



The Literary Interview as Autobiography

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how interviews with writers and artists operate as forms of autobiography, especially when collected and published in books. It briefly traces the history of the interview in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alongside precursors in the earlier forms of dialogues and table talk. It argues that books of collected interviews, with examples including Frédéric Lefèvre's *Une heure avec...* series (1924–1933) and the *Paris Review* “Writers at Work” volumes, offer colloquial portraits which have distinctive qualities compared to more ‘written’ autobiographies. Avant-garde writers and artists in particular have taken to the art of the interview from the 1950s onwards with the advent of the tape recorder, in an international tradition of volumes outlined here including Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (1969), Pierre Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1971), David Sylvester's *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1975–1987), Marguerite Duras's *Practicalities* (1987), and J.G. Ballard's *Extreme Metaphors* (2012). Chance, improvisation, and edited spontaneity emerge as attributes of the interview as a form of autobiography. Interviews, it is suggested, not only create flexible, immediate autobiographies of their subjects, but offer a dynamic mode of criticism, a space for the free play of ideas.

Keywords: interviews, conversations, autobiography

I

In a review of a collection of J.G. Ballard's interviews—*Extreme Metaphors: Selected Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008* (2012)—the British writer and philosopher John Gray remarked that “Ballard treated the interviews

he gave as exercises in a literary genre in its own right” (51). Like many writers, especially since the 1950s and the widespread use of the tape recorder, Ballard gave numerous interviews. “Henry James gave just three interviews in his life; there are at least two hundred published Ballard conversations,” writes Simon Sellars, the co-editor of this collection (xvii). He also observes that Ballard published just over a million words in novels, half a million in short stories, and over a quarter of a million in non-fiction, while the word count of his interviews comes to “around 650,000.” “In the Ballardian galaxy,” Sellars notes, “that’s a second sun, an enormous parallel body of speculation, critical inquiry and imaginative flights of fancy that comments critically on his writing, often explains it and, sometimes, extends or even goes beyond it” (xiii–xiv).

Ballard was a prolific and willing interviewee. As Sellars suggests, the Ballard interviews, taken together, are highly imaginative and creative exercises, as well as offering a kind of literary criticism. These dialogues also offer a very different—much more extensive and occasionally more revealing—portrait of the writer from Ballard’s autobiography *Miracles of Life*, written in 2007 after Ballard was diagnosed with cancer and published in 2008, the year before he died. To begin with, they cover different ground. *Miracles of Life* focuses on Ballard’s childhood and early phases as a writer up to 1969, with only three short chapters covering his last four decades. *Extreme Metaphors* picks up almost where the autobiography leaves off, in 1967. The autobiography, written in the knowledge and under the duress of Ballard’s illness, is a controlled, chronological, retrospective, dry yet nostalgic attempt to set down the shape of his life and work. Unusually, for this author so concerned with looking forward in his science fiction, it is a reckoning with the past, in which his work is only one aspect of a life that saw him move from Shanghai to Shepperton, begin and succeed as an author, have three children—the miracles of the title—and cope with the sudden death of his wife in 1964.

In *Extreme Metaphors*, the pivots of Ballard’s life are also recounted at various points, often more than once (repetition is an intrinsic feature of the interview as autobiography). Like many literary interviews, however, the focus is more scattered and fragmentary than *Miracles of Life*, which offers a coherent narrative. *Extreme Metaphors* is temporally more akin to a collection of letters or diary entries, occurring in the present while often looking back and forward, and closer to letters than diary entries formally, its content varying, being framed for a specific interlocutor or addressee. The form of the interview and its dialogue—with its immediacy, presentness, challenge, switches in subject and tone, stop-start spontaneity—also offers a rare glimpse of a mind thinking, as well as an ongoing autobiography, an autobiography in action.¹

In some ways, interviews blend biography and autobiography, as the interviewer often plays a key role both in the interview and in the editing of the final account, thereby acting like a biographer. Presented in a form like that of *Extreme Metaphors*, however, interviews are closer to autobiography, in that a first-person account is generally elicited. They are also a very distinct kind of autobiography. The prompts of the interviewer lend the situation an immediacy and provisional nature which allow for flexibility. The moment of speech is foregrounded, and any statement is open to question. Memoirs and autobiographies are frequently dictated with the assistance of a secretary or ghost-writer; but the question-and-answer format of the literary interview creates a unique context for narrating a life and its work. If, as Gray suggests, interviews do indeed form a genre of their own, their qualities have only been recognised fairly recently by literary critics, who have traditionally neglected them, although biographers have often been more attuned to their potential. The interviewer and critic John Rodden has suggested that interviews are an “emerging postmodern genre” positioned between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture (20); “a form of literary performance” (xi), and one that has been misunderstood.² Because of their links with popular forms, and also with the emergence of celebrity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, interviews have often been disparaged.

Émile Zola, himself an expert interviewer as well as interviewee, had typical reservations about the form, as reported in a contemporary’s “Interview on the Interview with M. Zola” (1893): “If the interview ... is hazy journalism, thrown together in twenty minutes ... written at a gallop at a table in a café, next to a vermouth or an absinthe, if it is most often a river of errors, it still remains one of the principal forms of modern journalism—because it is still alive” (qtd. in Speirs 306). That life within the form which Zola notes is perhaps rooted in the intriguing hybridity of the interview, which slides between generic conventions and cultural traditions, blending oral and written components (Masschelein et al. 1–2).³

Moving from speech to text, literary interviews—a term I’m using here to refer specifically to interviews with writers (and some artists) which end up in written form, even if conducted initially for radio or television—always have a dramatic aspect. Yet the relationship between printed script and spoken performance is inverse to that in traditional theatre, where a play-script is performed on stage. The element of improvisation in interviews is in many ways more extensive. Literary interviews, as texts, often have an intrinsic duality. They add to an author’s *oeuvre* as well as offering a commentary or critique of that *oeuvre*: they “function both as primary and secondary texts” (Miller 193). While building up an informal portrait of a writer, literary interviews can also offer an unusually focused

forum for the discussion of a writer's ideas, especially when directed by an astute interviewer. They operate as autobiography, and often simultaneously as criticism.

II

Literary interviews are a relatively new genre, tied to the use of the tape recorder from the 1950s onwards, and, before that, to the development of the question-and-answer interview by journalists in the mid-nineteenth century (Webster 471–472). Although the term *interview* first appears in English in 1514, “from the Middle French *entre-veue* (from *s'entre-veer*, to see one another) ... *interview* in the journalistic sense was first used in 1869, and the first interviews appeared three decades earlier in the *New York Herald*” (Masschelein et al. 5–6). These early American interviews were linked to crime reporting, and were often sensationalist. Scholars have agreed that the first *literary* interview, however, appeared across the Atlantic, in France, in *Le Petit Journal* in 1884 (Masschelein et al. 5–6). As Philippe Lejeune writes, the form developed rapidly in the following decade in France, but was still used above all for coverage of crime, politics, and “faits divers” (106). Jules Huret's interviews with writers, artists, and actors in *Le Figaro* from 1890 to 1905 pioneered the style of the literary interview; and Huret was the first journalist to see the possibilities of the genre (Lejeune 107).⁴

Hence the literary interview, though adapting an American format, has a distinctively French inheritance. And the first English literary interview has been claimed as being with a French writer: an interview with Jules Verne by Marie A. Belloc in *The Strand Magazine* in 1895 (Masschelein et al. 14). The 1890s saw the genre proliferate, being widely used in Britain and America. For Henry James, it was “an age of interviewing” (Salmon 160), in which new forms of publicity and celebrity thrived, eroding notions of privacy. Yet for all the interview's links with journalism, there have always been the traces of the form's precursors in Plato's dialogues of Socrates, and the collections of “table talk”—where an illustrious writer's informal sayings were noted by a friend, relation or fellow writer of some kind—which proved especially popular from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries (Smith 231–232), with individual countries highlighting special illustrious forerunners. In Germany, for example, Martin Luther's *Table Talk* (*Tischreden*, 1566) is cited as an important precursor, along with Goethe's conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann (1836). In Britain, meanwhile, there is the related early example of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), which has special relevance to the interview as a form of autobiography, being heavily based on conversations.

The affinity between the interview and the genre of biography is longstanding. As John Haffenden writes, “the aims [of the interview] ... are perhaps not wholly distinct from the aims of literary biography, except for the obvious fact that an interviewer cannot reach beyond what an author is prepared to present of his or her life and work” (vii).⁵ Biographies have also frequently been based on extensive interviews with their subjects, although these are often arranged within the biographer’s wider narrative. Boswell was pioneering in his extensive accounts of his subject’s conversations; his methods, long before the invention of tape recorders, relied on the use of journals made over years, written up day after day and so—Boswell claimed—accurate records. As Adam Sisman writes, Boswell “developed ‘an excellent method of taking down conversations’” (28); keeping “a record of Johnson’s talk in brief memoranda, noted down as soon as possible afterwards, later written up into a journal, which eventually became a principal source for his biography” (xviii). He also “learned the technique of introducing (‘starting’) subjects, to stimulate his companion into saying something worthy of record” (28).

Boswell must of course have been unable not to let elements of creativity and fabrication seep into his transcriptions. However, he stood by the veracity of his methods: of his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* with Johnson, Boswell wrote: “I beg it may be remembered, that it is not upon *memory*, but upon what was *written at the time*, that the authenticity of my Journal rests” (qtd. in Sisman 124). In his journal for 25 October 1764, Boswell expands on his technique:

My method is to make a memorandum every night of what I have seen during the day. By this means I have my materials always secured. Sometimes I am three, four, five days without journalising. When I have time and spirits, I bring up this my Journal as well as I can (qtd. in Sisman 148).

Today, tape and digital recording offer more precision, but the conversational procedure remains a basis of biography. “I taped his talk, hour after hour, like a servant taking buckets to a fountain,” writes Michael Ignatieff in *Isaiah Berlin: a Life* (6). “These conversations,” writes Patrick French in his biography of V.S. Naipaul, “conducted on an occasional basis at his house in rural Wiltshire over several years, were the strangest experience of my professional life. He could be angry, acute, open, self-pitying, funny, sarcastic, tearful—but he was always intense” (xvii). Yet neither biographer saw fit to reproduce, verbatim, these talks which form the bedrock of their books.

To let this talk stand on its own, in a book of conversation, edges it much closer to the form of autobiography. But such books of conversations, certainly of “table talk,” have never quite been valued on their

own as an art. In Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* of 1595, poets are praised for "not speaking (table talke fashion or like men in a dreame) words as they chanceably fall from the mouth, but peyzing [piecing] each sillable of each worde by iust proportion according to the dignitie of the subject" (qtd. in Ricks 16). Table talk is idle chatter, it is implied; the opposite of poetry, literature, words carefully weighed. It is uncomfortably close to gossip; frivolous, unconcerned with the life of the mind. Seeds of the later critical distrust of interviews can be found here in Sidney's appraisal.⁶

Such a view of interviews should be challenged. In interview volumes there is actually a good deal of editing, re-piecing words which have fallen "chanceably" out of mouths; and rather than furnishing gossip, such volumes can be closer to a kind of ideal criticism: dealing frequently with ideas, aspirations, intentions, abstractions. The Ballard book of interviews, for example, joins a late twentieth century lineage of talks with avant-garde writers and artists, who seem instinctively to have taken to the art of the interview: Richard Burgin's *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (1969); Pierre Cabanne's *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (1971); Marguerite Duras's *Practicalities* (1987); and David Sylvester's *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1975, 1981, 1987), to name just a few examples. In all of these books, the form of the interview has been stretched deliberately. Moving far beyond the specific journalistic form of the interview from the nineteenth century onwards, such volumes could be seen as reconnecting the interview with the tradition of dialogues, table talk and conversational biographies from earlier centuries.

III

In his fiction, the writer David Foster Wallace liked to play with derivations on the form of the interview. In real interviews, however, he had a sneaking sense "that no truly interesting question can be satisfactorily answered within the formal constraints (viz. magazine-space, radio-time, public decorum) of an interview," as he declared in 1999 (qtd. in Burn x). Here we have a much more up-to-date point of view than Sidney, conversant with the publicity-cycle of so many twentieth and twenty-first century interviews. In Wallace's view, the frame of the interview—whether measured in print by the space offered by magazines or newspapers, or in audio-visual media by the length of time of a radio or television show—is often a central problem with the form. The context of the interviewing situation, often seemingly quite intimate in literary interviews, although far more explicitly public in interviews for radio and television, sets the parameters for the talk.

The interview situation, so different from solitary literary production, mirrors in some ways the tradition of portrait painting or drawing from life in the visual arts, insofar as both a portrait from life and an interview stage an encounter between two (or more) people, in order to produce an outcome in images or words. In interviews, however, the subject speaks, creating much of what will become the final text; while in visual art the mute portrait is produced by the artist, not the sitter. In literary interviews, the frame of the encounter or encounters, as Wallace suggests, often proves decisive in the final outcome. In painting the role of the frame is often less restrictive than in words, where there is sometimes more tension between the frame or space given for the final printed interview (often very small) and the talk itself (often potentially many hours, or thousands of words, long). Hence literary interviews tend to exist in two forms: as an unedited transcript and as the final printed text. The standardised literary interview, tied to the release of a particular book, can be unsatisfactory because of the tight frame, and the limited context, in which interviewers can be personally or intellectually unfamiliar with the subjects and vice-versa.

Interviewers play a central part in the dialogue of any interview, and the balance of power between questioner and subject defines all such encounters. Even the terminology sometimes differs because of this balance. In the ‘interview,’ the interviewer often plays a more invisible role than in ‘conversations,’ where there is more parity between the speakers. John Rodden has suggested that there are three types of interviewer—“stage hands,” “supporting interviewers,” and “intruders”—with the stage hands seeking to draw the speaker out without much intervention, and the intruders operating at the other end of the scale, challenging speakers and seeking to dominate the interaction as a whole (19).

As has been recognised in the social sciences, cultural differences also play a part in interview encounters, especially when the interviewee and the interviewer come from differing backgrounds where the implicit terms of an interaction should not be taken for granted (Stotesbury, 29–31). Even with cultural differences between Britain and America, there are distinct interviewing styles.⁷ It is particularly in France that the literary interview developed into a distinctively sophisticated forum, in the early years of the twentieth century. This French tradition was due to the innovations of specific interviewers. As well as Jules Huret in *Le Figaro*, Philippe Lejeune also credits Frédéric Lefèvre and his series *Une heure avec ...* which began in 1922 in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, and resulted in six volumes of interviews published by Gallimard from 1924–1933, with bringing new subtlety and depth to the literary interview (Lejeune, 108).

Lefèvre went on to adapt his series for radio in the 1930s, but he also experimented with longer interview forms as books in his *Entretiens avec*

Paul Valéry (1926), which began as a time-defined *Une heure avec* interview, but grew over a number of other conversations, incorporated into a volume whose second half consists of critical commentary on Valéry's work. For Lejeune, Lefèvre made even greater advances with his conversations with Maurice Blondel, which resulted in *Litinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (1928), "the first interview book worthy of the name" (Lejeune, 109), in which one long conversation in three episodes, over 250 pages, is presented in dialogue form.⁸ Lefèvre's work during the 1920s and 1930s forms a striking contrast to the general neglect by literary Modernists of the possibilities of the interview. As Rebecca Roach has observed, "the most notable aspect of the modernist engagement with the interview before mid century is its lack ... Woolf gave no interviews (in English), Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Breton only a few."⁹

Bridging the French and Anglo-American traditions, one of the most successful examples of the possibilities of the literary interview in English is the *Paris Review* "Writers at Work" series, begun in 1953 by American expatriates in Paris, with an interview with E.M. Forster, whose own interest in novelistic craft (as evidenced in *Aspects of the Novel*) set the tone for subsequent dialogues. When the first volume of *Paris Review* interviews was published, Alfred Kazin specifically alluded to the way the series crossed cultural divides. "The art of the literary interview," Kazin wrote, "so little known off the European mainland, has been practiced here with a subtlety that I have never seen before in an American context" (qtd. in Wilbers 205). To this day, the *Paris Review* "Writers at Work" volumes remain one of the most widely recognized and discussed series of interviews in English.

The success of the series lies in its extension of the parameters and context of the standard literary interview. The series was also conceived very much as an antidote to conventional literary criticism: the authors themselves were given the space to provide their own self-criticism in these interviews.¹⁰ Early *Paris Review* interviews were conducted by two interviewers making handwritten notes, before, during the course of the first series, tape recorders became the norm. As George Plimpton recalled, in the early days, one interviewer would be "asking the questions and the other scribbling as fast as he possibly could with a pencil. Then when the pencil man got tired out, they would shift" (qtd. in Bains 765). Like portraits, the interviews were conducted over a number of sessions, sometimes over several seasons, even years. In their final form, they are a good deal longer than most interviews, closer to a book chapter than a journalistic piece. Ballard's *Paris Review* interview, for example, took place in 1984, and forms a chapter in *Extreme Metaphors*.

This final form of the *Paris Review* interviews is reached after careful shaping and editing, in which, crucially, the authors are sent drafts of the outcome and are allowed to alter them extensively, repeatedly. Hence, as Philip Gourevitch notes, “they are in large measure self-portraits ... always a collaboration, not a confrontation” (ix). All the *Paris Review* interviews are, in a sense, mini-autobiographies, yet the focus of the series, all the same, is tilted towards the discussion of the work rather than the life. Anecdotes and gossip find their place in these dialogues, yet the talk always veers back to the craft of writing and its intricacies. Far from being formless, as Sidney implies “table talk” often is, these interviews are tighter, more compressed than the seemingly freer mode of full autobiography. For some critics, the series is indeed *too* controlled, lacking spontaneity; as Usha Wilbers writes, “occasionally the intensively wrought responses seem forced” (204). Yet often the formality of the interviews works in their favour. In his introduction to the fourth series of “Writers at Work,” Wilfred Sheed refers to interrogation as a specifically twentieth century form, in its openness, transparency, and interactivity: “In a democracy, *we* ask the questions; *we* determine what is interesting. Within this cage of questions, the artist prowls, looks for exits, expresses himself somehow. The result (as with poets fettered by meter) is often better, or better for *us*, than their own mysterious wanderings would have been” (xiv).

The series also quite self-consciously responds to the essential closeness of the dialogue to the drama, and interviewers were sometimes prompted about this. George Plimpton, writing to the interviewer George Wickes, gives an insight into the process that often underlay these encounters, writing of an interview with Aldous Huxley:

I hope you will descend on the good man again—in fact a *number* of times if that’s what’s needed to heighten the interview to the level expected of a writer of such stature ... You should try to think of the interview as a dramatic form in itself—hard as that may seem—where one’s tools are very much the dramatic devices: character buildup, suspense, surprise, argument even. Obviously, it’s unlikely the interview actually moves along dramatically when it’s done; therefore rearrangement of material is necessary, additional questions often must be asked to fill out a section which seems to need emphasis, etc. (qtd. in Wilbers 203).

At other times the process was more intensive at the other end of the dialogue, with the interviewees making extensive revisions. For the interview with the biographer Leon Edel, for example, the interviews themselves produced, as interviewer Jeanne McCulloch recalled, about seven hours of tape, which she duly transcribed, edited, and sent to him. “When he

returned it to me, all my questions were still there, but none of his answers as I had remembered them. He had totally rewritten each response” (qtd. in Bains 765–766).

The *Paris Review* interviews can be contrasted with another long-standing series, the books of *Literary Conversations* published by the University Press of Mississippi, of which there are now over one hundred volumes. In this series, miscellaneous published interviews with writers are compiled into a book, more like *Extreme Metaphors*, with the house rules favouring the reprinting of these interviews in their original format. On one level, these volumes show the limitations of the interview as a form: many of the collected pieces take place in a more standardised context than the *Paris Review* interviews, are shorter, less intense, and can seem closer to publicity exercises. Yet the arrangement of these encounters over the length of a book allows the writer’s voice to be heard in a more sustained way than in the *Paris Review*, with themes and threads of autobiography making elaborate patterns from one interview to the next, alongside inevitable repetitions. The diversity of the encounters reveals diverse facets of the writer’s character. Less shaped and worked-over than the *Paris Review* pieces, less of a self-conscious self-portrait, the *Literary Conversations* tend to be more ‘raw’ and revealing. The loose, anthology feel makes these volumes analogous to volumes of “table talk.” One also sees the progression of the writer’s ideas over time in this assembly, making the conversations as a whole seem much more like an ongoing, colloquial, autobiography.

This continuity comes across even more strongly in volumes of single-figure book-length interviews where there is only one interviewer throughout, as in Lefèvre’s conversations with Valéry and Blondel. In 1967, Jorge Luis Borges was interviewed over a 6-month period during a summer stay at Harvard, by Richard Burgin, then an undergraduate, who also tape-recorded their conversations where possible, collecting six and a half hours of material. The resulting dialogues range over Borges’s life, work, and ideas, in the seven chapters of *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (1969); and Borges showed complete trust in the young interviewer, giving him a free hand with the publication of the book.¹¹ Burgin also later edited a volume of Borges interviews in the *Literary Conversations* series, which is more multifaceted. He continued his interest in the interview form by also publishing, in 1985, a volume of conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer, a compulsive interviewee. This proved a more difficult collaboration which initially involved over fifty recorded interviews (Miller 188) and took over seven years to complete.¹² Borges, however, in a prologue to his volume with Burgin, seems completely co-operative, drawn to the idea of an equal dialogue:

Dialogue for me is not a form of polemics, of monologue or magisterial dogmatism, but of shared investigation ... Rereading these pages, I think I have expressed myself, in fact confessed myself, better than in those I have written in solitude with excess care and vigilance. The exchange of thoughts is a condition necessary for all love, all friendship, and all real dialogue. Two men who can speak together can enrich and broaden themselves indefinitely (Burgin vii).

To stretch Borges's observation here in terms of one of his own favourite symbols, interviewer and interviewee are like two facing mirrors, whose reflections offer something more obliquely merged and endless than 'conventional' autobiography. A reflective, collaborative aesthetic also lies behind another unusual writer's interview volume, Marguerite Duras's *La Vie matérielle* (1987), translated as *Practicalities* in 1990, which is, however, superficially closer to the form of autobiography than the Borges conversations. In *Practicalities* a series of conversations between Duras and Jérôme Beaujour, conducted "from the beginning of autumn to the end of winter" (Duras 1), underwent a mercurial process of revision and collaboration that was even more open, dual, and intensive than that of the *Paris Review*. "All the pieces ... with very few exceptions," writes Duras, "were spoken aloud to Jérôme Beaujour." She adds:

Then the spoken texts were transcribed, we read them over and appraised them, I made corrections, and Jérôme Beaujour read the result ... we soon abandoned questions and answers. We tried a subject-by-subject approach, but gave that up too. The last phase of the work consisted of my shortening and lightening the texts and toning them down. It was all done by common consent ... At most the book represents what I think sometimes, some days, about some things (Duras 1-2).

In terms of its final form, *Practicalities* is composed of very short chapters, grouped around themes or little vignettes, and is presented as a first person, fragmentary narrative, with no trace of any questions. Apart from the short prologue by Duras outlining its process, and a few other passages, the book itself bears relatively few explicit signs of the way it has been composed, seeming like an essayistic, poetic, autobiography or book of musings. But the text has an unusual fluidity and flexibility, as Duras notes: "No previous or current genre could have accommodated such a free kind of writing" (1). As with the *Paris Review* interviews, admittedly, this is a very controlled kind of freedom: a flexibility moving within intensively revised limits and parameters. There is a distinctive distillation in the style: one senses both the way in which the text has been extensively

revised and shaped, and the fact that what one is reading is only a small fraction of what could have been said.

In the visual arts, interview volumes have also been influential. Pierre Cabanne's *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp* was first published in 1967 in Paris, then translated in 1971, offering an account of the artist's life and work through dialogue. The text, though discursive, is broadly chronological and bears many similarities to being 'an' autobiography in content. In his introduction, Robert Motherwell praises the interviewer as well as the interviewee: "Cabanne intuitively knows when not to press too hard, and when to come back discreetly again and again to a dropped question, finally to receive the 'answer'" (Cabanne, 9). The volume gains resonance as its method of ongoing talk as opposed to writing mirrors Duchamp's anti-retinal notions in art: it aspires to a similar, weightless, immaterial conceptuality, and also allows Duchamp to offer his own critique of his work. Indeed, the interview form was taken up by many artists in the 1960s and 1970s whose work was linked to Conceptual art.¹³ Duchamp's dialogues are also a classic example of a sub-genre of interview volumes—the 'last interview'—as Duchamp died a year and a half after the publication of this volume in French, at the age of 81 (Cabanne, 8). In the 'last interview,' the provisionality of any interview situation is given an extra, final resonance, one either granted by chance through fate or by the interviewee's assertion that after this occasion, no more interviews will be given.¹⁴

A particularly pioneering set of interview volumes in the visual arts is David Sylvester's *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, first published in 1975, expanded in 1981, then expanded again in 1987—by which point the collection had a new title too, *The Brutality of Fact*. It is as if Sylvester and Bacon only gradually saw the potential, and the importance, of adjusting and extending the format of the interviews. As in the *Paris Review* series, the original conversations here have been extensively edited—indeed, more so, as Sylvester writes that although he has not changed Bacon's actual words at any point, he has taken snippets from various different conversations with him, over, as he carefully puts it, "four different kinds of spoken material: audio recordings made for broadcasting or distribution; filmed recordings made likewise; audio recordings made privately; unrecorded conversations" (1987, 7). He has then spliced these snippets together in a montage, sometimes even inventing the 'questions' after the event.

"The aim," Sylvester writes, "has been to seam together a more concise and coherent argument than ever came about when we were talking, without making it so coherent as to lose the fluid, spontaneous flavour of talk" (1981, 7). Sylvester's extensive editing here gives him an almost equal creative role with the subject; his interviews are also distinguished by his eminence as an art critic, making his exchanges closer to a conversation

between equals than the often subservient role of many journalists or questioners. Indeed, Sylvester was a virtuoso interviewer, recording hundreds of sessions with other artists over his lifetime, some published in his *Interviews with American Artists* (2001) and *London Recordings* (2003): these latter being books in which the interviewer, not the interviewee, remains the fixed side in the dialogue.

Sylvester's questions continue the idea-centred focus of many artistic interviews, hence his interviews with Bacon are, more so even than the *Paris Review* interviews, often surprisingly, uncompromisingly anti-autobiographical. J.G. Ballard, in *Miracles of Life*, grumbles a little about this. Writing of Bacon, Ballard notes how Sylvester steered clear "of the questions everyone was eager to hear answered, and only asked Bacon about his handling of space and other academic topics" (156). As a result, Ballard writes, "we know less about the motives of this extraordinary painter than we do of almost any other twentieth century artist" (156). For Ballard, the Sylvester/Bacon interviews were a missed opportunity, one presumes, for self-revelation—or perhaps there was too much on artistic process, and not enough free play of ideas, such as Ballard's interviews offer, with their provocations and territory-tests. Towards the close of the third edition, Sylvester adjusts the anti-autobiographical slant, steering the final questions towards Bacon's life; but this comes too late to alter the focus in any substantial way.

IV

Certain subjects are more suited to the interview than others, and are revealed more in their conversation—they are known as great talkers. Samuel Johnson, through Boswell, is a classic example. Coleridge, whose *Table Talk* was collected in two volumes by his nephew Henry Coleridge in 1835, is another. Of Isaiah Berlin, Michael Ignatieff writes that "with him, thinking is indistinguishable from talking, from striking sparks, from bantering, parrying and playing. His talk is famous, not only because it is quick and acute, but because it implies that thought is a joint sortie into the unknown" (4). Some writers revel in the chance to give interviews, while others have proven notoriously uncomfortable with the genre. In the twentieth century, J.D. Salinger, Thomas Pynchon, and Samuel Beckett declined nearly all interviews (Masschelein et al. 2). Other writers, such as Vladimir Nabokov and Joyce Carol Oates, responded to their *Paris Review* interviews with written answers, clearly unsettled by the chance to be represented in dialogue.¹⁵

As with interviewers, John Rodden has suggested that there are also three types of interviewees—"traditionalists," "raconteurs," and

“advertisers”—whose response to the challenge of the interview moves on a sliding scale from preferring to discuss the work rather than the life (traditionalists); telling and embroidering stories and anecdotes (raconteurs); to exploiting the opportunity to form and mould a persona in public (advertisers) (6–12). This is a useful scheme, but clearly there is room for several other types of response here, or for blends of these responses. In terms of Rodden’s typology, Bacon utilises all three modes, although his focus on ideas veers towards the traditionalist model. He is a great talker, and his conversations with Sylvester revel in the chance, improvisation, colloquialism, informality, and freedom of the interview form.

Indeed, chance and improvisation become the very subject of the Sylvester/Bacon sessions. Bacon declares that “in my case all painting ... is accident ... it becomes a selective process which part of this accident one chooses to preserve ... There is a possibility that you get through this accidental thing something much more profound than what you really wanted” (qtd. in Sylvester 1987, 16–17). It is this unpredictability, this risk, that makes some writers and artists apprehensive in the interview situation, yet it is also what makes it so appealing and distinctive as a form of autobiography. As Janet Malcolm writes in *The Silent Woman*:

In most interviews, both subject and interviewer give more than is necessary. They are always being seduced and distracted by the encounter’s outward resemblance to an ordinary friendly meeting. The meal that is often thrown around it like a cloth, to soften the edges; the habits of chat and banter; the conversational reflexes, whereby questions are obediently answered and silences too quickly filled—all these inexorably pull the interlocutors away from their respective desires and goals (173).

The interview, Malcolm suggests, is “a special, artificial exercise of subtle influence and counterinfluence, with an implicit antagonistic tendency” (174). The use of the tape recorder—or in the twenty-first century, digital recording—can only have exacerbated the unease and the artificiality. Even Boswell, talking to Johnson in friendship rather than antagonism, searching for an elusive, intermittent spontaneity, was a kind of omnipresent spy on Johnson; and the slight distrust this engendered in others during his lifetime is also reflected in some writers’ later fear of the tape recorder, whose early use in interviews in the 1950s, during the Cold War, often reminded interviewees of surveillance, or interrogation.¹⁶

The recording of interviews is a kind of test. Indeed, many writers have seen the interview as a “trap” (Speirs 303). For Bacon, this was, perversely, part of the attraction, as in his art he aimed “to set a trap with which one would be able to catch the fact at its most living point” (Sylvester 1987, 53); and he was very taken with “these marvellous mechanical means of

recording fact” (Sylvester 1987, 66). Some writers and artists perform best for the tape recorder; others only when the tape is off. Others have found that their awareness of being recorded changes the situation enough to cramp their spontaneity. At the outset of his *Paris Review* interview, Gabriel García Márquez puts it like this—actually, as it turns out, advocating something very close to what Boswell went and did:

The problem is that the moment you know the interview is being taped, your attitude changes ... As a journalist, I feel that we still haven't learned how to use a tape recorder to do an interview. The best way, I feel, is to have a long conversation without the journalist taking any notes. Then afterward he should reminisce about the conversation and write it down as an impression of what he felt, not necessarily using the exact words expressed (qtd. in Plimpton 316).

The fear of the tape recorder might be a fear of inarticulacy, of the wrong words “chanceably” falling out of our mouths; or perhaps, as with so much autobiography, it is rooted in an anxiety about revealing too much, as talk turns into automatic autobiography, *auto*-biography, too easy, too banal, too invasive of privacy. As Sylvester notes, “like the camera, the tape recorder, roughly speaking, cannot lie, and cannot discriminate. Faithfully, it registers every false start, every crossing of purposes, every malformation of syntax and thought, every digression, every unthinking answer or question” (1981, 6–7).

There is also, understandably, writers' fear of losing control of their own words, which, once the interview is over, generally fall into the possession of the interviewer (Rodden 232). The question of who should take credit (or otherwise) for the final interview has always had an element of indeterminacy, even when it comes to final attribution of authorship of interviews. Some writers assert their authorship, while many interview volumes ‘belong’ to the interviewer. Sometimes, writers are quick to disavow their ownership of interviews, and there has always been a fear of being misrepresented through the interviewer's errors of transcription or invention. Zola, for example, asserted: “I only acknowledge as my opinion that which I have expressed myself by my own pen” (qtd. in Speirs 305). He thereby washed his hands, all too neatly, of all the sessions he gave as the most interviewed writer of the nineteenth century (Masschelein et al. 30).

Michael Peppiatt, who translated the Sylvester–Bacon interviews into French, was very aware of the distinction between interviews on the record and off the record when it came to interviewing Bacon himself. “Although Bacon and I talked at length about everything and in every mood during our long friendship,” Peppiatt writes, “we did only three

formal interviews” (9). Peppiatt writes revealingly of one of these sessions, when he tried to interview Bacon in 1989 at his studio:

I nervously edged my tape recorder onto the table between us. “Oh—are we *doing* something?” Bacon asked in an archly disapproving tone ... I asked the first question. To my despair, he said nothing. All that could be heard for two long minutes was the slight squeak of a tape turning to no purpose. Then mercifully, when I ventured a second question, Bacon began to talk. His replies were economic, not to say reductive ... We went to dinner, and the conversation soon returned to its old, unpredictable and frequently outrageous form (13).

The anecdote reveals Bacon’s awareness of the dynamics of the interview situation, and the extent to which, with Sylvester, he had learned how to manipulate the genre, and how to perform. For Peppiatt was initially disappointed with this curt session. Yet when he began to edit the material a few days later, he was “astonished to find not only that we had covered a great deal of ground but that there was virtually nothing to change. Although Bacon had resisted the idea of talking on the record, he had nevertheless given a concise, word-perfect performance” (13). Bacon’s suspicion and silence, followed by careful acquiescence, should be read not as a dismissal of the interview form, but instead as a recognition of its dangers. The interview, as we have seen, is far more unpredictable as a form of autobiography than many purely written forms. Hybrid, dramatic, spontaneous, existing in unedited and edited form, oral and yet written, both primary and secondary, always informed by specific situations, ambiguously owned, an ongoing form of autobiography and criticism, the literary interview remains, as Zola saw, full of life, and untapped potential. As with photography, the interview also has a documentary, mechanical aspect that accrues value over time. As Frank Kermode writes, interviewed writers have often “posed before the machine with the sort of patience they might have needed in Hawthorne’s time for a daguerreotype portrait” (xviii). Yet qualms, for many writers, will always remain about the interview—a unique form of portraiture of great flexibility, volatility, and depth—precisely because of its unnerving power.

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NOTES

- 1 Autobiography is of course a notoriously difficult term and has often proved hard to define. In this article, I am primarily using the term 'autobiography' to refer quite closely to what Philippe Lejeune calls 'contractual' autobiography, in which, as Max Saunders writes, "real author, narrator, and the name on the title-page all coincide, and seek to interpret their own life" (4). These roles are clearly different in the interview—for example, there are two narrators in a question-and-answer session, and authorship is often credited to the interviewer rather than the interviewee—yet I wish to argue here that interviews are closer to this kind of 'formal' autobiography than to the autobiographical traces in novels and other texts. A distinction between autobiography and the autobiographical is also made by Saunders, who notes that "reading something as 'autobiographical,' then, is different from reading it as 'autobiography'" (5).
- 2 As John Rodden writes, "despite the vogue for postmodernism in the American literary academy, the interview has been implicitly dismissed by genre scholars ... and the status of the interview as an emerging postmodern genre has gone little noticed" (20). Rodden strengthens his claim for the interview as a postmodern form by referring to Marjorie Perloff, who notes that "Postmodern genre is ... characterized by its appropriation of other genres, both high and popular, by its longing for a both/and situation rather than one of either/or" (Perloff 8). This is very true of the interview form, with its simultaneity as autobiography and criticism, and its long-standing relationship with both popular and 'high' traditions.

- 3 Anneleen Masschelein et al. provide a wide-ranging account of international critical positions on the literary interview in their article “The Literary Interview: Towards a Poetics of a Hybrid Genre.” As they write, “since the last decades of the twentieth century, the literary interview has been establishing itself as an object of research in French, German, and English scholarship. While these traditions show some overlap and exchange, the research done has nonetheless remained mostly isolated and limited to specific cultural and historical phenomena” (40).
- 4 Forty-three of Huret’s interviews in *Le Figaro* from this period are collected in *Interviews de littérature et d’art* (Paris: Thot, 1984).
- 5 Interviewers can challenge their subjects more than biographers in some ways, but they are, as Haffenden suggests, limited by what the subject finally says.
- 6 For a more contemporary, sceptical take on the interview, see Bruce Bawer’s article “Talk Show: the Rise of the Literary Interview” in the *American Scholar* 57 (2001): 421–29.
- 7 Robert Barr, for example, writing as an anonymous “‘Idler’ Interviewer” in “A Chat With Conan Doyle” (1894) distinguishes between English interviewing, where “the successful interviewer blazons forth as much of his own personality as possible; using his victim as a peg on which to hang his own opinions” (‘Idler’ 341), and the American style. “In America you get the real thing, and even the youngest newspaper man there understands how it should be done. An interviewer should be like a clear sheet of plate glass that forms the front window of an attractive shop through which you can see the articles displayed, scarcely suspecting that anything stands between you and the interesting collection” (‘Idler’ 341; qtd. in Salmon 163).
- 8 Oliva Blanchette, however, notes that Blondel himself actually wrote much of this so-called ‘interview.’ “The hour stretched out into many hours and many days, all the way up to four hundred hours ... Blondel himself, not Lefèvre, ended up writing this book, for in the end that editor was so overwhelmed by all that he had heard that he asked Blondel to put all that they had spoken of in writing, including the questions as well as the answers ... Blondel was able to put some order in the questions, and formulate them more precisely, as he thought they should be put, to give himself a better opportunity to say what he wanted to say.” See *Maurice Blondel: a Philosophical Life*. Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010, 324–5.
- 9 There are of course exceptions to this, but interviews with canonical Modernist writers can be surprisingly scarce or disappointing. A volume almost close to a Modernist version of ‘table talk’ is Frank Budgen’s *James Joyce and the Making of ‘Ulysses,’* London: Grayson & Grayson, 1934. Roach notes that Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald did give many interviews, yet “they were unusual amongst their peers.” “Despite the form proliferating hugely in mainstream magazines and newspapers in this period, interviews are rarely published in modernist magazines,” Roach also writes.
- 10 As Christopher Bains notes, William Styron outlined the magazine’s stance against criticism in the inaugural issue of the *Paris Review*. “Speaking for the *Review*, Styron proclaimed, ‘Literarily speaking, we live in what has been described as the Age of Criticism,’ whereby literature is smothered ‘under the weight of learned chatter.’ By excluding the critics, the *Review* established itself as both protector and publisher of literature” (Bains 761).
- 11 For more on Borges and his interviews, see Ted Lyon, “Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre,” *Latin American Literary Review* 22 (1994): 74–89.
- 12 Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Doubleday, 1985). For more on Singer and his approach to interviews, see Miller.
- 13 Gwen Allen has examined artist interviews of this period, looking at the interviews conducted in *Avalanche* magazine in the 1960s and 1970s. As Allen notes, “the *Avalanche* interviews enact a kind of reception that echoes the process-oriented models of artistic

production so central to radical art of this period: they insist that the meaning of the work of art, no less than the act of interpretation, is never finished, that it is unstable and ongoing" (61).

- 14 The sub-genre has also spawned its own series of books in Melville House's "The Last Interview" series, which has published volumes of last interviews by Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, Roberto Bolaño, Jorge Luis Borges, Jacques Derrida, Philip K. Dick, Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel García Márquez, David Foster Wallace, and others.
- 15 As Usha Wilbers writes, Nabokov in his 1973 collection of interviews, *Strong Opinions*, has described his typical process thus: "When preparing interviews I invariably write out my replies (and sometimes additional questions) taking care to make them as concise as possible. My replies represent unpublished material, should be printed verbatim and in toto, and copyrighted in my name" (qtd. in Wilbers 211).
- 16 See Rebecca Roach, "Endless Talk," for more on how Beat writers compared interviews with surveillance, and interrogation in court. Roach also reveals the ways in which the Beats utilised the tape recorder in composition, for example in Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* (1972), "made up in part of transcripts from the tape-recorded dialogue between the writer and Neal Cassady." Roach also discusses William Burroughs's volume of interviews *The Job* (1970), a collaboration with Daniel Odier, in which interviews between Burroughs and Odier were cut up with previously published materials, including essays and short fiction. *The Job* was first published in Paris as *Entretiens avec William Burroughs*, Paris: Éditions Belfond, 1969.