

The American Literary Interview: An Aesthetics

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Abstract The interview is a form well-known to the New American Studies Journal: A Forum. In this essay, Lucy Cheseldine explores the ways in which the literary interview can be considered a modern – and modern American – form. There is a particular focus on the aesthetic dimensions of the form, as embodied most prominently in the famous Paris Review interviews.

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The Paris Review called it an “art,” W.H. Auden called it “gossip” (Auden 78), Donald Hall called it “archival” (1962). Whichever word, all imply that there is an aesthetics of the literary interview. The form is a creative one that captures the act of making as it happened or, as the title of the *Review* series has it, depicts “the writer at work.” As Auden’s comment suggests, it also fulfils a desire for intimacy with those who are distant and includes a vital element of fantasy that, when not mediated well, can slip into slander. Yet many interviews have stood the test of time and remain documents to re-consult, piled up with browning pages or kept under glass; these are not “archives” but “archival,” offering the promise of immense discoveries that are yet to be organised. The literary interview is, I agree, a rich area of comment and surprise that in contemporary discourse is all too often denied creative and critical status, being passed off as belonging to the realm of performativity and “talk.” According to William T. Stead, the interview “was a distinctly American invention,” devised in the melting pot of entrepreneurialism, “with odd limitations” (Stead 293). If we can look past the overstatement, the limitations Stead introduces form a set of underlying principles. What’s “odd” about them is that they were not really limitations at all but were care-

fully chosen from an abundance of possibilities and poised to proliferate in intended and unintended ways. Through them, the American literary interview gains its aesthetics and thereby its definition as a genre. Its story is one of sounding out, of asking too much and of not saying enough, and it's told through the same medium these interviews take as their subject: the work of writing.

The American literary interview, to begin defining such a category, takes root in journalism both as a mode of publication and a form in which writers often started out, or ended, their literary careers. The *Paris Review*, setting the trend, invited writers to take on the role of an interviewer in a magazine whose contributions were measured by what editor George Plimpton described as “eclectic excellence.” Among its first interviewees was Truman Capote, who tells Patti Hill that his “unswerving ambitions still revolve” around the short story, adding that “whatever control and technique I may have I owe entirely to my training in this medium” (Capote). Nine years later, he would publish *In Cold Blood*, bringing literary conventions into the sphere of so-called truth to help establish New Journalism as an American invention. Its legacy remains in writers’ continuing turn towards forms like the creative essay. But the interview was already an indicator of such formal hybridity as it exercised an ongoing dexterity between fact and fiction. Harking back to early newspaper interviews with writers which appeared in narrative form, the opening of the *Review* texts included a hand-drawn sketch of the writer in question — later replaced by a photograph — and a short description of the moments leading up to the conversation. In the interview with Capote, Patti notes that despite his openness, “it would be hard to pull any wool over his eyes and maybe better not to try” (Patti). Deceit is precisely what Capote became good at in his own apparently journalistic frame writing. Yet this promise of candidness, and the insight it offers into the writer and his work, comes to us through a device closer to fiction. Pulling the wool over one’s eyes is thus not only to disguise, but to reveal, loosening the fabric of form, personality, and, most significantly, the craft of writing itself.

While the interview’s origins stretch back beyond the twentieth century, the in-depth interview that we have come to associate with literary giants emerged in the cold war era under the guise of a culture that was becoming

obsessed with celebrity, investigation and interrogation. These themes were compounded by revelations that the *Review* profited from CIA involvement in sales. More broadly, as the U.S. defined itself through delineations between the individual, their community and society at large, the interview, with its party of two engaged in a public dialogue, seemed like the perfect form for exploring not just a set of questions and topics but the dynamics of human relations themselves. Where the model often followed one writer interviewing another, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee was more conflicted than it first seemed. Returning to the *Review* openings written by the interviewer, the passages can read like introductions to a fictional character rather than a real person. In Annette Grant's she describes John Cheever's "faded blue jeans" as a preamble to his "casual and easy" demeanour, which made her feel, in cliché, "as though we were already old friends" (Grant). These moments reflect the interviewer's fraught task as both supposedly objective observer and invested listener, eager to get within earshot of another writer's creative process and to leave a mark of their own on the end product. They straddle that broader national condition which Sacvan Bercovitch calls the "ritual of consensus" (Bercovitch 29-30), in which the American writer is doomed to be inside the mechanisms of a culture they claim to remain on the margins of, even as they help to build those very mechanisms. Often, it's precisely this double bind and the creativity it allows that transforms interviewing into an "art" and gives truth its rightful place within it. But sometimes it results in moments in which the participants show too much of themselves.

At the other side of the table, the writer being interviewed has their moment in the spotlight while remaining under duress, testing the limits of their self-perception and public reception. A key development in the possibilities of the literary interview was thus the introduction of novel media that could capture these concerns in a new light. Charlie Rose's television interview with David Foster Wallace contains one of the more memorable demonstrations of complex interpersonal dynamics, here amplified by the technology's emphasis on the visual. After a set of fairly standard questions about writing and teaching, Rose asks, "Respect means a lot to you, doesn't it?" seeming to stump Wallace. Flipping the format on its head, he asks the next question, caught by what appears to be genuine surprise: "you can read this in my

face?” Yes, says Rose, but he also admits that he’s taken that from his prior reading (see 3:44-3:55). However, the subsequent mumbling which breaks the ping-pong pace of the two’s back and forth suggests that something in Wallace’s gaze prompted him to speak so searingly in what almost feels like an interruption. The exchange plays out respect like a performative speech act, its etymology writ large by the gaze and regard given to Wallace. The attention draws him to consider his standing in relation to others and consequently to look back at this own face, questioning its invitation to esteem and interpretation. The exchange illustrates Wallace’s approach to the interview as an act of self-exploration, heightened by the studio atmosphere of aesthetics’ foundational philosophy: the science of sensory perception. Whether or not it’s Wallace’s expression that prompts Rose to inquire about respect, his face becomes the subject for an answer and a means of information-gathering. In this exchange, he learns not only how he is perceived by others but also receives a rare glimpse into the slippery ways the senses overlap to send social signals that remain at the mercy of the body. Every interview is a collaborative endeavor that, as John Rodden argues, involves a certain level of performance, even if it takes the form of an “anti-performance” that eschews “all enquiries into...private lives” (Rodden 6). In Wallace’s case, television’s heightened sense of visibility sets the stage for something personal and revealing, creating a new openness in the interview flow. In this sense, a television director’s casual advice to “act natural” seems doubly apt.

Beyond the body, the power of the momentary, here captured on camera, is the territory of perception’s greatest Modern advocates. William James, his pupil Gertrude Stein, and Henri Bergson all sought out its temporal qualities in their own ways, in order to articulate the present’s knowledge of the past and the future; James in the continuity of “nowness,” Stein through her experiments in grammar, and Bergson with nuanced definitions of memory and duration. Whatever that space is between the subject and the object that is trying to be articulated, these thinkers engaged it, endowing it with the capacity for new forms of enlightenment. The space of the interview holds a similar magic in the moment when the question stops, the interviewee hesitates, a silence incurs. Rose’s interview with Wallace goes on to regain fluency, but perhaps its most astonishing moments are when Wallace

is quite literally lost for words, fumbling around to articulate himself because every which way he starts his next sentence, it feels inadequate. They are — and there’s more than one of them — painful to watch, embodying Wilfred Sheed’s claim that under interview a writer ‘prowls, looks for exits, expresses himself somehow’, though Wallace sometimes never reaches that final clause (Sheed in Plimpton, ed, 1977 xiv). For all their awkwardness, however, in this moment the writer is closest to the values of his own work: being sincere about the poverty of language, probing knowledge’s vulnerability and exposing his own. The interviewer’s hold on the power of the present elicits this reaction, and a perceptive audience makes the most of it. But it’s writing that gets the final word here, being expressed as that which relies on what’s left unsaid.

None of these extraordinary insights could arise from interviews at all, were it not for the prior reading that Rose mentions when questioned himself. Research, editing, and the formalisation of the interview space all play an essential role in enabling anyone — particularly the self-conscious word-smith — to say anything of meaning at all. As with any good and rigorous aesthetics, it’s the rules and restraints that enable the freedom. Bruce Bawer stresses the “enormous difference between writing and talking” (Bawer 423) in the context of being interviewed, but the form as pioneered by the *Review* was anything but. The whole process started through a series of letters between the interviewer and their subject in which the two would set and revise the questions that only later would be asked face to face. If you were a serial reviser like Marianne Moore, this preamble could go on for weeks, even months. After meeting face to face, sometimes over several days, the recorded conversation — “the interview” as we know it — was transcribed by the interviewer and revised again by the writer in question. Only after a final version had been ironed out from between layers of language, technology, and human utterance was something drawn up for publication and sent to the magazine’s editor for final checks. The point was “to get the form — something elastic enough to take the material” (Hall 1962), says Pound in his conversation with Hall. Talking on its own isn’t elastic enough when the material being talked about is writing. Here, anxieties about the writer’s artificial stance under question are relieved by the subtle give-aways of the slow game. “I never knew anyone who had such a passion for words who had so

much difficulty in saying things as I do” (Hall 1961) Moore confesses in the final published version of her *Review* interview. Yet she’d already had ample opportunity to feel her way into making a claim she might not have identified otherwise. While avoiding, head on, the slippery slope of the readers’ desire for authenticity, through revision, she and others show themselves instead in whispered asides caught on tape and scribbles in the margin, consumed by the creation that defines them.

It’s this unique texture of the literary interview that not only gives it a peculiar aesthetics but transforms these encounters into aesthetic objects. They are a labor of creativity, connection and sometimes of love that culminates in a thing of beauty, which nevertheless bears being held up to scrutiny and finally comes into contact with the world. Writing is, as Joan Didion tells Linda Kuehl, a “hostile” act. It involves “trying to make somebody see it the way you see it.” It is, she continues “always tricking the reader into listening to a dream” (Kuehl). Coercion can be as much a part of the interview as it is of writing fiction. Yet with the presence of another person, the dream becomes a social one, in which an exchange between two people constitutes the interview’s world, with all its etiquettes that enable release. The beauty within the object of the interview, smoothed over from its drafts, lies in this act of textual and social mediation. When achieved successfully, it eliminates the “trying” and highlights the “dream” that makes us all unaware of what we are doing, even as we do it. It’s the crystalline comments like Didion’s that have stood the test of time and not just for the interested reader but for critics, too, who may not see a new side to a writer but who do hear the objects of their study speak out of turn. Didion’s trickery is not an obvious part of her masterful aesthetics of transparency, but it rings even truer here, where new structures take hold. Its value is returned as something more nuanced than a statement or divulgence, which complicates the advice never to trust what a writer says about their writing. What the interview reveals more poignantly, in its words and its design, is the constant proximity of any writer’s isolated act to a social one, hostile or otherwise.

It is fitting, then, that this essay is being published in a “forum” for ideas and voices, one whose archives are made up not only of scholarly articles but of interviews and, perhaps most significantly, of conversations. For this is what the interview has now become, an open dialogue in which inter-

viewer and interviewee are joined by an active audience who bring their own questions and comments to bear on a talking point that far exceeds the interest of any individual. In today's climate the interview has exceeded itself as America's challenges continue to snowball, consuming whole communities and societies, and then engulfing the nation. Those direct question and answers between a collective of two no longer seem enough to provide the solutions we need. Yet miraculously, if we look closely enough, interviews still contain an aesthetics that is remarkably in touch with the social world. They hold together that unusual paradox precisely because they contain sociality within the remit of a single, coherent object, allowing it to play out its many possibilities as a space to practice intimacy through difference; a heightened capsule of self-awareness; a utopian space of collaborative creativity. Through this, the literary interview reminds us of the fundamental and immense capacities of what talking to one another can achieve when listening is built into its structure. "What I assume, you shall assume," exclaims Whitman, infamously, "for every atom that belongs to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 29). Closeness to the self's many parts arrives through others. Though what we share with them can only ever be "as good" as what we have, leaving just enough space to sustain and explore what separates us. At its best, this is the literary interview, which continues to remind us of bonds bound by the oldest craft and of what it means to speak about things that can hardly be spoken of.

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