

Speaking about Writing about Living a Life: Interview with Stephen Gray on his Autobiography, *Accident of Birth*

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Stephen Gray's impact on southern African literature and its reception both in South Africa and abroad has been immense. In addition to being a widely published critic, he has compiled anthologies of southern African poetry, prose and drama, and has thus exposed a wealth of material which may otherwise have remained in obscurity. He is himself a poet of international repute, having published many collections of his poems. A successful playwright, he has also written eight novels. A traumatic experience led him to turn his considerable talents to another use—the writing of his autobiography.

The interview was conducted at Stephen's home in Mayfair, Johannesburg on a beautiful sunny day in February 1996. The time lapse notwithstanding, Stephen's insights contribute significantly to the debate on the act of autobiographical composition. Furthermore, *Accident of Birth* has not attracted the critical attention it deserves; it is hoped, therefore, that this interview will do something to stimulate interest in an autobiography which tackles the politics of intimacy and the intricacies of politics with rare candour.

Judith (J): Most South African autobiographers steer clear of anything that's remotely impinging on their sexuality or their intimate personal relationships. It must have taken a lot of courage to deviate from that tradition of reticence and I wondered if there was any point at which you thought 'Hold on, this is getting too close to the bone; it shouldn't go into print'?

Stephen (S): I have to give a bit of a roundabout answer, because I am not sure of the final truth on this issue myself, even if it is the main issue of what became *Accident of Birth*. What are the politics of intimacy, or let's put the question a little

bit further back: is there a dividing line between public and private? Well, in all my writing I've expressed the notion that—in South Africa at large—there is a kind of prohibition, a sort of conspiracy of secrecy, about the very nature of privacy. Bit by bit I've been digging away at what for thirty years I've seen as my main theme: that the private *is* political, that what happens intimately in the household is directly connected to the outer political world. I think as citizens of apartheid we fooled ourselves that we were detached from it, but the very fact that we could have thought that was part of the ignorance that apartheid spread. But now, in this autobiography I don't think I was particularly revealing as there are still things about my life that I am not going to share with anybody, and that maybe I don't even share with myself. My particular aim was not to come my guts, as it were. But once the narrative is framed, I've used the technique of question and answer to the psychiatrist to convince myself of the rightness, or wrongness, of my point of view. The whole first part of the book is meant to be that confession to an analyst. So I made a point of jumbling the public and the private all in there together.

It's also a book about nervous breakdown; it's about collapse, about learning to come to terms with the post-traumatic stress syndrome that I was suffering. I was terribly damaged by that awful experience of having been at the knife-point of death, unexpectedly and, I thought, undeservedly. That was the accident of the title and it's a book about the kind of truths that just seep out, no matter how you try to put the cap on things and be all right. You can't, because your unconscious, your sense of the meaningless universe, with all the guilts and privileges of the person you are in the South African situation as it goes into our stressful changes, won't let you. Of course, it's called a middle-age crisis, isn't it?

J : Yet you are more prepared to take the reader into your confidence than any other South African autobiographer has been.

S : Maybe, but it's a tactic. I'm really the cold-blooded author who revised that text, let me tell you, about six times. I don't think I've revealed more than I wanted to. But I felt I should use the idea of giving away intimacies as a dramatic tactic in that text. I must say that some of the autobiographies you are referring to I find are formally boring, perhaps because formal innovations are not releasing content in any fresh way. South Africans are great at hearing only our own echoes. But I had to use other methods to deliver a different message. I am talking about writerly problems, like how to break through and talk in real terms about historical problems.

J : But your very controlled narrator doesn't give a sense of collapse.

S : Well, if that's the case, I'm sorry because I planned for those small moments which I hoped would be atomically explosive—at the end of the second chapter, after the first episode of confession about childhood, for example. The grabbing for the cigarettes... little domestic details like that. And that moment comes back, at the end of the book during the trial, when I'm in the witness stand. Fumbling in the pocket for cigarettes

J : And not remembering how to address the magistrate

S : And not remembering ... that's how stress manifests itself. I did not want to belabour the whole thing. I think a little crack in the exterior can suggest something very frightening.

J : Do you think that in order to tell a pleasing story the emphasis has to shift from telling the *truth* to *telling* the truth? Foucault has argued that 'The least glimmer of truth is conditioned by politics'. Could you talk about the politics of truth?

S : I agree with Foucault in this instance. I'm fascinated with seeing how I have changed since the days of my own upbringing, which did rather teach me that politics was out there in the world, was something done by Nationalists in government, and had nothing to do with this little colonial child playing on the beach around Table Bay. My whole life has been a discovery of how false and misleading that is. The very apoliticality that was taught us was just a way of keeping us under control. It's all to do with our heritage. Now, thank goodness, we are stepping out of thought control, of censorship. Look what a diminished literature we were left with and how crimped our natural desires to flourish and be challenging and mature as people became. The apartheid society almost crippled us. My book could be written only as a strategy against that monstrous situation, to try and build a more open, free mind-space, if you want to use a corny phrase like that. I think the key word of our recent times really is 'struggle': there was an inner struggle that had to be fought in our heads, perforce, as well. And I am quite angry about the fact that our leaders misled us; that was criminal.

J : Yes, but for many non-South Africans, white South Africans bemoaning their oppression may come across as self-indulgent whinging. I don't perceive it that way, though, because I understand your anger.

S : But I'm reminded of Angus Wilson, who had his childhood in Natal and was a wonderful satirist. When he paid a return visit in 1963 he said

English South Africans are unique in the world because their only attempt at being political is complaining!

J : In dealing with a politics of truth, Foucault talks in much broader terms about the kind of insidious political correctness of what counts as truth in any culture. To be able to write a narrative autobiography, you would have to conform to certain conventions to have it accorded the status of a truthful document. How do you see your project of truth-telling in *Accident of Birth*?

S : Foucault is fine, but I don't want to be forced into replying within his terms of discourse. I can only say that as I kept writing, at the top of every page I wrote the word 'stocktaking'. Stocktaking Chapter 2—Childhood; Stocktaking Chapter 4—Pre-teens, and so on. Even deciding the periods was a huge leap forward in terms of patterning and working out the interrelations. And I realised as I first wrote each chapter I was also, in my stocktaking, writing that thing off. I can't tell you the amount of searching that went on in this house, of old suitcases for photographs and for letters. The book is also hugely quoted from other sources—from things I'd written previously, from things other people have said, and especially from books I've read. In fact, one of my themes there is that I am what I read. At the end it all comes to trial, and the big question which nobody ever has the guts to ask about themselves is forced upon me when I am in the dock, about to condemn others: should I not perhaps condemn myself? That was me facing my deepest truth.

J : The act of endeavouring to tell the truth in narrative must of necessity be structured around the economy of confession, that is, through a complex relationship of disclosure and concealment. How do you see this at work in *Accident of Birth*?

S : I agree that that's what it is. But I had this awful continuum of questions, like am I holding the reader, is the reader going to be interested by this? How can I twist it so that I can keep them all?—or not them, usually a reader is one person.

J : But that sort of calculated thinking—you know, I'll keep them amused for five pages and then I'll hit them on page 6—that wouldn't have happened as you were writing under such pressure ...?

S : It did. It has to, it controls it all and it was that control that saved me. Otherwise I couldn't have faced the roiling, muddled, hysterical chaos that I then felt was my collapsing and shapeless life.

J : So that was there, at the most fundamental level?

S : Yes, I felt that if I was a writer, I should write my way out of all that, otherwise I was dead. But remember also that in the opening scene I kept thinking of my buddy Richard Rive, who had been stabbed to death in similar circumstances—28 times! He must have put up a brave fight for his life with those two damned intruders. And I grieved over that—I wrote not one, but two obituaries for Richard. It seemed like an apartheid thing—good people being killed, in Richard's case in his own kitchen. I was tied up in my own livingroom with this monstrous event that had happened to Richard happening to me. I sat there bound in a yellow rope, freezing to death, with blood coming out of my throat, asking myself, 'Richard, what did you do wrong?' I'm not saying Richard replied, but I realised instinctively, at that fighting survival level, that Richard was a very aggressive type who fuelled his life with a kind of aggro. So I thought, don't do that, try another way; don't antagonise them, if they want something, just say yes, because I was outnumbered three to one, and they were even better armed than the intruders who visited Richard. And so Richard gave me a little gift of a lesson, which was: 'Win by the word, it's worth your life'. And as I was still tied-up, not knowing the outcome of my own story, I thought: my God, I've got a book, if I live to write it!

J : The title, *Accident of Birth*, is drawn from the epigraph which reads: '*We shall not let our creed be determined by the mere accident of birth in a particular age or a particular part of the earth's surface*'; but out of that context, the title implies the opposite. Did you intend this sort of ambivalence?

S : Not really. I had fallen on the phrase 'accident of birth' before I actually found the quote (via Olive Schreiner) from Herbert Spencer. Later I discovered two wonderful points that Spencer made relatedly, that the only two things a human person cannot control are who they are—in other words, who your parents are—and where you are born. The rest of your life you can control. I thought that was the most basic statement of the problem of identity in an autobiographical framework.

J : But the sentiments expressed in the quotation—that identity and beliefs should not be determined by mere accident of birth—are, in terms of contemporary theoretical orthodoxy, idealistic and impossible. To what extent do you feel that your own life, and the story that you told of it, testify to the validity of Spencer's assertion about individual freedoms?

S : I think he is countering that mid-to-late Victorian determinism

which came from two sources, both still potent in our self-formation. One is the Darwinian scientific natural selection school that puts such stress on character, as in Hardy's notion that character is destiny. The other school is the Marxist revolutionary school of thought that is also deterministic, even mechanistic, in presuming that the individual ego is a social function. I wanted to counter Darwinism and Marxism, the two schools which inform our thinking in the twentieth century, by saying that I feel some things do happen by accident, and that rebirths, transformations, are possible. So I am agreeing with him—not that I am a covert student of Spencer or anything like that. But I must stress that at the time of writing I was not influenced by thoughts like that at all. It's only later that I found them in my own text. I just worked by instinct. I didn't have a title at all until three-quarters of the way through.

J : To what extent are you and your story the products of a specific historical moment?

S : Well, hugely. This is what I am interested in, in my writing: catching the texture of each historical moment, not just one, and remembering that you and I and everybody else in our country have been going through such shifting historical moments. I thought I should catch the excitement of their transformation.

J : For Virginia Woolf, what's worth recording are those very brief—but rare—moments when we are *truly* alive in between the usual sludge of mere existence. In your autobiography, have you set out to extract those kinds of moments, or are you trying to record an entire chronological pattern?

S : I think in the end it's you, the critic, who must decide that.

J : The large print emphasis of 'Birth' and 'Gray' on the cover is most striking particularly because the blood red lettering and the scarlet foetus invoke the physicality of birth. How does the cover design render commentary on the text?

S : I can't give an authoritative answer because traditionally the cover is not in the realm that an author can control. But this is a COSAW publication, with the Congress of South African Writers agreeing that writers must have an active role in the book-making. So, unusually for me, I was there while Andrew Lord assembled it. But in the end it's his work, that's his view of the text (which he also typeset by the way), so he was absolutely integral in its packaging.

J : The representation of you on the cover anchors you to the act of

autobiographical testimony and the authorial signature in a way that is quite conventional.

S : There's another photograph on the back cover as well.

J : The one on the back announces even more explicitly, 'Here I am'.

S : The one on the back is the breezy, genial guy in his workplace, which is right in this room, right at that desk.

J : How long did it take you to write *Accident of Birth*?

S : It's all gone into a kind of merciful fog of forgetting. The action actually is dated because in the framing or the hold-up narrative I give the date of the invasion of my house as in October 1990, and it ends with the trial following that New Year, which coincides with the first sensational Winnie Mandela trial. And it's more or less so that I first drafted it between the hold-up and the trial. But that's cheating a bit, as anybody in book-making knows you don't get a big work done in 3 or 4 months. In fact, another 3 years of drafts passed before it was actually finalised.

J : Did you learn anything about yourself and/or your life as you were writing it?

S : Hugely, all the things I had been avoiding facing. Autobiographies are very demanding because you have to get the most personal layers and use them which one does when one's doing other things like poetry or novels but not in the way that's so awkwardly revealing and potentially embarrassing.

J : On page 10 you say, 'This round I will attempt to tell the truth'. Do you want this to be read as an unproblematic record of your life or do you want the reader to engage with the fictiveness which necessarily results from the narrativisation process and from endeavours to tell about events which are blurred due to the vagaries of memory?

S : The answer must be the latter because there isn't ever a direct record which accurately records something that is or is not the truth and delivers it unproblematically over to a reader who says that is true and that is false, finish and *klaar* (Afrikaans for over, finished.) That is why I decided to make the last scene the trial, because in a trial that is what is being judged—whether you are lying or telling the truth, whether you are moral or immoral. What the magistrate does is sit there

deciding. But I am perforce an ironist, a humorist, and I think the truth is very difficult to touch directly at all.

J : How do you see this text intersecting with other genres?

S : You mean of my own?

J : Of your own.

S : Well, when I write poetry, I think in a certain way. When I write fiction, I think in another way. If it's theatre or criticism, different ways, because that old thing about the medium is the message is half-way true. Certain genres are designed to deliver certain goods. For me it was altogether fresh, stepping into autobiography as a genre.

J : Do you see this as perhaps one volume of a multi-volume autobiography, the other volumes of which are your poetry, your critical work, your novels?

S : Emphatically no. This is, I'm pretty sure, the only labelled autobiography I will do. I'm not going to produce further volumes—I mean who is interested, and who the hell am I to think that people would be? Many South Africans just can't stop at one, but I believe in doing extremely economical work; I try to make my texts diamond hard and as complete as possible. I've done that one now; I won't do it again. I'm not really writing from an inner need, I'm trying to make good books.

J : What my question was pointing to was how autobiographical is your other work?

S : Unavoidably there are traces of autobiography there, because no writer—I keep referring to this generalised writer, but it's common sense—no writer would do something that doesn't fascinate them at the moment. So there is a kind of deep desire in everything that a writer writes, stretching from a book review through to the most elaborate poem. But to say that it's all autobiographical is a very big supposition.

J : Do you see *Accident of Birth* primarily as testimony, confession or self-portraiture?

S : Elements of all three. While I was within the text working it out, bit by bit, I did read quite a lot of theory about autobiography and noticed those three categories. I started to read other autobiographies; inevitably one has to. I mean, I went back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*. I came to realise that there is a link between autobiography and the Western concept of the highly developed individual ego. That's one of ten points I began to pick up, but I was burrowing ahead like that mole not quite knowing where I was going—a mighty lot of digging with no real direction, and thinking I can use that, or I can't use that. I thought, okay, it's a bit of a Rousseau-like confession, but I'm not confessing for the same reasons, if you like. That's one little example.

It all really started by chance when I got pushed into a corner by the History Workshop here at Wits University a few years before, for whom I did a paper on Peter Abrahams. I came across various autobiographical texts of Peter Abrahams about his life in Vrededorp and Mayfair, my area of Jo'burg, and I found that, because they were written at different times, if you put them together you got three different people. That stuck in my memory, and I learnt that autobiographies are predicated on lies, not on truths, which was interesting.

J : How much influence did your publisher have on the final version of the text?

S : None, because I did not have a publisher at the time. In fact, I had a few problems getting this book published at all, I must tell you, as my regular publishers turned it down—for various perfectly good reasons of their own.

J : Did you have any readers read over it in draft stages?

S : Yes, many. Normally only an in-house editor would work on a book for stylistic corrections; the content is normally held pretty well sacred, as it's considered the writer's right to write what he or she wants. But in this case I felt it needed refereeing, because I had decided that I was not going to offend anyone. Although I think it's a hugely offensive book, it's even obscene and rawly aggressive and confrontational, that was not going to happen in the area of personalities. So I mailed sections to everybody who gets some attention in the book, asking them to confirm that they would not be miffed by anything. For example, Athol Fugard, Cecil and Thelma Skotnes, Phil du Plessis and others who play roles in the text. They all came back with, 'Oh for God's sake, you are free to say what you like!'

J : So, there were no revisions as a result of that sort of refereeing?

- S : There were. Even then, if I sensed a bit of fussiness I took it out.
- J : Whom did you think of as your potential audience? It seems to me that the absence of explanations of certain South African terms indicates an implied audience of local readers.
- S : Yes, it's for my generation here, and I hope the future generation—a community of South African English-speakers who would not have trouble understanding it. Not for export overseas, like much South African literature which is so generalised that people in London, New York can read it without a problem. This is business conducted between me and my extended family, and you know that the readership for a thing like this is actually quite small.
- J : What are your thoughts on the political implications of who reads and who writes in contemporary South Africa?
- S : I do think that reading and writing is still a scandalously elitist activity, and of course I support educationists like yourself who are encouraging wider literacy. However, as one rises in the hierarchy of letters, I know one loses the community of oral culture. But then, beyond all that, I can only agree with Doris Lessing who says in the end the book is the greatest liberator man's ever thought of.
- J : Looking at the kind of output that is coming out of this country now, one sees that the autobiographers who are producing in numbers are black South Africans.
- S : That's an utterly appropriate phenomenon of the moment, presumably the biggest selling autobiography of all time produced by a South African being Mandela's. But Doris Lessing's last one is doing well in the bookshops at the same time.
- J : Names in autobiography serve to secure the text's referential status; I wondered, though, whether at any time you might have felt the need or desire to fictionalise names, as Breytenbach did in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*?
- S : There are just one or two who have false names, simply to avoid libel, but they are not fictionalised as such. But the portrayal of the famous in an autobiography I spotted early on was a fatal trap, ending in a string of gossip cameos. I am afraid I've got people like Nadine Gordimer walking in and out of the book, but

I scrupulously avoided—please let's stress this—portraying a situation where 'Nadine said to me' and 'I said to Nadine'. I could have gone on name-dropping forever otherwise.

J : I just wondered if there might have been times where you felt that it was necessary to talk about somebody without letting a reader know who it was.

S : There were. But I have a friend called Francis King, the British novelist, who has been everywhere, knows everyone. He once said to me, 'I'll never get talked into writing my autobiography because it will just have to be a string of anecdotes about those who have been more successful than me'. That stuck with me.

J : Freud and his followers have placed a premium on the fundamental truth value of disclosures about sexuality. In this respect *Accident of Birth* flies its truth-telling flag quite high. Did you perceive this as a measure of your ability to be honest and truthful?

S : I have to reply Yes and No. The No in a nutshell is that I think sexuality is not the final measuring stick of truth about a psyche. There is not necessarily an organic relationship within the person between sexuality and performance out there, or the intellect, or the creative potential. I think all sexualities can have all of those results in different combinations.

The Yes side is that when you are doing an autobiography, you know that readers are very turned on by revelations of sexuality, and that the bland, evasive South African habit of not talking about it is part of the general cover-up. In doing that stocktaking I've mentioned, I could not leave out my different stages of sexuality—I've talked a lot there about my sexual experiences, particularly bisexual problems. But not a wham, in-your-face thing. It is a big theme generally in my work, though.

J : But was there also a sense that to reveal those private aspects of your life was for you a way of confronting publicly who you are?

S : That's the way you see it. The way I saw it was that I could not evade the sexuality issue, just as I could not evade all the other ones—the educational issue, the political issue.

J : So you will not compartmentalise yourself and say, well, only this is okay?

S : Quite. But I had a very good analyst, and it was a real course that I was going through. That person Ruth, whom I didn't say very much about, is actually a real analyst called Ruth who has a very holistic view, to use a post-Freudian, wishy-washy term. But yes, I am looking for a more holistic understanding of identity.

J : I looked forward to interviewing you enormously because I liked the autobiographical narrator. Did you find that naïve conflation of yourself with the narrator in other critical responses to the text?

S : When people have responded, I've automatically gone deaf; I just watch their lips, pretending I'm interested, but I don't actually listen....

J : But what about reviews?

S : There have been precious few, and reading reviews is a habit one gets out of early on in a writing career ... otherwise you'd slash your wrists every second week, and I've only got two wrists. The work is in the public world and must lead its own life.

J : Nadine Gordimer said in an interview in 1995 that she would never write an autobiography because 'she is much too secretive'.

S : Well, Gordimer has the perfect right to do anything she likes which many people won't let her have, or won't let me have, for that matter. There are a lot of pressures on the writer in South Africa to perform certain things which are expected of them, and not to do others because they are considered in poor taste or inappropriate, or whatever. And so I'm very interested in how another writer is situated.

But having said that, one has to rely on one's ability to do whatever comes up, to challenge oneself—and the contingent is always a factor. I didn't know that those three invaders would force me to take a new direction. I realise now that for quite a long time I'd been taking the preliminary steps. For example, open a letter, something completely unexpected—University of Iowa Writers' Workshop—they want a memoir of my days there. And I produced it with great pleasure and ease over a weekend, sent it off; three years later it comes back in an anthology, and I took strength from that. Then there was a message from my agent to do a 'growing up under apartheid' piece for this magazine, quick, quick, for bucks (which, in the end, I didn't get). But subsequently it was reproduced in France, which I had never dreamed of, and reprinted in my *Human Interest* collection. I really cracked the lockjaw that I was suffering when I wrote a number of journalistic reports in which I included

myself as a character—well, as the uncharacterised narrator who characterises everything around him. Remember, I used to be a weekend writer when I was a professional academic, so I did 'diary pieces' to fill the jigsaw in a bit more. I found that I'd built up the courage to do the big one without even realising it.

J : Were you conscious of a need to withhold details as the composition process went on, or did you feel that the abandonment of the therapy structure in Chapter 10 allowed you to be less detailed?

S : Yes, but there are 18 all in all. So, chapter 10 is the transition. And the first 9, apart from the frame, use a more or less linear chronology, looking at the character in development. But once I got to 1969—and this is true of my real experience—and settled in Johannesburg, my life became very static. So I took the second life as a whole and looked at sections of it and the chapters become more essayistic, much more theoretical.

But do you mean you want to know whether I am being forthright about coming out or not?

J : No, I just wondered whether the therapy structure had in any way made you more forthcoming ...

S : Yes.

J : ... and whether the abandonment of that had freed you? You know, because the whole question of sexuality is fundamental in analysis whereas it doesn't have to be fundamental in other kinds of self-exploration.

S : Agreed, but firstly there was a narrative situation. If I'd kept up with those sessions of psychoanalysis it would have become so tedious and so self-indulgent that the reader would have stopped reading. I had to vary that. But there is a bigger answer and that is I wanted to portray the process of healing and healing involves using something, grabbing it while you need it and rejecting it when it has served its purpose. So there is a larger story, which is of a mental development as I get my life in order. I wanted to dramatise a crisis and look deeply into the healing process. In the second half, bits are coming together, things are getting organised.

J : One reader remarked that he thought you'd cheated by being quite forthcoming about your sexual exploits in the '60s, and then becoming much more reserved later. He said it was almost clichéd for people to be honest about what they did in the '60s.

S : Quite true, it's a fair point. But there are other things I left out, for obvious reasons. As things became closer to me, inevitably I became more discreet. There are people around who don't want to be told that they were slept with. I left out almost all my professional life, too; I think I mentioned the place where I worked for all of 23 years only once, and 23 years at that time was half my life.

J : I wanted to ask you about that. When did you retire from the English Department at the Rand Afrikaans University?

S : During the process of writing the first draft of the book.

J : Is there any connection between the book and leaving your job as Professor?

S : Yes, but I omitted all that as I hadn't taken stock of it. I just thought I would open my private study door, but not my office door. The last thing I wanted to do was an English department exposé.

J : Foucault argues in his *History of Sexuality* that a confessional relationship is a power relationship: while the confessor might feel he's unburdening himself to heal himself, the power actually resides with the one to whom the confession is being given.

S : Maybe, but I see myself as containing many people and I know that I have a certain kind of power in choosing, on my terms, to manipulate other people's attitudes to sexuality. I could see that it's a power game to play, that hurts people, and moves people. And I know that using the sexual element can be devastating. I have huge respect for my friend, Pieter-Dirk Uys, because I think he can catch South Africans on such an awkward nerve that, while trying to evade it by laughing it off, they actually can break through to new ways of seeing. I have a lot of time for gay theory, and I have a lot of time for theatrically subversive strategies. And heavens, when you are in this business you have got to use them all. I can't accept that the reader terrorises me; I have to try and out-manoeuvre the reader.

J : What is your life like after autobiography?

S : It's more different than I could ever have imagined. Because I feel freer and easier. That stocktaking was very important for me in order for the healing to occur at all. In fact, I just wanted to tell people, look, if you're in a mess you've

got to go through it, and you've got to come out changed. And I meant that as a model for everybody's behaviour.

We are talking about life experiences, and I thought what I could do for my readers was show them that, kicking and screaming, against all the odds, I went through it all and could come out and change. You are free if you make freedom for yourself. It's more an existential view, if you like.

J : You said that your life post-autobiography had changed...?

S : Firstly, the whole thing had been shucked off. It's gone. It's now between the covers of this COSAW book. That's it. Then I look at the photos, because there is a great interplay between photo and text in the book, and it really does seem like a family album of the past for me.

J : Coming back to the question of gender and genre now. At times your frank discussion of sexuality raises the issue of gender politics in that the bisexuality transgresses the sex - gender equation. Do you see any connection, formal or otherwise, between fluid gender roles and fluid generic practices?

S : Well, I always have kept myself pretty well informed about the feminist debate, and then more recently about gay studies. I've always tried to break the old rigid, hierarchical, heterosexual, racially-exclusive casts in which ideology and its literary product has been moulded. So in the second half of *Accident* all sorts of new forms are being invented, which are expressive of the impact of these alternative ways of formulating life.

J : If we agree that gender is produced through the discourses of self-representation, then how is this particular attempt at variance with other more conventional autobiographies?

S : Let me refer to the ur-text for me, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which for each rebellion in the different chapters there is a kind of compensatory gain in artistry. I'm not sure others end up presenting themselves as rebel artists.

J : Feminists like Leigh Gilmore have argued that the political ideology of individualism which defines our understanding of autobiography has been complicit with the oppression of women.

S : Yes, I agree.

- J : Would you agree that this applies also to gays and bisexuals?
- S : Absolutely.
- J : Then would you describe the textual strategies that you had to adopt?
- S : Well, anything but the linear realist, macho story-telling model, and conducting an experiment with the traps and loop-holes of English expression that must be filled in to express something that's always been left missing. It's about stylistics as well as politics.
- J : And to that extent, writing an autobiography as honestly as you could was itself a political act of saying, 'I am the subject of my sentence, I am the subject of my utterance and I am the subject of my actions'.
- S : Quite.
- J : And that in itself had political resonance. To narrate is to select; did you feel that the necessary selections were reductive?
- S : They were, but I tried to fight against that. While being apparently self-effacing, some autobiographies are actually quite self-aggrandising; I found that a bit phoney and silly.
- J : You remark on page 49 that memories of journeys you had undertaken have now been obscured by your fictional descriptions of them. Is it not equally likely that the self of those times is obscured by the fictions?
- S : It is equally likely, yes. The end result is when you come back to survey what you've done you can't remember what was the work and what was the reality because for you it has become the words of a text.
- J : Ja, just as a photograph that you talk about also in your text replaces a visual memory and becomes the memory.
- S : It's pure Roland Barthes.
- J : If an autobiographical narrative can be described as mapping a terrain, what areas are left unnamed, unmapped?

S : I tried not to leave anything unmapped within the part of the field that is included. But then I suppose one must look for the erasures and absences in the area that is under scrutiny which perhaps should have been presented.

But at various ages one feels differently about things, that's all I can say. One's perspective is always changing; it's a biological thing, rather than an intellectual thing. For example, I'm not nearly as self-absorbed as I used to be. It's a change in me and that has to be reflected in the portrayal in the book.

J : How simple is the inhabiting of the 'I' in daily life? Is it easier or more difficult in autobiography?

S : Autobiography is easier, an easier way to get back into a difficult life. But when you're suffering from post-traumatic stress and trying to cure yourself, remembering is terribly difficult because every time you go back in memory, you remember the knife at your throat. But you have to unblock, and in order to unblock you have to come to terms with the trauma. Then you can begin to remember in a more orderly fashion.

J : *Accident of Birth* explores the two facets of confession/testimony: in the first few chapters there is the therapy structure; later, there is the legalistic aspect. Here, the narrator is a witness testifying both to the crime which was perpetrated against him as well as to the truthfulness of his life story. But these two features can be said to be operating at cross purposes to one another because in the therapy scenario, the narrator offers up guilty secrets—both sexual and political—and is on trial, so to speak, while in the testimony given as legally binding he's an innocent victim. How do these two tendencies seem to you to inform the narrative and is there a tension, productive or otherwise, between them?

S : Yes, there is a productive tension between them. I agree those are the two dramatisations of confession: section A—therapy, B—on trial. But there is a third factor, the writing of the book as therapy. At one point the writing of the book overtook the therapy. The book was doing the job better and quicker. It was just my way of fixing things.

J : Can the autobiography be read in part as an attempt to refuse the status of victim?

S : Oh, absolutely. Here I am and this is me. That's not a victim.

J : Okay, and the very last question. I referred earlier to the cover design: what does the Stephen figured there look towards? Which is just another way of asking, what next?

S : If you open the book out, you've got three Stephens there. One sucking his thumb in a bath of blood—prenatal; the other before he had his teeth done—relaxing in his study; and the third one ... well, Nostradamus looking off the page. And I hope you enjoy all three!

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