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Second Person in Different Genres and Cultural Practices

Abstract

The editorial introduction shows the richness of traditional literary genres (fictional and non-fictional), new cultural practices (digital literature, games, and playable media) in which second-person address may be encountered. The presence of a direct address to “you” (individual or collective) is also a distinct marker of contemporary marketing, advertising, and social media communication. There is a number of transitional forms in-between print and digital literature and games, in which the presence of the second-person pronoun is one of the main features of poetics. These include narrative role-playing games (RPGs), game books, interactive text games, and paragraph games/books. Complementing the existing gap in Polish interdisciplinary research, the editors discuss both the historical forms of second-person narrative and its potential to cross the boundaries between various media. Additionally, the article reconstructs the fuzzy status of you-narrative in 20th-century narrative theory, since the semantic ambiguities of the multifaceted “you” address resulted in multiple theoretical attempts at defying and analyzing the second-person storytelling. We summarize the main threads of the heated debate on the semantics, poetics, and pragmatics of second-person narrative that took place at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The editorial discusses the reasons why narrative theory gradually recognized the typological equivalence of second-person storytelling to the third- and first-person narrative mode. Another recurring problem in research on second person is its impact on reader’s immersion and identification processes. Moreover, we indicate the new cultural context (the digital revolution) as an important factor in the current dissemination and popularization of second-person narratives.

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Why second-person narratives?

Second-person literary narrative has never had a narratological status comparable to that of first- and third-person mode, although it is often considered the most profound innovation in fiction since the introduction of interior monologue. The first thoroughgoing second-person novel (*How like a God*) was written by Rex Stout in 1929 (Morrissette 1965: 12), but the form reached its peak of popularity in French *nouveau roman* in 1957, when Michel Butor's *The Change of Heart* [*La Modification*] was published. Second person was used in fictions that gained worldwide recognition e.g., Carlos Fuentes's *Aura* (1962), Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, 1979), Jay MacInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). It can be also found in non-fiction genres (Jeziorska-Haładaj 2019) — the oldest example being the memoirs of duke Maximilien de Béthune de Sully (1638), the most acclaimed Christa Wolf's autobiographical *Patterns of Childhood* (*Kindheitsmuster*, 1976) and Oriana Fallaci's biographical *A Man* (*Un uomo*, 1979). Paul Auster made second person a hallmark of his recent non-fiction writing (*Winter Journal*, 2012; *Reports from the Interior*, 2013). When in 1994 Monika Fludernik came up with a list of second-person texts in world literature it featured about one hundred and fifty texts; today it would be probably a four-digit number.

Initial theoretical recognition of second-person narration dates back to the 1960s. and was a result of the impact Butor's novel had made — it was discussed, among others, by Roland Barthes and Michel Leiris. Butor's self-reflexive remarks were one of the first attempts to pinpoint the phenomenon (Butor 1965), followed shortly by the groundbreaking contribution of Morrissette (1965). Not very much happened for the next thirty years with prominent theorists underestimating the specificity of second person, considering it a disguised first or third person, a simple case of heterodiegesis (Genette 1983: 92–93) or an extension of the address to the reader known already in the 18th century novel (Genette, 2004). It was not until the last decades of the 20th century when a lively discussion on the semantics and typologies of second-person narratives has swept through the most important literary theory journals (“Style” 1994, vol. 28, no. 3 and no. 4, “Language and Literature”, “Narrative”, “Poetics Today”) and has resulted in numerous substantial articles and monographs (Margolin 1990, Fludernik 1993; Herman 1993, Richardson 2006, Kacandes

2001, DelConte 2003, Fludernik 2011, Macrea 2016, Illiopoulou 2019, Sorlin 2022). The interest has diminished again, however, before the beginning of the *You Turn* (Eilan 2016), which recently marked the domains of philosophy (of mind, of language, ethics and epistemology), social sciences, psychology and neuroscience. Moreover, the frequency of second-person storytelling has recently acquired a new cultural context of digital literature (Bell, Enslin 2011) and interactive playable media (Harrigan, Wardrip-Fruin 2007).

Although the number of second-person novels is also rapidly increasing in Polish literature (to mention A. Zaniewski's *Szczur* 1995, W. Kuczok's *Opowieści słychane* 2000, Sz. Twardoch's *Morfina* 2012, Z. Szczerek's *Siódemka* 2014, W. Engelking's *Lekcje anatomii doktora D.* 2016, J. Żulczyk's *Czarne słońce* 2019), the state of research on that narrative mode is not widely known. The special issue *Transmedial Second-Person Narratives* discusses the presence of the second-person storytelling in contemporary texts and cultural practices — in a variety of fictional and non-fiction genres of print literature, in role-playing and video games, in current theoretical reflection. The participants of previous theoretical debates on second person (Mildorf 2012, 2016; Parker 2012) are among the contributors to the current issue of “The Problems of Literary Genres”. We are very pleased to announce that this is the first thematic issue devoted to second-person narrative in Poland.

Second person in fiction and non-fiction

The contributions to this volume continue, discuss or engage in polemics with earlier approaches, so it might be instructive to view the essays in a broader context. In general, contemporary research is focused on issues relating to the semantics and pragmatics of second-person narrative, the textual and extratextual effects it produces. In case studies — which is also visible in this issue — second person is often not the only aspect of the text taken into account. Intertwined with other analytical observations, the narratological perspective adds up to a complete and wholesome interpretation of a literary text.

To make this state of affairs possible, the pioneering research had to settle the fundamental matters. One of them was the question whether second person constitutes a distinctive narrative situation or is it “only” a point of view, a textual strategy, or a mode of narration. Further efforts were directed at establishing a satisfactory definition of “proper” or “real” second-person narrative and distinguishing it from related yet different phenomena (like the epistolary novel for example). Another preliminary goal was to revise the existing models and typologies of narrative which so far did not go beyond the first/third person divide. Fundamental work was done by Fludernik, who was first to recognise the potentially subversive aspect of the form, tagging it “a test case for narratology” (Fludernik, 1994a). She proved that it undermines realist narrative patterns and puts into question the established categories of narratological enquiry, proving them insufficient. The result of this line of thinking was a complex typology that combines Genette's homo- and heterodiegesis with Stanzel's opposition of the teller/reflector mode (later replacing his concept of the narrating and experiencing self by the addressee-you and experiencing-you; Fludernik 2011). A result was a comprehensive, general typology, which became a reference point for further research. Recently Sandrine Sorlin (2022) revisited Fludernik's concepts from a pragmatic standpoint, including the author-reader relationship and making face-to-face interactions a model for understanding written narratives. A different approach was adopted by Rich-

ardson (1991) whose typology of second person was based on generic criteria. He distinguished standard, hypothetical, and autotelic second-person narration and analyzed their functions and effects on the reader.

Attempts at grasping the semantic complexities of the multifaceted “you” pronoun became a common denominator of research representing different methodologies. An early example is the work of Andrzej Bogusławski and Ewa Herman (1991) inspired by the natural semantic metalanguage developed by Anna Wierzbicka. One of the most exhaustive typologies of the “you” was proposed by David Herman (1994). He distinguished the generalized *you*, fictional reference (to a character), fictionalized address (to a narratee) and apostrophic address (to the reader). Herman’s most influential concept though is the idea of *doubly deictic you*, which creates ambiguity by combining at least two of the possibilities listed above. This double deixis helps to explain the simultaneous reference to the protagonist whose story is told and the actual reader who feels addressed. The degree of the engagement of the flesh-and-blood reader — even if the pronoun clearly refers to the protagonist — is constantly debated. Irene Kacandes compared the effect of “you” on the reader to a situation when someone calls “You!” on a train platform: the reaction is immediate and automatic, the invitation to feel addressed “irresistible” (Kacandes 1993: 139). Even if the effect is temporary, it brings up the problem of immersion: the question to what extent second person facilitates the reader’s investment in the story to the level of being absorbed by it. First remarks on that issue were formulated by Marie-Laure Ryan who noted the short-term effect of the reader being “figuratively pulled into the textual world and embodied on the narrative scene” (Ryan 2004: 138). This line of thought was continued by Mildorf (2016) who distinguishes between aesthetic-reflexive involvement, a sort of intellectual response to the text, and affective-emotional involvement, closer to empathy. Macrae (2016) has shown however that surprisingly there is no significant difference between the impact of second-person narration, compared to first person, on readers’ identification with the viewpoint of the narrator, narrator-character or character-focaliser.

Another recurring problem in research on second person is the status of the narrator and the relation between the “you” and the “I”. As Matt DelConte pointed out, considering this type of narration requires a methodological shift from the question “who is speaking” to the problem “who is listening”, therefore existing “narrator-centered” or voice-centered models seem inadequate. The shift can be seen in terms proposed by Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik (2022) who purposefully dubbed the “you” referent the *initiator of the action* (“you” referent) and the speaking “I” an *interactor*.

In considering the relation between the narrative “you” and “I” the ethical perspective comes to the foreground. Two opposing views have been expressed so far. The first one stressed the cooperative, dialogical dimension of second person and its ability to speak up for the speechless, represent those who are deprived of their own voice in this optics, *speaking on behalf of the other is a moral obligation* (Rembowska-Pluciennik 2022: 80). Understood in that way second person may have a political aspect and is capable of tackling problems of race, gender, or class. One of the first to point that out was Richardson (1991) who expressed his belief in the homology between radical ideological standpoints and radical narrative experiments.

An opposite approach underlines the potentially oppressive aspect of second person: the act of taking over somebody else's story. The first to mention it was probably Margolin (1990: 444) who wrote about "the superiority of the speaker to his or her addressee/character in terms of knowledge and/or understanding and/or judgment". It is particularly striking in non-fiction, in biographies and reportages, where the real protagonist's life is interpreted in a definite, arbitrary way.

One of the most gripping issues regarding second person is the problem of their supposed "unnaturalness". It was Fludernik again who paved the way to the concept of natural and unnatural narratives (Fludernik 1996): second person is often considered within that framework. It is subject to debate as to whether it has — like first or third person — real-life counterparts. Butor (1965) believed it to be practically non-existent in everyday communication apart from specific, extraordinary situations when addressees cannot tell their own story and it has to be narrated to them. This point of view was shared and elaborated on by Richardson (2006). Later research suggested that in real-life forms like self-talk or conversational storytelling (Mildorf 2012) fragmentary, short-term passages of second person are possible. Fludernik introduced a diachronic perspective and proved that the increasing popularity and proliferation of initially unnatural second-person narratives leads to their familiarization; readers gradually perceive them as less odd than initially. Thus "you" narratives "extend the boundaries of the nonrealistically possible in emphatic ways" (Fludernik 1994: 460). Recent research on unnatural narratives, to a certain extent polemical to Fludernik, prefers rather to preserve or even cherish the "unnaturalness"; Alber and others (2010) object to making mimetic patterns the reference point for the interpretation of unnatural narratives. According to them it leads to simplification and applying rational rules to texts that oppose them.

The problem of possible naturalization is linked to the question of fictionality. The majority of research on second person focuses on novels and short stories; it is only recently, with the rising interest for factual narration, that second-person non-fiction is beginning to be considered (although, as mentioned above, the first example dates back to the 17th century). Including non-fiction may lead in the future to certain amendments in definitions and change of assumptions. An example might be understanding the "I" addressing the "you" as an indefinite, unspecified voice. In texts ruled by the referential pact the narrator is identified with the flesh-and-blood, existing author whose name is on the cover. In autobiographical second person we deal most commonly with self-address, in literary journalism it is most commonly the voice of the reporter who is addressing the protagonist. This is only one of the differences; the fiction-centered second-person theory still needs adapting to the specificity of non-fiction genres.

Second person in digital literature and media

A digital reader in the 21st century functions in a multimedia environment for which interaction with "you" (human or virtual like AI) is the easily accessible mode of using technological tools for communication, professional collaboration, and entertainment.

The pragmatic function of "you" (*The Pragmatics of Personal...*, 2015) seems to be related to the medium in which it occurs. In printed literary texts its elementary effect is to complicate possible deictic constellations (it may refer to a protagonist, a narratee, a fic-

tional or real reader). Electronic media seem to impose in a much more unambiguous way the obligatory identification of the user of the device or interface with the addressee of the pronoun “you”. Without this identification, it is not possible to operate the systems programmed on the basis of directive speech acts (orders, requests, questions such as “click”, “search”, “copy”). According to Jill Walker (2001: 12–14) second-person in digital media creates an effect of *forced participation*, while in print literature gives a reader more freedom for *involuntary enactment*. However, this overly generalizing thesis is modified by more recent analyzes of games and hyperfiction (Bell, Ensslin 2021: 157), which emphasize the whole spectrum of solutions that make it possible to complicate the relationship between the game system, the second-person narrative and the player.

Two phenomena have an impact on transmedial naturalization of second-person storytelling: widespread of direct and informal online communication (in one-to-one and one-to-many mode) and the rapid development of new forms emerging in the interactive environment (discussion forum, chat, comment, vlog, blog, post, audio-video streaming Gajewski 2021). As described by José van Dijk (2013: 45–67), Facebook operates on two main strategies for collecting, processing, and distributing data: it promotes connectedness and connectivity, which enable content to be shared with others at a basic interface level. The presence of a direct address to you (individual or collective) is also a distinct marker of the marketing and advertising (Sorlin 2022: 1–9).

There is a number of transitional forms in-between print and digital literature and games, in which the presence of the second-person pronoun is one of the main features of poetics (some of them may have a double — print or digital form). These include narrative role-playing games (RPGs), game books, interactive text games, and paragraph games/books (Harrigan, Wardrip-Fruin 2010). The second-person narration plays an important role here, guaranteeing the identification of the player and the reader required by the genre — refusing this condition, a reader cannot make the necessary kinetic and interpretive gestures “to choose their own adventure” (to refer to popular genre’ designation). The most complex category are narrative role-playing games as transmedial practice (Szeja 2004, Hoover et al 2018) in the form of performance, a video game, a literary text, a film.

The significant case in this context are so-called MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon, multi-person dungeons), i.e., systems created for multiplayer online games, that finally turned into platforms of intensified and unlimited social contacts, in which meeting, chatting, and socializing turned to be a highly evaluated additional value. However, in many video games the “you” address does not function as an apostrophe but plays a constructive role in the narration. In games the responses from the system are usually written from a second-person point of view, some of the characters (non-playable) talk to the player represented by their avatar, addressing them directly and interacting with players. Second-person narration in games undermines the clear division between the narration level and the level of the narrated events, as well as between the intra-textual and extra-textual existents.

The “you” address forms one of the crucial functionalities of reading electronic literature (e.g., interactive fiction or hypertext novels; Hayles 2007). More complex digital genres as playable literature requires not so much using the technological devices as participation in an experiential event accessible via such devices — a reader may virtually *become* “you” inscribed in interactive location of VR reality. In such an experience each sensual modality may activate the affordances of the multimedial text (breath, a specific type of touch, not

just a mechanical click, see Górska-Olesińska, Przybyszewska 2020). New digital literature genres that frequently apply second-person narration are also e.g., a blog novel, a novel in tweets, an email novel, a mobile phone novel and an app novel.

The coexistence in the 21st century of so many types of printed or digital genres that use the “you” address is a phenomenon that radically affects the status and reception of previous literary forms written from the second-person point of view. It irrevocably ceases to be rare, experimental modus belonging to highly artistic, ephemeral texts.

We hope the eight texts presented in this volume will bring new impulses to the research on second person. The opening article by Pernille Meyer challenges the existing definitions of “real” second-person narratives and proposes a new criterion: the “you” is supposed to be designated but not addressed. Her case study is Maria Gerhardt’s *Transfer Window*, a text situated on the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. Jarmila Mildorf continues her research on second person with an analysis of Anne Harich’s (auto)biographical book devoted to her late husband Wolfgang Harich. Joshua Parker’s contribution offers a vast and profound theoretical account of second-person fiction. Maria Błaszowska-Nawrocka and Piotr F. Piekutowski analyse contemporary Polish novels: Paweł Paliński’s *Polaroidy z zagłady*, a dystopic fiction, and Andrzej Zaniewski’s *Szczur*, where the narratological approach is combined with the concepts of animal studies. Denise Wong examines the intersection of hypertext fiction and autobiographical writing on the example of two texts written in the second decade of the 21st century. Michał Kłosiński and Paulina Siedlecka focus on games; the former essay tackles the problem of second person in a biopolitical perspective, the latter explores the function of the “you” in the RPGs.

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