

Little Questions

Roach, Rebecca

DOI:

[10.1515/9783111086484-003](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111086484-003)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Roach, R 2024, Little Questions: the Interview and Literary Studies. in C Junker (ed.), *Inspecting the Interview: A Companion*. Diskursmuster / Discourse Patterns, vol. 35, De Gruyter, pp. 23-38.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111086484-003>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Rebecca Roach

Little Questions: The Interview and Literary Studies

Abstract: This article discusses the interview's status and use in literary studies and literary culture more broadly. It outlines a typology of the interview as conceived in literary studies, arguing that the diversity of conceptions and uses of the form and practice is illuminating for our understandings of why interviews have flourished within the field while being simultaneously belittled by literary scholars. Moreover, in tracing the rise of Interview Studies in the last decade, the article claims that this diversity within literary studies is suggestive for scholars working in other disciplines.

Keywords: literary interview, *The Paris Review*, contemporary anglophone literature; author interview, literary studies, literary field, life writing, chatter, book talk, mediation, paratexts, subjectivity, inscription technologies

What defines a literary interview? This little question has a surprisingly broad range of possible responses. Is it the subject: interview Seamus Heaney, Nadine Gordimer, Margaret Atwood, or any number of authors or editors, and voila the interview is considered “literary”? Or is it the topics discussed: where conversations around form, creative practice, and literary influences abound a literary interview is born? Or perhaps it is the way in which the interview transcript is treated: edited and shaped into a piece of aesthetic writing with qualities of “literariness”? Maybe we could even define an interview as literary by the way in which it is received: deemed literary if it is utilised by literary scholars or framed as such by publishers?

I am not highlighting these distinctions in order to be pedantic. Granted, there is often a degree of overlap in the possible approaches I outlined above, with such factors co-existing in the same interview scenario. My point is rather that, in the realm of literary studies, publishing, and culture more broadly, there is little consensus around the question of what defines a literary interview.

Perhaps this seems like a rather little question, one that needn't occupy scholars outside of those relatively few who write on interviews in literature,¹ and of little interest to those working in other fields—to a researcher deploying interviewing as a method within the social sciences, for example. Why should they care

¹ My monograph *Literature and the Rise of the Interview* was the first to treat the topic in the Anglophone sphere.

about what seem to be questions of aesthetic value?² Actually, I want to argue that this little question has a significance far greater than its apparent reference and with far greater reach. Looking to the interview's utilisation and status within literary studies has much to teach scholars working across a whole range of disciplines. Moreover, it sheds light not only on the fruits and challenges of interdisciplinary work itself, but on such fundamental topics as twentieth-century conceptions of identity, the nature of public spheres, or even the relationship between humans and technology.

A Typology of Interviews in the Literary Field

Let us start small. We will circle back to the question of the literary interview, and its potentially tricky associations with literariness. Instead, let's replace it with a focus on the interview in literary studies. Even here, however, my little question would seem to have left literary scholars with something of a foundational problem. What do you do when there isn't even agreement about what the object of study is exactly? By way of approaching that question, I will outline a typology of interviews as they are deployed and thought about within the literary field writ large (encompassing the literary market and criticism). This move is perhaps suggestive. That such a descriptive exercise is warranted indicates the limited nature of scholarship on interviews in the field today. It is indeed something of a paradox that interviews are avidly read within the literary field and yet rarely discussed by scholars. It is a point to which I will also return. But first, let me put forward my categorisation, born of my own research, of interviews as they are deployed in the field.

Interviews as Data

Interviews have been utilised as a means to collect, from subjects, information that has relevance to the literary field. I start with this classification not because it is necessarily the most prevalent understanding of what an interview in the field might constitute but because it is likely the most familiar deployment of interviews to scholars from other disciplines. Interviewing is deployed as a means

² Laurel Richardson has written engagingly on this question. Although I do not think that interviews should be considered synonymous with poems, her attention to the poetics of the interview is refreshing.

of data collection within literary studies despite it not being as common a methodology as in other disciplines—as textual scholar Jerome McGann notes, the objects studied in the humanities are “not primarily informational materials. They are made for reflective and imaginative purposes” (16). Where interviewing is deployed, it is often in the arena of literary sociology and those areas wherein information about subjects of interest to literary scholars—readers, writers, editors, etc.—is currently lacking: where the archive, beloved by many a literary scholar, is yet to exist.

This research is often oriented towards literary culture itself and often, for obvious reasons, focused around contemporary trends. Scholars and publishers working in contemporary literary culture, or book history, for example, might be keen to use qualitative interviewing methods to develop an understanding of how readers utilise digital reading devices, for example, or how their reading habits have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, or why they might choose to visit a literary festival. Similarly, scholars interested in relations between the publishing industry and the literary field turn to interviewing as a means of collecting information from subjects working in the industry. John B. Thompson, a sociologist by training, has produced a number of works on the contemporary publishing industry that are the product of extensive interviews with key players. In other instances, literary scholars have themselves emulated similar approaches. When writing *Making Literature Now* literature professor Amy Hungerford interviewed several editors and authors as part of her research; I have done the same when trying to catalogue contemporary author interview usage in the publishing field (Roach, “The Role and Function of Author Interviews”).

In other cases, interviewing becomes a means by which to open up or advocate for an area of study, population of readers, or local culture that has hitherto been neglected. When, in their pathbreaking work, Janice Radway argued that scholars should attend to the ways in which readers engaged with the romance novel, or Elizabeth Long made the case for the cultural significance of book clubs in readers’ lives, they both went out and interviewed women readers to collect information on areas that had been ignored by scholarship to date. Usually, the result of such interviewing is oriented towards a scholar’s specific research project, more unusually is it conceived as contributing a dataset that will be made available to other scholars as a kind of archive of the present. In all cases these interviews are perceived as informational materials, with attendant assumptions about how they should be treated.³

³ For a discussion of the import of the changing status of the interview in the social sciences in an era of social media data, see Masschelein and Roach.

Interviews as Life Writing

Perhaps the dominant understanding of interviews within literary studies, and certainly within our broader reading culture, is that they provide a portrait of the individual. As scholar and interviewer Ronald Christ had it, the purpose of the (literally) “inter-view” is to “allude to data while being about the real business of creating character” (114). Certainly, the interview is perceived to be a culturally privileged site of authentic and spontaneous expression, even by social scientists as Paul Atkinson and David Silverman noted back in 1997. Its ties to longer Western traditions of both confessional narrative—in the vein of Rousseau or Saint Augustine—and Socratic dialogue—which seeks to obtain a truth through rigorous examination of the speaking subject—underlines the perception (which we might want to contest) that the interview offers a revelatory form of writing about the self. Distinct from the research interview, in which confidentiality and anonymity are key, the interview aimed at a reading public promises a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a public figure (politician or author), whether in the form of confession or access to the supposedly “truer” private self.

In recognising the interview’s connections to other forms of auto/biographical writing, we can conceive of it as a form of “life writing.” The term designates genres that include autobiography, memoir, biography, diary, letters, oral history: namely forms of writing that narrate personal lived experience.⁴ The term also designates an interdisciplinary field of relatively recent formation that draws heavily on its antecedents in and continued interactions with literary studies. Expansive in its scope, life writing is attuned to the potential of narratives of the self to take multimodal forms, for example engaging with video games and Instagram feeds or technologies of bureaucratic identity such as questionnaires and pre-printed forms. Such recognition opens the potential for critical engagement with hitherto neglected forms such as the interview. Despite representing a natural home for the form within literary studies broadly, to date interviews have received little attention within the field, despite them offering a quintessential example of what eminent life writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call “coaxed narratives” (the encouragement of certain kinds of expression via material, formal and social disciplining) (64–69). The interview’s peculiarity—it differs from autobiographical writings like memoir and diary in containing not one

⁴ Increased attention to multimodality and digital constructions of the self mean that the “writing” in life writing has become a bit of a misnomer, but the term is valuable for its inclusivity in contrast to the more restricted import of terms such as ‘autobiography,’ with its associations with an Enlightenment, white, Western, male subject.

subject but two, it offers a formative rather than a retrospective account, etc.—in fact suggests that it might offer much food for life writing scholars' collective thought. The degree to which we privilege the interviewee's subjecthood and efface the interviewer's is curiously unmatched by our frequent designation of authorship rights to the latter and suggestive as we think about cultural constructions of authorship in our contemporary moment, for example. Interviews have always been imbricated with larger questions around race, gender, and class—who gets interviewed, by whom, is asked which questions, and to what purpose—and attending to interviews *en masse* can provide us with some important insights into how authorship has been constructed historically. As the field matures, it will, hopefully, provide an avenue for literary studies to perceive both the interview's formal singularity and popular cultural role in writing, reflecting and shaping images of authorship.

Conceiving of the interview as life writing has ramifications for the way in which it is understood in both a literary studies and interdisciplinary setting. While sharing with the social sciences an assumption that the interview might provide information on the subject or their views, a life writing perspective shifts emphasis slightly in placing greater emphasis on the text as a shaped narrative portrait. The focus is often on its production of individual expression rather than extractable or reproducible qualitative data—with significant repercussions for the way we understand the (aesthetic) status of the interview manuscript, any revisions or editorial contributions, and any ethical consequences deriving from such.

Interviews as Chatter

Despite interviews being considered as informational materials or portraiture in some quarters, there is a strong perception within literary culture that interviews are documents of dubious standing. Ever since the inauguration of the published interview in nineteenth-century America,⁵ the form has also been associated with gossip, scandal and the improper circulation of private communication in the public sphere. This is part of its appeal: it promises an intimate portrait of the subject—in the case of an author usually in her or (more usually) his private study, hence the common narrative of the interviewer venturing into this sphere

⁵ Debates raged around the 'first' published interview. See for example Nils Gunnar Nilsson, "The Origin of the Interview" and Christopher Silvester "Introduction."

and describing (or photographing) the study, that often sets the scene of an interview. Such a rhetoric emphasises privacy, conversational immediacy, and the possibility of disclosure, despite the interview's heavily mediated status and its explicit aim of conversing precisely for the purposes of publication and an absent reader. As journalism scholar Michael Schudson notes, interviews “promoted a novel form of communication between interviewer and interviewee, in which the most important auditor, the public, was present only in the imagination” (49). The overall result has been that the published interview, particularly when associated with the “prying journalist-interviewer” (satirical sketches of whom abound in nineteenth century periodicals), has retained more than a whiff of illegitimacy.⁶

Today interviews with authors abound within literary culture. They are published in literary magazines, in the book sections of broadsheets, in industry publications or performed as platform interviews at literary festivals and book readings, on television, radio or podcasts. Yet this hegemony has not resulted in any accrual of cultural weight for the form. The interview's long-standing associations with journalism do not help in this. Often considered outside the remit of literature proper, journalism's perceived ephemerality (both in terms of its production and status in the archive) is regularly contrasted with literature's supposed longevity, to the detriment of the former. Both the interview's regular appearance in serial publications such as newspapers and periodicals and its presentation as occurring in a specific time and locale have left it open to accusations that it too is an ephemeral text.

Perhaps the extreme of this association is sociologist Daniel Boorstin's influential conception of the interview as the quintessential “pseudo-event” (11). An event planned for the purposes of its being reported or reproduced, for Boorstin the interview is an exemplar of media- and publicity-oriented culture. In such a conception, the interview is both insubstantial and endlessly reproducible, designed solely for the purposes of news coverage. In such a reading the interview is the form *par excellence* of celebrity culture.

This potential has been enthusiastically embraced by the marketing departments of publishing houses (and by some authors) in the last half century. When an author publishes a new book, the promotional campaign will regularly include a number of interviews—whether print, broadcast or in person—all designed to raise the author's profile and promote the title. The expectation that authors participate in these interviews is strong enough that not only can writers'

⁶ For extensive discussion of this aspect of interviews' reception see my discussion of the Hawthorne-Lowell Scandal (Roach, *Literature and the Rise of the Interview* 33-47).

refusals to give interviews become news, but we also see a trend in anti-interview rhetoric among authors. Toni Morrison resignedly spoke of the repetitiveness of being interviewed, John Updike more stridently of it being a process that “rots a writer’s brain, it cretinises you” (Amis). That both did so in the course of an interview indicates the degree to which such rhetoric does important work in distinguishing between types of interview interactions and between the labour of being interviewed and the labour of writing: responding perhaps to a perceived concern that “authors’ utterances have elbowed aside authors’ texts” (Mobilio).

For many the interview has become synonymous with its worst uses within celebrity culture. The “tell all” interview, the piece of promotional “fluff,” the Q&A of form questions conducted entirely via email, the scandal around a quote attribution, or perhaps the exposé wherein the subject was unaware that they were being interviewed ... all contributed to the interview’s negative reputation.

Despite a myriad of concerns about the status of the interview within literary culture, it is notable that they continue to flourish. In addition to their recognised promotional value, they are popular with editors (perhaps because there is not the suggestion that an author be paid for their contribution when interviewed) and with readers. Even writers recognise their potential as a platform (for advocacy, promotion, or alike). Chatty they may be but they also offer, as interviewer and literary scholar Jeffrey J. Williams has noted, a “toehold” for readers: a potentially democratic and timely introduction to the author and their work (“The Literary Interview as a Genre”). They are often entertaining, accessible and enjoyable to read.

Collectively such interviews also hold out the promise of behind-the-scenes insight into an industry and the writing process. They offer a modern incarnation of that perennial feature of literary culture “book talk.” For this reason, they can, *en masse*, have significant value for scholars interested in the literary field itself, whether those concerned with the development of readerships and publics, constructions of authorship, marketing practices, or conceptions of writing and literary value. As I argue in my book, chatter can be a valuable source of information.

Interviews as Paratexts

This next categorisation is particularly shaped by theoretical conceptions of the nature of the “text” within literary studies, which have had significant implications for the perceived status of interviews within the discipline. When he proffered his influential theory of the “paratext” in the 1980s, French literary critic Gérard Genette described the interview as such. Paratexts, for Genette, are those

features that surround the text and help to “present” or “assure its presence in the world” (“Introduction to the Paratext” 261). Such features might be “peritextual,” or attached to the text, such as an author’s name, an epigraph, illustrations, etc., or they might be “epitextual” and spatially distinct from the text, such as an interview. Together these paratexts may shape the text’s reception in the world but they are not, by implication, constitutive of the author’s literary creation.

There is a tension here in that Genette’s work was meant to raise the profile of those features that are often overlooked by literary scholars in their rush to engage with the text “proper”—the discrete literary object or “well-wrought urn” so beloved of an older generation of literary scholars (namely the New Critics who dominated literary studies during the 1950s). Yet, in his rush to recover the paratext, Genette denies the possibility that the interview could claim the status of text, or literary object.⁷ Such a positioning highlights the paratextual functions that the interview might demonstrate—promoting an author and her work for example—but it also narrows the interview’s potential value for literary scholars to those interested in the material circulation of books and in literary culture broadly.

Genette’s own analysis of the interview-as-epitext compounds this positioning. Although acknowledging that the function of the epitext (unlike the peritext) “is not always basically paratextual (that is, to present and comment upon the text),” his depiction of the interview is heavily and negatively shaped by such a function (*Paratexts* 345). The interview is “drudgery” for writers, it is a false dialogue, a constructed manuscript created by an author and a “nonperson”—an “ungracious” description he admits but describing what he seems as the role of the interviewer as “messenger” (*Paratexts* 360, 357). Genette contrasts the interview and the conversation—for him the latter occurs after the fact, is with a more “personalized” interlocutor and is wider in scope, suggesting that he views the interview as less valuable for being (apparently) ephemeral and tethered to a specific (often journalistic) occasion (*Paratexts* 358). Such a characterisation is in part born of the French intellectual tradition within which Genette writes, and which has a slightly different conception of the interview to that held in the Anglophone sphere. Nevertheless, Genette’s depiction, with its alignment of the interview with promotional activities, with book talk, and with its failure to conceive of the interview’s potential function as a co-creation between two parties,

7 His use of the term “text” in fact indicates a desire to more expansively conceive of the material of literature than that designated by the New Critics, but he fails to grant the interview this status.

or as a form of creative practice, has hitherto done little to raise the interview's status within Anglophone literary studies.

Interviews as a Critical Resource

Despite their often-lowly status within literary culture, interviews are regularly mined for evidence of authors' opinions, literary influences and work habits by scholars. Ignoring the shaping role of the context, interviewer or any editing processes, these published interviews are largely taken to be authorised and reliable informational materials by the scholars that use them. Such usage differs from the data collection described above in that these are previously published, usually conducted by a third party, and, intriguingly, commonly considered to be subject-specific. In contrast to the research interview, wherein the information is, to a degree, conceived as extractable and generalisable—as providing evidence about a population cohort—the published author interview is often taken to be a portrait of the unique subject. The interview is, in this light, a source comparable to the autobiography, the diary, or any other form of supposedly revelatory self-expression (but with the added suggestion of proffering expertise through use of such a consultation format) and can be deployed by the critic keen to utilise such (subject-specific) information.

The pre-eminent author interview in this respect is that conducted by American literary magazine *The Paris Review* under their series “The Art of Fiction.” Inaugurated in 1953, these long-form interviews are highly regarded by critics, authors and general readers and heavily cited within literary studies. The list of authors interviewed is impressive: from E. M. Forster in the first edition through to Ursula K. Le Guin, Athol Fugard, Joan Didion, Umberto Eco, James Baldwin, Derek Walcott and a few hundred more. The eminence of the series is in part due to its subjects, but also a format wherein authors are encouraged to edit the transcripts and consider them as the ultimate self-portrait: “constructed to stand as testimonials for the ages” (Gourevitch ix). Some impressive self-promotion by the magazine doesn't hurt—one editor described a *Paris Review* interview as “a sort of international laurel for writers, a recognition of a mature life's work” (Gourevitch xi).⁸

The success and status attained by *The Paris Review* interviews has also pushed critics to consider, despite insisting on the author's privileged

⁸ Such a quotation also indicates the degree to which an interview can be akin to a literary prize, on which see James English.

subjectivity, the collective import of the form and the value they might have for criticism writ large. The *Review* has again been a leading example for scholars, perceived to offer a collection of definitive statements on the craft of literature; it once ran under the tag line “the DNA of literature” (*TheParisReview.org*). The *Review* has, since its early dates regularly put out a number of anthologies of interviews under titles such as *Writers at Work*, *Latin American Writers at Work* and alike which encourage readers to read across the different examples. In this they have been followed more recently by other publishers. We have seen a flurry, since the 1990s, of interview anthologies, whether those of single authors like the University Press of Mississippi’s “Conversations” series, specific series such as those of Canadian interviewer Eleanor Wachtel, or thematically organised (often around writers originating from a specific country). More than book talk, interviews might offer insight into the nature of writing itself.

This growing body of interviews also seems to proffer a kind of alternative literary criticism. Scholar Tim Mayers has spoken of author interviews as providing what he calls “craft criticism” at mid-century—in an era in which literary studies was dominated by New Criticism, author interviews became a place wherein authors could discuss questions of craft and readers learn. Certainly, numerous writers have backed this point up in their insistence on the literary advice the format offers: Orhan Pamuk is not alone in talking of the comfort taken and practical knowledge gleaned from reading *Paris Review* interviews as a novice writer.

In a slightly different vein, Williams has noted the degree to which interviews with critics, a burgeoning sub-genre of the author interview since the 1970s, can themselves collectively provide an intellectual history of literary criticism. For him, “Interviews give a lived sense of criticism, of the intellectual, institutional, and biographical coordinates that inflect the ideas critics have and the positions they take. They show how critics might speak and move through their thought extemporaneously” (“Criticism Live” 237). Indeed, he suggests that the critical interview offers something of a hybrid between the literary interview, with its “holistic framework” and the scholarly article, from which it takes “the more serious bearing of academic work as well as presumed intellectual remove to talk about criticism and cultural politics” (“Criticism Live” 236–7). While some critics, like some writers, have dismissed the interview as promoting what Frederic Jameson calls “bad habits,” “from which thinking only slowly recovers, if at all,” for others the form offers the opportunity to address readers in a less formal environment than the scholarly article (6). For still others, the interview form itself offers a focus for intellectual reflection—and sometimes experimentation as Michel Foucault’s 1969 anonymous interview as the “Masked Philosopher”

demonstrates.⁹ Overall then, we can argue that, within literary criticism and the history of post-WW2 intellectual thought more broadly, the critical interview offers an important corollary to the scholarly article and other more familiar forms of criticism. They offer, as Williams has eloquently put it:

a unique mode to help build a picture of criticism and theory in our time. Interviews give a lived sense of history and of the conditions that both produce and limit criticism [...]. Critical interviews compose a kind of intellectual autobiography of the institution of criticism in our time, as well as of the various critics who have done their work alongside us. (“Criticism Live” 250–1)

Whether critical or literary, interviews are an important potential resource for literary scholars. In acknowledging as much, we can recognise that there is a significant gap between the uses to which the interview is and might be put within the field, and the status it currently holds.

Interviews as a Source of Literature

Interviews appear in literature. Often, they crop up in treatments of literary culture or authorship—thus the writer-protagonist in Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014–18) trilogy is subject to promotional interviews (within works that are themselves often shaped as conversations) as part of her role as a working author. Elsewhere they become the form with which the author experiments. J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* is made up of interviews with the now-dead author “John Coetzee’s” former acquaintances; the interview becomes a means by which to explore questions of narrative and biographical truth. David Foster Wallace meanwhile examines misogyny and contemporary masculinity in his short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* via a series of supposed interview transcripts with the titular men. Adding further interest to the volume, following accusations of abuse made against Wallace, the degree to which the expressions of the subjects should be collated with those of the author (given the supposed revelatory nature of the interview form) has been the subject of discussion in recent years (Hungerford).

⁹ A 2003 special issue of the journal *Nottingham French Studies* entitled “Thinking in Dialogue: The Role of the Interview in Post-War French Thought” demonstrates the importance the form has for prominent French intellectuals such as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Barthes, Kristeva, and Derrida.

The phenomenon of featuring interviews and interviewers in fiction is not new. Henry James frequently used interviewers as a symbol of the “devouring publicity” of modern life and as a foil for the serious writer in his fiction, in works such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians* (1886), and short stories (James 40). He also gave interviews. In the interwar years in Britain and France a penchant for publishing collections of so-called imagined or dream interviews prevailed and in the US *Vanity Fair* ran a hilarious series of impossible interviews between discordant figures such as Sigmund Freud and Jean Harlow or gossip columnist Walter Winchell and media commentator Walter Lippmann.

Such examples demonstrate that the interview has offered fodder for authors interested in thinking through issues as diverse as the perceived health of the public sphere, literary inheritance, the nature of celebrity, surrealist practices, or the Socratic method. Pointing to the diversity of ways in which authors might respond creatively to the form—of value in itself, focusing on interviews as a topic nevertheless somewhat sidesteps the question of the form’s epistemological status within literature.

In another twist, interviewing has also contributed to the creation of literature and scholarship via its function as a “creative practice.” Anneleen Masschelein and I coined the term to describe “how interviews have been and are used in creative ways, and how they in turn contribute to new forms and ways of being” (174). The collaborative process entailed in interviewing has been embraced by some for its ability to develop ideas. Coetzee’s volume *Doubling the Point*, a collaboration with the young scholar David Atwell, intersperses essay reprints with interviews between the pair that seek to examine the nature of writing on the self. In doing so it presses at the (often dialogic) process by which intellectual thought emerges. Meanwhile for Sylvère Lotringer interviewing is a form of thinking, particularly appropriate for artists and activists in its inherent provisionality (199–234). In such an understanding of interviewing, the process becomes less a revelation of the self and instead a generative practice of co-creation. Here interviewing itself becomes part of the craft of literature.

Interviews as a Form of Literature

Can an interview be literature? This is perhaps the thorniest question concerning interviews in the literary field and one that will often raise the ire of scholars. During my research for my own monograph, I was regularly asked by senior scholars whether I was claiming that authors’ interviews could attain the high status of literature. The implication was often that the sanctified walls of the English department had been scaled and Literature itself was threatened. If the critic’s

fine discriminations could not hold back the onslaught of such attacks against Literature's aesthetic singularity and superiority, then all was lost. I confess, those scholars' concerns were somewhat beside the point for me. I wasn't trying to make a claim for the interview's literariness (although J. M. Coetzee's oeuvre is a useful case study if I so chose) but rather describe the emergence and deployment of a form within literary studies and culture. I might have noted that the interview is a relatively recent innovation from the standpoint of form: unlike the lyric, the novel, and the biography, our contemporary conception of the interview didn't exist in the mid-nineteenth century. Novelty certainly brings suspicion: while we might not think to contest the novel's status as a literary form, it too was attacked as a terrible modern invention on its appearance. But the sheer persistence of this anxiety was and continues to be suggestive.

For the record, yes, I do think that interviews can reach the lofty status of literature if they ask to be read as such. But not all do, nor do all aspire to be considered literature. In fact, to read interviews as literature is to deny their subversive and chameleon nature. The very plurality of their associations, their fluidity as a form and method, indicates that they are an epistemological oddity. They can undermine the stability of the object of literary criticism itself in stimulating (if sometimes anxiety-producing) ways. They force literary scholars to consider the question precisely of what makes literature literature—and how we define the author, the craft, the book, and how too these features are, to steal a phrase from Genette, made present in the world.

Interview Studies

In the above I have offered you a typology of interview usage and conception within the literary field. We can and should argue about my sortings—why not include the platform interview, with its aim to entertain, as a separate category? Surely, I should pay more attention to the question of expertise, given that interviews are often presented as the novice writer/interviewer in consultation with the literary lion? Aside from not wanting to perpetuate this list endlessly, my aim has been to highlight the degree to which the interview is a heterogeneous thing and process within the literary field. The word carries wildly different associations to different people depending on their investments, sub-disciplinary orientations, and knowledge. These different associations also bring with them very different expectations as to how the process or text should be treated. How we define a literary interview might seem like a little question but in trying to answer it we are forced both to recognise both the plurality of endeavours within the field

and to move beyond the bounds of literary culture entirely. Even within literary studies, discussion of the interview requires an interdisciplinary perspective and appreciation of the potential effects of its definitional diversity.

We have begun to see movements in this direction, not least in volumes such as the present. Within the literary field, the last decade has seen a flowering of criticism by a number of scholars on the topic. Work by Anneleen Masschelein, Galia Yanoshevsky, Sarah Fay, Jeffrey J. Williams, myself, and others has begun to elucidate the current and historical status of the form and sketched possible directions for future research. We can identify what Williams has called the “emergence of Interview Studies” within the field (“The Literary Interview”).

The rise of Interview Studies has the potential to shift perceptions of the previously “iffy” form within literary studies, while also bringing more theoretical and practical revolutions as well. Looking broadly across the field we might note the degree to which interviews have often promoted a very particular version of authorship that has been unappealing or inaccessible to many writers: what are the ramifications of that on a global literary stage and how might we use the interview as a means to examine authorship norms and practices in other cultural, geographical and World Literature contexts? How have interviews been used—or not used—outside of Anglophone and European literary contexts?

Elsewhere, Masschelein and I have called for interviewers and editors to more overtly discuss and acknowledge the editorial decisions and processes entailed in producing the published text which are too often left unsaid (174). Such a shift would encourage more reflection on the variety of mediations entailed in the process and perhaps more recognition of the degree to which an interview is always a construction of sorts—and thus of interest to literary and media scholars more broadly. In my discussion of chatter above I pointed to some of the ways in which interviews might prove of interest in those studying textual circulation—something I flesh out more thoroughly in my book. So too I might note that, following N. Katherine Hayles and Friedrich Kittler, print interviewing is an inscription technology in that it offers a set of social practices designed to capture utterances so they can be stored and retrieved. It follows too that the interviewer is a technology of inscription, inscribing and mediating a conversation into text—while having to bear the weight of heavy claims to objectivity. The frequent scandals around attribution and quote accuracy in interviews and the suitability of certain categories of humans to be interviewers (female interviewers often get a very bad rap) are an expression, as I note, of anxieties around “the precise nature and value of the human (and by extension art) in an enterprise that is associated with the statistical, representational, mechanical, and biopolitical: the

relationship between bodies and technologies in modernity” (*Literature and the Rise of the Interview* 12).

We can already see then that the emergence of Interview Studies has the potential to contribute to more fields than the literary. Interviews offer an example of Foucault’s “technologies of the self” and have constituted, as I have noted, two versions of subjectivity in modernity (16–49). More than this, we can identify that in our modern culture the mediatized subject is promoted, while the mediating subject is often erased. These recognitions have implications for the ways in which we understand constructions of selfhood across disciplines and import in the realm of politics, history, sociology, philosophy, and a number of other fields. A literary perspective brings to the study of the interview an awareness of form’s diverse role in shaping our understandings of ourselves. The question of how we define a literary interview might be small; the ramifications of any answer are not.

Works Cited

- Amis, Martin. “When Amis met Updike.” 1987. Reprinted in *The Guardian*, 1 Feb. 2009, www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/01/john-updike-interview-amis-martin. Accessed 22 June 2021.
- Atkinson, Paul, and David Silverman. “Kundera’s Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self.” *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1997, pp. 304–25.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961.
- Christ, Ronald. “An Interview on Interviews with Ronald Christ.” *Literary Research Newsletter*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1977, pp. 111–24.
- English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Harvard UP, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel. “The Masked Philosopher.” Reprinted in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley et al. New Press, 1997. Vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, pp. 321–8.
- Foucault, Michel. “Technologies of the Self.” *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin et al. U of Massachusetts P, 1988, pp. 16–49.
- Genette, Gérard. “Introduction to the Paratext.” Translated by Marie Maclean. *New Literary History*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1991, pp. 261–72.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Foreword by Richard Macksey. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Gourevitch, Philip. “Introduction.” *The Paris Review Interviews*. Vol. 1, Picador, 2006, pp. vii–xi.
- Hayles, Katherine. *Writing Machines*. MIT Press, 2002.
- Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford UP, 2016.

- James, Henry. *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. Oxford UP, 1987.
- Jameson, Frederic. "On Not Giving Interviews." *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, edited by Ian Buchanan. Duke UP, 2007, pp. 1–9.
- Johnson, Christopher, editor. *Thinking in Dialogue: The Role of the Interview in Post-War French Thought*, special issue of *Nottingham French Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2003.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Stanford UP, 1990.
- Long, Elizabeth. *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*. U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Lotringer, Sylvère, et al. "Confessions of a Ventriloquist." *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 199–234.
- Masschelein, Anneleen, and Rebecca Roach. "Putting Things Together: Interviewing as Creative Practice." *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 169–76.
- Mayers, Tim. *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2005.
- McGann, Jerome J. *The Textual Condition*. Princeton UP, 1991.
- Mobilio, Albert. "On the Record." *Bookforum*, 2007, www.bookforum.com/print/1305/on-the-record-323. Accessed 1 July 2016.
- Nilsson, Nils Gunnar. "The Origin of the Interview." *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 49, 1971, pp. 707–13.
- Pamuk, Orhan. "Introduction." Translated by Maureen Freely. *The Paris Review Interviews*. Vol. 2, edited by Philip Gourevitch, Picador, 2007, pp. vii–x.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. UNC Press, 1984.
- Richardson, Laurel. "Poetic Representation of Interviews." *Handbook of Interview Research*, edited by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, Sage, 2011, pp. 876–91.
- Roach, Rebecca. "The Role and Function of Author Interviews in the Contemporary Anglophone Literary Field." *Book History*, vol. 23, 2020, pp. 335–64.
- Roach, Rebecca. *Literature and the Rise of the Interview*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Schudson, Michael. *The Power of News*. Harvard UP, 1995.
- Silvester, Christopher. "Introduction." *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*, Penguin, 1993, pp. 1–48.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., U of Minnesota P, 2010.
- The Paris Review*, Tagline, TheParisReview.org, 4 Dec. 2004. Accessed via Wayback Machine on 19 June 2021, web.archive.org/web/20041204135211/http://theparisreview.org/.
- Thompson, John B. *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*. 2nd ed., Polity Press, 2012.
- Williams, Jeffrey J. "Criticism Live: The History and Practice of the Critical Interview." *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 235–55.
- Williams, Jeffrey J. "The Literary Interview as a Genre and the Emergence of Interview Studies." forthcoming.