for

NANNA

because you are there

Now I know what he's done and I smile and say — Not bad Andre Brink. Very clever Andre Brink, you've used an interesting twist of the narrative there. Good Heavens but we're getting clever these days, the things people think of doing with illusion and reality . . . But I'm furious and I go cold all over because as an African I know that this is no novel, it's a true story, there was an Andrea Malgas and a Paul and everything and she IS THERE. That is the second terrible thing about this book and the second reason why I wish I'd never read it.

The woman next to me has just waved her fat little fingers in front of my face, pointing out the window of the aeroplane, there it is — a glimpse as Andrea saw it on the drive, Capetown to Johannesburg, that took her away the first time, "at last the yellow and white of the mine-dumps, a city drifting weightless in the smog . . . " I feel ill.

Well Mister Brink? Where are you Mr Brink? You were here too, where are you now, Eygalieres?

STEPHEN J. WILLIAMS

INTERVIEW

EP: First, the obvious question: When did you begin to write poetry?

SJW: In 1979. And it was all awful. I did a Kafka on it, burned it, and started again.

EP: You apparently thought it was rather different from the work in *A Crowd of Voices*. But how was it different?

SJW: When I started writing poetry I was, like most people, locked into an idea of what I thought poetry *should* be like. So, I had to shake that off first. Poetry can do anything it wants. It's like speaking in tongues. If there's anything to be said about style in *A Crowd of Voices*, it's just that it's a crowd of voices, not a single voice. There seems to me something suspect about the notion of a stable voice speaking behind different poems: is it a fiction that makes criticism of poetry easier?

EP: Influence is a misleading word, but were you interested in the work of writers like John Tranter, for example, or Michael Dransfield, when you began to write?

SJW: I learned by reading, but I can't point to particular things I learned by reading. The people who were writing around me were more important, I think, because I could *listen* to their poetry coming out of their own mouths. Lyndon Walker, Barbara Giles, Joyce Lee, Eric Beach, were the first poets I *heard* and they opened my ears.

Of the writers you mentioned, I admire John Tranter very much, but he's been no influence on me at all. The same is true of Rae Desmond Jones. I especially like Jones' work for its magic.

EP: Magic is important to you?

SJW: Yes — being able to do things with words that you can't usually do, and working very hard to make the magic of this appear on the surface of the poem.

EP: Perhaps that's what gives your own work some of its surreal quality? Yet you couldn't say that anything in *A Crowd of Voices* is on the surface only. It has brilliancy, but it stands up to a probing, which is not always so with some brilliant poetry.

SJW: I'm very conscious of making different kinds of surfaces. "The Poetry of Wallace Stevens" is a poem which I believe has a very highly polished surface. "Burning Poem" on the other hand is rough and dramatic, and can shock people because it starts lightly and ends up being a nightmare.

EP: I find rhythm very important when I'm reading your poetry. Is it consciously of importance to you?

SJW: For me, rhythm is related mainly to the problems of reading poetry aloud. I'm not interested in formalisms, in having a pattern just for the sake of having a pattern.

EP: Most people agree that poetry is sensuous, and I feel also that it's physical, which is why rhythm is so important. Occasionally a poem has something that compensates for lack of any kind of rhythm, but when you have thought intimately attached to rhythm, a poem really becomes exciting.

SJW: Yes, I think I'd agree with that. I hope we can include less regular, more natural rhythms, the rhythmic twists and turns of the way people normally speak. Many poetry readers and listeners, and many of the people you "catch" at readings and by publishing in newspapers, find extremely regular rhythms so psychologically alienating you can *see* the pain of listening to it creep across their faces. Which is only to say that writers need to work at concealing artifice; except when the artifice of the poem is the point of the poem. It's a high-wire act.

EP: Could I ask you a question that greatly interests me at present: what is the identity or identities of the "I" in your poetry?

SJW: It varies a lot. One of the short stories, "X equals X", deals in part with that problem. The "I" of this story takes a place in the first page or so which appears to be stable, and then, as the story continues, the "I" disappears. I want to imply that I've murdered the "I" of my story and disposed of the body somewhere in the garden of the story — in the pool, actually!

In the poem you're looking at now — "Love" — the "I" makes reference to me indirectly. That poem is really a series of outbursts or states of feeling which become increasingly ridiculous and melodramatic and pathetic. These outbursts represent feelings which most people can identify with. I want to avoid a situation in which I'm forced to claim ownership of these feelings, to the exclusion of everyone else.

The short story "The Living Room" shows another aspect of the problem you raise. This was originally a dream, and the versions of it in my notebooks have me wandering around a hospital. In order to make it work as a story I had to cut myself out of it and replace "me" with "you". It simply works better for the reader that way. The choice between "I" and "you" can be merely technical.

In other pieces still, the "I" cannot be said to be anything like me at all. There are several poems between quotation marks in which I make another "I" or reproduce the poetry which I have heard people speak.

You're right to leave open the possibility that the "I" can be plural, can shift and change. I've found that many of my sarcastic poems, for example "Ode to John Tranter", were written during periods of unemployment. I'm sure no-one could pick that poem as being written by the same "I" which wrote the "Poems from Psychoanalysis".

EP: What is the history of the poem dedicated to Frank Kavanagh — "Days Dressed in Dream and Black Wire"?

SJW: This poem has two histories, I suppose. There's the history of writing it and the history of its content. It was originally intended to be a poem with short lines and a structure like William Carlos Williams' *Pictures from Brueghel*, though on a smaller scale. I kept it for about four years trying to find a form that would work. Only in desperation at the end, I changed the length of the lines, cut the poem severely, and made it visually very ordered and neat. The history of the content is that I started writing it at a time when both my grandparents were

very ill. My grandfather appeared to be dying. His wife was responding emotionally and physically to the prospect of losing him. So, the poem was an emotional rehearsal for that loss. What happened fortunately was that they both got well. I continued working on it because it seemed to contain something worthwhile. It is probably a poem about differences in ways of living. My grandparents never owned a farm, but they lived for a time in Castlemaine. The imagery of the poem is a collection of experiences, travelling into the country to visit them in Castlemaine, recollections of parties and funerals and the first time I saw an animal gutted. The week after I finished the poem, Frank Kavanagh, the father of a very good friend, died of cancer. The funeral, the wake, the day I spent with my friend, reminded me of the things for which the poem was rehearsing, so I dedicated the poem to his father as a gift.

EP: How would you go about selecting work from Australian poets at the moment if you were editing a book of Australian poetry — by poets under thirty-five, perhaps?

SJW: I think I don't want to answer this question. I could say that I'd try to avoid using any politics of style in making the selection, to try to be aware of my prejudices. But that's easy to say, and impossible to do. You'd think that it would be easy to represent a great variety of ways of writing by including a variety of writers, but, strangely enough, it doesn't work that way. You can see evidence of this by picking up almost any literary magazine. Each magazine tends to publish the same sort of writing issue after issue, even though different people are writing it. It's uncanny. Barrett Reid, at *Overland*, appears to be one editor who's capable of getting off that treadmill. It may be because he's less interested in "poetry" than in the urgency and passion with which the writer writes.

EP: I've heard others say that about Barrett Reid, and agree. You worked at *Meanjin* for a time, didn't you?

SJW: As a kind of office boy! Even at *Meanjin* the tea doesn't make itself. Talking with A.A. Phillips and typing the rejection slips he wrote are among the few pleasant memories I have of the place.

EP: A collection of his criticism would be valuable: his pieces on drama in the sixties and seventies were very valuable and perceptive for their time.

SJW: I'm sure that's so, but frankly I'd rather read the rejection slips! Many of them are like maxims for story-writers, and very funny.

EP: Could I ask about your present ambitions for your own work?

SJW: I have two projects in mind at the moment, and I've done a bit of writing on both of them. I don't know yet how much they'll require — it may be only a couple of pieces, perhaps more. One concerns psychoanalysis and the other concerns — what do we call it? — the "nuclear age". The two may be related.

EP: The nuclear age often seems to be more insistently reflected in the graphic arts than in poetry. Now and then we get poetry about the holocaust or about the barbarism of nuclear thinking, but it does not seem yet to have conditioned the writing, to have manifested itself as an attitude or spirit or movement — a movement in the way Romanticism was a movement, for example.

SJW: I suppose the first thing you'd say is that nuclear awareness is apocalyptic. The work which comes instantly to mind is Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *The Sinking of the Titanic*. It's almost impossible to contemplate our situation without bringing up apocalyptic metaphors, without imagining what our last actions will be. The fear of such things is tremendous, and it naturally dominates the way we speak about nuclear issues. But there is also a sense in which that apocalyptic thinking — despite probably being a realistic assessment of the danger — is psychologically, politically and artistically disabling. There's only so many times I can read or listen to another version of Byron's "Darkness", poems which say "Bang, everyone does naughty things to each other, then we die." It's boring, and artistically deadening. Politically dangerous, too, because that sort of writing and thinking, when it is all we can do, lets us forget the detail of what's happening *now*. Peter Booth's *Painting* is a painting about now.

EP: That is the *Painting 1981*. It's also rather Freudian.

SJW: Yes, the one on the cover of *A Crowd of Voices*. There's a crowd of very strange — or very normal! — faces all looking towards this Freudian figure. Waiting for what to happen?

EP: So already your interest in psychoanalysis merges with the nuclear concern?

SJW: Yes, but we have to be careful, because there are still a lot of people who understand psychoanalysis as having something to do with mental illness! I prefer to think of it as a highly developed process of reading the world; so I don't have any difficulty rejecting those aspects of it which are sexist or which result from a blindness in regard to sexual violence and power.

The value of psychoanalysis, artistically, and in relation to nuclear awareness, is that it contains many useful insights and metaphors which can help us unravel our situation. For example, Freud writes in "A Note on the Mystic Writing-Pad" about the system of perception and consciousness being like that children's toy — sheets of celluloid on a wax slab — used for writing with a stylus. The writing disappears when you lift the sheets off the wax, but a permanent trace of the writing remains on the slab. The wax slab, says Freud, is like the unconscious. Now, thinking about this metaphor in relation to nuclear awareness, I think it emphasises the need to write a poetry which deals with the permanent traces of our experience, rather than a poetry which simply wields the big stick of fear. What is needed is a creative writing which deals with the signatures on the cheques which pay S.D.I. scientists, the clerical inertia and slowness of government in dealing with people's fears and demands, the traces left on the landscape in which we live, radomes, silos, craters, tremors, and which deals with the contradictions and complexity of the actual speech which comes out of the mouths of people who have the power to make decisions on practical matters.

Creative writing of this sort is rare, at the moment. Wendy Poussard's *Outbreak of Peace* is the best recent example I can think of. It may only be a coincidence, but she uses psychoanalytic ideas, in a subtle way, to describe the women's action at Pine Gap in 1983.

EP: You're more interested in Freud than in Jung?

SJW: Yes. I don't know much about Jung.

EP: Jung seems to throw up a different kind of poetry and fiction when a writer is influenced by him.

SJW: If you were trying to find someone to compare my poetry with, as far as the difference between Freud and Jung is concerned, you could try Joyce Lee's work. She is, if anyone, a Jungian poet. "Miriol" is clearly the most important of her poems in this respect. It's an interior journey through a symbolic landscape. Very good!

EP: I enjoyed Joyce Lee's *Abruptly from the Flatlands* very much. It was published by Pariah Press, who published your *A Crowd of Voices*, wasn't it? I agree that "Miriol" is one of the most interesting poems published here in the last five years or so. Many of her shorter poems, like "Mad Dream in Melbourne's Lunch Hour" and "It is Nearly Dark When I Come to the Indian

Ocean", also blend realism with Jungian dream patterns — they don't disappear easily from one's mind.

SJW: Apart from the matters I've already mentioned, there are questions about the form of the struggle that goes on in the mind. "The Breach" and "The King of Hate", which are based on a short passage in Freud's 1895 papers on hysteria, deal at one level with the fragmentariness of memory and the structure of the self. I expect my interest in that sort of thing will continue.

EP: In *A Crowd of Voices* you have prose pieces which have qualities that distinguish them from prose, or even from "poetic prose". What do you see as the difference between the prose and the poetry in the collection?

SJW: Well, I think that distinguishing between poetry and prose is not very productive. Some of the prose in the book does read like poetry — it has that intensity. Some of it attempts to avoid the poetry/prose classification by taking the form of dream-work or joke-work or puzzle. So, thinking that the separation of poetry and prose is not productive, I'd like to show how productive it is to force a slippage between forms.

EP: Are the elements of surprise or shock important for themselves in this collection?

SJW: I wasn't trying to shock the reader, but one reviewer described the book as a roller-coaster ride. I liked the idea, though the effect wasn't intentional. The only structure written into the book is the arrangement of poems — to assist assimilation, because the variety of styles of writing could be confusing.

EP: But your poetry does have a strong sense of centre and concentration.

SJW: Well, yes — in each individual poem.

EP: Perhaps because your attention to poetry is serious — there is a sense of gravitas about the poems.

SJW: The humorous poems do have a serious intent. I like jokes that echo!

EP: I feel that the collection does suggest that the poet respects poetry and the reader of poetry. Is that idea important to you?

SJW: I think I can respond to this question by referring to something which Joyce Lee said to me years ago, which may have affected the way I write. She said that a poem is an individual, has its own individual moment of finishing, and a life of its own. She may have meant to say something quite different from what I understood her to mean; but to me it implies that my control

over my own writing is not complete — or, at least, not completely *conscious*. So, in order to get a piece of writing to work, I need to allow it to do whatever it wants. Many of the beautiful and powerful effects of writing are already embedded in language and culture, and writing is in part the process of making those effects visible, audible. The poem "Epic Red" may be a good example of this. I didn't have a clear picture of what this poem was going to be like, or what it was going to say, until it was finished. It was written in a kind of semantic frenzy — word associations which lead from a series of images into what is essentially a joke. A joke on ideology.

EP: Your comments on the genesis of "Epic Red" are interesting because the poem does reflect — or enact? — the random stupidity of ideologies, which may be tightly organised, but organised around some quite ridiculous or bizarre or disparate ideas. The logic is forced on to an ideology afterwards — by its users. "Epic Red" captures the essence of that.

SJW: "Enact", the word you used, is the right one I think. The poem doesn't reflect my views. I hope my position is not discernible at all, even though the effects of language and culture to which the poem refers are enacted in my writing. I didn't "write" this poem.

Thinking again of your question about whether or not I respect the reader of poetry — which I don't think I answered —I would say that I try to provide large spaces — areas of uncertainty, which are also areas of freedom — for the reader to move around in, so that the process of reading becomes indistinguishable from the process of writing. All reading is like this anyway, so, instead of resisting it, I give in to it and work with it.

A Crowd of Voices by Stephen J. Williams received the Mary Gilmore Award in 1985/86, offered by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature for the best first book of poetry published by an Australian poet. This interview was recorded at the 1986 annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Townsville, 10 July 1986.