Unnatural Voices
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The genealogy of second person fiction is surprisingly rich, including Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story “The Haunted Mind” (1835), Hans Christian Andersen’s brief sketch “This Fable Is Intended for You” (1836), the opening sections of May Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier* (1919), the sixth chapter of Part Two of Jean Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), Mary McCarthy’s “The Genial Host” (1941), Ilse Aichinger’s “Spiegelgeschichte” (1954), as well as, intriguingly enough, Rex Stout’s detective novel *How Like a God* (1929) and the first sentence of the nineteenth chapter of Ian Fleming’s first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale* (1953): “You are about to awaken when you dream that you are dreaming” (124). Since the publication of Michel Butor’s *La Modification* in 1957, second person narrative became much more visible on the literary landscape, especially those areas occupied by experimental authors. The nineteen sixties and the early seventies saw the publication of a number of interesting texts written in the second person, including Carlos Fuentes’ *Aura* (1962), the first chapter of John Hawkes’ *The Lime Twig* (1962), Georges Perec’s *Un Homme qui dort* (1967), Mark Insingel’s *Reflections* (1968), John McGahern’s *The Dark* (1969), Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* (1970), W. S. Merwin’s “The Second Person” (1970), and several passages of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s
Rainbow (1973). It was not, however, until the early nineties that second person narration received extended theoretical study.

In what follows, I will attempt to identify the main types of second person narrative, differentiate them from superficially similar forms, discuss their status, and show how they achieve their distinctive effects. I will distinguish three types of second person narrative: what I will call 1) the “standard,” 2) the “hypothetical,” and 3) the “autotelic” forms. The standard form is by far the most common, and will consequently receive the most attention in what follows. It can be identified by its designation of the protagonist as “you,” rather than “I,” “he” or “she”; its best known example is Michel Butor’s La Modification (1957). The hypothetical form employs the style of the guidebook to recount a narrative, as in several of Lorrie Moore’s stories: “Begin by meeting him in a class” (“How” 55). The autotelic form employs direct address to the reader or narratee, as in the opening of Italo Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveller: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel.” In the course of this analysis, I will try to clarify the shifting relationships that the second person has with its more established and conventional neighbors, the first and third persons, and speculate on the social, literary, and philosophical reasons behind the emergence and proliferation of this technique in our time. Finally, I will discuss analogues of this practice in other genres.

First, however, it is necessary to distinguish second person narrative from other types of fiction that frequently employ the second person pronoun at the level of narration. One of these is the familiar authorial colloquy in which a heterodiegetic narratee (“gentle reader”) is directly addressed, a common practice of Fielding, Thackeray, and George Eliot. Another kind of narrative that frequently employs the word “you” but that is not properly speaking a second person narrative is the monologue addressed to a real or imaginary homodiegetic audience, works like Camus’ La Chute and Hawkes’ Travesty. An additional conventional type of text that uses the second person pronoun with considerable frequency is the apostrophe; such texts likewise present little problem for narrative theory and are readily situated within standard categories of narrative and rhetorical analysis. All these works can be easily comprehended by traditional dyadic theories of narration point of view: the authorial colloquy exists outside of the narrative proper, the autobiographical monologue and apostrophe are addressed to characters, albeit silent or absent ones, within the fictional world.

Even after delimiting the field in this way, we find a wide variety
of second person texts. We may define second person narrative as any narration other than an apostrophe that designates its protagonist by a second person pronoun. This protagonist will usually be the sole focalizer, and is often (but not always) the work’s principal narratee as well. This definition accords with that of Monika Fludernik (“Introduction” 288); it differs from those proffered by Gerald Prince (86) and Matt DelConte in which the “you” simultaneously designates both the protagonist and the narratee. In some cases, such as in several passages of O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place*, the narratee is quite distinct from the “you” protagonist: “Alone for the first time on the street, you were conscious of your appearance. Your coat was ridiculous compared to other people’s coats” (172). The use of “you,” the past tense, and the suggestion that the character is being seen externally show that this is decidedly not the kind of speech a character would normally direct to herself. As David Herman remarks on this passage, “textual you functions not (or not only) as discourse particle relaying and linking the various components of a fictional protagonist’s self-address, but (also) as a form of address that exceeds the frame of the fiction itself” (342). A still more obvious discrepancy (indeed, an unbridgeable one) between narrator, protagonist, and narratee appears in Calvino’s 1984 story, “A King Listens”: “Around you there is no longer a palace, there is the night filled with cries and shouts. Where are you? Are you still alive? Have you eluded the assassins who have burst into the throne room? Did the secret stairway afford you an avenue of escape?” (59). These rhetorical questions are not literally addressed to the protagonist, but rather directed to an extradiegetic narratee.

It is important to note that second person narration is an artificial mode that does not normally occur in natural narrative or in most texts in the history of literature before 1919. In most instances, the story is narrated in the present tense, and one type, the “hypothetical” or “recipe” form, also includes frequent usage of conditional and future tenses. It should also be noted that my account enumerates tendencies rather than stipulates invariant conditions; this is because second person narration is an extremely protean form, and its very essence is to eschew a fixed essence.

I. The Standard Form

The most common type of second person narrative, what I term the “standard” form, is also the closest to more traditional forms of
narration. In it, a story is told, usually in the present tense, about a single protagonist who is referred to in the second person; the “you” often designates the narrator and the narratee as well, though as we will see there is considerable slippage in this unusual triumvirate. This is the form used in *La Modification*, *Aura*, *Un Homme qui dort*, *A Pagan Place*, and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*. Butor is often mistakenly credited with having invented the technique; as we have seen there are several earlier short stories which are written entirely in the second person. A typical passage from McCarthy’s “The Genial Host” reads: “Now you hesitated, weighing the invitation. Sooner or later you would break with him, you knew. But not yet, not while you were still so poor, so loverless, so lonely” (163). The opening lines of Aichinger’s text also provide an excellent example of this form: “Wenn einer dein Bett aus dem Saal schiebt, wenn du siehst, dass der Himmel grün wird, und wenn du dem Vikar die Leichenrede ersparen willst, so ist es Zeit fur dich, aufzustehen, leise. . . .” (44). (“When someone pushes your bed out of the ward, when you see that the sky is growing green and when you want to save the priest the trouble of holding a funeral service, then it is time for you to get up, softly. . . .” [Aldridge, 65–66]).

These sentences could have been written in the first person, in the third person with a single focalizer, or in free indirect speech. Instead, the second person was chosen, and a different type of narration follows, one which approximates but cannot be reduced to any of these other perspectives. Some of its characteristic features include ambiguity over the identity and status of the “you”: it is, at the outset, epistemologically a more dubious pronoun than the traditional “I” or “she,” which we ordinarily have no trouble processing as we encounter a fictional text for the first time. The “you” (or in the case of Aichinger, “du”) also threatens the ontological stability of the fictional world insofar as it seems it could be addressing the reader as well as the central character. In standard second person fiction (unlike other second person forms), the protagonist/narratee is quite distinct from the actual or implied reader; nevertheless, one of the more unsettling features of this mode of narration is that this distinction can be collapsed whenever the “you” could refer to the reader as well as the protagonist.

Most authors employing this mode play with this boundary. In *Un Homme qui dort*, Perec writes: “Tu as vingt-cinq ans et vingt-neuf dents, trois chemises et huit chausettes, quelques livres que tu ne lis plus, quelques disques que tu n’écoutes plus” (“You are twenty-five
years old and have twenty-nine teeth, three shirts and eight socks, some books you no longer read, some records you no longer listen to” [24].) On first reading lines like these, it is almost impossible to entirely ignore, bracket, or erase the deictic function of the word “you” as it occurs in virtually every other discursive situation, where it refers invariably and exclusively to the addressee—that is, us. The implicit disparity (we are not twenty-five and have more or less than twenty-nine teeth) is then juxtaposed with a probable identity: in all likelihood, we possess several books we no longer read and, at the time of its publication, most readers would have had some records they no longer played. A continuous dialectic of identification and distancing ensues, as the reader is alternately drawn closer to and further away from the protagonist. This you is inherently unstable, constantly threatening to merge with the narratee, a character, the reader, or even with another grammatical person.

Historically, earlier theorists of narrative either ignored this kind of narration or dismissed it as a curiosity. Others claimed it clearly was a thinly disguised version of one of the two basic categories of narration. But which one? For Genette, this “rare and simple case” is readily situated as heterodiegetic narration (Revisited 133). Brian McHale likewise believes that “you stands in for the third-person pronoun of the fictional character, functioning in a kind of displaced free indirect discourse” (Postmodernist 223). Franz Stanzel takes the opposite position: despite his emphasis on the importance of the differences between first and third person narratives (80–83), he nevertheless contends 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, too” (225). He does confess in a footnote, however, that its “classification in my opposition of first-person and third-person form would cause difficulty if one did not consider it a variant of the first-person form, albeit a very significant one” (258). Matt DelConte likewise suggests that nearly “all second person narration is actually homodiegesis considering that a narrator must be on the same diegetic plane as his/her narratee-protagonist . . . in order to communicate with that narratee-protagonist” (210).

At this point we need to look closely at a few representative passages to help determine this issue. Many sentences in La Modification (the object of both Stanzel’s and McHale’s remarks) cannot be reduced to the first person. 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 habitue 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’s had. When Frenchmen speak to themselves, they always say “tu.”

On the other hand, this kind of narration cannot always be neatly subsumed under the rubric of the third person, so assiduous is it in depicting the stream of impressions, thoughts, and subverbal speech of the protagonist, as McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* reveals. The same is largely true of *Aura*, as its opening sentence discloses: “Leese el anuncio: una oferta de esa naturaleza no se hace todos los días. . . . Distraído, dejas que la ceniza del cigarrillo caiga dentro de la taza de té” (2) (“You’re reading the advertisement: an offer like this isn’t made every day. . . . You don’t even notice when the ash from your cigarette falls into the cup of tea . . .” [3]). Here we are given both the protagonist’s subvocal speech and the description of an event that he did not witness. It is in fact precisely this irreducible oscillation between first and third person narration that is typical of second person texts, texts that simultaneously invite and preclude identification with the other pronominal voices. Helmut Bonheim, who has argued for the even more constrained definition of narrative “you” as simultaneously designating the narrator, protagonist, and listener/reader of a second person text, nevertheless admits some of the more curious implications of this practice: “if one tells a story to a particular person who was on the scene of action himself, the reader will naturally ask why the ‘you’ needs to be told what he must already know” (76). In such cases, we may well conclude that that “you” is by this very fact not the narratee.

The ambiguity and fluctuation of this pronominal form are wonderfully captured by W. S. Merwin in a passage quoted by McHale,

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. . . . 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. (116–17)
The second person is a playful form, original, transgressive, and illuminating, that is always conscious of its unusual own status and often disguises itself, playing on the boundaries of other narrative voices. This can be seen best by looking at the pronominal manipulation of the second person texts that most closely resemble first person narratives (Bright Lights, Big City) and third person novels (A Pagan Place).

In the first paragraph of McInerney’s book we encounter the lines:

You are at a nightclub talking to a girl with a shaved head. The club is either Heartbreak or the Lizard Lounge. All might come clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder. Then again, it might not. A small voice inside you insists that this epidemic lack of clarity is a result of too much of that already. (1)

All of these sentences—and, for that matter, almost all of the sentences in the book—could be seamlessly transferred into the first person. Unlike the passage from Aura, they do not contain any information the protagonist is unaware of; unlike the quotation from Butor, they do not employ syntactic patterns alien to his customary discursive range. Nevertheless, the employment of the pronoun “you” brings with it an element of instability, of the very absence of clarity that is explicitly thematized within the passage. This effect is compounded by the mention of still another voice, the “small voice inside,” that further fragments the protagonist’s subjectivity. A number of hypotheses appear, ready to attempt to explain this curious situation: a psychomachia between self and soul, a dialogue between id and superego, a character employing the voice of another to interrogate himself, a realistic dramatization of the disorienting effect of cocaine. It is the nature of the second person narration to render all of these hypotheses plausible, while ensuring that no one can be definitive. As the novel continues, the interpretive possibilities decrease, though more playful deployments of narrative voices appear.

In the book’s third chapter, entitled “The Utility of Fiction,” the protagonist reads through a form letter sent by an insurance company to the female model that has recently left him. The letter reads: “Modelling is an exciting and rewarding career. In all likelihood, you have many years of earning ahead of you. But where would you be in the event of a disfiguring accident?” (37). Here, the fatuous
prose and vulgar “you” of advertising copy—a ridiculous attempt to personalize a letter mailed to tens of thousands of potential customers—is surrounded by the narrative’s considerably more subtle use of the second person. The reader is presumably invited to consider the political implications of this juxtaposition. Is McInerney here satirizing commodity capitalism and attempting to subvert the advertising industry’s possession of the “you” which, in the United States, is quite pronounced (“wouldn’t you really rather have a Buick?”), or is it the protagonist’s discourse that is infected by the discourse of the salesman, just as his thoughts are contaminated by tabloid headlines (“COMA BABY SIS PLEADS: SAVE MY LITTLE BROTHER,” 11)?

A further twist appears when the protagonist remembers the more hopeful days of the recent past when he first applied for the job at the prestigious magazine that currently employs him:

Already you feel a sense of nostalgia as you walk down the narrow halls past all the closed doors. You remember how you felt when you passed this way for your first interview. . . . You thought of yourself in the third person: “He arrived for his first interview in a navy blue blazer. He was interviewed for a position in the Department of Factual Verification . . .” (34)

In this passage, a rather ordinary perception, thinking of oneself in the third person, is entirely transformed when articulated in second person narration. A powerful effect of “defamiliarization” is achieved, as the unremarkable thought is teasingly framed by the unusual narrative mode.

A somewhat similar situation arises later in the novel when the protagonist speculates on issues of intersubjectivity:

They’re trying to imagine themselves in your shoes, but it would be a tough thing to do. Last night Vicky was talking about the ineffability of inner experience. . . . She said that certain facts are accessible only from one point of view—the point of view of the creature who experiences them. You think she meant that the only shoes we can ever wear are our own. Meg can’t imagine what it’s like for you to be you, she can only imagine herself being you. (101)

This passage discusses incommensurable viewpoints even as it plays with point of view. It chronicles the motif of the inability to communicate one’s most profound feelings, one’s “inner essence,” even to
those that are closest to one. (Significantly, the protagonist is not sure he grasps the precise meaning of Vicky’s statement of the impossibility of fully conveying such meanings.) We may note that this paragraph, if written in the first person, would sound rather ordinary; its second person form, on the other hand, both invites an identification, however tenuous, between the protagonist and the reader, and introjects a ludic element of self-consciousness that makes the theme less bland. Furthermore, the one phrase in the novel that at first glance seems to betray the artificiality of the second person address, that makes it appear a gratuitous and even clumsy way to be original at any cost: “Meg can’t imagine what it’s like for you to be you,” turns out, once the rest of the sentence is added, “she can only imagine herself being you,” to yield a rather witty observation. The limits of Meg’s consciousness are perfectly revealed.

In Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place*, the status and identity of voice and person are veiled in ambiguity at the beginning of the text. A recapitulation of a plausible reader response will disclose how the narration suggests different possibilities before finally revealing itself. The novel opens in the third person: “Manny Parker was a botanist, out in all weathers, lived with his sister that ran the sweetshop, they ate meat on Fridays, they were Protestants” (9). The next sentence, however, introduces the second person pronoun, and thereby raises the question of the status of the narrative and the identity of the speaker: “Your mother dealt there, found them honest.” The next paragraph reverts to the third person until, several sentences later, “your mother” is referred to again. At this point, the customary assumption about the narrative transaction is, I presume, that we are in the presence of a “memory monologue”; some other older inhabitant of the village is narrating, without benefit of quotation marks, perhaps to an unidentified auditor. This reading is in turn problematized by certain odd locutions that seem more appropriately spoken by the ostensible narratee, who seems to be a child, rather than the presumed adult speaker: “When the cow did number two into the pail of milk, Mr. Wattle who was milking didn’t see it” (10). This narrator, we might note in passing, employs a different ideelected from the voice that narrates elsewhere in the book, most prominently where unlikely objects of the child’s knowledge are revealed:

Your father met your mother at that dance but didn’t throw two words to her. Your mother was all dolled up, home from America on holiday, had a long dress and peroxide in her hair. Your mother put the eye on
him then and got her brother to invite him up to their house to walk the land. (12)

It is not until several pages later that we know with certainty that the person referred to as “you” is indeed the work’s protagonist, and that the work is a standard second person narration, albeit an initially deceptive one. The “you” will continue to reach out to other perspectives; like all second person texts, this one continues to oscillate and merge with a number of other vantage points and usages, many of which David Herman has meticulously identified (337–68). The paragraph just quoted turns out to be not an eyewitness account but rather, it seems, the girl’s personal version, one made up from other narratives, many of them no doubt frequently related within family circles, told (or rehearsed) to herself. The question then arises as to why O’Brien chose such an oblique and frankly misleading way of exfoliating her narration.

The answer is I believe a thematic one, and lies in the social world that surrounds and continually threatens to engulf the protagonist. She is a girl, possibly around the age of ten. Her family lives in poverty, surrounded by brutality: her parents quarrel cruelly, and her father is a violent alcoholic. As a girl, she is frightened and powerless in a highly stratified and harsh society. Virtually everyone she encounters, whether parent, priest, teacher, putative friend, or lewd stranger, erodes her selfhood and suppresses her speech. She internalizes this neglect, and acquiesces in her own silencing:

She said there was nothing like bettering oneself. She addressed you but it was for your mother to register. Each time when you were on the point of saying something to Emma the words got caught in your throat and you could neither say them nor forget them and you could not utter them. You were like someone with a muzzle. (106)

Even in her own consciousness she views herself as a peripheral figure, a passive and largely inconsequential bystander. To refer to herself as an “I” would take more temerity than she possesses. Her subjectivity is muted, diffused, collapsed. Her “you” expresses her distance from her self.

Analogously, passages from Mavis Gallant’s story, “With a Capital T,” document the internalized debate of an independent female reporter writing under the conditions of wartime censorship: “At the
back of your mind, because your mentors have placed it there, is an obstruction called ‘the policy factor.’ Your paper supports a political party. You try to discover what this party has to say . . .” (319). Once the narrator stops trying to accommodate the demands of her publishers, the narrative voice changes back to the “I” that began the tale. Here we see another way in which narration in the second person, in this case a change to and from the pronoun “you,” enhances the representation of mental states.

An especially sustained and compelling juxtaposition of persons occurs in Nuruddin Farah’s Maps, which will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter. Like Carlos Fuentes’ La Muerte de Artemio Cruz, Farah’s novel is written in alternating first, second, and third person sections, and the narrative perspectives differ in their depictions of the same protagonist: as Rhonda Cobham points out, the first person narrator is much more sympathetic to him than the second person narrator is (49). Farah plays as well with discontinuities in the second person form; the book begins with the sentence: “You sit, in contemplative posture, your features agonized and your expressions pained; you sit for hours and hours and hours, sleepless, looking into darkness, hearing a small snore coming from the room next to yours” (3). The first part of this sentence gives an external view of how the protagonist would appear to an observer; the rest of the sentence discloses perceptions that ordinarily would only be known to himself. This oscillation between internal and external perceptions that might normally be divided between first and third person narration or framed within a “limited omniscience” continues throughout the novel. Farah immediately goes on to add a metafictional twist to his narration:

At times, when your uncle speaks about you, in your presence, referring to you in the third person and, on occasion, even taking the liberty of speaking on your behalf, you wonder if your existence is readily differentiable from creatures of fiction whom habit has taught one to talk of as if they were one’s closest of friends. (3)

Later in the novel, in a particularly cunning move, Farah opposes the “we” of the authorial aside to the “you” of standard second person narrative: “Since we’ve been going backwards and forwards in time, let’s continue doing so. But let us, for a while at any rate, spend some time with you, know how you were when you first came into their lives. . . . Your eyes said one thing to them, your silence another. And Hilaal
and Salaado decided to wait, placing themselves between these aspects of yourself (as Hilaal put it), knowing full well there was another you” (138). Here a distinct narrator addresses the protagonist rhetorically before moving on to a more standard description, and then goes on to record the possibility of another, hidden “you” behind that standard “you.” Taken together, these features make Maps one of the most powerful displays of the importance of the distinction of person and the richness of second person narrative in contemporary literature.

In summary, we may observe that the choice of the “you” form radically alters the tone of the work and provides a unique speaking situation for the narrator, one that does not occur in natural narratives and consequently one that continuously defamiliarizes the narrative act. Its usage can engender a heightened engagement between reader and protagonist in different directions: we may oppose identification with a “you” we resist, or we may sympathize more fully with a central character like McCarthy’s: “Now and then, this look of commendation would rest particularly on you; whenever this happened, it was as if, in his delight, he had reached over and squeezed you” (149). Or, as often occurs, a dialectic is established in which the reader alternates between identification and distancing. The technique simultaneously opens up new possibilities for representing consciousness and provides a site for the contestation of constricting discursive practices. Of most importance for traditional narrative theory, second person narration is situated between but irreducible to the standard dyads of either first and third person or hetero- and homodiegetic narration, but rather oscillates irregularly from one pole to the other. As Fludernik affirms: “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)” (“Natural” 226). We may now turn to the other two modes of second person narrative, modes that cannot be simply converted to the first or third person.

II. The Hypothetical Form

Lorrie Moore’s Self-Help is a collection of daring short stories, most of them in the second person. These differ from what I have termed the “standard” mode; as many of their titles suggest (“How to Become
"At First You Feel a Bit Lost" / 29

a Writer,” “How to Be an Other Woman,” “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce”), they are written in the style of the user’s manual or self-help guide. I originally called this mode “subjunctive”; other rubrics such as “hypothetical” or even “recipe form” now appear to be in wider use. This technique goes back at least as far as what Morrisette (“You” 11) terms the “pseudo-guidebook” style of the opening pages of Robert Penn Warren’s 1946 novel, All the King’s Men; it has been used in a number of recent stories, including John Updike’s “How to Love America and Leave It at the Same Time” (1979), Margaret Atwood’s “Happy Endings” (1983), and Pam Houston’s “How to Talk to a Hunter” (1990). A few sentences from Moore’s story “How” will disclose some of the idiosyncratic features of this mode:

Begin by meeting him in a class, in a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory. He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes. . . . From time to time you will gaze at his face or his hands and want nothing but him. You will feel passing waves of dependency, devotion, and sentimentality. A week, a month, a year, and he has become your family. (55)

Here we find three features generally absent from standard second person narration: the consistent use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee.5 The protagonist is a possible future version of the narratee, though it soon takes on an independent, parallel existence. Equally noteworthy are the unspecified and virtually arbitrary natures of the male character, the setting, and the chronology of events. These elements are not, however, entirely gratuitous. There is a certain plausibility about the locations of the first meeting and of the time period customary for passion to unfold. As to the man’s occupation, the extreme degree of specificity—not merely a teacher or store manager, but a sixth grade teacher or a hardware store manager—is rather incongruous, unexpected, and amusing: a single woman does not usually go to a bar with such precise expectations. The foreman of the carton factory at first glance strains the sense of probability and is clearly intended as a comic element, and yet on further reflection this figure can be read as one of the inescapable improbabilities in life that sooner or later inevitably appear. What Moore provides, in short, is a kind of enumeration and interrogation of the typical, identifying the remotely possible as well as the more likely scenarios.
Ironically, this very wealth of possibility gradually gives way to a strange kind of necessity; the protagonist is unable to be happy with any man, whatever his occupation. (“Back at home, days later, feel cranky and tired. Sit on the couch and tell him he’s stupid. . . . He will try to kiss you. Turn your head. Feel suffocated” [57]). The stories almost always end sadly; they are a caustic parody of the glowing self-help manuals they pretend to imitate. The plots chart the succession of poor decisions, casual betrayals, and unavoidable tragedies that life invariably provides, instead of the delusory fictions happily proffered by paperback psychologists.

It is worth observing that many non-literary books employing this form of the second person are often highly gender coded. Fix-it manuals, especially those dealing with gasoline engines, are regularly directed to a very male reader; most recipe books and many self-help volumes specifically target a female audience. The narrative audience reader of the stories that compose Self-Help is usually female; consequently, it may not be inaccurate to see these stories as, in part, a feminist critique of an extra-literary genre that ultimately preys on the female readership it purports to serve.

The “hypothetical you” is also a protean one, perhaps even more so than the “you” of standard second person texts, which can occasion some ontological slippage. As James Phelan observes, at the ending of “How,” “narratee, ideal narrative audience, and narrative audience all nod their heads in understanding here. The close positioning of the complementary audiences strengthens the second-person’s general invitation for the narrative, authorial, and actual audiences to project themselves into the narratee’s position” (“How” 362). This “you” is one that can embrace almost all of us.

III. The Autotelic Form

The defining criterion of my third category, “the autotelic,” is the direct address to a “you” that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction. It is a narrativization of a form of address, and as such appears in relatively “pure” instances only in extremely short texts, such as Merwin’s “The Second Person.” In more extended works, it alternates with third or first person narration. This mode may first have originated in Lautréamont’s Les Chants du Maldoror, is present
in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* (“You wouldn’t think it was the same old gang as a moment ago, or would you? What can you expect, they don’t know who they are either” [372]). This form is most thoroughly deployed at the beginning of Italo Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*. Like the “hypothetical” form, it plays with the construction of the typical, and the narrator is quite distinct from the narratee. Like standard second person fiction, it is told primarily in the present tense, and some pronominal shifting is evident. Its unique and most compelling feature, however, is the ever-shifting referent of the “you” that is continuously addressed. Calvino’s novel opens with descriptions of the reader interacting with the book, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*” (1). This sentence necessarily applies to every actual reader who starts the volume at the beginning. Here description is reenactment; the reader’s response is portrayed even as it is being created. The narrator’s present tense is identical to the temporality of its reception. As John T. Kirby explains, “In McInerney’s narrative, the reader knows that he or she is extradiegetic, outside the narrative, and only assumes identity with the main character as part of the act of play in which reading consists. Calvino’s sophisticated strategy is to catch you, the extradiegetic reader, off guard, and make you the subject of diegesis, thereby spiriting or abducting you into the narrative” (11).

Calvino’s text goes on to give advice concerning its consumption:

> Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally. (1)

Here, Calvino designates the most likely settings that the reader has already just chosen. With the exception of this slight temporal gap, the “you” of the text continues to correspond with the actual reader of the book, except in the unlikely event that one is, say, reading the passage while standing in the office of the foreman of the carton factory. A kind of game now begins; as long as Calvino accurately depicts our physical position or mental response, he is addressing the actual reader in an uncomfortably proximate manner. Once he slips, digresses, or changes tack, however, as he does when he describes the
reader struggling to open the packaging that envelops the book—an act that cannot occur simultaneously with our reading a depiction of it—we return to the more familiar role of the conventional reader: the “you” now designates a fictional character, one who is merely a dramatized narratee. Throughout the text the “you” continues to move, shift, double back, and change again, addressing alternately the real reader and the narratee.

In another passage, Calvino writes: “So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page” (9). This is directed to the narratee, since the actual reader has begun the novel several pages earlier. Calvino continues: “You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don’t recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone?” These lines too are addressed to a narratee; the implied reader has already perceived the Calvino touch—the sly irony, the undermining of narrative conventions, the relentless reflexivity. The author now raises the stakes: “On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these changes you recognize him as yourself.” The actual reader will probably concur with the first of these statements, while the implied reader will see in the second sentence another version of the theme of identity—of individuals, of narrative situations, and of the book itself—that permeates the text. When Calvino goes on to observe, “Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost” (9), the locution may simultaneously refer to all the different readers (narratee, implied, and actual) that traditional narratology attempts to keep separate in theory as well as a character called the Reader (see Margolin, “You” 441–42). At the same time, it both alludes to and enacts the anti-essentialist stances concerning personal identity characteristic of poststructuralist theory and postmodern narrative. In this work, literature and theory interanimate each other, the concept of person dissolves, and presentation fuses with representation.

Looking back over these three basic types of second person narration, we may clarify the nature of each by contrasting which figures are juxtaposed, fused, or destabilized. “Standard” second person narration oscillates between third and first person perspectives, with each narrative usually settling toward one or the other, while repeatedly if briefly seeming to include the reader as the object of the discourse. Hypothetical second person texts fuse a heterodiegetic depiction of an ever more specific individual with an imagined future of the reader, thus merging a third person perspective with a hypothetical “you” that is the virtual equivalent of “one.” Autotelic texts have the greatest share
of direct address to the actual reader and superimpose this onto a fictional character designated by “you” that tends to be treated from an external perspective as if in the third person. This intensifies one of the most fascinating features of second person narrative: the way the narrative “you” is alternately opposed to and fused with the reader—both the constructed and the actual reader.

All “you’s” are not equal, however, and not everyone is equally able to merge with the second person. After all, as Brian McHale points out, “Italian grammar forces Calvino to specify the number and gender of his Reader in the original text—the Reader is, at the outset, masculine, singular” (Postmodernist 256), though by the end he has two readers, one male, the other female, go off together.

A comparable point is made forcefully in Jamaica Kincaid’s nonfictional book on Antigua, A Small Place, a work that takes its discursive tone from another variety of second person writing, the travel guide:

You disembark from your plane. You go through customs. Since you are a tourist, a North American or European—to be frank, white—and not an Antiguan black returning to Antigua from Europe or North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives, you move through customs swiftly, you move through customs with ease. Your bags are not searched. (4–5)

By identifying the racial and economic status of her “you,” Kincaid reveals the dynamics of the divided audience, and challenges the monolithic “you” that implies a universal, deracinated, ideal construct. Kincaid is painfully aware of antithetical communities of reception, as well as the ideological codes that typically surround notions like the ideal reader. The assumptions that white middle and upper class audiences bring to the act of reading are thus foregrounded and exposed—particularly the insidious assumption that they are, “naturally,” the universal you addressed by the text. As the book’s frequent reflections on language make clear (“For isn’t it odd that the only language I have to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal?” [31]), Kincaid’s interrogation of the “you” is part of a larger critique of imperialists’ objectifications of colonized peoples. In this context, one is reminded of another poignant usage of the second person that also addresses a divided readership—the final words of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: “what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak
for you?” (568). This passage, with its rhetorical questions, internal rhyme, and direct address, easily evokes the rich oral tradition of African-American storytelling, a tradition that stresses interaction between speaker and audience. Once again, we see that by identifying and contesting an already appropriated “you,” minority writers are better able to create a discursive space where their own voices may be heard.

Performed narratives can also employ this technique, though the fact that the “you” is spoken alters its effects. An audience in the theater can be addressed by an actor or a character in a play. The following speech opens Athol Fugard’s play, My Children! My Africa! “You’ve got to drive in first gear all the time because of the potholes and stones. . . . I think you’d be inclined to agree with our mayor” (15). A more radical address to the spectators and narrative of the audience’s behavior appears in Peter Handke’s “Insulting the Audience.”

While first person cinema has been widely discussed by theorists like Edward Branigan, George Wilson, and Sarah Kozloff, second person film is rarely mentioned (although here too Morrissette offers some interesting commentary: “You” 20–21). There is no question that second person films do exist; military forces routinely employ them for training new recruits. But cinema lacks the immediacy of the theater where actors can directly address individual spectators; its mode of production and reception makes any attempt to speak to its viewers something of a gamble. More significantly, the existing conventions of narrative film militate against second person narrative cinema. Edward Branigan observes that characters are prohibited from staring into the camera in the classic film in order to preserve the spectator’s status as invisible voyeur (46). When it does occur, direct second person address is generally coded as a personal narration that reveals the subjectivity of the speaker. Branigan concludes that we may speak of “unmotivated” camera movement and direct address to the camera only because a standard of neutral narration and reception exists. In every film text, he affirms, there must always be “an underlying level of omniscient narration—that which frames but is not itself framed—and voyeuristic reception—that which looks but is not itself seen—which together create the fictional appearance of other levels of narration” (46). This may help to explain why, in the film version of Bright Lights, Big City, the second person narration was invariably perceived as the voice of the protagonist speaking to himself. One might add that this situation need not always be the case, as the beginning of Lars von Trier’s film Zentropa demonstrates. Its second person voiceover was so compel-
ling that some film critics could not resist writing their reviews in the second person.

It is easy to guess why narrative theory has resisted conceptualizing second person fiction for so long. There is of course the force of habit, especially the habit of thinking in terms of binary oppositions. For those theorists attempting to construct a universal narratology, capable of embracing all narratives, both factual and fictional, an additional problem appears: first and third person novels have obvious nonfictional counterparts in autobiography and biography, but second person narrative is an exclusively and distinctively literary phenomenon, its only nonfictional analogues being the pseudo-narrative forms of the cookbook, the travel guide, and the self-help manual. The typical discourse of the standard second person novel (“The newspaper—it was folded to the listings of single rooms—fell from your pocket when you drank from the bottle,” [Hawkes, 5]) has no precise nonfictional equivalent. Here, a thorough poetics of fiction as actually practiced in the twentieth century will threaten the dream of a universal narratology, a situation that I will discuss at greater length in the conclusion to this book.

One may now assess the distinctive characteristics of second person narrative. First of all, it is a relatively novel mode of narration, one that allows innovative authors a fresh way to treat traditional fictional situations, and one that permits authors to explore the boundaries of and invent variations on a new fictional voice, as many of the authors discussed above amply demonstrate. It may even turn out to be one of the most important technical advances in fictional narration since the introduction of the stream of consciousness. Though second person narration seems peculiarly suited to the concerns of postmodernism, it is important to observe that numerous other aesthetic stances have found the strategy fruitful: romanticism (Hawthorne), expressionism (Aichinger), magical realism (Fuentes), realism (O’Brien), and high modernism (Butor).

Secondly, it offers new possibilities of creative representation, particularly for revealing a mind in flux. The narrative “you” is especially effective in disclosing the sense of intimate unfamiliarity present in the cocaine-charged brain of McInerney’s anti-hero, in the dream-like self of Fuentes’ Felipe Montero throughout his mythopoetic adventures,
and in Aichinger’s protagonist’s journey through death and time. The narrative “you” is also admirably suited to indicate the suppressed subjectivity and silenced speech of O’Brien’s female protagonist, and one might also suggest that Butor’s “vous” is peculiarly appropriate for describing the mind of a conflicted individual in the process of making significant decisions that he would prefer not to have to think about. And, in a very different way, Calvino impressively documents the act of reading even as it is taking place.

The ideological possibilities of second person narration are also rich. It invites a rewriting of commercial discourses intended to exploit their readers through the illusion of identification, it helps dramatize the mental battles of an individual struggling against the internalized discourse of an oppressive authority, and it is a useful vehicle for minority writers to foreground a subjectivity typically excluded from common, unexamined notions of “you” and “us.” And at a more philosophical level, it is admirably suited to express the unstable nature and intersubjective constitution of the self.