your work, have you or do you have affinities with existentialist thinking?

AB: I have only dipped into *Being and Nothingness*, but *Nausea* much impressed and maybe influenced me, along with Camus. As for Beckett, I delighted in *Murphy*, *Watt*, and a couple others, and *Godot*, *Endgame*, and more. However, *The Unnameable* I call *The Unreadable*. Like Joyce, Beckett extended the range of the possible. He is somewhere there in my

mind when I'm working, but I don't quite know where.

DM: I'm always interested in tracing the development of a writer's career, and I think your essay in *Beyond the Words* is a superb articulation of your career up to *The Angry Brigade*. However, it all seems so clear, deliberate, and logical, and surely it didn't evolve that conveniently. Would you comment on how you see the development of your career?

AB: I've reread my bit in *Beyond the Words* and can see what you mean. It does indeed make the move from one book to another far more ordered and rational than it actually was. Having, in my dialogue with you, rejected the notion of deliberateness in my choice of this or that theme and so on, I in my "Essay" purported to discern just that element in my progression from book to book. So you've spotted a contradiction there, or, to put it more simply, I think I got it wrong in "Essay." But now I stop and ponder what was really going on, I'm stumped. I can and have, in my various answers to your questions, to some extent accounted for my attraction to the particular form and content of each book, but the overall structure of what I now concede can perfectly properly be called a "career"—that, mate, I leave to you . . . And the best of British luck!

DM: In the *FallOut* interview, which I'm sure many readers will have a difficult time finding, you mention your discovering "the value of the image" while writing *Buster*. Would you elaborate on the meanings and implications of this phrase for your prose.

AB: "Images think for me" (Paul Eluard, I think). I'll "find" an image, ponder on it, explore it, most importantly and usefully, *follow* it, and that means traverse terrain, "push on," and create the narrative structure of the novel. I'll give you one example to clarify my meaning. Take the bridge at the start of *Europe*. The novel's initial image. Explore and follow it. A bridge across a . . . river. Near-archetypal European feature—a river as a frontier, and there's tension between the river flowing one way, and the road across the bridge cutting across it and heading . . . where? Ah, there's a road. On the road a vehicle, what kind, not an isolating motor car but a socializing bus, and anyway, immediate postwar ravaged Europe—yes, a bus. Who is travelling on that bus? Whence came they? Whither go they? Find the answer to those key questions, not merely spatially or geographically, but in social and human terms. And of course, if these folks are travelling for a purpose (and only madmen would do otherwise), then we will wish to follow their pursuit of that purpose, and, needless to say, strew a few obstacles in their way. . . . Thus I, who would find "plotting" difficult or impossible, make, allow, the image to do the job for me.

DM: The style and plotting of *Celebrations* is quite different from *Europe after the Rain*. Were you consciously searching for or attempting a new style here?

AB: You will understand well enough by now that I do not search for or attempt new style for its own sake. The fundamental rule here must be: "content governs style (or form)." The only "progression" I'd see, from one

novel to the other, is a certain growing confidence resulting from an admittedly mixed press but one that contained some thoroughly favourable reviews. They made me think I could "be myself" and "go for it." Thus *Celebrations* might loosely be called "more extreme" than *Europe*, getting further away from the traditional novel. Thus the leaps between the images are greater, the juxtapositions bolder, the risks crazier, and so on.

DM: While the plot is certainly more linear than *Europe*, it is not without its surreal aspects. These I see most obviously in the figurative tropes, the use of unexpected metaphors and similes—"the mouth hidden behind obscure houses," "the end of the life was the sound of yellow," and "he talked like a sickness," to cite just a few examples. Could you explain your use of these elements here?

AB: I see what you mean about the plot of the later novel being "more linear" than the earlier. I had not thought that was so, but you're right. The reason for this lies, paradoxically, in the very risks I was taking (see above) in all other areas. Thus I thought, if so much else is, or seems, haywire (not so though), then the basic story line must be clear and simple, to hold the thing together. Those phrases you quote, I love. The story line is just a peg to hang them on. The images and their juxtaposition result from that "I do not seek I find" cut-up method. I literally "found" (having carefully set up the conditions in which I could peer at and then find) those separate images: "mouth," "houses" "obscure" . . . and found a way to hurl them together. And so on, all the way through the book.

DM: At the end of chapter 7, after Williams learns that Jacqueline and Michael will wed, time collapses and Williams and Jacqueline have sex in his office. Is this an event taking place in chronological or dream time?

AB: Another example of those "reversals" you spotted early on. Once I'd pushed Jacqueline seemingly decisively in one direction (Michael), I felt the immediate need to drive her in the other (Williams). And the sooner after the wedding, the harsher the insult to Michael, and the more violent his response. Everything to hot up the tension. So you will see that this is intended to be "for real." As much as I go for the "quality of dream," I entirely eschew "real" dreams in novels. I feel that reader interest inevitably sags—the blood's not real, it's "only a dream." Also, it somehow spoils the overall dream effect, to have a "real dream" intrude, and invite comparison with the rest.

DM: I found your comments in the interview with Peter Firchow about sociology displacing fiction most interesting. Paul West commented to me that when preparing his novel *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, he read many histories on the Third Reich and found them wildly contradictory on the most elemental level. His response was that he refused to let historians appropriate the role of the novelist as a creator. Is something of the same impulse at work in your novels?

AB: What I think about historian *versus* novelist came up most acutely in connection with *The Angry Brigade*. The Brigade existed as a group which

"did things" in London and elsewhere in the very early seventies. (I'll have more to say on this when I answer your questions on the book.) I cooked up a so-called documentary novel in which I purported to have interviewed six of them and the book consists of what are presented as interviews with them. The novel thus "tells their story." As the whole work is fiction, the story I tell differs from what actually happened. One vital detail: the novel has the Brigade leave a bomb which "blew a waitress into pieces"; whereas, the real Brigade did not, I believe, kill anyone. When the book came out, Stuart Christie, a well-known Anarchist who'd been jailed in Spain for his activities, wrote in strong protest to *Time Out* that I had defamed the members of the "real" Angry Brigade. I replied that the imaginative truths revealed by a novelist can be "truer" than the "facts" reported by a journalist. The darned thing is that I wrote the novel in protest against, and with the intention of off-setting, the demonizing of the members of the Angry Brigade in the press and other media. However, the book was pretty widely reviewed and generally seen as an attack on the "real" Brigade, satirizing them, depicting their petty squabbles, their male chauvinism, and so on. Those negatives were part of my intended subtle characterization of people I did not see as simple heroes and heroines, but with whom I had many sympathies. Finally I think I regret the novel's title. I now think I should have removed it more clearly from seeming-reportage.

DM: Could you explain the method in *Babel?*

AB: I start not with a method but a mood. The novel was published in 1969, written in 1967 and 1968. High days and holidays, it was a time to be alive! Events of Paris, and "things happening" in London too. The great antiwar (I always think it's wrong to say anti-Vietnam) demo outside the US embassy (there with my wife, met B. S. Johnson and others), and a so-called Assembly of Artists, met in a warehouse by the Thames, and so on. Writers Reading founded then also. Needless to say, I'm not putting such minor happenings on a par with Paris, but I had a feeling I was part of a general upsurge. I thought we were going to win! Add to that, I had two and a half books out. In *Celebrations* I had taken extraordinary risks with language and seemed to have got away with it, got through at least to some—Robert Nye's fantastic review, and B. S. Johnson's also, Angus Wilson's tribute[3] and the Arts Council support that followed from that (Wilson was Chair of the Literature Committee that allotted grants and prizes). You see, all this *has* to do with method. The mood in which the book was composed was almost exultant—in fact the tension between that and the grim events portrayed, notably the Vietnam war, is one of the strands that holds together a book that has an appropriately high explosive tendency to fly apart. Just as the reception of *Europe* gave me courage to go further in *Celebrations*, so the response to the second book made possible the third.

I've already written of "images think for me" and the "cut-up" and these continued to dominate my method—more so maybe. Just as the cut-up fragmented the sentence (you'll maybe have read elsewhere my description:

"the subject of one sentence drives in one direction, the object of another arrives from another, and the verb is left uncertainly alternating between the two"), I felt the same could be done with the novel's whole narrative structure. I also leaned on what became for me a familiar litany I cooked up that generalized out from the concept of fragmentation: the Empires were fragmenting, the concept of God also, the human personality (schizophrenia, Laing, and Cooper, et al.), the family (growing divorce), and matter itself (smashed atom). And frag-(let's fragment fragment)-mentation, needless to say, is at once a destructive process and one that liberates energy (follow it through: atom, empire, family, mind).

Finally, I attach a copy of a page from a marvelous book, *Kurt Schwitters in England*, by Stefan Themerson—you'll see by my asterisk, reference to the Merzists's ideas about introducing "symmetries and rhythms instead of principles"—that too says something about the way *Babel* evolved.[4]

DM: Method, I think, there definitely is. For instance, in the first twenty pages there is discussion of the bishop and other religious leaders, then of an unwed mother and her baby, and later there is a segment devoted to "the baby-sitting bishop [who] has a fur hat." The method seems deliberately fragmentary, only to have certain fragments united unexpectedly and abruptly. Comment?

AB: The above relates. Having abandoned solid, chronological narrative structure (i.e., storytelling), I knew I needed something else to give the book that essential unity properly required of any work of art. I knew I did not want a mere collection of aphorisms, which would have seemed elegant, dilettante, self-indulgent, and repellent. I insisted on the book being "of and about the world" and not simply clever. A network of recurrent images was the way, with, of course, not a mechanical, exact repetition, but a near-miss, a variation close enough to give the reader that satisfying sense of recognition, ah, yes, I have met something like that before, so that a discernible world slowly emerges, mapped out, always with surprises, but also with a growing sense of familiarity. And that progression to some extent provides a substitute for the traditional novel's narrative tension deriving from whodunnit or whatever. Again, as ever, this was not actively planned, but "found"—though of course that "finding" is not purely passive, there's a good deal of crafty organization and arrangement goes into it.

DM: The method also appears aphoristic; one of my favorite passages is, "Most people will claim to be people, usually." The circularity is hilarious, only to be outdone by the adverbial coda. How much were wit and humor concerns of yours here?

AB: Glad you like that quote. Me too. The "circularity" reminds me of Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet Please*, which I also love. My favorite is "another month gone, you know" (11). As it happens, my desk is before a window that looks out onto "the forests' tall and bristly haircuts" (80). As to wit and humour generally being "concerns" of mine, Abso-bloody-lutely. In *Babel* and in each and every novel—*irony in every line*. In your excellent

piece in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that was the only point you failed to make, though there were a few passing references. The tension between what is stated and what is implied goes or is intended to go spinning through from start to end. I could talk of text and subtext here, but not sure of my ground—you'll know better.

DM: In structure the novel reminds me a great deal of Beckett, especially *Watt* with the fragmentary, forking plot. Any comment?

AB: I love *Watt* (and have a slightly-battered-but-beautiful (aren't we all) Olympia edition, 1958—though I'm no kind of book collector). Though, like many books I love I've never read it right through, have dipped in many times, especially, "Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. . . ." and on and on for the next four pages. While I was not consciously influenced by *Watt* in any way, Beckett was certainly another of those writers who extended the range of the possible.

DM: I'm particularly interested in your intentions with the appendix of characters. Is this a salute to Beckett and his appendix or a parody of the nineteenth-century convention of providing a list of characters, usually as prefatory material, or was something else entirely on your mind (perhaps a guide to the lost or wayward reader)?

AB: As ever, no preplanning, stumbled into it—my fundamental creative method—trial and error—tried it out, scribbled down "A policeman called Lilian"—liked it—added more, yeah, fantastic *list*, funny, silly, readable, provocative, above all interesting—why not, try it. I remember puzzling for ages over whether the list should be at the start or the end of the book . . . This reminds me that B. S. Johnson and I say something about *lists* in *The Imagination on Trial*.

DM: You've commented that *Babel* "had gone to unrepeatable extremes in the fragmentation of narrative." Did you have that feeling of extremes as you wrote it or did that feeling come later?

AB: I think I pretty well knew what I was doing, except that I thought my few fans would go with the book. Not so. Even Robert Nye said I'd reached a dead end and so on. (He sent me a copy of one of his novels inscribed, "for Alan Burns—especially in gratitude for *Celebrations*"—which neatly makes the point.) And I did "retreat" from extreme fragmentation thereafter. *Dreamerika!* deliberately used the known Kennedy story to hold the thing together. And so on.

DM: In rereading *Babel*, I noticed the considerable number of segments devoted to the victimization of women and the young, and the novel now seems like a clear precursor to *The Day Daddy Died*. Was this theme of the exploitation and humiliation of women a conscious element in the novel's conception?

AB: I don't see *Babel* as about the exploitation and humiliation of women, except and insofar as that's one form of injustice and inequality among countless others. The humiliation of women in my work, as in others, contains an element of male chauvinist whatnot. The women I met in

Minnesota taught me to recognize that, and I've since then tried to reshape my writing to eliminate that strand, while still managing to say what I wish to say. (The powerful, sometimes heroic character of Hazel in *Revolutions of the Night* is an example of those women's influence on my work.) While we're on this, there's passages in *Babel* I would now write differently. An example is the term *queers* to denote homosexuals on the opening page, but there's no point in rewriting such stuff. (As, I believe, Auden did.) (My raising the point may sound like silly political correctness, but that's a term I loathe—it's a cleverer version of "knee-jerk liberal," an idiotic putdown designed to scare folks from stating Left views with conviction.)

DM: Could you comment on the novel's narrative point of view? In most places it is the voice of an anonymous, omniscient consciousness, with varying degrees of emotional engagement, and in others there is a first-person narrator, at times male and at other times female. What were you attempting with what appears to be a floating narrative point of view?

AB: Remember, as ever I was not consciously adopting a particular form; you could say I was not fully aware of what I was doing, and I'd reply that that is a necessary ignorance. I don't believe you can be creative writer and critic at the same time—rather, I can't, I know others can. So I'd happily settle for your perceptive and eloquent analysis, especially "floating"—like "slippery" earlier, you have a knack of hitting on out-of-the-way yet apt vocabulary.

DM: How would you explain your method in *Dreamerika!?* (For what it's worth, I see a distinct change from *Babel*. The fragmentation is on the level of the cut-up pieces that act as prompts or, for lack of a better term, "inter-narratives"; whereas, the narrative proper is far more linear than the last novel.) Why the Kennedys and why America?

AB: After *Babel* I felt I could go no further in the direction of fragmentation, without losing my readers altogether. I seized on the idea of referring to, using as a basis, some story line universally known—much like the Roman and Greek gods—part of the common language, common reference points, myth. I thought of Robin Hood, Bible stories, all sorts, and finally hit on the Kennedys as perfect to do the job I needed them to do. Only later did I realize that the Kennedys also repeated my family history, and my basic plot line, in their dominant father, and the double death of two young(ish) sons. The Kennedys' immersion in the media made my use of fragmented newspapers particularly apt. The fact that I could use a terrific "found" story line, and one universally recognized, made it possible for me to take the fragmentation of sentences even further than in *Babel* and I got a kick out of that. Finally, there's my constant fascination with the "look of the page"—almost literally painting with typography—that, *Dreamerika!* permitted, encouraged, delighted in.

DM: How much research did you do on the Kennedys before writing this? Some of the quotes seem entirely in keeping with Joe, Sr., for instance ("The newspapers say I'm worth five hundred million dollars. Why, if I had

that kind of . . ."), and suggest more than a passing acquaintance with the Kennedy legend.

AB: Very little. I relied on my "common knowledge"—did not want to go in for esoteric research—wanted to be able to rely on tuning in to my readers' common knowledge. The quote you quote, would have been "found" by me, probably in the course of a cut-up, and I'd have seen instantly how it could be applied to Joe K. Another reason for eschewing research is that I wanted to be free of it—to allow as I've said elsewhere in connection with *The Angry Brigade*—to allow "some very undocumentary truths to emerge." So, finally, I've no idea whether Joe was "worth five hundred million dollars"—it's a good swinging phrase, and that's good enough for me.

DM: This was the first of your novels to have a subtitle ("A Surrealist Fantasy"). Why?

AB: "A Surrealist Fantasy" was not my idea and I don't like it. John Calder insisted, because of the risk of a libel suit, especially by Rose Kennedy. He thought that label would help show that anything in it should not be taken literally, and therefore we, if forced to defend such a suit would not be compelled to "justify," that is, prove that what we wrote was literally true. As a libel lawyer myself, I saw the force of his argument, but I dislike intensely the implication that surrealism is mere fantasy—on the contrary, it is supertrue, truer than mere "true"—but you know all that, at any rate you know that I think that.

DM: Was Kafka a conscious influence or were you deliberately invoking him with your title?

AB: Kafka's certainly an influence all through my work and my life. My title was not intended to invoke his *Amerika*, except and insofar as that spelling was in vogue and carried a political punch in the sixties. Also the fact that Kafka wrote his book without going there fits with my rejection of research, as per my response about research about the Kennedys.

DM: The novel was written well before the barrage of embarrassing personal disclosures about John Kennedy's personal life and the dystopian view of his presidency that replaced the "Camelot" myth. Was it the Panglossian view of his political and personal life that you were exploring?

AB: Nope, not really. I was intrigued, as ever, by a contradiction—my view of the US and their government as the quintessence of late capitalist evils at the same time there was their undeniable attractiveness, their Roosevelt-role in maybe tackling the most vicious and war-making elements, and so on, their being undeniably Big Money, yet opposed to certain deadly forces—the very fact that they were murdered, I presumed by the CIA (had or have since read the Garrison book) made them Goodies of a kind. Finally, those disclosures were not news to me, not in the sense that I had inside factual knowledge, but—as *Dreamerika!* I believe brilliantly (forgive me!) demonstrates—I had imagined all, long before the journalists dug up the dirt—back to my "undocumentary truths."

DM: I realize it is an unfair question to ask any writer what his or her own favorite book is, but barring that, do you have any special regard for *Dreamerika!?* Knowing that scissors and paste are as indispensable to you as a typewriter, this book seems to me to be the quintessential expression of your collage technique.

AB: Sure I love that "look of the page," but, for what it's worth, *Celebrations* IS MY FAVORITE—again it's happened—the Caps button took over—I tippexed it out but forgot to change the button, so heck let's leave it, it's trying to tell me something. And, yes, I like and adopt your characterization of *Dreamerika!* as "the quintessential expression of (my) collage technique"—or anyone's, I guess—show me another that compares . . .

DM: Where did the collage headings come from—found pieces or created ones or a mixture of both?

AB: In the text (as opposed to the headlines) it's almost always "both," i.e., you find something with potential, but you have to nudge and titivate it, to attain that potential. The headlines however, were mostly found as they appear in the book, though I may have altered one or two—would have been difficult, though, because I could not reproduce the typography—all I could do was cut bits out. I managed to "fit" the right headline in at the right place (insofar as I did) by collecting literally thousands of bits from newspapers and magazines (more the latter, as they're more varied and bold than papers). I lay them on big tabletops and then the floor—what fun it was! I remember spotting COME ON IN, EVERYBODY CAN FLOAT . . . and fitting it into the Chappaquiddick story with indescribable delight.

DM: Why is Robert Kennedy depicted as being gay?

AB: I don't know. When Angus Wilson, the book's dedicatee, came to the launching party, he (who of course was gay himself) grinned at me and said he'd always known that Bobby was gay. But I hadn't. I guess, as so often, I just stumbled into it—maybe wanted a bit of a change from Jack's aggressive heterosexuality, more likely, a mere "Why not?"—and also, possibly, another push in the direction of denying, sabotaging the documentary truths.

DM: Who is the novel's narrator; at one point (page 72 in the "Survive" chapter), the narrator uses the pronoun "I" ("I think you know what happened"). Is this an anonymous figure or someone in particular?

AB: I think you have spotted an error. Though it doesn't worry me too much, I think I'd delete it if there were a reprint. Don't want any intrusion of the first-person narrator—don't think the book could take it.

DM: The narrative moves along fairly smoothly until the last two chapters when the focus shifts to Robert Kennedy's son, Joe, living on a commune, and then to Charles Manson. In these sections and the last there is a sense of dissolution; comprehensible narrative gives way to fragments and discontinuity. Is the idea that the American dream is giving way to the American nightmare, a nightmare implicit in the history of the Kennedys all along?

AB: I'm not conscious of that change in the last two chapters, nor, I think, would I go along with "moves along fairly smoothly," though I know what you mean. Hold on a bit, I'm thinking as I type, maybe you are right, and I think I know why. Before the end of the novel (given that I was having a problem, as ever, in making it bulky enough to sell as a novel), I had, as it were, "run out of story line"—the notorious Kennedy story was told and I had to fill at least a few more pages, so yes, I think there is a change of gear, as I maybe rambled around in plot. That American dream/nightmare stuff is there alright, but I wouldn't make too much of it, if only because it's so obvious as to be trite (and was done so well in *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and many others—now there's some real documentary truths worth telling). There's another clear change as from page 130, when I did want to give the whole story a wider perspective—something there of the Greek gods too.

DM: In the preface to *The Angry Brigade* there is a press report of bombings and a quote from someone at Special Branch blaming the Angry Brigade. Was this an actual press account that you clipped from the papers?

AB: As I recall, it was a real press account, though I may have edited it a little, to make it serve my purpose, which was of course to provide a documentary facade to my fiction.

DM: The preface also says that you met and interviewed two groups, but I recall your telling me years ago that all this was the product of your imagination. Which is it, or is there a blend of these methods?

AB: My reply is as per your *Dictionary of Literary Biography* piece, with one addition. While most of the material came from "friends," with that drastic rewriting I illustrated with my "dentist" story, I did talk to one or two genuine extreme anarcho-left guys and groups, and used those tapes more directly, though much cutting and shaping was still needed. I recall the name of one of those groups, but even now, so many years later, think it would be wrong to name them.

DM: This leads to my by now familiar question about your aims and methods. I suppose this question is becoming tedious, given your response about inspiration and the instinctual. However, I see development and change over the course of your career, and I'm trying to get your sense of that development (if, of course, you see it as such).

AB: Remember, I was "going popular," but not only for sheer commercial reasons. At around this time Heinrich Böll made a speech on receiving the Nobel Prize. It was about the need for novels especially to make—to be designed to make—a political impact—this in rather high falutin' terms—writers' political responsibility, etc.—and that the self-indulgent elitist "art" novel was intolerable. This hit home, and I resolved to write in a plain, accessible style, literally a "conversational" style, via the tape recorder. The recorder was a godsend to me. I cut out the cut-up and found this other way of creating the "ocean of raw material" I have always needed, so that I could "find" the good stuff among the debris—to mix my metaphors. I also discovered the wonderful music and subtlety of people's speech, and there

was a bit of politics in that also. (I also found out what an exhausting method it was, with hundreds (?) of hours transcribing tapes, editing and rewriting them.)

DM: The technique of using multiple, first-person narrators is especially effective, but new for you. Did you do anything particular to capture the sound and feeling of voices speaking?

AB: Beyond what I've just said about taping, it was a matter of building a character out of multiple fragments, "seeing and hearing" the person—all the familiar stuff of the traditional novelist (because no one of my many interviewees turned out to "be" any one of my six characters—each was a collage of fragments).

DM: In your view who is the hero of the novel? I realize the idea is the montage of voices and personalities, but Jean and Dave strike me as particularly compelling for their generally humanist views of others, the struggle, and their eventual disaffection.

AB: I agree about Jean and Dave.

DM: I'm curious if any or all of your children have played important roles in your work—as creative provocateurs, models for characters, or whatever?

AB: Fascinating question. There's the old tag about a novelist putting all of himself into each sentence. Them kids are a vital part of me, maybe the best bit of me, I cannot go beyond that because I have so much to say about it. As for models for characters, bits of them for sure, here and there, and Danny and Sham were clear models (though not exclusively so) for Harry and Hazel in *Revolutions*. Maybe "models" is not quite right. I "had them in mind," "saw" them throughout.

DM: You mention in the "Slash and Burns" interview in the *Minnesota Daily* the method of buying old books and creating impromptu verbal collages with the pages. I'm afraid most readers won't have access to that piece, so could you revisit (I'm sorry) the inevitable interview question about your creative methods?

AB: Start with a word: browsing. Dictionary says it means "read desultorily." Desultorily means "going constantly from one subject to another, disconnected, unmethodical." The process begins with me browsing in a used bookshop. The state of mind is all: disconnected, unmethodical, unpurposeful, not hunting for good material, bumbling around, humming a bit (not really), glancing through pages, saying hm, from time to time, or not saying hm, saying mmm, or not, from book to book, maybe an hour or two, no hurry, never mind if nothing, but maybe piling up a few. Needless to say, what's happening is the subconscious taking over. I'm going on about the state of mind because the same is repeated more or less, at the next stage, glancing down at the pages of the books I've brought home. There's much more on this in chapter 5 of my book in progress, "Art by Accident," prefaced by Klee's incomparable: "Does inspiration have eyes, or does it sleepwalk?" "Sleepwalking" is maybe more apt than "browsing."

Sometimes I fold pages over, so I can read across, half of one page, half of another. I think I have never actually cut up pages, though in a couple of interviews I've said I have because it makes a good story. Then of course there follows the interminable process of peering (usually down, the cuttings or pages are on a table) and shuffling them around, by trial and error, finding a way in which they may go together, stretching my imagination and the reader's, to encompass a new, an unfamiliar aspect of each word or image, as it strains to hook up with its neighbor. The novel is plotted in the same way, as I see the possibility of one scene following another, again stretching my characters' potential—there, she's in a pub, but I have some good stuff on a mountain—how to get her from pub to mountain. Ah . . . I have used the analogy of the child's drawing book, where he joins up the dots—scrabble of dots at the foot of the page, a couple at the top, ah, it's a giraffe!

DM: Who is the narrator in *The Day Daddy Died?* In the first few paragraphs there are ellipses, to signify hesitancy, an almost stuttering quality to the narrative. Is this a case of narrative ventriloquism—a third-person narrator imitating perfectly the rhythms, intonations, dialectical idiosyncrasies of the main character, Norah?

AB: Again the way you phrase the question illustrates the difference between your approach and mine. It would not occur to me to ask myself, still less to answer, "Who is the narrator?" though I am now enjoying the analysis that follows. But to stay first with the general. I don't adopt a tactic in order to create a literary effect—"narrative ventriloquism" (great phrase) or whatever. I try to find the words that seem true to, that truly convey and share the bit of life experience I remember/imagine. Thus those ellipses arose from the subject matter—a man dying from some bronchial catastrophe that first hindered, then stopped his breathing. The man's choking to death. A few ellipses are the least I can allow him. There's another layer of hesitation too: the scene is being recalled by his adoring, grief-stricken (maybe overstates it) daughter. The words are closely based on one of the many tape recordings I made with the woman whose story forms the basis of the novel. Can't recall details now, but I would probably have edited it quite heavily, eliminating repetitions and all sorts, producing in the end a purity of language that's far from spoken speech, but yet retains some of that quality. In addition of course, Elsie (her real name) would have spoken in first person, and I transcribed into third. (I think all my novels are in third person, for the distancing.)

As well as the attempt to convey the experience, it occurs to me now that there's also the aesthetic qualities of the words themselves—their sound, the way they look on the page, and in relation to each other—I am particularly interested in that. Of course it's a cliché of commercial writing to avoid wedges of uninterrupted grey print—most obviously, use dialogue to break up the page, but I also have gone for more extreme methods—*Dreamerika!* for instance. And my other work in progress—"Imaginary

Dictionary"—goes for that in a big way. Finally, yes, your characterization of the third-person narrator, puts it nicely. (Though there are other voices in the book.) Oh, and I'm also "mapping my own mind," and there's other factors also. The result is an infinitely complex equation, more than my mind can grapple with, which partly accounts for my reliance on ill-defined aspects of (un)consciousness, like "instinct," and similar.

DM: In your interview with Charles Sugnet you talk about being "moved away" from the styles of *Babel* and *Dreamerika!;* did you feel you were abandoning a method you were deeply attached to or was the change in the order of a progression and new sense of artistic commitment (the latter one might assume from your remarks in the same interview about Heinrich Böll's Nobel Prize speech)?

AB: A bit of one and a bit of t'other. "Abandoning a method to which I was deeply attached" comes nearest, however. If my early novels had been commercial successes, if the film, for example, of *Europe* had been made (the option was sold, but it got no further), then a) I would have had the confidence to explore the surrealist possibilities further, and b) my royalties would have been enough to live on, giving me the time to write full-time . . . but that never happened. I had thought I could have the best of both worlds, artistic freedom and earn a living, but not so—Kafka: "To earn your living, or live your life, that is the question." On the other hand, that Heinrich Böll story also contains part of the truth.

DM: I'm curious about the use of the various letters; what were you trying to achieve with these? (Again from my point of view, these seem an extension of *The Angry Brigade*'s technique of getting a host of voices filling the narrative.)

AB: One critic made quite a thing about the so-called "epistolary" thread that runs through the book. For me, it fitted with my interest in junk and in found objects generally—an interest shared by many surrealist artists—Picasso, of course, and Schwitters and Miro's marvelous sculptures, i.e., each of the letters used was actually found by me and stuck in a cardboard box I keep for such things. And yes, I guess there was a kinda dawning that, yep, there's a "thread" developing here—after I'd used a couple, and then I would have, more deliberately, tried to build on that. The letters would have been ruthlessly cut, shaped and edited, to fit my story line. I remember the delight with which I found—in the street, the gutter I think—that sweet love letter to "Babe"—you see, I could never have written that but I don't feel I've cheated or stolen anything (though sometimes I say, as I think others have said, that a novelist needs to be a cheat, a liar, and a thief)—because I have a) recognized the potential of this "junk" material, and b) slotted it into a context in a way that enhances—maybe transforms—the found object and builds the novel. Again, remember that "child joins up the dots" notion—well those letters also stretch the plot by encouraging it to hook up with the content of the letters. (That letter demanding payment of a bill was based on one I received from my son's music teacher.) Finally, yes, a host of

voices is right—another way of creating collages.

DM: I'm curious about your use of the surreal elements. I know the book originated from two sources—the Cockney woman you interviewed in London and the short story of a love affair between an older man and younger woman—and your desire to blend these two radically different stories and styles. However, the surreal elements are far more limited in this novel, and when they appear, they deal with inanimate things and lend to the novel's atmospherics. For instance, passages such as "music was the way the room said loud" (9), "Her thick lashes were in the room and could not get out" (10), "The sitting-down smile had been educated, taught to read and write" (57) illustrate what I'm suggesting. Could you comment on the change that indicates, as far as the surreal is concerned in this novel?

AB: My first response to your question is to relive the delight I had in those terrific images and phrases (though I sez it mesself). It confirms the fact that the "real me" is the author of that language. I would not dismiss the rest, but, for me, it is secondary, it is a compromise, a retreat, done for the commercial and other reasons I have already given. Interesting point you make about this voice dealing with "inanimate things." However, a key early scene between Norah and Dad used that heightened language in relation to them, as opposed to things. ("Key" because I think it's the first time I introduce the voice, and it's vital to get it right, so the reader takes it on board and allows you to use it throughout.)

DM: What led to your bringing Ian Breakwell into collaboration on the novel? Some of his images are truly sympathetic and harrowing complements to the narrative.

AB: I first met Ian very early on. He was running an Arts Centre in Bristol. Ian was/is a very versatile guy—writer, books and TV, films, happenings, painter, dedicated surrealist. (I've just invited him up to Lancaster U. as visiting speaker.) I think I was dipping into (as ever) *The Pickwick Papers,* illustrated by Phiz and others (watch it, Burns, are you making this up?), and I sez to mesself, I sez, maybe, why not? But I felt from the start there was no point in simply "illustrating," I wanted—and yes, this hooks up with your comments on "host of voices"—another voice. Ian seemed the right choice just because of his range of interests, literary and visual. I sent him early drafts of the novel, and he responded with early ideas for his collages. It was a neat additional interaction between his work and mine, that the text and the pictures together formed a collage, also the text and the pictures themselves were collages—a collage of collages.

DM: At one point Norah tells a companion that her favorite people are "those who live on the border-lines and edges, and burst into life from time to time" (52). This it seems to me could be said of most of the major characters in your novels. Would you care to comment?

AB: I'm fascinated by those moments when a writer unknowingly typifies himself in the course of a novel, and I think you have spotted one such—not that it's true of me, but of my characters, yes. Unless it's simply

true of all novels' protagonists? Maybe it's only such protagonists who can generate the tensions that propel them through a novel?

DM: I'm interested in this and the other novels' sense of time. In each of your novels there is a telescoping of time—some events or scenes or descriptions will be rendered with great precision and detail yet other events will leap around with sometimes blinding speed. Could you comment on this temporal shifting?

AB: Your characterization is correct. All I would add is something parallel with the "velocity of the dream." That "quality of dream" I've written of before, partly, or even largely, derives from this way of handling time. The relation between the novel and the dream is dialectical, which is to say: the dream invades the novel, the novel inhabits the dream. More straightforwardly, I'd also say that the memory (and of course all fiction comes from memory) works in just that way—fits and starts, dwelling interminably in one place, with one image, one scene, one moment, only to zip and zoom away at astonishing speeds. So, it's not merely "right" and desirable, it is unavoidable and inevitable in a novel "written from the right point" (wherever that is, midway between the novel and the appendix, if you still have one, without one the question is more difficult to answer, maybe the place where it would still be if it were still there, anyway, it's somewhere in the guts).

DM: *Revolutions of the Night* begins enigmatically, with an anonymous pair of observers atop a tower looking down on the three generations of men in the protagonist's family. Who are these figures, if anyone, and was your intention here to create an atmosphere of foreboding that builds throughout the narrative? (For instance, the image of birds flying into dark clouds reappears surreally in the penultimate chapter, when babies come hurling out of the night sky to earth.)

AB: Those figures atop the tower are who they are. Where did they come from? From one of the hundreds of pictures, paintings, photographs I collected and assembled and from which grew the novel. I wanted to use the Ernst (cover/title) image early on, but not start with it—boring merely to repeat what the reader has just seen. Also needed to "place" the three figures from Ernst, and did so by placing them in a landscape suggested by another Ernst picture with a tower and a forest clearing. The three on the tower echoed the three on the ground. The two groups were connected by the young woman on the tower being Harry's sister, revealed in the penultimate line on page 10. Wanted her in the story from the start, but there's no female in the Ernst, so skewered her in this way. The atmosphere of foreboding—yes—I so much "wanted it," I searched for an image that contained it, and for reasons uncertain, sensed that it would make a good start. (Once you have "placed" your characters, the narrative obviously must move on, they can't stay there forever.) As for the "bookends" effect, I always think it's right (essentially it's sonata form, as described in "Art by Accident"), i.e., night sky image at the start and end, but I was not aware of

it before you pointed it out. Maybe some instinct of which I was unaware headed me towards this, anyway, I'm glad it came out that way. Of course there's not an exact repetition, it's birds at the start and babes at the end. This is a chance to point out that the image of the "burning child flew into a tree. The tree became its funeral pyre" is my compressed version of precise, science-based information of the likely effect of nuclear war contained in a pamphlet I'd read.

DM: How would you describe your aims with this novel? I see a return to a more complex infusion of surreal techniques than those in *The Day Daddy Died*.

AB: As ever, my aims focused on content, not form or technique—their job needless to say was to serve, to express the content. However, I agree that they are more surreal than those in *Daddy*, though there is an extreme surrealist strand in *The Day Daddy Died*, but balanced, even outnumbered, by more pedestrian others. Not so in *Revolutions*. To that extent it's maybe "purer," but not as popular.

DM: Could you now comment on the role Max Ernst's painting played in the conception and execution of the novel (besides, of course, providing a title and jacket art)? I am also interested more generally in the influence of painting and the plastic arts on your aesthetics.

AB: The Ernst gave me license to go for it, as I suggest above. It also fit my father/son (and grandad for good measure). You'll have gathered that getting what seemed to me good usable stuff from Ernst, I launched into a wholesale raid on the mass of available works of European (mainly) art—all a bit quirky and chancy (all the better for that) in that the book was written on leave in England, and I had few books with me, a few more (reproductions of paintings and photos, that is) in the tiny village library. I'd have been swamped by "everything," so good that Chance did the initial selecting for me. This is the equivalent of hanging around secondhand bookstores for earlier novels. As to the general influence of painting—it's considerable. I have always thought, and on occasion argued, that the visual arts could teach writers a thing or two, in their multiplicity of schools, constant breaking ahead with the new—Picasso of course, the incomparable artist of our times—delete that horrible bundle of clichés—I get woolly when I enthuse. Also remember the visual/spatial/collage approach and method I use in assembling (itself a visual arts term) a novel on a tabletop, etc. Even the awareness of letters forming ideograms (is that the right term?) throughout but most extremely in, say, that dissection of the word *shack* in my "Imaginary Dictionary."

DM: The novel ends at a rural cottage after a flight from civilization. Were you consciously commenting on the failure of the pastoral ideal in modern life?

AB: The rural cottage stuff more likely came from where the book was written, a village in southeast England. I did much wandering around while writing it. I'll tell you (though you don't ask) an extraordinary coincidence

that happened along the way. I'd got a character, Bob, stuck out there in the hills, miles from the city where the plot required him next to be. War-torn countryside, no gas, no transport, how does he make it? I went on a walk in the hills around and sat on a bench at a high point, guess what should swing towards me high in the sky—a hot air balloon! (There it is, on page 123 of the novel.)

DM: The tone of this novel reminds me very much of *Europe after the Rain*. The most outrageous events (Bob's being pushed out of a balloon to what appears certain death, the lion-man on the train who cuddles Hazel, a woman midwifing a fish giving birth, etc.) are narrated in the most cool, detached manner. Could you comment on this feature?

AB: Yep, that's true. In this I was aided by the technique of "copying" images from paintings. In other novels, especially those using the cut-up, I'd get the words themselves from my source materials; couldn't do that using pictures. So I was driven to use my own "natural" ability to put words together—an ability I thought had atrophied as a result of reliance on found materials. I was relieved and delighted to find I could put the words together—given the help of pictures. I'd place the book of reproductions or whatever by the side of my typewriter and simply swing into it—free fall—and found I could do it. There's another admission to make. The reason I need all these aids and tricks—cut-up, pictures, etc.—is that I find it so darned hard to write. I'm a page counter from page 1, so I seize on a picture, and an inexhaustible supply of such, with relief—I can complete the blasted book. Finally on coolness, note that certain passages, particularly towards the end, deal in ultimate catastrophe—nuclear war—what other style is there? I tell my students, "the hotter the content, the cooler the style"—when the content is the temperature of the sun, you'd better measure up to it, or cool it (man). By the way, the last chapter of *Revolutions* is a word picture of Ernst's *Europe after the Rain*.

DM: In many of the scenes in *Revolutions* there is a resonance or for me a vague quality of familiarity with many of the novel's scenes. Were there specific sources of inspiration in the novel, and if so, can you share some of these?

AB: That "vague quality of familiarity" you experienced while reading *Revolutions* may well derive from my use of countless paintings, mainly surrealist stuff, as the source of word pictures which I then sewed into the narrative—tried to make it seamless, invisible mending—though of course these set pieces not only thread into the narrative line, they also suggest extensions of it. (I've written before about kids' "dot" pictures, and the dot which tells you "it's a giraffe.") I've also written of having my kids somewhere in mind when drawing Harry and Hazel—it's just possible that your kids in your mind chimed with mine from time to time. Also perhaps your familiarity with those paintings or some of them, might have made you feel that you had seen that image somewhere before.

Needless to say, the whole range of sources that fed other novels, fed this

one also—meaning, I suppose, my whole life experience. Thus the title image could not but suggest my experience as son and grandson and father.

DM: I'd like to turn to your only play, *Palach*, and ask you explain the reason for the self-reflexive introduction composed of correspondence between you and Charles Marowitz.

AB: You will know by now that I adopt a "grab-bag" approach to a book—in this case a play. Anything becomes usable once the central idea is truly launched. I "came across" my notes of those telephone conversations and simply found a place for them. I know now stuff about "self-reflexive" whatnot but at the time such notions were a million miles away. There's just one aspect that is down to earth and thought out, however, and it's not particularly admirable—the more reason for mentioning it. I've written elsewhere about what seemed to me Marowitz's self-aggrandizing manner, especially revealed in his later claiming co-authorship in the Penguin edition of the play. Therefore the inclusion of those notes of my conversations with him sought to establish, within the script, evidence of our writer/director relationship. If you read the lines again (sorry to put you through it), you'll see, I think, that my status as writer is, at least to some extent, confirmed. Finally, and more to the point, that "framing," I believe, is appropriate to such tragic and desperate subject matter. It intensifies the poignancy, to be shown how Jan Palach's ultimate act of despair is not only being commemorated, it is being exploited and turned into a play, a commodity, and coolly discussed as such.

DM: Is the failure of the play's voices to communicate with one another a verbal equivalent of the surreal that we find articulated in your novels?

AB: Not really! But maybe! I think it's mainly a straight political, even rather too obvious portrayal of what late capitalism has done to the human spirit. Late capitalism's problem of course is that it needs educated, skilled, even imaginative workers to produce sophisticated competitive products. Yet, those workers must not get ideas above their station. Hence brainwashing of myriad kinds, to keep those potentially revolutionary minds in check—advertising, media, all sorts. So "characters" mouthing advertising slogans at each other show the end result of that process, and given the primary subject of the play, it's clear that Stalinism is as guilty as so-called capitalism. The "maybe" above indicates that some of the scenes do create a dreamlike effect that could be labeled surreal.

DM: I'm curious about the play's comic elements. This feature is mentioned in the one of introductory comments (196), and I see it especially in the closing scene where each member of the family is locked into his or her private obsession—the mother with cooking a satisfactory pudding, the father with football, and the girl with her cosmetics. What were you trying to achieve with what I see as undeniably comic interludes? (For what it's worth I think they operate in the Shakespearean sense of lessening some of the grimness, but I'm sure you had other intentions in mind.)

AB: Lessen the grimness, sure. Also, the play deals centrally with utter

despair (which precipitated Palach's suicide), and the comic is human being's ultimate weapon in dealing with such.

DM: Obviously this was your first play. What formal challenges did it present, especially for one whose career up to this point had been in fiction? How would you compare the two genres from your perspective?

AB: Terrific challenges: first the human element. As compared to the purity and isolation of myself at my desk, there was the messy, complex involvement of people . . . But I love collaboration on many grounds: political obviously—comradeship and all that, and a knowledge that "we are many and they are few." There's also an interesting connection with Chance, in that collaboration introduces the random element—obviously, I can't be sure what my collaborator will contribute, and vice versa—and that is stimulating, nerve-racking, precarious, all the things needed to cook up somethin' tasty. There was also the real and undeniable excitement of "seeing and hearing" my words made real. And when we got, among others, that sensational review by Harold Hobson (then the doyen—silly word—of the London theatre critics) then that was excitement and pleasure, all the better when shared with others. I was not much aware of the formal differences between writing a novel and a play—maybe I'd have done more and better if I had been clearer about what I was about—dunno. Remember, I was always dead keen on theatre, went often, even acted (in Shakespeare, with "traveling players") when younger, so I was familiar with its requirements.

DM: I've noticed in this play and in many of the novels sharp criticism of organized religion, especially the Roman Catholic Church. Could you comment on your feelings about the Catholic Church or religion in general?

AB: I think I'm instinctively a religious person, at least in the sense of having a deep need. But unhappily cannot begin to believe all that "God up there" stuff—and the intellectual versions, pantheistic and more—are simply pathetic. Did the Red Sea part for the fleeing Israelites? If so, great, except I don't believe it. If not, and it's symbolic of this or that, to hell with it, who cares. You'll note a kind of anger there, that's powerfully there in most of my references to churches or religions, and of course it's the anger of a jilted lover. One who longs to believe but cannot, has reason for fury. I simply loved the language of the Bible, Old Testament and New, adored Jesus as a man—the kind of leader who kneels and washes his disciples' feet is terrific. But the Church, especially the Catholic Church as an institution is of course another matter. My answer to your question should perhaps have begun with my saying I'm a Jew, but my Jewishness died with my mother, in 1944. My father remarried, a Catholic. I have always been wary of displaying my Jewishness, though I would not deny it, not only because I am and have for all my adult life been an atheist, but because I absolutely wish and intend to avoid any kind of labeling or stereotyping as a Jewish writer, which, in spite of my love for Kafka, I totally reject. One of the few traces of Jewishness in my writing may be seen in the intensity with which *Europe after the Rain* evokes aspects of the Holocaust. However, I always

try to counter the notion that the Holocaust victims were all Jewish. Marxism, of course, provided all I needed in terms of religion—a reason for being, a promised land, a complete understanding of human history, and my place in it. But if the promised land turns out to have been a nightmare—what then?

DM: In Chapter Five of "Art by Accident" you mention modern artists' disinclination to admit the force of inspiration in their works. Do you eschew the phenomenon of inspiration in your work? Do you do anything to "feed the muse"? Your collecting pulp writing and journalistic clippings strike me as one way of—not creating—but provoking serendipity. Are there other ways you do this?

AB: I have just reread chapter 5 of "AbyA." I can tell you that each and every line was "true for me"—those (mainly) painters and composers and I, work(ed) in the same way. Yes, the religious associations and implications of the term *inspiration* put me off, but it can be a handy word and I use it occasionally, as in "AbyA." As to tactics, as opposed to the above, which could be called strategy: in addition to those cut-up tricks, I walk a lot, the pace of ambling seems to be just right, and the slow change of surroundings again seems "right" for the *reception* of thoughts, images, ideas—I don't even get active enough to "invite" ideas—just await them—and this is the active bit—I need to be able to recognize the good ones, meaning of course the useable ones, and even better, the ones that suggest, or in an odd sortofa way, bring others in tow . . . so—I say again—it's *the state of mind* that matters, it's the key. "Daydreaming" is a useful notion too. I also use boredom. I lie down and do nothing, think nothing, until I get so fed up, I jump up and start typing.

NOTES

[1]In response to an earlier question Burns added, "I know [in my writing] I am a willing accomplice . . . but . . . still at the heart of my heart is . . . DOUBT, which is why I put things next to each other (collage) and leave them [readers and critics] to work it out."

[2]The passage to which he refers reads: "The content of dreams illustrates this [the emphasis in the word *surrealism* on *realism*] nicely. Dreams are generally made up of everyday objects. . . . Yet there is a deep contradiction between their apparent solidity and the sense of precariousness, of uncertainty, that pervades them. . . . [Referring to Dali's *A Loaf of Bread about to Explode!*] Exactly! That is the precarious reality of the dream. And that is a marvelous effect for the fiction writer to aim at. We must deal with the real life around us. But we should also share our awareness that the ordinary always carries with it the potential for the extraordinary."

[3]This commendation, which has never appeared in its entirety in the US, reads, "Alan Burns, author of *Europe after the Rain* and *Celebrations*, is to

me one of the two or three most interesting new novelists working in England—and if this sounds cool, let me say that I mean that he is a very good novelist indeed. The exploration of the psycho/political/life/language/thought/action of our age in *Europe after the Rain* is as deadly accurate as it is exciting, frightening and also extremely moving. It is perhaps the more immediately impressive of his two books, yet I finally prefer *Celebrations* for it has a compelling sense of the composition of modern personality from the institutional (in this case industry), the cliché (this part is very funny), the instinctual (Mr. Burns can make poetry out of the language that describes this) and the small nugget of something which is ours alone that we hug so closely. It is a mysterious, rich and engrossing book."

[4]The passage Burns refers to is Themerson's explanation of the juxtaposition of unlikely elements playing havoc with "the classification system on which the regime is established." After citing a series of havoc producers, including Galileo, Einstein, Russell, and Schönberg, Themerson writes, "the Cubists with their funny ideas about shapes, or Dadaists or Merzists with their funny ideas about introducing symmetries or rhythms instead of principles."