"The Literary Interview as Autobiography"

Jerome Boyd Maunsell
Kingston University, London

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5463/ejlw.5.194

Keywords: Interviews, conversations, autobiography

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 (1924-33) 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.

This article was submitted to the European Journal of Life Writing on November 27th 2015 and published on June 22nd 2016.

Author Biography

Jerome Boyd Maunsell, Kingston University, London
Jerome Boyd Maunsell is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Kingston University, London, and prior to that a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Life-Writing Research, King’s College London. He is the author of the biography Susan Sontag (2014), published by Reaktion Books in the Critical Lives series. The main focus of his work is on Modern and Contemporary literature, especially the interactions between fiction and the forms of life writing.