The Influence of Narrative Tense
in Second Person Narration:
A Response to Joshua Parker[*]

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In his recent article, "In Their Own Words: On Writing in Second Person," Joshua Parker argues that authors employ second person narration to distance themselves from certain events in their stories, namely those that might seem embarrassing or shameful; this is most noticeable in works that contain oscillating narrative voices, when the second person appears during those potentially embarrassing events. Parker's primary support comes from authors' own testimonies. By focusing on *why authors use* second person, Parker redirects the more common rhetorical interest in *how readers respond to* second person. Although the authors' anecdotes that Parker cites suggest that second person narration has the potential to separate the teller from the tale, they do not account completely for how second person positions the speaker relative to the events: once we consider the influence of narrative tense, we also recognize second person's potential to connect the narrator to his/her story.

Before I turn to Parker's specific claim about the function of second person, I would like to address a more foundational issue raised in Parker's essay that influences how we relate an author to his or her work. Based on their "own words," the catalyst for using second person is these authors' concern that they will be associated with the events that their narrators tell, a concern that erodes the distinction between author and narrator. Yet, in works of fiction, there exist at

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least three different layers of ontology: that of the narrator, the implied author, and the flesh-and-blood author. Moreover, in many cases of heterodiegesis, we add a fourth layer, for an extradiegetic narrator and intradiegetic characters will also reside on different planes of existence. If readers and critics do sidestep these ontologies to connect an author to a work, they seem to blur the author/narrator distinction rather than the author/story distinction (the latter being the concern of the authors whom Parker references), even in homo-diegesis. For example, Nabokov wasn't so much accused of being a pedophile as he was accused of telling about pedophilic events with a discomforting zeal; that is, (certain) readers didn't associate Nabokov with Humbert the character as they did with Humbert the narrator. In such instances, the difference between the narrating and experiencing functions is more significant than the fact that they both belong to the same person. Ultimately, the concerns of the authors in Parker's study are much more psychological than narratological, given the extent that the narrative structure buffers authors from their creations.[1] In the final analysis, however, the distinction between authors and their narrators, crucial among many critics, might be moot when consider-ing Parker's specific concern: because Parker (prompted by authors themselves) conflates author and narrator, to ask if second person distances the author from the story (Parker's version) is equivalent to asking if second person distances the narrator from the story (my version). The overarching question becomes, does second person narration distance the teller from the tale?

The answer is "yes and no"—depending on the tense of second person narration. What we find is that second person written in past tense as well as historical and simultaneous present tense has the potential to distance the narrator from the events and from the "you" narratee (as Parker claims); however, second person written in the future subjunctive mood (what I've elsewhere labeled "How-to narration"), an increasingly popular form, conversely tightens the connection between narrator and events.

One of the primary differences between past and present tense second person and subjunctive second person is the level of realness of the narrated events. Second person narration told in the past and present tenses contains "real" events (at least "real" within the ontology of the fiction, a crucial distinction made by Peter Rabinowitz in "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audience") that have happened or are happening. For instance, the narrator in Butor's *La Modification* (a seminal second person text) reports that "She had shut the door of the apartment before you started down the stairs, thus missing her last chance of touching your heart, but it's obvious that she had no desire to do so" (10). Some critics have claimed that ultimately readers will assimilate the "you" into an "I" and interpret the narrative as a disguised first-person account; this might be the de facto response of certain flesh-and-blood readers who resist the second person address. However, other readers are able to suspend disbelief and imagine themselves addressed and, consequently, enacting the story of the "you." And here there might exist a difference in degree between past and present tense second person. That is, readers might accept that they are the "you" more readily in past tense than in present tense, because past tense second person does not require them to disavow their current status. For example, when the narrator of *Bright Lights, Big City* tells us

> You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might become clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. Then again, it might not (1),

our knee-jerk flesh-and-blood response might be: "but I'm not; I am in my living room in Syracuse, New York currently reading a book by Jay McInerney."[2] Yet the multiple ontologies within fiction remind us that the narrator (a fictional construct) is not meant to be speaking directly to the reader; rather, the narrator reports to a narratee (also a fictional construct). Because of these distinct ontologies, ultimately the extent a reader accepts the second person address is inconsequential when we are considering the relationship between a narrator and a

"you" narratee. Likewise, there is nothing from our flesh-and-blood world that challenges the narratee from being the one who experiences the story-events.

Ultimately, Parker's essay invites us to examine the distance between the teller and the tale, which can hinge on the distance between the tale and the audience: the more a narratee is associated with the events, the less the narrator becomes responsible for them. The logic, at least of the grammar, is that because "you" have done or are currently doing something, "I" am not. Importantly, because the events are "real" and connected to an Other, the narrator (read "author" for Parker) can maintain the exclusive function of reporting, allowing the experiencing to reside in the distinct "you." As Parker notes (again conflating author with narrator), "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" (172). Assigning the events to an Other also occurs in standard heterodiegeis, in which a "he" or "she" is doing the experiencing. However, second person might seem to create even more distance than third-person because "you" serves more of a binary opposition to "I" than does "he" or "she": at least in terms of linguistic relationships, I/you creates a sharper opposition than I/he or I/she. This distance, which I locate completely within the ontology of the fictional world, might in fact affect the psychology of a flesh-and-blood author; it provides a narratological explanation for why the authors in Parker's research might find comfort in using second person to narrate what they consider shameful events.

Unlike the "real" events of past and present tense second person, the events within subjunctive mood second person are conditional and hypothetical (even within the ontology of the fiction): what we read in these texts is "If you were to do x, you might start by doing y" (which is why Brian Richardson has compared this mode to recipes and instruction manuals). Strictly speaking, nothing has happened in these texts: by definition, the subjunctive mood describes events that have not occurred. Thus, second person subjunctive does not contain

a story or fabula, at least not in the traditional sense. Pam Houston's "How to Talk to a Hunter" exemplifies the mode:

> A week before Christmas you'll rent *It's a Wonderful Life* and watch it to-gether, curled on your couch, faces touching. Then you'll bring up the word "monogamy." He'll tell you how badly he was hurt by your predecessor. He'll tell you he couldn't be happier spending every night with you. He'll say there's just a few questions he doesn't have answers for. He'll say he's just scared and confused. Of course this isn't exactly what he means. (100)

The narratee (the "you" with whom the audience might associate, at least grammatically) hasn't yet experienced the events (and might not ever), so an attempt to locate the events within an experiencing other, i.e. someone outside of the teller, becomes difficult if not narratologi-cally impossible. Instead, it is the experience of the narrator that forms the basis of the advice/instruction. Even though the narrator is not performing *these* events because *these* events are only conditional, the narrator presumably experienced parallel events in the past in order to gain the authority to speculate on these potentially-future events; a major theme in how-to narratives is that the scenario is so predictable and uniform that anyone (even a potential reader) who finds him-/herself within that scenario detailed by the narrator will experience the same basic story.[3]

That many how-to narratives include forking paths and multiple scenarios makes the narrator seem even more knowledgeable and experienced, further tying that narrator to the events. Consider the following passage from Junot Diaz's "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie":

> Get serious. Watch TV but stay alert. Sip some of the Bermudez your father left in the cabinet, which nobody touches. A local girl may have hips and a thick ass but she won't be quick about letting you touch. She has to live in the same neighborhood you do, has to deal with you being all up in her business. She might just chill with you and then go home. She might kiss you and then go, or she might, if she's reckless, give it up, but that's rare. Kissing will suffice. A whitegirl might just give it up right then. Don't stop

> her. She'll take her gum out of her mouth, stick it to the plastic sofa covers
> and then move close to you. You have nice eyes, she might say. (147)

Not only does Diaz's narrator possess the authority to speak on a single course of action, his expertise is such that he can predict and negotiate multiple possibilities. With these iterative scenarios, how-to narration in fact seems to assign the experience and attending ethical judgments to the narrator even more powerfully than would occur with homodiegetic narration, whose narrators experience and recount only a singulative event. The ontological separation between author and narrator that I discussed earlier proves significant here. The more a narrator is tied to the events, the more he/she moves beyond simply a "telling" function, the more he/she is grounded in the ontology of the fiction, the more distinct he/she becomes from the implied author's ontology. So, in a sense, how-to narration does confirm Parker's claim, but not in the terms Parker establishes: it doesn't separate the teller from the tale; instead, it separates one teller (a narrator who speaks to a narratee) from another teller (the author who communicates to a reader).

The rhetorical distance created by assigning experiences to a "you" only exists when we narrate those experiences in the past or present tense (having already happened or currently happening). When we narrate in the future conditional, the tense specifies that the "you" hasn't yet done (and might never do) these things; the experience, then, lies with the narrator (regardless of how much or little a reader might feel addressed and imagine him/herself in the hypothetical scenario). The difference relies on function: narrators in past and present tense second person are reporters (i.e. *I'm just telling you what you're doing*), whereas narrators in subjunctive second person are instructors and predictors (i.e. *I'm explaining what you will probably encounter and advising how you should act because I've been through it myself*). Ultimately, that second person narration enables such varied rhetorical effects testifies to its complexity as a narrative device, especially when we recognize how it works in conjunction with other aspects of the narrative delivery, such as tense. In fact, it might be this

very versatility that attracts authors to the mode. In a recent conversation between Mohsin Hamid and Jay McInerney, Hamid explains ("in his own words") his interest in the flexibility of second person, which he uses in his *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*:

> I really like the second person because […] it allows a movement from a very intimate first-person, like "you" can be "I" or "you" can be the person sitting next to me; it can be very close and very immediate or you can zoom back to a sort of cosmic, almost-religious text. You know, "thou shall not." So there's a wonderful ability to move in second person.

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NOTES

[1]Although she doesn't use a narratological explanation, Toni Morrison identifies a similar distance between an author and his/her characters' actions. In *Playing in the Dark*, she claims that authors are *responsible* for their characters' action (because they created those actions), but authors are not *accountable* for those actions (because they didn't actually perform them) (86).

[2]Calvino addresses this issue of mimesis by having the "you" of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* be a reader who has just started Italo Calvino's book called *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

[3]Given the scope of Parker's original article, I've in turn limited my analysis of the relationship between narrator and story/events to grammar (the presence of a "you" narratee and the tense of the narration); the actual content of these stories has been inconsequential. We might, however, adopt James Phelan's analysis of unreliability, which requires us to address story-events, to understand a number of relationships: that between the narrator and the events, between the implied author and the narrator, and ultimately between the implied author and the authorial audience.

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