

# Keeping You Unnatural: Against the Homogenization of Second Person Writing. A Response to Joshua Parker\*

BRIAN RICHARDSON

I read Joshua Parker's "In Their Own Words: On Writing in Second Person" with great interest and enjoyment. Parker deftly covers a vast swath of second person narratives as well as corresponding narrative criticism and theory in this impressive article, bringing in new material and casting fresh light on older pieces. Especially fascinating are the many accounts he has assembled by authors explaining their decision to employ the second-person form. He also packages the various scattered uses of this technique into a single, plausible, unified position. Unfortunately, the very virtues of Parker's approach also lead to what I see as its limitations. The homogenization of these disparate texts can be questioned on three counts, concerning their reception, production, and theoretical conceptualization.

## Reception

Drawing on Helmut Bonheim's "open definition" (or, rather, loose account) of the subject, Parker presents second-person narration as part of a continuous spectrum of other uses of the second person, such as the apostrophe or direct address to readers or narratees. This allows him to compile and juxtapose a wide range of material with a considerable historical reach. My own sense, however, is that there is

---

\*Reference: Joshua Parker, "In Their Own Words: On Writing in Second Person," *Connotations* 21.2-3 (2012/2013): 165-76. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debparker02123.htm>>.

a tremendous difference between established, conventional uses of the second person and what I have called “unnatural” uses that do not occur in ordinary discourse and are only found in innovative fiction (*Unnatural* 18-19; 134-40).<sup>1</sup> Consider the difference between the following passages; first, the beginning lines of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*: “You follow Highway 58, going north-east out of the city, and it is a good highway, and new. Or was new, that day we went up it. You look up the highway and it is straight for miles” (3). This is a conventional deployment of “you” to mean “one.”

Now compare your experience reading those lines with the following: “You are the second person. You look around for someone else to be the second person. But there is no one else. Even if there were someone else there they could not be you ... You make a pathetic effort to disguise yourself in all the affectations of the third person, but you know it is no use. The third person is no one. A convention” (116). The second passage, by W. S. Merwin, is unconventional and much more jarring. It is disorienting, seeming to address the reader and then (perhaps) using this form of address to depict a character’s thoughts, producing what David Herman has called “double deixis,” something that does not occur in natural discourse and therefore is perceived either as mistaken, unnerving, or ludic. In fact, I would argue that this destabilization of the standard communicative frame is one of the most powerful effects of second-person narration and the reason why many innovative authors choose to use it. I strongly believe that the uniqueness of this effect should be foregrounded and appreciated. The distinction between conventional and nonconventional second-person forms also extends to digital fiction, as Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin have convincingly shown: second-person narration in some hypertext fictions “ask for reader input, but they also limit the involvement of the reader by preventing her from identifying with ‘you’ completely” (313). This distinction is in fact also central in Joyce Carol Oates’s story, “You,” which at first seems to be an unnatural second-person narration but then is revealed to be simply the apostrophe of a disappointed daughter addressing her absent mother.

## Production

Parker does an excellent job uncovering authors' statements concerning their decision to use the second person and seems to suggest that the second-person form is typically or especially used to disguise or distance what is essentially a first-person discourse. This is no doubt often the case, and Parker deserves credit for establishing this connection. But often it is not the case, and the authorial "I" is resting far away from the textual "you." I find it difficult to think the salesman in *La Modification* is some version of Butor, or to view the Reader as an image of Calvino in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Neither, I'm sure, is the actual John Hawkes hovering behind these lines: "The newspaper—it was folded to the listings of single rooms—fell from your pocket when you drank from the bottle" (5). We may profitably return to Merwin's text and agree with its speaker: "No, you insist, it is all a mistake, I am the first person. But you know how unsatisfactory that is. And how seldom it is true" (117).

## Theory

As I understand him, Parker takes the position that second person narration is primarily or essentially a disguised first person narration. My reservations about this stance are two: it does not fit the facts of the case and it tends to minimize or partially ignore the existing theoretical debate over the nature and status of second-person narration (see Reitan). As just noted, it is hard to imagine the authors mentioned above caching themselves within those fictional figures, however remotely; it is also difficult to see many "you" characters as directly or indirectly addressing themselves. Italo Calvino is clearly not using the second person as a disguised form of the first person in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*: his "tu" rapidly is transformed into an "il." Let's look at a passage from Michel Butor. As I note in my chapter on this subject, many sentences in *La Modification* resist

reduction to any first-person figure. The book's second sentence includes the lines: "votre valise couverte de granuleux cuir sombre couleur d'épaisse bouteille, votre valise assez petite d'homme habitué aux longs voyages, vous l'arrachez" (9), ("you lift up your suitcase of bottle-green grained leather, the smallish suitcase of a man used to making long journeys" [1]); it is very difficult to imagine a veteran salesman muttering these words to himself, and in the formal, rather than informal second person form at that, no matter how hard a day he has had. When a Frenchman speaks to himself, he always says "tu."

Parker seems uninterested in the considerable "theoretical wrangling" that surrounds the question of whether second person narration more resembles first- or third-person discourse. But perhaps one cannot or should not avoid this wrangling; the confusion the debate discloses may be revealing. After all, nearly every earlier narrative theorist claimed second person narration was one of the two prominent forms. Revealingly, however, the theorists couldn't agree on which form it belonged to. Franz Stanzel affirmed that in "the novel in the second person [...] the 'you' is really a self-dramatization of the 'I,' and the form of the monologue prevails here" (225). Discussing *La Modification*, Mieke Bal states categorically that "the 'you' is simply an 'I' in disguise, a 'first person' narrator talking to himself; the novel is a 'first person' narrative with a formal twist to it that does not engage the entire narrative situation" (29). Parker seems to align himself with this camp. But Genette has taken the opposite position; for him, this "rare and simple case" is readily situated as heterodiegetic narration (133). Brian McHale similarly believes that "'you' stands in for the third-person pronoun of the fictional character, functioning in a kind of displaced free indirect discourse" (223). We need to ask why it is so difficult to make a convincing determination, and what is at stake in doing so.

This confusion displayed by the older narratologists is inevitable, I believe, because unnatural second person narration is situated between but irreducible to the standard binary oppositions of either

first and third person or hetero- and homodiegetic narration, both of which have been around for millennia and are entirely conventional.<sup>2</sup> Instead, second person narration oscillates irregularly from one side to the other and cannot be convincingly “naturalized” to either conventional practice. Its nature is to elude a fixed nature. Monika Fludernik has accurately described the curious function of this kind of narration: “second-person fiction destroys the easy assumption of the traditional dichotomous structures which the standard narratological models have proposed, especially the distinction between homo- and heterodiegetic narrative (Genette) or that of the identity or nonidentity of the realms of existence between narrator and characters (Stanzel)” (226; see Reitan for the latest moves in this debate). Narrative theory can help us identify the fundamental ambiguity of writing fiction in this manner. This points once again to the ultimate alterity of this relatively new kind of narration. Thus, when I read Parker quoting Martin Buber on “I and Thou” relations, I want to protest that Buber’s communicative “Thou” is very different from Calvino’s playfully polysemic “tu.” In the end, I don’t see the value in gliding over categories and homogenizing very different kinds of discourse. Second person narration is still too rare, too unusual, and too discordant to be conventionalized or domesticated; it still has the power to produce a bracing sense of estrangement as standard distinctions between narrator, character, narratee, and actual reader are conflated. *You* is still unnatural.

The University of Maryland  
College Park, MD

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See also my chapter “At First You Feel a Bit Lost: The Varieties of Second Person Narration” in my *Unnatural Voices* (17-36).

<sup>2</sup>Free indirect discourse, which once was comparably unsettling, has now become entirely conventional and is hardly noticed.

## WORKS CITED

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 3rd ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2009.
- Bell, Alice, and Astrid Ensslin. “‘I know what it was. You know what it was’: Second Person Narration in Hypertext Fiction.” *Narrative* 19.3 (2011): 311-29.
- Butor, Michel. *La Modification*. Paris: Minuit, 1957.
- . *A Change of Heart*. Trans. Jean Stewart. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959.
- Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. 1983. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Hawkes, John. *The Lime Twig*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- Herman, David. “Textual ‘You’ and Double Deixis in Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place*.” *Style* 28.3 (1994): 378-410.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Merwin, W. S. “The Second Person.” *The Miner’s Pale Children*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 116-17.
- Reitan, Rolf. “Theorizing Second Person Narratives: A Backwater Project?” *Strange Voices in Narrative Fiction*. Ed. Per Krogh Hansen, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Rolf Reitan. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011. 147-74.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006. 17-36.
- Stanzel, Franz K. *A Theory of Narrative*. 1979. Trans. Charlotte Goedsche. Cambridge: CUP, 1984.
- Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King’s Men*. New York: Harcourt, 1996.