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The Imagined Interview: A Literary Genre

Abstract: While “press interview” is an umbrella term defining all journalistic interviews that circulate among different media, I propose to call the literary genre that writers create by imagining the interviewer, the interviewee, or both as fictional characters “imagined interview.” By analyzing examples within the French, Italian, and English literary fields in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I identify three types of the imagined interview based on the interlocutor who is invented in each of them—the self-interview, the impossible interview, and the fictional interview. In addition, I examine the imagined interview in books, radio, and theater because, like the press interview, the imagined interview spans different media. Re-staging some characteristics of the press interview, the imagined interview does not merely represent the writer’s revenge on the press, exemplified in this genre by the interviewer’s caricature. Above all, it shows us the different uses that literature and the press make of the same principle of character investigation: indiscretion.*

Keywords: literary interview, fictional interview, imaginary interview, self-interview, media, press, literature, radio, theater, contingency, plurivocity, reliability, authenticity, authorship, co-authorship, indiscretion

From Press Interview to Imagined Interview

The interview is a transmedia genre, as we find and recognize an interview independently from the various media in which it appears (Fastelli 26). The term “press interview” is used here to indicate the set of journalistic interviews conducted through different media forms—radio, TV, newspaper, etc. The press interview is, in short, a journalistic and transmedia genre, in which we can identify certain characteristics, namely contingency, reliability, authenticity, plurivocity and co-authorship.

Firstly, it is important to stress that the interview is an encounter that takes place in a well-defined space and time. Think of the first press interviews transcribed in newspapers, where journalists wrote a prologue introducing the

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importance of the interview and describing the place and occasion of the event, in order to help the reader situate the dialogue (see Thérénty, “Parole”). Later, this prologue remained and took an oral form on radio and television (Lejeune 126). The dialogue within the interview also bears traces of the moment in which it occurs, for example through references to recent events, to issues currently debated, and texts just published—in short, the dialogue itself displays the “here and now” of a society.

Secondly, the interview aims at providing the audience with a trustworthy message. This does not mean that the interviewee’s opinions are taken for granted. On the contrary, the journalist often contests the claims of the interlocutor. Rather, the principle of the interview itself is to be a serious and reliable communicative event for the audience. On the one hand, a printed interview should faithfully report the dialogue that actually took place between the journalist and the respondent. On the other hand, in a recorded interview—on radio or TV—the editing should not alter the meaning of the exchange and the speech (Marin 13). The press interview is based on a pact of trust between the journal and the public, the broadcaster and the audience.

At the same time, each interview takes place between two people who meet to talk to each other. In a press interview, the interlocutors should not pretend to be someone other than themselves or to speak for someone else. As far as any interaction between people implies the performance of certain roles, which Erving Goffman notably studies taking the model of the theater into account, even writers perform some codified role during an interview (Rodden 6–19). Nevertheless, when journalists ask authors about their personal life and convictions in an interview, the writer is addressed not as a fictional character, but as a *persona* in their physical presence. In addition, even interviewers are commonly perceived by the audience as real people—that is to say—individuals belonging to society.

As a dialogue, the interview contains at least two alternating discourses. The questions and answers are interwoven in oral discourse as well as in the written one, even when the latter results from a shorthand transcription of a recorded interview: the interview is defined as such by the intertwining of the interviewer’s questions and the interviewee’s answers. In any case, the interview always holds a bi-vocal discourse or even a plurivocal one when there are more than two interview partners. Here, the traditional plurivocity of some types of discourse, as Mikhail Bakhtin claims, is not integrated into a unique voice or discourse, as in the case of the narrator in the novel, who presents different points of view under the same expression. Both discourses of interviewer and interviewee remain visible, and this concrete plurivocity affects the whole discourse.

Indeed, the dialogue involves two speakers who collaborate in its construction (Yanoshevsky, *L'Entretien littéraire* 218). Its published version therefore belongs to both. The press interview can be defined as the construction of a shared message addressed to a virtual addressee (Morin 72). Each interlocutor is credited with a relative number of utterances, but the ownership of the whole interview is ultimately a matter of double authorship.

The imagined interview is a literary genre which stages, as a fictional narrative, the situation of an interview. We will see that the imagined interview borrows some of the constraints from the press interview. The imagined interview identifies, among the five features listed above, those to be imitated and those to be faked.

It is possible to identify three categories of imagined interviews according to the interlocutor who is turned into a fictional character: the interviewer, the interviewee, or both.

When the interviewer is a fictional character imagined by the author, we call the interview a self-interview—the appropriate name to define an interview that a writer conducts with her/himself. The interviewee can also be a fictional character, for example when the author plays the role of the interviewer who converses with an imaginary interlocutor such as a ghost from the past or a mythological hero. We call this interview “impossible” (based on the title of a seminal Italian broadcast series analyzed here) since the writer is always publicly recognizable beyond his task as interviewer but still interacts with an interlocutor who cannot exist in the moment of the dialogue. The label “fictional interview” identifies the situation in which both interlocutors are fictional characters. This regularly happens when the imagined interview is included in a novel, but we can generally find it in any form of fiction.

We will now look at select examples of each of these three categories, taking into consideration case studies of three specific media: the printed book, the radio, and the theater. In this way, I would like to demonstrate that this two-fold perspective—the interlocutors as fictional characters and the media involved—is essential to the understanding of the mechanisms that regulate and animate this genre.

Self-Interviews—The Interviewer as a Fictional Character

Let us start with the first category, the “self-interview”: in this case, in addition to the role of the interviewee, the author assumes that of the interviewer. The result is a literary text that reproduces the bi-vocality and contingency of a press interview but avoids “co-authorship” in the sense that questions are both asked and answered by the author. Nevertheless, we will see that the self-interview claims to carry a public message as reliable as the one of the press interview.

Most published self-interviews have minimal degrees of invention. Their interviewer does not rise to the rank of a real fictional character, but remains a simple textual function, a ‘shifter’ for continuing the self-interview. In most cases, the invented interviewer has no name and appears only to present the questions; during the dialogue, no references give the character an identity; the extent of speech is limited and the questions serve the writer’s ideas, if they are not limited to assertive interruptions or interventions that reinforce what has just been said. This less inventive use of the interviewer’s character reveals above all the desire for control that an author tries to exercise over the social discourse usually managed by the press. The most relevant effects are that of losing the structure of the dialogue despite showcasing it. The text appears as a bi-vocal discourse but hides the author’s monologue. At the same time, the authenticity of the interviewee—the author—cannot be contested, while the other—the interviewer—fades into an anonymous journalist, whose role, opinions, and ability to address questions seem no longer relevant.

Let us have a look at some examples of the most common self-interviews in book format. *Interviews imaginaires* by André Gide (1943) represents the earliest model of the self-interview in French culture, but I want to discuss simpler cases of self-interviews before moving to a more complex example. If we consider *Entretien sur des faits divers* by Jean Paulhan (1945) and *La nuit sera calme* by Romain Gary (1974), the interviewer is given a figurehead who is said to have agreed to the dialogue. Gary’s fake interviewer has the name of his longtime friend, François Bondy, who acts as a chronological alibi (see Amossy; Cornuz 145), because his biography coincides—temporally—with that of Gary. We find the same ruse in Michel Butor’s *Le retour du boomerang* (1988). Presenting the volume, the writer states that Béatrice Didier, editor of the series including the book, is his interviewer, but in another note she herself confesses that Michel Butor is the sole author of the dialogue.

The Swiss author Jacques Chessex has produced the most eloquent example of a self-interview as introspection. Published posthumously but completed before his death, *L'interrogatoire* (2011) can be interpreted as a self-analysis in the form of an interview. Chessex represents himself as chased by an *interrogateur*, a nameless voice that embodies a divine and inescapable power, like the one of an ecclesiastical inquisitor or of a judge acting in a court. Although this voice comes from the ego (“one is always questioned by oneself,” 109, trans. mine), its first appearance is through a beam of light (11) that hits the victim in the face and leaves the persecutor in the shade, as if in a police interrogation. By bringing the role of the interviewer closer to the grim figure of a police investigator, *L'interrogatoire* makes explicit the analogy with the sadism of the media that Chessex had experienced as real public defamation. Therefore, he decides to clean up his reputation which has been unfairly sullied by the press: “I say what it is. I don't wear masks” (55, trans. mine). In order to defend himself and “illuminate” his own truth, the self-interview aims to project a “clear light” on Chessex's “human depths” (102) as opposed to the cruel spotlight of the press.

Why are the fictional interviewers such poor characters in these self-interviews? The self-interview aims at the self-portrait, which disguises the author's monologue as a fictional confrontation with the press. In this sense, the interviewer ceases to be an intermediary between the author and the public and becomes a mere verbal function that allows the writer an inner interrogation of their own life, both public and private. In short, the self-interview accounts for an author who renounces the public confrontation with a journalist, even though the dialogic structure of a press interview remains entirely in sight. It is exactly the self-interview's appearance as a press interview that accounts for the reliability of a different message—a self-portrait alone, instead of an actual interview with a journalist.

In some self-interviews, the interviewer can, however, become a fictional character who performs his duties as a writer's interlocutor. Although composed of different self-interviews that were published separately in *Le Figaro* between November 11, 1941, and June 2, 1942, once put together in a volume (several editions appeared in 1943) the *Interviews imaginaires* by André Gide expose a series of fictional encounters between the writer and journalists. Initially Gide employs a fictional interviewer he had previously created in 1905 for three texts published in the magazine *L'Ermitage*. ‘Summoned’ again, in *Interviews imaginaires*, the journalist returns and visits Gide, who, in the meantime, has grown older. Surprisingly, during the tenth self-interview, “L'interviewer interviewé,” Gide decides to interrogate the interviewer and has an unexpected revelation: “let me say that I am not who you believe. I am his brother. It is curious that you do not pay

attention to people's age" (357, trans. mine). In fact, Gide claims that the journalist was twenty in 1905, while this time (in the early 1940s) the interviewer is thirty-eight. As the interviewer observes, he could not be the same person. Moreover, this journalist is not the last of the interviewers who visit Gide, as another appears right afterwards and is amazed that during the previous meetings his colleagues did not interrogate the writer about certain topics and authors.

Changing his interviewers allows Gide to represent different types of interviewer characters—the interviewer can be hostile or friendly, a competent critic or an occasional journalist, a professional figure in compliance with the task entrusted to him by the press or a novice writer who uses the interview with a great author as a springboard for a career in literature. The variety of interlocutors in Gide's self-interviews and their endless substitution point out that the interviewer's task, which is to be at the service of the author, cannot be accomplished, as an interviewer capable of that task does not exist, neither in fiction nor in reality. Therefore, Gide seems to impose upon himself the responsibility of giving the audience a reliable and authentic message of his proper authorship under the guise of a press interview.

Gide's example shows that, in order to create an authentic sense of the writer, the fictional representation of the interviewers must replace actual journalists with the author interviewed, who can perform both roles of the interview's interlocutors.

Another writer, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, invents a self-interview that equally aims at taking control over the interview, but this time it concerns a replacement of the journalistic style of the press interview with the literary style of the author himself. In *Entretiens avec le Professeur Y* (1955), the dialogue that fakes an interview between him and an interviewer is an example of his own style of writing, which can give a more reliable image of Céline himself than any other press interview.

The book was written in the post-World War II period, when Céline's public life and career faced strong ostracism and when the author found himself dealing with his rehabilitation after exile, prison, and conviction for anti-Semitism. Previously, in the thirties, during the promotion of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, he presented himself as a "physician for the poor," that is, as a writer outside of the traditional system of literature and its social elite. Then, before and during World War II, he contradicted himself by publishing anti-Semitic pamphlets, where he proposed his work as that of an authentic French writer who opposes the "Hebrewization" of language (Meizoz 103). Upon his return to France in 1951, Céline was considered the "traitor, the genocidal man [...] whom people mustn't talk about!" (32, trans. mine), and therefore needed to restore his own image. His

solution to the problem was to promote his modernist style of writing. His fictional interview *Entretiens avec le Professeur Y* served this purpose. The interviewer in this book is a fictional emissary of the press, who helps the writer deliver a defense of his own style. In this sense, the self-interview builds a real “aesthetic manifesto” (Cornuz 72), in which Céline pleads the case of his own style.

In the Arts-et-Métiers district, the author meets Professor Y, a grotesque and highly caricatural interviewer, who is potentially also a writer or perhaps already a failed one (he, too, like Céline, has submitted a manuscript to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.) When given a fictional identity and personality, interviewers are often portrayed as intrusive or incompetent. David Martens and Christophe Meurée call the self-interviews that turn the interviewer’s character into a caricature “playful fiction” (86), as in Céline’s *Entretiens*.

The interviewer is the ideal character to act as the vehicle of Céline’s literary style because his comic connotations make him the perfect representative of a mediocre audience—the press and the public—that Céline aims to persuade. In fact, Y echoes the discourse of his interviewee: “he repeated all my words to me” (80, trans. mine). Near the end of the *Entretiens*, Y is involved in a paradoxical exercise: taking a kind of summary quiz, made of the most important keywords of the previous dialogue, he must answer without mistakes (110–11). Even if he does not immediately understand Céline’s ideas, Y has been provided with minimum requirements as a fictional character. For example, he is a musician and, therefore, can follow Céline comparing the ellipsis of his writing with the pauses of music and, in the end, he agrees with the writer that the melody cannot be imagined without such moments of silence (96).

At the end, the interviewer is perfectly tamed. He becomes a docile puppet in the interviewee’s hands. Réséda (the interviewer by his name) has by now taken on the role of the imitator so well that he reads reality itself as described in a page from Céline: “He sabotaged the whole subway!... he put breaks everywhere!... anarchist monster!... sold writer!... traitor!...” (102, trans. mine). The interlocutor could have played the role of the intermediary between Céline’s opinions and the public interest but ends up taking on the task of the author’s defense. Obviously, this is a convenient way for Céline to conduct a self-interview and, at the same time, to represent a situation in which he deals with mass media and public exposure. Céline simulates an interview situation to contrast public opinion and to shift focus from his current negative image as a “collaborateur” during World War II to his innovative style of writing, thanks to which he was supported by his publisher, Gallimard (see Lacroix 119–22). Instead of defending himself as a political victim, Céline depicts himself as the most influential writer of his era by virtue of his creative power and turns his fictional interview into a

weapon against the press and the literary scene of his period. His interview should be read as a more reliable image *of* himself rather than the one offered by the press *about* him.

***Impossible Interviews*—Inventing the Interviewee on Air**

The “impossible interview” designates interviews that an author imagines having conducted with others. In this paragraph, we will focus on those that a writer “holds” with historical figures. When broadcast on radio, the interview is always a dialogue that takes place in front of an audience at a precise time. An imagined interview on radio pretends to be a “live interview” between two voices whose plurivocity is clearly perceived by the public. Nevertheless, the double presence of an actor who plays the role of the interviewee and the answers prepared by the writer deprives the character who is being interviewed of any authenticity.

An exemplary case study of this model is the series *Interviste impossibili*, an Italian radio broadcast that, in the mid-seventies, stood out for a large group of writers involved in its creation and for its popularity among the public.¹ The formula of *Interviste impossibili* is very simple: a writer interviews in first person, with their own voice, a figure from the past or a mythological character played by a professional actor.

Evidently, the impossible interview can be interpreted as an example of “the presentification of past worlds,” which is about “experiencing the past” by “techniques that produce the impression (or rather the illusion) that the worlds of the past can become tangible again” (Gumbrecht 94). Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s formulation is particularly relevant for this type of imagined interview, as “the presentification of the past” accounts for—as he claims—“the possibility of ‘speaking’ to the dead or ‘touching’ the objects of their worlds” (123).

The idea of an imaginary dialogue with the dead is an ancient one that dates back to an Ancient Greek genre (e.g. *Dialogues of the Dead* by Lucian) and is still present in the twentieth century (see Boni). The impossible interview takes up some of its features from other previous genres. There is the effect of a journalistic scoop because the interviewer manages to interrogate a dead person and

¹ Several *Interviste impossibili* are accessible on YouTube and RayPlay Sound (<https://www.raiplaysound.it/playlist/leintervisteimpossibili>). All of them are transcribed in a volume edited by Lorenzo Pavolini (2006), from which all of the quotes are taken.

brings their voice to a contemporary audience. In addition, the idea of communication with the afterlife comes from séances and the technical means used for pretending to speak with the dead (e.g. electromagnetic connections, see Kittler 12). Finally, the characterization of the interviewee as a ghost has already been outlined in the same mediumistic transcriptions, such as *Le Livre de Tables: Les séances spirites de Jersey* (1835–55) by Victor Hugo, defined as the “best collection of interviews” by Pierre Michon in the preface to his own collection of interviews *Le Roi vient quand il veut* (2007) (see Seillan 23).

The impossible interview finds a more suitable technology in the radio than in any other mass medium. As historians of media have pointed out, the radio has a peculiar power of suggestion over its audience (see Sconce), not so much because of its orality, but rather thanks to the invisibility of the speaking voice, “for the essence of broadcasting consists just in the fact that it alone offers unity by aural means” (Arnheim 135). Even without the speaker’s physical presence, the audience “considers the sequence of phases of thought at the same time as the congruence of people taking part in a discussion”; this is “the most elementary and most primitive illusion that hearing transmits” (189). The “acoustic bridge” (195) that radio creates manages to connect different voices in a unique event of sound and, in the case of *Interviste impossibili*, it is apparently built between the domains of life and death, between the now and an eternalized time.

The voices of the past, which radio makes us hear and with which, in the *Interviste impossibili*, it makes us speak, are built by discourses that are already included in our cultural traditions. In order to appear recognizable to the listeners, the interviewees interpolate direct quotations in their answers, report documented references on their life and social background, and respond in a detailed manner with respect to their own history. In short, the writers make characters speak by following the traces that they have already left in written sources and others provided by historiography. These quotes from historical sources foster the effect of a reliable message coming from the past.

The magazine *Radiocorriere* announces the new format in 1974 as follows: “through these imagined conversations each interviewer will try to give an unconventional interpretation of the character and of the events of which she/he was the protagonist or witness” (Libera 17, trans. mine). However, this “interpretation” goes beyond that purpose. The interviewee will undergo an anachronistic transformation because, in addition to their own knowledge of the past, they are made aware of issues concerning current events that happen in the present of the broadcast (1974–75) and that the writer—the interviewer—projects onto them. The most evident reference to current times is the feminist movement of the seventies when divorce (1970) and legal abortion (1978) are broadly debated in Italy

across the media. It is interesting to consider some impossible interviews with important women of the past in which the writers perform their role differently depending on whether they are men or women.

For example, Umberto Eco interviews Dante Alighieri's muse, Beatrice, whose character as an interviewee is composed of references from *Vita Nova* and *Comedia*, and is also provided with an anachronistic capacity of self-analysis that makes her a feminist activist. She is endowed with the knowledge of current agitation against the patriarchal system; she is aware of the debate that exploded in the Italian magazine *Effe* in the days of broadcasting; she is preparing actions against the chauvinistic power of Dante and other past author in the afterlife. In short, Beatrice wants to free herself from Dante's exploitation (Pavolini 224–30).

The same happens in other impossible interviews. Edoardo Sanguineti manages to reach Dante in the afterlife by telephone. He wants to interview Paolo Malatesta, but Francesca da Rimini, initially mistaken for a telephone operator, cannot put Paolo on the phone, just like in Dante's inferno where the lover couldn't start a conversation and got lost in sobs before the poet (*Inf.* V). Sanguineti can do nothing but listen to Paolo's weeping while Francesca protests at being regarded by posterity as the cause of their shared divine punishment (217–23). Cleopatra, interviewed by Luigi Santucci, tries to free herself from the prejudices of those who have portrayed her as a calculating and dangerous woman for centuries. She claims her own vitality as a woman and refuses to be considered by history as the cause of her beloved Antony's downfall (100–06). Joan of Arc is interviewed by the same author in a sort of afterlife inquisitorial process (239–45). Facing Santucci, she claims her revolutionary nature: she dresses like a boy, shaves her hair, and resists male bullying. Finally, Joan of Arc claims to have inaugurated "this thing that should spare me from burning for unpopularity": feminism (244, trans. mine). Zelda Fitzgerald, in her own way, tries to demolish the memory of her that history has given us (709–18): she was not only the wife of the famous writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald, but also a transgressive and uninhibited feminist who rebels against her interviewer, Fabio Carpi. Zelda retorts that, as a feminist, she has the right to protest against the yoke imposed on her by the famous writer (714).

The male writers basically seem to move backwards when they play the role of interviewers. They start the interview recklessly by using their own voice, but usually end up stammering, trembling, or losing sight of the purpose of their interviews. So much so that Joan of Arc, as soon as she grasps the discomfort of Luigi Santucci, scolds him: "Don't tremble and don't get pale" (240, trans. mine). The same interviewer, as he faces Cleopatra's charm, fears falling prey to her and then runs away exclaiming in a languid tone: "goodbye, devil spirit..." (106). The

interviewer's final escape actually stages a sense of general inadequacy that characterizes all male interviewers confronting the female characters they invent.

We therefore see that, unlike in the self-interview, in the impossible interview the author acts as someone else. Despite their voice, which is the sensible and unmistakable mark of their presence, male interviewers abandon the writer's role to play an unqualified intermediary, which voluntarily diminishes the figure of the interviewer. On the one hand, they content themselves with taking the place of a *de facto* unaware interviewer, who speaks from a social situation for which he is not responsible. On the other hand, the writers use the interview to avoid expressing an opinion on the present, because they delegate to their interviewees the task of expressing friction with the current times. The whole impossible interview loses the authenticity of an actual interview because none of the interlocutors speak for themselves. In the end, male interviewers become similar to the representatives of the press against whom writers react in the form of the self-interview. The impossible interview is a type of the imagined interview that the authors employ to represent interviewees who stand up to the interviewer, while the self-interview serves them to show the journalist how his task can be better accomplished (from their point of view).

In this series, male interviewers cannot express the same complicity and empathy with the female characters they imagine interviewing, as it happens, for instance, between Maria Luisa Spaziani and Catherine the Great. There, we listen to two women speaking the same language and agreeing on their different historical situations. The interviewee has an anachronistic knowledge of the present just like any other character. She defines the second half of the twentieth century as the "first great youth" (333) of women. But Catherine finds in her interviewer a conniver because she shares the same preoccupations and goals of taking a stand. The character asks while replying to a question: "Aren't you a feminist? Why should a question about children interest [...] the mothers more than the fathers?" Spaziani can do nothing but agree and be complicit: "Touched! It is true..." (336, trans. mine).

One reason for this difference in the role played by women writers is a historical one: in 1977, at the conference "Women and Information" held two years after the *Interviste impossibili*, statistical data were given stating that only 8% of Italian professional journalists were women (Buonanno 6). Except for the prominent figure of Oriana Fallaci (1929–2006), renowned worldwide for her role as a war correspondent and interviewer for the print media, there are only few examples of Italian female interviewers on radio for women writers to emulate in the seventies. In the cases of female interviewers interviewing women of the past, the imagined interview becomes a self-conscious meeting between women who feel

the need to discuss their historical position. Female writers do not seem to forget who they are—contemporary authors in a patriarchal system that dates back ages—and claim their gender-coded authorship in the dialogue. By addressing their specific experiences as women, female writers can turn the impossible interview into a friendly dialogue between peers who share the same destiny rather than into a journalistic duty.

Nevertheless, from a broader perspective, being either a male or a female writer does not make any difference concerning the characterization of an anachronistic interviewee. When talking to the dead guarantees the scoop of the meeting, the presence of ghosts seems here to take control of the dialogue. To the extent that the interviewee knows what the interviewer also knows, the conduct of the dialogue shifts to the advantage of the interviewee. Ultimately, the dialogue with the dead does not really proceed in one direction from our present to the past, because the latter is already altered by the former. Rather, the *Interviste impossibili* put us in dialogue, neither with our present nor with our past, separately, but with their encounter, which takes place between text and interpretation, between historical memory and current standpoints.

Fictional Interviews—The Imagined Interview on Stage

The theatrical stage has offered interviews with invented characters since the early years of the twentieth century. According to Marie-Ève Thérénty, these first appearances are comic creations, “joking interviews” (“Frontières”). Octave Mirbeau early wrote a one-act farce titled *Interview*, which was performed at the Parisian theater of the Grand Guignol February 1, 1904, and included in the book *Farces et moralités* in the same year. Between interviews with very important personalities (a politician and a king) and from a position of power (“I am the press! [...] It denounces, judges, condemns”, trans. mine), the journalist mistreats an innkeeper to extort from him the confession of a crime. The ending reveals that it is a case of mistaken identity. All dialogues revolve around a misunderstanding between interviewee and interviewer and related linguistic jokes.

In the third type of imagined interview, the “fictional interview,” questions and their answers take place in an imaginary world where they are attributable only to fictional characters. Both the interviewer and the interviewee belong to the same world of fiction. The interlocutors cannot be seen as authentic in the sense that they have no reference to the external world.

While invented, the fictional interview preserves plurivocity and the idea of an occasional communication, characteristic of the press interview. In a fictional interview in the theater, two actors develop a dialogue that takes up a segment of the performance. In the case of transcripts of oral interviews, the meeting has already taken place and the reader only encounters a re-creation, which follows certain rules in transcribing the words spoken by the interviewer and interviewee: “the literary interview is above all an *event* [...] that precedes the writing of the dialogue and its reworking into a publishable text” (Yanoshevsky, *L’Entretien littéraire* 76, trans. mine). In contrast, on stage, the script is prepared by the author in advance. The actors interpret it as a “live interview,” a dialogue in synchrony with listening and watching the show: “the temporal relationship to the enunciation scene is reversed: anteriority of the bodies in the presence for the interview, posteriority for the theater” (Cornuz 185, trans. mine). Thus, the fictional “live interview” in the theater (or in the impossible interviews on radio) aims at reproducing the contingency of a press interview.

Both of the following case studies of a fictional interview in the theater encourage the “live interview” form to broaden temporal and historical insights respectively. In the first piece, the performance of the interview takes place offstage (even if it is the main topic of the piece) and, thus, even though the “live interview” is not visible to the audience, allows a general consideration of the entire life span of an author. The second piece exemplifies an imaginary encounter, provided by the interviewer. While this conversation is localized neither in space nor time and the dialogue moves freely across different eras, the audience experiences it as a “live interview” that focuses on pivotal moments of the character’s story and even links it with the global history of his country.

Our first example is Natalia Ginzburg’s 1989 comedy *Intervista*, which revolves around an interview that a young journalist fails to complete, once in the first act and another time in the second act. The journalist’s name is Marco Rozzi; he visits the house of a famous intellectual, Gianni Tiraboschi, located in the Tuscan countryside. Marco Rozzi explains that he wants to publish an interview with him to bring prestige to a new periodical. However, on neither occasion does Tiraboschi show up to the agreed meeting. Failing twice holds Marco’s unsuccessful interview up to ridicule.

Nonetheless, the third act puts the comedy aside and features more serious dialogues. A time leap takes us from 1978 to 1988. Reunited, the characters talk about the passing of time and the changes in their lives. In the absence of the interviewee, who is a ghost that never appears on stage, Marco talks to the other two residents of the house: Tiraboschi’s younger sister, Stella, with whom Marco has a quick and unsuccessful love affair, and the dissatisfied partner of

Tiraboschi, Ilaria. Their friendly dialogues give a positive value to Tiraboschi's absence during the first two acts. There are multiple occasions that highlight his international fortune as an author and a keynote speaker: "He always travels from one point of the world to another. They always call him. It is incredible how much they call him" (Ginzburg 9, trans. mine). But in the third act, his absence from the scene reveals a turnout in his reputation. Ilaria tells Marco that Gianni no longer leaves his room because of depression. While his life proceeds from success to oblivion, that of the two younger characters—Marco and Stella—goes the opposite direction. Marco has become a successful screenwriter. Stella is freed from the tutelary deity of the house—Ilaria—and, after being in Rome with Marco (between the first and second act) and returning to the villa in Tuscany (second act), becomes a much sought-after cook for her recipes in poor cuisine (35).

Over the years, the villa, which could be the setting of the "visit to the great writer" (Nora), transforms into a decaying mansion, as the characters comment, and the audience witnesses the reversal of fortune in favor of the naïve journalist and at the expense of the illustrious author. We learn that the ex-interviewer stole his latest lover from the great intellectual between the second and the third act. While Marco's life, after an unsuccessful departure as editor and publisher, has finally found financial security and a respected social position, Tiraboschi's world has collapsed onto itself. Even his books are no longer reprinted (39). At the end, the play focuses on the dissipating action of time, inhibiting the previous irony.

The promised meeting between interviewee and interviewer will finally take place, but offstage away from the public eye; it is only announced by Ilaria. Tiraboschi has surprisingly accepted, despite his precarious health situation, to speak with Marco, who had not managed to meet him in person even during his relationship with Stella. At this offstage interview, the ex-journalist will have to look back at his past, momentarily return to the role of the young admirer he had been and honor the defeated Tiraboschi with a final gesture—the interview, significantly ousted from the scene:

You will sit next to Gianni [...] and ask him [...] all those questions that journalists usually ask. [...] You must now behave as if time has not passed. As if you were who you were, a reporter, and as if he was who he was, when he never slept, he wrote his books all night, and they called him at dawn and got in his car and drove from town to town. When he talked to people, standing on all those stages. [...] People listened to him enchanted, and applauded [...]. So people will remember him. Gianni Tiraboschi. The famous Gianni Tiraboschi. One of the best men that Italy has ever had. (45, trans. mine)

The third act of *Intervista* takes place under the sign of melancholy, which differs from the repetition and return of comic situations in the first two acts. The last interview with Tiraboschi effectively represents the opposite of a press interview. We know that a journalistic interview is closely linked to a specific occasion: it respects social norms and obeys the ephemerality of fame. Marco's interview with a disgraced intellectual, instead, goes beyond such objectives. Marco knows that he can do little to rehabilitate Tiraboschi: "I'm no longer a journalist. I no longer collaborate with any magazine, any newspaper. Nobody remembers my name among the editorial boards" (44, trans. mine).

This fictional interview follows the rules of two genres. As far as comedy is concerned, the courting interview initially elevates the interviewee to the rank of a sought-after celebrity and lowers the journalist to a disastrous position. Regarding drama, the final reversal of destinies fills the gap previously opened between the two characters and, eventually, changes the meaning of the interview from a journalistic event to an act of friendship. Through these different values across the play, the fictional interview becomes exemplary of the trajectory of an author's life.

The second example reuses the genre rules of the impossible interview, but with a significant variation. David Greig's play *Miniskirts of Kabul* (2009) is part of a series designed by Nicolas Kent for the Tricycle Theatre in London: the project, entitled *The Great Game*, focuses on the history of Afghanistan and its renewed centrality in the international arena since 2001. In Greig's piece, the interviewer creates the interviewee like any *Intervista impossibile* on radio, but the whole process of fictionalization is directly stated to the audience. *Miniskirts of Kabul* creates the character to be interviewed during the dialogue, that is, while the play is taking place.

The interlocutors are a nameless British female writer and Mohammad Najibullah, the last president of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The dialogue takes place on UN premises on September 26, 1996: the very day Najibullah died at the hands of the Taliban. The writer acts as a reporter and immediately states that she has not been formally authorized to meet him in his shelter, while a battle explodes in the distance:

What channels did you go through?

This is not a normal visit.

I don't understand.

I'm imagining you.

It wasn't possible to arrange a meeting any other way. (Greig 130)

Unlike the other impossible interviews, the interviewer explains to her interlocutor from the beginning that he is a product of her imagination. The exchange suggests that the imagined interview is a necessity because Najibullah is already dead (“Imagining what it was like to be you. / Was? / Is. / I meant ‘is.’”, 134–35). At the end of the dialogue, while the Taliban troops approach the compound, the writer also tells the interviewee the details of his imminent death. At the same time, unlike the “acoustic bridge” in the impossible interviews on radio, the illusion of a channel between the present and another world is no longer necessary. The impossible interviews’ typical suspension between life and death materializes straight from the writer’s imagination.

Some scenic elements also enhance the power of the imagination. For example, the woman remedies an initial shortcoming: she had not brought a gift for her interviewee and, scolded by him, she thinks of a bottle of whiskey that magically appears on the stage. Najibullah does not protest in light of the confirmation of his invented nature. Made aware of being a momentary invention sprung from another mind, he asks, “What do you want? / Only to talk” (131). The writer replies that she is dissatisfied with the existing biographical sources on the life of Najibullah, so she decides to question him directly to learn more about him and better understand his point of view (134–35). Najibullah points out the aporia of this way of thinking, because according to her perspective, anything he thinks or says is already in the woman’s mind. In addition, he compares himself to his own country, Afghanistan, which has been historically imagined by colonialist countries with tragic outcomes:²

You want everything to be easy? You want me to be like you? [...] My country is the creation of foreign imaginings. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is an imaginary line [...] Every blood conflict in the world today has its origins in the imagination of British surveyors. You come here imagining. You expect me to co-operate? (134)

Then, the dialogue reveals a story that is both personal and national thanks to the cooperation of the interviewee: the events of the country intertwine with the biography of Najibullah, his studies at the university, his years of communist militancy, his work for the secret service, his rise to power through torture and terror up to the relationship with the Soviet Union and its role in the conflict with the Taliban. According to the title of the play, though, the interviewer seems to narrow the topics down according to what interests her above all: women’s

² For such political topics, as a model for *Miniskirts of Kabul*, Maggitti recalls the piece that Peter Morgan created in 2006, based on David Frost’s interviews with Richard Nixon: *Frost/Nixon* (Maggitti 15).

fashion during the Najibullah regime. An interest that seems to disappoint Najibullah: “Have you come all this way—imagined yourself all this way—imagined yourself sitting with me in a city under siege—to ask me about women’s fashion? / I’m interested in how it felt to be a woman in Kabul in the nineteen eighties. / It felt better than now” (141).

The interview overcomes the limited perspectives of both interlocutors. Neither of them has complete awareness of time. On the one hand, the interviewee knows his biography and the history of Afghanistan better than anyone but remains unaware of his final fate; on the other hand, the interviewer has a considerable advantage in knowledge over Najibullah’s death, although she is short-sighted towards the affairs of Afghanistan. The woman’s point of view, culturally located in Western culture, is as useful to Najibullah as his is to her. Making these two plans complementary is Greig’s goal. The dialogue of imaginary characters combines two points of view, giving the imagined interview the value of a historical reconstruction. In short, the fictional interview simulates an interview that happens at a precise moment; nevertheless, the event of the dialogue opens up to both national and biographical history and brings together two distant ideological perspectives.

Conclusion—Reasons for the Imagined Interview

In each of the three types of the imagined interview studied here—self-interview, impossible interview, fictional interview—the authors do not completely break with the conventions of the press interview but replace some of them with literary features. These texts conspicuously maintain the appearance of a press interview by preserving its characteristics.

As we have seen, there is a difference between the types of the imagined interview according to their degree of fictionality. This degree increases from the self-interview to the fictional interview and, consequently, there is a progressive departure from the press interview. First, the self-interview imitates four aspects of the press interview: contingency, plurivocity, reliability, authenticity. Second, the impossible interview emulates three of these characteristics: contingency, plurivocity, and reliability. Finally, the fictional interview only imitates contingency and plurivocity.

These variations show us that the imagined interview does not reject the rules of the press interview altogether—not even in its complete fictional rendering. This happens because the characteristics of the press interview are fundamental in managing the relationship between a writer and the audience.

Modern authors are forced to deal with how the press manages their authorship, but at the same time they want to regain some control over the media by using their own literary style (see Yanoshevsky, “The Interviewer”). While the imagined interview simulates the effective framework of a journalistic discourse, it takes place under the full control of the writer. In fact, the only press interview’s characteristic always absent is the co-authorship of interviewer and interviewee: this cannot be respected in imagined interviews where the real confrontation with a journalist is replaced by a fictional *mise-en-scène* of the interview. If, as it has been written, through the fictional form of the interview, “literature takes its revenge, retaking possession of what has been stolen from it” (Yanoshevsky, *L’Entretien littéraire* 16, trans. mine), then the imagined interview steals a precise form of discourse back from journalism: the press interview.

Such appropriation can only work because literature and the press share a common ground. From the end of the nineteenth century, writers, novelists, and poets have explored without reticence the interiority of their characters and the subjective layers of their lyrical selves. During the same era, the press interview develops from that same expressive core. The ambition of exposing the subject to readers entails an indiscreet look, which means that the individual’s several faces, external images, and latent content have to be perfectly visible and presentable to the public.

Modern novelists, through their narrators, have generally turned this same indiscreet gaze over to their characters. Guido Mazzoni identifies an *inward turn* in the history of the novel after the mid-nineteenth century. Narrative texts turn inward when interest shifts from what everyone can see or hear to what only individuals know, and which the narrative text reveals: a hidden territory of characters, their intimacy becomes the content of the narration (Mazzoni 334–36). Concurrently, the press analyzes public characters with the same indiscreetness. It is the “light of the press” that a journalist characterized by Henry James in *The Reverberator* states as a new paradigm for the penetration of the public gaze into our private life, the *chronique intime* (James, 40–1). As Ponce de Leon explains, “the tendency of reporters and biographers to focus on a subject’s private life” fulfills the interest of readers (104).

This indiscreet gaze finds its counterpart in the press interview, which responds to a more general principle of public life: the demand for indiscretion with which journalism haunts celebrities, a status writers also gain during the nineteenth century (see Salmon). The imagined interview is nothing other than the genre in which this principle of indiscretion—which makes the private accessible to the public—finds an expressive opportunity otherwise separated in two

communicative contexts: on the one hand that of the press, on the other hand that of literary writing.

In short, revelations made by the press relate to those traits of character that the narrator also sees and likewise reveals to the reader. The light that narrative discourse casts on the interiority of its subjects is analogous to the one projected by the press on civil life. Both use an indiscreet look, which makes individuals more interesting by unveiling the secrets they hide, the thoughts they harbor about themselves and other people, and the emotions they are led by. A character's interiority is no longer concealed, neither in the novel, nor in the press, nor in the interview.

With the imagined interview, on the one hand, writers adopt the principle of indiscretion against the interviewer or the interviewee, transformed into fictional characters. On the other hand, having experienced the press interview, they turn an indiscreet look onto themselves. Literary discourse makes this journalistic practice a counterattack, in which the author exposes an image that they would like the media to accept and share (the self-interview). Yet, the writer can create more interesting interviewees who also display conflicts of interpretation, for example about the gender roles of the past (the impossible interview). Finally, in the fictional interview biographical and historical narratives emerge that differ from what appears in a regular press interview. In conclusion, the author of an imagined interview pretends to use the principle of indiscretion as a press device while employing it as a fictional tool. More precisely, the self-interview turns into a self-portrait; the impossible interview creates fictional characters from past figures, mixing historical biographies and current affairs; the fictional interview becomes a dialogue that enters into a relationship with other narrative representations, which now encompasses the entire destiny of a character (Ginzburg) or collective events of Great History (Greig).

It remains to be decided whether the imagined interview's imitation of the press interview's indiscretion aims to increase the circulation of fictional texts within a cultural market that is governed by mass media, starting in the second half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, it is true that, from this period onward, audiences get used to finding fiction in any media form, including audiovisual formats from radio dramas to podcasts, from movies to television series available on streaming platforms. In this sense, the imagined interview can be interpreted as an early invasion of fiction in a territory traditionally occupied by the press, with newspapers and then radio as early forms in this field. On the other hand, not least because an author can be more or less telegenic, certain literary genres are, to a certain degree, particularly suited to adapt their features to the specific codes of the media system. As far as the imagined interview is

concerned, this genre succeeds in taking on several media adaptations thanks to the quality of its simulation of the press interview's characteristics. Ultimately, the literary simulation of the interview follows the need to adapt literature to a cultural system in which it is no longer prevalent as a form of communication that can influence the audience and give it orientation. The imagined interview becomes a successful example of the peculiar hybrid condition of literary genres in the twentieth century. Not only do literary genres intermingle with each other, as the history of the novel has taught us, but they establish deeper relations with other social discourses that emerge from media technologies different from publishing and subsequently explode as new forms of social life for a mass audience. One of those connections between literary and media genres can be found precisely in their function as a means of indiscretion.

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