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In Their Own Words: On Writing in Second Person*

JOSHUA PARKER

Some fifteen thousand years ago, when a painter at Lascaux or at Trois-Frères took brush to cave wall, it was with the consciousness of designing images not only for himself, but, we today assume, also for an Other. Whether or not these images were autobiographical, their author conceived of an experiencing point of view other than his own. If the painted faces of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses later peered back from the darkness of temples at visitors, this, too, was by an artisan's design. Such skill in bringing viewers into "contact" (albeit with a suspension of disbelief) with another lifelike level of existence, metaleptically, through a sort of mimesis of dialogical gaze, long held for viewers something akin to magic. Surely a goal any writer working today might likewise pursue. Or so we might imagine.

In literature, narrators since Beowulf's first "Hwaet!" have underlined both their own and readers' participation in texts by addressing us through apostrophe. The novel's birth pains (along with, in sixteenth to seventeenth century England, the melding of "thou" and "you" into the singular *and* plural "you" of contemporary English) allowed for the further extension of experiments with apostrophe, with authors like Sterne and Fielding playing with texts' focus between diegesis (the story itself) and extradiegesis (the story's telling). Extensions of this personification and animation of the "you" of apostrophic second person address can be traced over the course of western literature through the nineteenth century.[1] The twentieth century

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took things further, introducing a technique grammatically placing "you" in a story world as if "you" yourself were an active character, blurred[2] somewhere between the diegesis and extradiegesis. "Perhaps," wrote Gérard Genette, the story itself, as opposed to narrative discourse, "is already, for us [...] a thing of the past, and we should hurry to consider it as it retires, before it has completely disappeared from the horizon" (Genette, *Figures I* 69; my translation). As narrators again began insisting on their own place, along with that of the narratee, in the story, it has yet, nearly half a century later, to disappear from our literary horizon. Yet fiction over the past decades has more and more insistently emphasized its dependence on discourse.

In this progressive insistence on the act of enunciation itself in creating narratives, Genette notes that it also opens the narrator's metaleptic "capacity to intrude in the diegesis"—a capacity which can also extend to the reader. Genette notes Sterne and Diderot's "incidental call to the reader," which makes of the reader a "sort of acolyte of the author"—yet in a very general sense only. In Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, for example, this "you" is a generalized figure that might be the individual reader or "human beings in general" (Genette, *Métalepse* 94-95). This "'you' of participation" returns, but only erratically (96). Its extension for any length results in extreme form in the most "notorious" case of this kind of thing—Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957), in which, "by the same means" as Sterne and Diderot's apostrophes, this "you" takes the form of a flesh and blood hero (96). By being consistently defined, however, Genette writes, any identification on the part of the reader with the character is excluded (97-98). Genette sees this as a simple extension of the "'you' of participation" already present in the late eighteenth century, which (at least according to Genette's historical examples) progressively extends to longer and longer sections of text over two centuries, until turning back on itself in closure—entirely self-referential. But referring to what self?

Roland Barthes furnished one of the first critical responses to a novel written entirely in second person. "Personally," he in no way believed the second person address Butor used in *La Modification* was

"an artifice of form, an avant-garde variation on the traditional novel's third person." This second person address seemed to Barthes literal: "it is the address of the creator to his creation, named, constituted, created in all its acts by a generative judge." In Butor's novel, he wrote, this address is of capital importance because "it institutes the hero's conscience: it's in hearing himself described by a look that the hero modifies himself" (103).[3] If the death of the author ushered in what we today call reader response theory, one finds, in the above lines, the seeds of an eventual "writer response theory."

While Butor's own comments on his reasons for employing the form were consistently somewhat enigmatic,[4] Georges Perec three years later both substantiated and complicated Barthes's assumptions in commenting on his own recently published *Un homme qui dort* (1967). Using second person in a novel, Perec said, finally "mixes the reader, the character and the author." "I directly address the reader, […] I directly address the character," Perec admitted, but insisted most emphatically that "this 'you' is also an 'I.'" Perec was, he said, trying to speak of himself "in a very personal way, but with a certain distance" (my translation).

As reader response theory indirectly influenced much theory accounting for second person since the 1970s, most studies aimed at understanding how we read "second-person fiction" have developed linguistic or narratological theories focusing on its effects on readers, rather than inquired into why authors themselves choose the form. Yet if *l'auteur* has been effectively dead for nearly half a century, there remain men and women still very much alive, with professional experience as writers, who are capable of speaking quite eloquently on their own reasons for writing in second person. Many of their statements hint at a surprising dissonance between what theorists often tend to assume about the form and what authors themselves experience in creating it.

In the late twentieth century, as American authors, perhaps first inspired by works of Perec, Butor and Calvino, as well as their own Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and Richard Brautigan, had begun

experimenting with full-length "second-person fiction," Brian Richardson proposed that second-person fiction was "arguably the most important technical advance in fictional narration since the introduction of stream of consciousness" (327). What had begun as experimental was soon popularized during the 1980s and 1990s by writers like Jay McInerney, Russell Banks, Stanley Crawford, Alice Munroe, Chuck Palahniuk, Tom Robbins, Pam Houston, Lorrie Moore and Melissa Bank. And while novels written entirely in second person remain a limited genre, the potential for drawing readers seemingly directly into a plot has made second person increasingly popular in introductions to novels and in the short story.

Much theoretical wrangling with "second-person fiction" has examined how the pronoun "you" posits the reader as a character in a diegetic situation—often illustrating, like Genette, how this "trick" of playing with narrative levels, when extended for any length, is "naturalized" by readers so that the "you" is finally "read" as a third person "he" or "she" (cf. Booth 150; Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology*; Passias 199; Bal 216). Eric A. de Haard compares intermittent but fairly descriptive narratorial apostrophe to complete second person narration in *La Modification*, reminding us of critics' repeated comments that the "you" in Butor is soon ignored and read as "he." De Haard proposes that, while Butor's work is technically "true second person," more intermittent second person use (de Haard gives the example of Tolstoy) is actually more powerful in provoking a reader's identification with the figure created through its use. This article will not take up the traditional field of full-length "second-person fiction" texts (a fairly rare bird, in any language or genre) but instead deal with cases falling under Helmut Bonheim's more open definition of second-person narration: narration in which "the 'you' is frequent enough in a section of text that the narrative effect is essentially modified" (73-74). Taken this way, it's little wonder Monika Fludernik has noted that second person used to address "the reader" in contemporary fiction has, in our time, finally reached a point of "conventional inconspicuousness" ("Test Case" 472), contemporary

readers growing so comfortable with extended narratorial apostrophe that they now often go barely remarked on. One possible explanation of this increasing use might be simply the imitation of the vernacular rhythms of spoken word. Eric Hyman, in a linguistic study of second person use in spoken and journalistic American English, notes that it has increasingly become the preferred form (taking precedence over a number of other pronouns and even proper names), falling into overlapping categories he places on a continuum: the vocative-deictic "you," the anaphoric "you," the semi-coreferential "you," the indefinite "you," and the existential explicative "you." Slips into second person in spoken American English are, in effect, according to Hyman, fast becoming the norm in oral story-telling and conversation. Indeed, the "you"-designated protagonist in a text often seems to develop out of an author's desire to give an effect of spoken word, or *skaz*, to the text. Chuck Palahniuk describes his early experimentation as an attempt to move his writing closer to that of spoken language:

> I went into Tom [Spanbauer]'s [writing] group still trying to write in third person, and Tom said, "You know, this is not even very good for what it is. Third person isn't very powerful. [...] Why don't you write the way you speak, write closer to how you tell stories." And that made all the difference in the world for me. I remember going home that night and writing in a vastly different way. (Bures 30)

Yet while part of Palahniuk's notoriety comes from a style which often includes instructions directly to the reader, in interviews, he has denied that he imagines his readers themselves during the writing process: "I have to pretend that I write in a vacuum. I can't write knowing that someone is going to read it. So I have to sort of get to the place where I'm writing as if no one will ever see what I'm writing [...] I have to get to that place where I can't be thinking about the people reading it" (Bures 30). Likewise, the narrator of Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son* shows himself interested in direct contact with his readers, and seems fascinated by his power to help or manipulate them.[5] Yet Johnson, whose apostrophe even references violent physical contact with readers, casts doubt on the same technique in the work of other writ-

ers. "What I first require of a work of art is that its agenda [...] not include me. I don't want its aims put in doubt by an attempt to appeal to me, by any awareness of me at all" (Johnson, *Name of the World* 73).

For many authors writing in second person seems to provide a middle-ground, as Philippe Lejeune has conceived it (36-37), between the "owning" of an experience by writing in first person, and the stance of complete alterity from it implied by third person. Many admit that second person is a disguised first person, a way of putting distance between themselves and an embarrassing or traumatic past experience—and not always out of any particular concern for their flesh and blood audience's opinion. Authors may use second person to treat subjects closely drawn from personal experience simply because second person allows themselves to hold an experience at a certain distance. David Foster Wallace described "one of few autobiographically implicated things" he had "ever tried" to write as being the fictionalization of an "excruciatingly" shameful personal experience. It was his "desire for an Alienated Narrative Persona" that led him "to use the second-person point of view" to distance himself from the memory as it was recalled while writing. He later worried readers would think he was "just some McInerney imitator in a black turtleneck, a copy of Kierkegaard under my arm," for the story seemed even to himself stereotypically "like the product of a young writer who was ashamed of a personal trauma" (Wallace 374-75).

Pam Houston describes her short story "How to talk to a hunter" similarly. If "[n]ow," Houston has explained, "what I like about the story is the rhythm the second person created, the cadence, and the sound" (in effect, one might assume, like Palahniuk's early experiments with the form, its tone of *skaz*), it was originally "a story so frighteningly close to my own structures of fear and pain and need that I had to write it in the second person [...] even though (and also because) second person is the most transparent disguise" (Houston 349).[6] Admitting her place as narrator to her public, while psychically avoiding it herself, she transforms her own experience into something "fictional," an ironic disguise, frighteningly close, but othered. By

editing their own narratorial identity out of situations previously experienced first-hand, some writers describe a freeing of themselves from these situations that is necessary for describing them more completely, objectively and, perhaps, more honestly. Writing in second person thus gives them a degree of alterity from their own experiences (or desires) without having to "own" them as an authorial persona. In Palahniuk's novels, it systematically appears during sections written as instructions for preparing terrorist attacks, for how to walk out of a restaurant without paying for a meal, or for splicing pornographic images into films played in cinemas—all activities from which an author might want to distance his public persona.

As Lolo Houbein writes of her novel *Walk a Barefoot Road* (1988), sections where the protagonist shifts from first or third person into second person "may have" occurred during the writing process "in moments of embarrassment, when distance-taking is necessary for self-preservation, or to keep unpleasant things at a distance in one's thoughts" (Houbein 1992). In Melissa Bank's stories of dating experiences in Manhattan, it appears most markedly during an episode of an unsuccessful encounter with a married man. In Denis Johnson's stories, it appears during the protagonist's most desperate moments of disillusionment. Other writers insist clearly that the "you" in their fiction is, as Peter Bibby called it, a "counterfeit first person" which allows them some distance from a situation of "disgust at the self," creating a position where "you stand (raging) outside yourself [...] of wanting almost to not be that person" (Bibby 64-65). According to John Encarnacao, the "you" in one of his stories "has been the id in me all along. Maybe it is pride that won't permit me to cast the whole story in first person; maybe it is shame, fear or even arrogance" (39).

Seeing the self as "other" often only takes place during descriptions of certain events or over periods of text. This self, like its experiences, is unstable. What is inscribed in second person, then, is the author's relationship to this self, a relationship often in flux. Temporary second person episodes are often distinctly separated from other parts of the text, either by chapters or by other breaks, as in Russell Banks's *The*

Book of Jamaica (1980), or in the short story collections of Pam Houston and Melissa Bank.

Identification itself is "the psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of the Other and transforms him or herself, wholly or partially, after the model the Other provides" (Laplanche and Pontalis 187; my translation).[7] Or, as Martin Buber wrote, "I *become* through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say Thou" (Buber 11). To write "I" in a text is not necessarily to underline a narrator's own existence as an enunciating source (an "I" can just as easily refer to the historical character of the first person narrator in the diegesis, described—at a distance—by the narrating voice). But when an author writes "you," he insists on both a reader's existence and on his own, putting his narrator in relation to an Other, and defining his position as narrator by this relationship. If this may be imagined as illustrating a desire to fill in an essential lack on the author's part through the creation of an ideal listener, then the creation of this ideal listener proceeds, finally, from the author's own desire to be ideal. A "you" addressed to the self creates alterity between a described situation and the enunciating voice, fortifying the author's identification with an *extradiegetic* narrator, helping to guide the story along during descriptions of trauma. In other words, by creating a narrator who directly addresses "someone else," a writer is in these cases able to put himself more "in the place" of the story's "telling" position rather than in that of the "experiencing" position. By projecting the rejected self onto the text, an author is mercifully removed from the story-world and now instead controls it. If much third person writing presumably works similarly, writing in second person has the advantage of keeping this distance indeterminate, offering a comfortably adjustable level of alterity. In their own words, by separating their narratorial identity from certain situations, these writers find themselves better able to describe them. What on the surface seems simply changing a pronoun is actually a complex reconfiguration of the writer's relationship with her own experiencing self.

Curiously, in disassociating their own authorial personae from an experience, slipping into second person allows the emergence of a blank textual figure with which readers often feel encouraged to identify. It is always a memorable moment when we, as readers, identify with something in a literary text. Perhaps even more memorable is the moment in which we can say not, "That's me!" but instead, "it *could* be ..."—something which second person texts, much like slips into second person in oral narration, would seem to promote. As a form of apostrophe, second person is usually also written in present tense, further increasing the reader's sense of immediacy. As David Herman has noted, "second-person narrative suggests that there can be an addressee just because there *could* be other addressees […]. In this (postmodern) economy of speech, [...] [w]e are eavesdroppers on the discourse that addresses us and beckoned by discourse addressed to others (Herman 410). Or, as John Ashbery wrote, "we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness [...] and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what's the important thing […] rather than the particular person involved" (Bloom and Lasada 123-24).

In the opening of Mavis Gallant's "The Concert Party" (1988), an explanation for a narrator's slip into second person is found in the story itself. "I remembered advice my Aunt Elspeth had given me: 'Put yourself in the other fellow's place,'" begins Gallant's narrator (32)—before putting *herself* "in the place" of a diegetic character with seven subsequent pages in second person. If readers empathize with these "you" characters, it is because, like many literary techniques, they put us and the narrated self in a position of a seemingly shared subjectivity. The writers cited here interpret the self as other, while their readers in turn imagine the other as self. Second person protagonists, whether stable, identifiable characters whose actions range over the full course of a text, or fleeting near-impromptu figures for a few apostrophic lines, would often appear to do double duty. Writing in second person certainly illuminates the polyphonics of language and our readerly roles as participants in the text. But perhaps its authors'

joke is on us: most clearly underlining our own persistently human need to put ourselves "in the other fellow's place."

University of Salzburg

NOTES

[1]Wayne Booth's study of *Tom Jones* (1749) was probably the first to note the narrator's increasing familiarity with the narratee over the course of Fielding's novel (Booth 216-17), but a similar technique of narrowing or tailoring general (often pluralized) narratees into more specifically characterized narratee figures was not uncommon during the following years, both in Fielding's own work including his *From This World to the Next* (1749), and in the work of other English novels like *The History of Fanny Seymore* (1753) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67). The technique can be attested even a century earlier, however, in Francis Kirkman's *The Unlucky Citizen* (1673). To cite two of the best-known examples in American literature, Hawthorne's short story "The Haunted Mind" (1835) presents a highly specified second person protagonist which develops out of an originally generalized narratee, and Melville frequently "animated" the figure created by his apostrophe to the reader, so that the figure ("you") was described as moving through the diegesis as an observer to introduce new settings in *Moby Dick*.

[2]See David Herman's concept of double deixis, in which the pronoun "you" simultaneously refers to both a character and the narratee.

[3]"Je ne crois nullement, pour ma part, que le vouvoiement employé par Butor dans *La Modification* soit un artifice de forme, une variation astucieuse sur la troisième personne du roman, dont on doive créditer 'l'avant-garde'; ce vouvoiement me parait littéral: il est celui du créateur à la créature, nommée, constituée, créée dans tous ses actes par un juge et générateur. Cette interpellation est capitale, car elle institue la conscience du héros: c'est à force de s'entendre décrite par un regard que la personne du héros se modifie […]."

[4]In an essay, he would write, "Tout langage est d'abord dialogue, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne peut être l'expression d'un individu isolé" (*Essais sur le roman* 104). While hinting at his reasons over his lifetime, most explanations were, like this one, typically Bakhtinian, focusing on dialogue and polyphonics as the basis of language.

[5]With perhaps his most searing example: "Will you believe me when I tell you there was kindness in his heart? [...] It was only that certain important connections had been burned through. If I opened up your head and ran a hot soldering iron around in your brain, I might turn you into someone like that" (Johnson, *Jesus' Son* 51).

[6]If the "you" in second-person texts is sensed by readers to be a "disguised 'I'" (Capecci 42-52), and thus a nonfictional, confessional mode, this is perhaps part of the reason it has become increasingly common.

[7]See Laplanche and Pontalis: "le processus psychologique par lequel le sujet assimile un aspect, une propriété ou un attribut de l'autre et se transforme, totalement ou partiellement, sur le modèle de celui-ci."

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