



Usha WILBERS

The Invisible Hand of the Editor:
The Making of the *Paris Review* Interview

Abstract

Although frequently cited in literary biographies, the *Paris Review* interviews are not often placed in the context of the medium for which they were originally produced. This article highlights the editorial processes which preceded the publication of the interviews, as opposed to reading the end products as autonomous texts which border on (auto)biography. In *The Paris Review's* case these processes could take up years and involved a range of mediators, including editors, interviewers and literary agents. Whether the involvement was extreme, as in the case of the Allen Ginsberg interview, or more subtle, as in the case of the Ralph Ellison interview, the *Paris Review* editors made a critical imprint on the interview series, which has so far remained invisible to readers of the journal.

Abstract

Si elles sont fréquemment citées dans les biographies littéraires, les interviews de la *Paris Review* sont en revanche peu souvent envisagées dans le contexte du medium pour lequel elles ont été réalisées à l'origine. Cet article se penche sur le processus éditorial qui précède la publication des interviews, en rompant avec la lecture du résultat final et publié comme texte autonome qui touche au domaine de l'(auto)biographie. Dans le cadre de la *Paris Review*, ce processus était susceptible de prendre plusieurs années et d'impliquer un nombre considérable de médiateurs, qu'il s'agisse des éditeurs, des intervieweurs ou encore des agents littéraires. Que l'implication de l'auteur ait été forte, comme dans le cas de l'interview d'Allen Ginsberg, ou plus subtile, comme dans le cas de celle de Ralph Ellison, les éditeurs de la *Paris Review* ont un impact critique manifeste sur la réalisation de la série, qui demeure toutefois invisible pour le lecteur de la revue.

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THE INVISIBLE HAND OF THE EDITOR

The Making of the *Paris Review* Interview

The Paris Review is a literary magazine that was founded in Paris in 1953 by American writers Peter Matthiessen and Harold Humes. Under the guidance of editor-in-chief George Plimpton it became one of the most successful American literary periodicals, publishing early work by Philip Roth, Geoffrey Hill, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Jonathan Franzen. Plimpton died in 2003, but the magazine continues to be an active player in the American and, though less so, European literary field, for instance awarding promising writers with the Plimpton Prize and more established *literati* with the *Paris Review* Hadada prize.¹ Despite its considerable track record in prose and poetry, the magazine is best known for its interview series. From the maiden issue on each *Paris Review* featured an interview with canonical poets, novelists and playwrights such as E.M. Forster, T.S. Eliot and the notoriously reticent William Faulkner; later also decidedly more middlebrow writers like Woody Allen and Stephen King. In many cases these interviews were the most extensive ever given by the authors. By placing the writer on centre stage, *The Paris Review* consciously ignored the cultural codes of the age. In an era dominated by literary criticism, the periodical chose not to publish critical essays and reviews, but instead let writers reflect on their own work. In doing so, the editors implicitly rejected the ideology of New Criticism which promoted the autonomy of the literary text over biographical criticism. As George Plimpton explained: “In an Age of Criticism, when so many magazines were devoted to explanations and exegesis of contemporary texts, the notion was to skip the indirect approach and seek out the authors in person to see what they had to say.”² Additionally, when in 1967 the author was pronounced dead by literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, the editors in a way resurrected him by placing his or her craft and creative mind in the spotlight.³

The *Paris Review* interview sparked off a new genre in literary interviews which would become a “cliché of literary quarterlies”, copied by magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Playboy*.⁴ As John Rodden argues in *Performing the Literary Interview* (2001), the editors “established an artistic pedigree for the English-language literary interview.”⁵ A key aspect of the *Paris Review* interviews is that they are, as Plimpton once stated, collaborations instead of confrontations. They invite performances from authors in which they can invent and fashion themselves. In some cases, the authors were given

1. For an overview of *The Paris Review*'s current activities, as well as an archive of all the interviews, see: www.parisreview.com.

2. George PLIMPTON (ed.), *The Paris Review Anthology*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1990, 281.

3. See: Usha WILBERS, “The Author Resurrected: *The Paris Review*'s Answer to the Age of Criticism”, in: *American Periodicals*, 2008, 18, 2, 192-212.

4. Donald HALL quoted in Hilton KRAMER, “The Literary View: Remembering Poets”, in: *The New York Times*, 1978, April 30.

5. John RODDEN, *Performing the Literary Interview. How Writers Craft their Public Selves*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2001, 5.

so much control over the final version that the interviews essentially can be interpreted as semi-autobiographical self-portraits.⁶ However, although frequently cited in literary biographies, the *Paris Review* interviews are not often placed in the context of the medium for which they were originally produced. Every interview is the end product of an extensive, intricate process which in *The Paris Review's* case could take up months or, occasionally, years. It often started with the editors approaching suitable interviewees who had in some cases written books about their subjects or, indeed, whom the interviewees had specifically suggested. Several of the *Paris Review* editors conducted the interviews themselves, or requested acquaintances to do so. The process involved one or more interview sessions, several rounds of revisions—by interviewers, interviewees and members of the editorial board—and were sometimes postponed for years to ensure that the result was satisfactory to the editors. Documents from the *Paris Review* archives show that during various stages the editors corresponded with literary agents and publishers who acted on behalf of the authors.⁷ By reconstructing the roles that such mediators played before, during and after the “input” and “output” stages—the interview as it was performed and the interview as it was published—we get a unique view on the various factors that shape a literary interview. In this article I focus on the editorial processes which preceded the publication of the *Paris Reviews* interviews, as opposed to reading the end products as autonomous texts. The selected interviews were published between 1953 and 1973, which count as the formative years of *The Paris Review* and consequently of the interview series. By using a range of editorial documents—consisting mainly of correspondence and manuscripts—I will reconstruct the processes that produced the *Paris Review* interviews and bring to the fore a crucial, but often overlooked element: the impact of editorial interference. Whether the involvement was extreme, as in the case of the Allen Ginsberg interview, or more subtle, as in the case of the Ralph Ellison interview, the *Paris Review* editors made a critical imprint on the end products, which has so far remained invisible to readers of the journal.

By putting the editor on centre stage, this research contributes to a current tendency in the interdisciplinary field of American and European periodical studies. Recent conferences and special issues of journals have focused increasingly on so-called “backroom issues”, shedding light on the production of journals and the historically marginalized actors involved in the processes of periodical production. Projects that highlight the mediating position of the editor are Laurel Brake and Julie F. Coddell's collection *Encounters in the Victorian Press. Editors, Authors, Readers* (2004) and Marianne Van Remoortel's research project “Agents of Change: Women Editors and Socio-Cultural Transformation in Europe”, which is funded by the European Research Council and will run from 2015 to 2020. In his 2012 essay “The Role of the Periodical Editor: Literary Journals and Editorial Habitus”, Matthew Philpotts proposed a typology of periodical editors by elaborating on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus. In doing so, he was the first to seriously conceptualise the qualities and strategies which periodical editors employ to function in, and profit from, the literary market. Philpotts highlights “the crucial role played by the editors of literary journals as highly influential agents in the literary field” and stresses how markedly under-researched this cultural phenome-

6. I elaborate on the (auto)biographical character of the *Paris Review* interview in the aforementioned article in *American Periodicals*.

7. The *Paris Review* archives are housed at Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City.

non is.⁸ He builds his research on the assumption that literary periodicals, as cultural agents in their own right, are characterized by a “common habitus” and that the role of the individual editor is “to maximize the sums of capital acquired and maintained by the journal.”⁹ Philpotts distinguishes between three types of editorships—charismatic, bureaucratic and mediating editorship—and suggests: “From these typological analyses, it is clear that the ideal editor would possess a highly differentiated, multiple habitus encompassing intellectual, economic, and social dispositions which allow him to mediate the network of forces of which he is the focus.”¹⁰ *The Paris Review’s* management of the interview section was by no means “ideal”, with various attempted interviews never seeing the light of day or failing to generate the expected forms of capital. However, the editors actively employed intellectual, economic and social skills to ensure that each interview reached its potential, for instance by textually revising the interviews, negotiating deals with literary agents and seeking out the ideal interviewees from their networks. As the following analysis of these strategies demonstrates, their input was crucial for the success of *The Paris Review’s* interview series.

1. THE IMPACT OF THE *PARIS REVIEW* INTERVIEW

As the case studies about Ginsberg and Ellison will show, for the featured authors the *Paris Review* interview was often an important document in their careers, a unique personal statement in which they could present their views on the craft of their writing. However, the interview series was equally important for *The Paris Review* itself, as it formed an integral part of the magazine’s identity and provided a much-needed source of economic and symbolic capital. Between 1953 and 1973 every *Paris Review* issue included at least one interview. The following table demonstrates that although no more than two interviews were published per issue, they increasingly covered more pages:

Date	Issue	Interviews	Series	Pages
Summer 1953	2	1	Art of Fiction	8
Summer 1955	9	1	Art of Fiction	21
Spring/summer 1957	16	2	Art of Fiction	29
Spring-Summer 1959	21	1	Art of Fiction	25
Summer-Fall 1961	26	2	Art of Poetry/Fiction	47
Summer-Fall 1963	30	2	Art of Poetry/Fiction	33

Table 1. A biennial overview of *The Paris Review’s* interview section between 1953 and 1973.¹¹

8. Matthew PHILPOTTS, “The Role of the Periodical Editor: Literary Journals and Editorial Habitus”, in: *The Modern Language Review*, 2012, 107, 1, 40.

9. *Ibid.*, 42.

10. *Ibid.*, 43.

11. This table presents one issue out of every two years. I have selected Summer issues (except for 1973) to provide a consistent overview.

As the table demonstrates, over time the interviews became longer: E.M. Forster's interview in the maiden issue counted twelve pages, whereas the conversation with Anthony Burgess in issue 56 was spread out over no less than 46 pages. This seems to have been a direct result of the fact that the interviews were valuable sources of income and prestige. Only five years after the series' inception, the first collection of interviews, entitled *Writers at Work*, was published. Malcolm Cowley praised the series and observed that up until the *Paris Review* interview the genre had never been successful: "This is the best series of interviews with writers of our time that I have read in English. The statement, though sweeping, isn't quite so eulogistic as it sounds. As compared with Continental Europeans, the English since [James] Boswell, who was Scottish, and the Americans from the beginning have seldom been good at literary interviews."¹² As the success of the interview series grew, literary historians, journalists and the *Paris Review* editors themselves attempted to explain its success. Broader socio-cultural circumstances seemed to play a role, as in hindsight the interviews may be seen as early exponents of the celebrity culture that would develop throughout the late-twentieth century and would increasingly dominate popular—and high-brow—literature. The *Paris Review* interviews offer unique insights into the personality of authors, which, as English critic John Wain argued, fit within the concerns of the age in which the concept matured. During the 1960s American culture experienced a change from objectivism to subjectivism, as personal or confessional documents such as autobiographies and journals gained prominence and readers longed to get acquainted with the personalities behind the literary personas. According to Wain, the interviews, as biographical portraits, responded to this cultural change:

Our age has very few frameworks of ideas, very few scaffoldings of moral, metaphysical or social axiom. The typical modern man lives from one experience to the next, enjoying or enduring each one as it comes without managing—without, perhaps, even trying—to relate them to an overall pattern of duties or rights, or rewards or punishments, of causes and effects. ... At this point the modern man turns to his oracles. And one of these oracles is the writer.¹³

The fact that the *Paris Review* interviews offered authors a unique platform and catered to the reader's hunger for celebrity profiles may partly explain their popularity. Yet, as I will argue below, another crucial factor—one that is not immediately obvious to readers of the *Paris Review* interview—was the editorial process that preceded each publication, which enticed even the most reticent authors to collaborate. This, in turn, made sure that the periodical could boast a seemingly endless list of renowned writers, which will have stimulated the series even further.¹⁴

2. EDITORIAL PROCESSES

In the period between 1953 and 1973 each *Paris Review* interview was the result of an extensive process that comprised several stages, and involved a chain of

12. MALCOLM COWLEY, "How Writers Write", in: MALCOLM COWLEY (ed.), *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interview*, New York, Viking Press, 1967 & 1976, 3.

13. JOHN WAIN, "Consulting the Oracles", in: *The New York Times*, 1967, November 26, BR4.

14. See appendix 1 for a full overview of the interviewees between 1953 and 1973.

mediators. Some of these mediators, like the authors' literary agents and publishers, would play a decisive role in guiding the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and negotiating with the editors. In several of the cases the interview took place in one sitting, but George Plimpton—who was keenly aware of the economic and symbolic capital that the interviews generated for *The Paris Review*—would often insist that interviewers go back to the authors to add questions and make sure that the opportunity was exploited to the full. The editorial documents in the *Paris Review* archives provide insight into how interviewers approached the practicalities surrounding the interview. Before the onset of electronic devices in the 1960s, two or sometimes three interviewers would visit the author, each interviewer writing down answers and comparing versions later on. Interviewers were paid between 50 and 200 dollars, depending on travel expenses, the amount of time needed and whether an interview with the author was difficult to come by, as in the case of Boris Pasternak. The interviewees were generally not paid for their efforts, although Vladimir Nabokov and Robert Graves were exceptions. Not one of the interviewers who contributed an interview between 1953 and 1973 had any professional experience with interviewing, which may have been an advantage: it meant that the interviewers were likely to be more respectful of their subjects and that they did not pose a threat to the interviewees. After the initial conversation had taken place and the interviewers had written out a transcript, the interviewees were given ample opportunity to edit and revise the first results. In many cases additional questions were posed and transcripts were continuously revised. The level of involvement from the interviewees was at times surprisingly intense: some authors even typed the final draft of the interview themselves. As a result, the views of the interviewee were represented as he or she intended to and misquoting was avoided. Most interviewees gladly seized the opportunity to keep control of the end result. Eudora Welty, for instance, was quite anxious to see to it that the interview represented her ideas, as her agent wrote to George Plimpton: “Eudora is very insistent about seeing galleys of the piece before used since she says she made very extensive revisions which she typed up and sent you—and she wants to be quite sure these are all in properly.”¹⁵ This level of control was a key aspect of the success of the *Paris Review* interview. Authors could suggest interviewers, for instance their own biographers, which assured that the interviewer was knowledgeable about the topic, came to the interview well-prepared and invested in the event. These conditions created an all-important climate of trust and seemed to open the way for a more personal approach. In many interviews discussion about the technical craft of writing goes hand in hand with insights into the creator's mind. How disarming the result could be is illustrated by the interview that William Flanagan conducted in 1966 with Edward Albee, author of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Flanagan posed questions such as “Do you feel that in your own particular case, on the basis of a single big-time commercial hit, that you have been raised to too high a position?” and Albee gave honest answers: “I've certainly done myself considerable damage, though not as an artist, by attacking critics, because they can't take it.”¹⁶ The *Paris*

15. Diarmuid Russell of Russell & Volkening, Inc. Literary Agents to George Plimpton, TLS, 18 February 1972, File Eudora Welty Interview, Box 5 J Train Correspondence (L-Z) 1965-1973, The Paris Review Archives, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

16. William FLANAGAN, “Art of Theater IV: Edward Albee”, in: *The Paris Review*, 1966, 10, 39, 107.

Review format seemed to stimulate such confessions, yet the process that preceded the publication may have been equally important.

A poignant example is the interview that Plimpton himself conducted with Ernest Hemingway for the Spring 1958 issue. After the initial meeting, *The Paris Review's* editor-in-chief added a stunning 32 pages of additional questions. Correspondence between Hemingway and Plimpton demonstrates that throughout the process the author had misgivings about the interview: "This morning started at 7:00 and to 10:30 I've done 3 questions. The trouble is that I'm so profoundly un-interested in them and can feel you are too. We are both way past this question and answer thing."¹⁷ In the end result Hemingway's aversion towards some of Plimpton's questions shines through, as it does in this excerpt:

Interviewer: Is emotional stability necessary to write well? You once told me that you could only write well when you were in love. Could you expound on that a bit more?

Hemingway: What a question. But full marks for trying.¹⁸

To a casual reader of the interview Hemingway's attitude may seem rather blunt, but knowledge of the extensive process involved in creating the end product puts the author's curtness into perspective. He simply seems to have been overwhelmed by the effort, dedication and stubborn perseverance of the *Paris Review* editors.

3. CASE STUDIES

A clear illustration of how the dedication of the *Paris Review* editors paid off is the interview that Tom Clark, the journal's poetry editor between 1964 and 1973, conducted with Allen Ginsberg. Published in issue 37 (1966), it won the exuberant praise of *International Herald Tribune* writer Irving Marder, who criticized most of the other *Paris Review* interviews featured in a 1972 *Writers at Work* collection:

Dropping his clown's mask, Ginsberg talks with sustained brilliance and lucidity about poetic technique and anything else that enters the mind. His talk is laced with vivid homosexual imagery that is never likely to make the *Reader's Digest's* "Toward a More Picturesque Speech" column—it may, in fact, have caused the *Paris Review* editors to swallow hard a few times before printing the piece back in the late 1950s [sic]. Exhibitionism, no doubt, but accompanied by a boyish (girlish? Goyish?—no, that won't do) playfulness that is hard to resist.¹⁹

The success of the interview is mainly due to the immense effort spent by Clark. He interviewed Ginsberg in Cambridge, England, in 1965 and spent several months preparing the publication. After the initial meeting, Clark did a follow-up, as he recalls:

17. Ernest HEMINGWAY to George PLIMPTON, ALS, 4 March 1957, File Ernest Hemingway, Box Temporarily Unprocessed Material, The Paris Review Archives.

18. George PLIMPTON, "Art of Fiction XXI: Ernest Hemingway", *The Paris Review*, 1958, 5, 18, 68.

19. Irving MARDER, "A New Book on Literary Lights", in: *International Herald Tribune*, 12 September 1972, TPR Clippings, Box 4 John Train 1966-1973, Corr. A-K, Maxine Groffsky, The Paris Review Archives.

Later on, once I'd transcribed and edited and typed the interview, I met up again with him in London to go over the results. Gregory Corso, a trickster by nature, was present at that meeting, and gave Allen a hard time about exposing his heart to *The Paris Review*. Allen however loved the interview and always later on considered it his prime testament.²⁰

At one point Clark was in possession of 62 single-spaced pages and he put great effort in revising the bulky manuscript, as he recalled in 2002: "I probably put more time in on editing Allen's 'conversational' replies into that compact and condensed narrative form than I later did on writing my first novel, *Who Is Sylvia?*, and the results show it."²¹ It can be argued that when the editing process is as extensive as in this case, the authenticity of the self-portrait becomes debatable. The Ginsberg interview essentially can be interpreted as a co-production between the author and his interviewer, and yet Clark's contribution is hardly mentioned in the reviews and reproductions of the interview.

In the case of the Ginsberg interview, both interviewee and the periodical benefited greatly from the end result. In the 1950s, *The Paris Review's* literary selections were perceived as being as relatively conventional. In 1959 E.P. Dutton & Co. published *The Best Short Stories from The Paris Review*, containing fourteen pieces, five of which had appeared as part of novels after their first publication. Next to *Paris Review* favourites such as Terry Southern and Evan S. Connell, the collection featured four European authors: Italo Calvino, Samuel Beckett, Antoine Blondin and Dutch author Gerard Kornelis van het Reve. To mark its publication, Donald Barr wrote an in-depth review of the collection for *The New York Times Book Review*:

The fourteen stories are very various—which testifies to the editors' love of literature—but they do leave a composite impression of old-fashionedness. It is not that they are derivative in a pallid or lazy way; only a few of them are that. It is not that they are reactionary. But many of them seem to follow the rule that the strongest influence on an author is what he read in his adolescence.²²

Barr takes the *Paris Review* stories as being exemplary of American fiction at the end of the 1950s, when short stories tended to be conservative and neglected to comment on modern life. Critic John Leonard branded *The Paris Review's* fiction section as "always civilized and rather tame", but asked: "Is there anything wrong with licking modernism as if it were an ice-cream cone? [*The Paris Review's*] excuse is quality."²³ Up until the mid-1960s—under the guidance of poetry editors Donald Hall (1953-1961) and X.J. Kennedy (1962-1964)—*The Paris Review's* poetry section was equally solid but traditional, with its emphasis on formalism. When Tom Clark took over, the periodical gained an editor who, according to George Plimpton, "made up for modernist lost time."²⁴ With this statement George Plimpton most likely refers to Clark's promotion of free verse and progressive poetry that moves

20. Author interview Tom CLARK, 2 August 2002, via email.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Donald BARR, "Lively and Unprecious", in: *The New York Times Book Review*, 1959, November 1, BR40.

23. John LEONARD, "Books: Robust Survivor", in: *The New York Times*, 1981, May 29, Column 3, 26.

24. George PLIMPTON (ed.), "The Paris Review Sketchbook", 1981, 23, 79, 385.

beyond the modernist uses of form and tradition which had been advocated by Hall. Ginsberg's candidness and free use of language in his *Paris Review* interview marked another step away from conservatism. It gave a sense of "edginess" to an overall mainstream publication. For Ginsberg himself it was also an important document, as Clark observed:

He was self-consciously stating 'for history' his self-image and program as a poet, as fully and completely as he was able. He understood the importance of this forum. No poet I've met has had a more sensitive understanding of the nuances of media representation than Allen. He was entirely aware of the breaking of class barriers that his entry to *The Paris Review* represented.²⁵

Although interviews with Ginsberg had appeared in *The Sullen Art* and *City Lights Journal*, never before did he make a clearer statement about his position as a poet. In this respect, it is also an important document about the Beat generation. The strength of the interview is Ginsberg's perception of and insights into poetic technique, uncovering it not as a necessary burden, but as an intuitive, raw force: "The poetry generally is like a rhythmic articulation of feelings. The feeling is like an impulse that rises within..."²⁶ Ginsberg's passion contrasts sharply with the composed musing of older colleagues like, as he talks about drugs, Hindu mythology, Jazz, William Blake and his own monumental poem "Howl". For the poet the interview offered the opportunity to channel all his energy, intelligence and power in a carefully edited portrait. For *The Paris Review*, it was one of its most vibrant publications.²⁷ Ginsberg gladly made use of the platform to a mainstream audience that *The Paris Review* offered and Clark's dedication played an instrumental role in the road to the publication.

Another author who consciously used the *Paris Review* interview series to make a personal statement was Ralph Ellison. Compared to the production of the Ginsberg interview, the editorial influence here was more subtle, but no less crucial. George Plimpton was conscious of the fact that an interview with Ellison would be important for both the author and the periodical. The interview, published in the eight *Paris Review* issue in 1955, coincided with the author being awarded the *Prix de Rome* and his reputation as one of America's most important new novelists was already set. To ensure its success, the editors carefully selected the interviewers, eventually choosing Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard. Chester and Howard were part of what was known as "the *Paris Review* salon", a network of American exiles in Paris who were associated with the journal. They had managed to gain the trust of the author, which proved to be crucial for the openness that Ellison displayed. Plimpton seems to have had a clear vision of what the interview should be, namely a political statement of sorts:

He answered a most difficult series of questions related to the Negro artist in the American society, saying at the end of it all that it was about time such

25. *Ibidem*.

26. Tom CLARK, "Art of Poetry VII: Allen Ginsberg", in: *The Paris Review* 1966, 10, 37, 23.

27. In issue 38 the editors placed a footnote to the Ginsberg interview, in which the poet addresses the *Paris Review* reader and follows up on his experiences with the drug LSD, to repair some of the "legislative miscomprehension of the LSD boon." ALLEN GINSBERG in "Footnote to Allen Ginsberg Interview, Issue #37", in *The Paris Review*, 1966, 10, 38, 149.

questions were asked and answered, that he was glad to have been given the opportunity. He was a most knowledgeable and voluble man, certainly a credit to his peoples.²⁸

The interview gave Ellison the opportunity to speak about a highly sensitive manner: his racial heritage and position as an African-American author. Three years earlier his novel *Invisible Man* (1952)—a manuscript page of which was included in the interview—had made a strong impact on the literary world. In his review of *Invisible Man* critic Irving Howe commented on the racial implications of the novel:

Some reviewers, from the best of intentions, have assured their readers that this is a good novel and not merely a good Negro novel. But of course *Invisible Man* is a Negro novel—what white man could ever have written it? It is drenched in Negro life, talk, music: it tells us how distant even the best of the whites are from the black men that pass them on the streets; and it is written from a particular compound of emotions that no white man could possibly simulate. To deny that this is a Negro novel is to deprive the Negroes of their one basic right: the right to cry out their difference.²⁹

In the *Paris Review* interview the author took the opportunity to elaborate on some of the more complex facets of the race issue. Although the interview took place almost 60 years ago, the reader can sense Ellison's excitement at being offered this platform. He opened the interview with a strong proclamation: "Let me say right now that my book is not an autobiographical work."³⁰ The politics of being an African-American writer came up time and again. When asked about the value of Negro folklore, Ellison answered: "One ironic witness to the beauty and the universality of this art is the fact that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and find in the singing an exaltation of their own humanity."³¹ On the writings of African Americans he stated: "If the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he's lost the battle before he takes the field. I suspect that all the agony that goes into writing is borne precisely because the writer longs for acceptance—but it must be acceptance on his own terms. ... Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience."³² Ellison discussed social realism, Ernest Hemingway, art, and American fiction, about which he stated:

All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance. ... [The search for identity] is THE American theme. The nature of

28. George Plimpton to Thomas Guinzburg, Sadruddin Aga Khan, Peter Matthiessen and Donald Hall, TL, 22 October 1954, File George Plimpton Correspondence, Box 13 Founding Documents, The Paris Review Archives.

29. Irving Howe's review of *Invisible Man*, originally printed in *The Nation* on 10 May 1952, was reprinted on the following website: <http://universityhonors.umd.edu/HONR269J/archive/HoweReview.htm>

30. Alfred CHESTER and Vilma HOWARD, "The Art of Fiction VII: Ralph Ellison", in: *The Paris Review*, 1955, 2, 8, 56.

31. *Ibid.*, 61.

32. *Ibid.*, 59.

our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society and it is an integral part of its development.³³

The Ellison interview, in short, contained some of the strongest political and cultural statements published in the self-proclaimed apolitical *The Paris Review* to date. In the pre-publication phase, the editors—Plimpton especially—had strategically orchestrated its success by giving Ellison the platform at the right cultural moment, and also by carefully selecting the interviewers. After the interview session had been completed, this editorial interference continued, as Plimpton provided comments on the early drafts and corresponded multiple times with Ellison, who gladly seized the opportunity to be closely involved in the editing process.³⁴ The fact that Ellison later reprinted the interview in *Shadow and Act* (1964) suggests that the author considered it an important statement.

4. FAILURES

Despite these successes, in its first twenty years the *Paris Review* interview occasionally led to disappointing results, and for several different reasons. For instance, timing proved to be an important factor in the success and failure of the interview section, as sometimes the editors approached authors just in time, or just too late. Boris Pasternak, Charles Olson, John Berryman, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Jean Cocteau, George Seferis and others were all interviewed shortly before they died—in some cases, the *Paris Review* interview was their last publication. When reviewing the John Berryman interview one critic observed: “This is the last interview John Berryman, a very good poet, gave before leaping from a bridge. In retrospect, Berryman’s words seem scary.”³⁵ American poet E.E. Cummings died while an acquaintance of Patrick Bowles was preparing an interview with him.³⁶ Colette died before the editors could approach her, as did Paul Claudel. John Steinbeck died before his interview was even published, prompting Plimpton to exclaim: “The great man died *working* on the thing, can you believe it.”³⁷ Timing was also important in another respect. At the time of William Fifield’s interview with him, Jean Cocteau’s reputation as a literary figure had reached stellar heights and he played an important part in the re-evaluation of pictorial and fictional art which had taken place in Paris. The interview with Cocteau, published in issue 32 (1964), was a prestigious coup for the editors. William Carlos Williams, however, was interviewed at such an advanced age that he was years past his creative peak (he had virtually stopped writing at the time) and the interview reflects this. In contrast, the editors felt that they had interviewed Françoise Sagan too early in her career. She appeared in issue 14 in 1956, which also featured an interview with Danish author Isak Dinesen. The juxtaposition of these

33. *Ibid.*, 58 and 65.

34. Ralph Ellison to George Plimpton, TLS, 22 November 1954, File Ralph Ellison, Box 1 Correspondence Group I, A-H, The Paris Review Archives.

35. George FRAZIER, “Sudden Endings”, in: *The Boston Evening Globe*, 1972, 30 June, File TPR clippings, Box 4 John Train 1966-1973, Corr. A-K, Maxine Groffsky, The Paris Review Archives.

36. Patrick Bowles to George Plimpton, TLS copy, 16 September 1962, File Letters sent by Paris Editor, Patrick Bowles, Box 3 Correspondence: Misc. Editorial, 1953-1964, The Paris Review Archives.

37. George Plimpton to Maxine Groffsky, TLS, 28 December 1968, File John Dos Passos, Box 6 1967-1973, The Paris Review Archives.

two authors created a sharp contrast: in 1956 Dinesen was considered to be a grand dame of literature, while Sagan's reputation rested on two novels—*Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) and *Un Certain Sourire* (1955)—only. What emerges from the interview is that as a young writer, Sagan had not yet fully developed her ideas on the craft of writing and her inclusion in the interview section seems somewhat of a compromise. The interviewers, *Paris Review* editors Robert Silvers and Blair Fuller, regretted the publication of the interview:

I do think it is an error to elevate Sagan to the art of fiction ... I think it's important to bear in mind that scarcely any serious critic—none that I know of—thinks her top notch at hit point. The English reviews of the last book weren't enthusiastic. She's got a minor talent which may or may not develop. She's popular, yes, so are Mickey Spillane, A.J. Cronin, Kathleen Winsor etc. who are bad writers.³⁸

Although Sagan and Dinesen were an exception, it can be argued that between 1953 and 1973, women writers were underrepresented in the *Paris Review* interview series, though they had a *Writers at Work* edition devoted to them. The first woman to be interviewed was Dorothy Parker in issue 13 (1956). In the interview she made the significant statement “I am a feminist,” which proved to be a pivotal moment in her career.³⁹ Nine female poets, novelists and playwrights followed, but the sixty male authors published between 1953 and 1973 far outnumbered them.⁴⁰ In this sense, the *Paris Review* interview series between 1953 and 1973 can hardly be called representative of American—let alone European—letters of the mid-twentieth century.

Then there were authors whom the editors chased after, sometimes for years, yet who simply refused to be interviewed. One of those was Jean-Paul Sartre. Although his life companion Simone de Beauvoir was interviewed for issue 34 (1965), Sartre himself never appeared in *The Paris Review*. The *Paris Review* editors tried to arrange an interview for years and failed, while *Playboy's* Madeleine Gobeil seemed to get easy access to both Sartre and de Beauvoir, even seducing Sartre to talk about de Beauvoir.⁴¹ In 1954 the editors had come close: an interview originally designed for the *Times* almost fell in the hands of Plimpton. That same year François Erval, board member of *Temps Modernes* and “a very good friend” of Sartre, was also considered as an interviewer, yet all of these attempts fell through, seemingly because Sartre refused to be published in the *Review*.⁴² A similar hunt was undertaken for an interview with Samuel Beckett. In 1961 the editors hoped to get to Beckett via Paris resident and *New York Times* critic Pierre Schneider. Several

38. Robert Silvers to George Plimpton, TL (undated), File Silvers to GAP II, Box 13 Founding Documents, The Paris Review Archives.

39. The importance of Parker's statement in *The Paris Review* is further discussed in a dissertation by Barbara Lynne Hahn entitled “‘I'm a feminist': Gender Issues in Selected Short Stories by Dorothy Parker”, Florida Atlantic University, 1992.

40. The female writers featured in the interview section are Dorothy Parker, Isak Dinesen, Françoise Sagan, Marianne Moore, Mary McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter, Lillian Hellman, Simone de Beauvoir, Anne Sexton and Eudora Welty.

41. Madeleine Gobeil to George Plimpton, ALS, 14 November 1963, File J, Train, Silvers, Guinzburg 1, Box 1 Correspondence Group I, A-H, The Paris Review Archives.

42. According to some, *The Paris Review* had right-winged tendencies, which may have been an important reason behind his refusal. Morton to George Plimpton, TLS, 15 April 1954, File M Train, Silvers, Guinzburg, Box 2 Correspondence group I, I-Z, 1953, The Paris Review Archives.

years later *Paris Review* editor Maxine Groffsky advised Plimpton to contact *Saturday Evening Post* writer John Kobler, who had written an unpublished article on Beckett for the *Post*, but to no avail.⁴³ It appeared that the author simply disliked the idea of a “formal” interview, as *Paris Review* editor Blair Fuller observed.⁴⁴

In addition to timing problems and the occasional questionable choice that the editors made, the *Paris Review* format itself also proved to be problematic at times. Because of the tight control that interviewees had on the end product, it can be argued that some are hardly present in the interviews (critic Wilfred Sheed would say of the Nabokov interview: “The mask of a Vladimir Nabokov is wedded seamlessly to his face: the persona in the interview is as real and unreal as Humbert Humbert himself”).⁴⁵ Moreover, the extensive editorial process hampered the spontaneity of the interviews. A reviewer of *The First Time* (1975), a book about the sexual experiences of celebrities based on interviews, criticised this lack of spontaneity as follows:

The authors [Karl Fleming and Anne Taylor Fleming] could give a few pointers to the people who conduct interviews with writers, such as those in *The Paris Review*, for instance, in which the questions are so unspontaneous and cramping that the writer being ‘encouraged’ never seems to develop any personal momentum, or get carried beyond the confines of the question into the further recesses of his own feeling.⁴⁶

The criticism seems justified: the editorial manuscripts demonstrates that only a few of the extensively edited interviews exuded spontaneity. George Plimpton commented the following on the these failures: “There are ... interviews you think are going to be quite marvellous, very verbose, and yet on the printed page it’s all discombobulated without the depth you thought it might have.”⁴⁷

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Notwithstanding the occasional failures, the popularity of the *Paris Review* interview series proved to be enduring, which suggests that the magazine filled a lacuna left by other American and European periodicals. By breaking away from the dominance of literary criticism and going straight to the source, i.e. the author, *The Paris Review* offered a valuable alternative to the critical essay or review. Analyzing the editorial process that preceded each publication helps to understand the series’ success and failure. It is questionable whether the interviewees would have opened up as they did if they had not received the extent of control that the *Paris Review* editors offered them. Additionally, the dedication of the interviewers and

43. Maxine Groffsky to George Plimpton, TLS, (undated), File Groffsky–Plimpton Correspondence, Box 5 J TrainCorrespondence (L-Z) 1965-1973, The Paris Review Archives.

44. Blair Fuller to Marion Capron, TL, cc, 15 May 1961, File André Deutsch, Ltd., publisher, Box 11 Commercial and Financial Records, The Paris Review Archives.

45. Wilfred SHEED, “Introduction”, in: *Writers at Work: Fourth Series*, New York, Viking Press, 1977, X.

46. Anatole BROYARD, “A Kiss, a Rude Awakening”, in: *The New York Times*, 1975, September 2, 29.

47. George PLIMPTON in David APPLEFIELD, “Interviewing the Interviewer”, in: *Frank*, 1996, 15, 9.

Plimpton's perfectionism made sure that many of the interviews reached their full potential. Whether we read the interviews as literary criticism, authorial profiles or even self-portraits, it is clear that the extensive editing process which shaped them defies a straightforward interpretation. For instance, knowing how much time and effort Tom Clark spent in revising the Ginsberg interview inevitably leads to questions about the authenticity of the poet's self-portrait, as it borders on biography. Additionally, the tight control that writers like Eudora Welty and Vladimir Nabokov wielded over the interview process is perhaps as revealing as some of their comments in the published version, as it exposes the authors' self-awareness of their public persona. These examples demonstrate what can be gained when the *Paris Review* interviews are studied in the context of the medium for which they were initially produced. Indeed, I would argue that studying the involvement of various mediators in these interviews is indispensable for their future readers, as the pre-publication process at times reveals more about the interviewee and the interview than the final product.

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Appendix

The *Paris Review* interviews, 1953-1973

	Issue	Interviewer(s)
1	E.M. Forster	P.N. Furbank / F.J.H. Haskell
2	François Mauriac	Jean le Marchand
3	Graham Greene	Martin Shuttleworth / Simon Raven
4	Irwin Shaw	John Philips / George Plimpton
5	William Styron	Peter Matthiessen / George Plimpton
6	Alberto Moravia	Anna Maria de Dominicis / Ben Johnson
7	Joyce Cary	John Burrows / Alex Hamilton
8	Ralph Ellison	Alfred Chester / Vilma Howard
9	Georges Simenon	Carvel Collins
10	James Thurber	George Plimpton / Max Steele
11	Nelson Algren	Alston Anderson / Terry Southern
12	William Faulkner	Jean Stein
13	Dorothy Parker	Marion Capron
14	Isak Dinesen	Eugene Walter
	Françoise Sagan	Blair Fuller / Robert Silvers
15	Thornton Wilder	Richard H. Goldstone
16	Truman Capote	Pati Hill
	Robert Penn Warren	Ralph Ellison / Eugene Walter
17	Frank O'Connor	Anthony Whittier
	Angus Wilson	Michael Milgate
18	Ernest Hemingway	George Plimpton
19	Henry Green	Terry Southern
20	James Jones	Nelson W. Aldrich Jr.
21	T.S. Eliot	Donald Hall
22	Lawrence Durrell	Julian Mitchell / Gene Andrews
23	Aldous Huxley	George Wickes / Ray Frazer
24	Robert Frost	Richard Poirier
	Boris Pasternak	Olga Carlisle
25	Robert Lowell	Frederick Seidel
26	Ilya Ehrenburg	Olga Carlisle
	Marianne Moore	Donald Hall
27	Mary McCarthy	Elisabeth Niebuhr

28	Henry Miller Ezra Pound	George Wickes Donald Hall
29	Katherine Anne Porter	Barbara Thompson
30	S.J. Perelman Evelyn Waugh	William Cole / George Plimpton Julian Jebb
31	Louis-Ferdinand Céline Norman Mailer	James Sherwood/Darribehaude/Guenot Steve Marcus
32	Jean Cocteau William Carlos Williams	William Fifield Stanley Koehler
33	Lillian Hellman	John Philips / Anne Hollander
34	Yevgeny Yevtushenko Simone de Beauvoir	Olga Carlisle Madeleine Gobeil
35	William Burroughs	Conrad Knickerbocker
36	Saul Bellow	Gordon Lloyd Harper
37	Blaise Cendrars Allen Ginsberg	Michel Manoll Thomas Clark
38	Arthur Miller	Olga Carlisle/Rose Styron
39	Edward Albee Harold Pinter	William Flanagan Lawrence M. Bensky
40	Jorge Luis Borges	Ronald Christ
41	Vladimir Nabokov	Herbert Gold
42	Conrad Aiken	Robert Hunter Wilbur
43	Jack Kerouac	Ted Berrigan
44	Robert Creeley Isaac Bashevis Singer	Linda Wagner/Lewis MacAdams, jr. Harold Flender
45	John Updike	Charles Thomas Samuels
46	John Dos Passos	David Sanders
47	Robert Graves	Peter Buckman / William Fifield
48	E.B. White John Steinbeck	George Plimpton / Frank H. Crowther John Steinbeck / editors
49	Charles Olson	Gerard Malanga
50	George Seferis	Edmund Keeley
51	Pablo Neruda	Rita Guibert
52	Anne Sexton	Barbara Kevles
53	John Berryman	Pter A. Stitt
54	Jerzy Kosinski	George Plimpton / Rocco Landesman

THE MAKING OF THE *PARIS REVIEW* INTERVIEW

55	Eudora Welty	Linda Kuehl
56	Anthony Burgess	John Cullinan