A THEORY ABOUT THE SECOND PERSON PROSE: THE RELATION NARRATIVE -YOU- ALTER-EGO/ALTERITY

Lucian Dumitru BĂICEANU[*]

Abstract*: Second-person literature represents a literary phenomenon that has been growing more and more lately. In short stories and novels we find various examples of texts in which the narrative perspective no longer falls under the traditional formula (text written in the first person or third person). The use of the second person pronoun (YOU) in the narrative text aroused lot of controversy: on the linguistic level and on the theory of literature level. Another approach to the interpretation of this narrative-YOU address we can find in psychology and philosophy, turning to analyze some key-terms: the relationship I- alter ego and the identity-alterity relation. Therefore, we propose an analysis of the second person prose from a different perspective, that of psychology and philosophy, to crystallize a concrete theories on this innovative and surprising form of literature.*

Keywords: *second person prose, narrative-YOU, alterity, alter-ego.*

Jonathan Culler wrote in *Problems in The Theory of Fiction* that the metaphor 'person' should not be seen as an analytical tool, but as an integral element of creation and realization of fiction itself: „rather, as Jonathan Culler suggests, the metaphors of "person" should be seen not as analytical tools but as integral to the making and reading of fiction itself (Culler, 1984: 6)"(Schofield, 1998). Opposite to the structuralist terminology 'point of view', *the person* becomes an indispensable concept of fiction, integrated and decanted in the fiction, source of subjectivity. Thus, when we discuss about the *person*, should no longer limit the examination to shape, but also to utility, the *person* being the nucleus from which is born the narrative perspective or composition of narrative perspective through which is produced, later, fiction. Furthermore, by reference to the three models of narrative-person (first person, second person and third person), Dennis Schofield believes hat the smoothest, special by her atypical character, it is the second person, being the one that refuses to establish a stable model of subjectivity, permanent putting in parallel the two other traditional forms: "I regard the "second person" as a special case of narrative "person" that, at its most fluid, can produce an experience of reading quite unlike that of reading traditional "first-" and "third-person" narrative. Essentially, this unique experience comes about because Protean-"you" neglects to constitute the stable modes of subjectivity that readers expect to find within narrative textuality."(D. Schofield, 1998: 13).

Starting from the ideas outlined by the Australian researcher, we present four different perspectives of second person prose :

1. The first relationship that can be established is that in which a narrator speaks of himself using the second person, keeping a certain distance in relation to his acts and thoughts. In this case the relationship is very simple to illustrate: an *I* converts, disguising himself, in a *YOU*. We do not have only a simple case of first person disguise, but the multiplication of subjectivity through intersubjectivity. This type is called *standard form* (Richardson, 1991: 311). Mathematically we propose the following formula: $I = YOU \neq HE$. This

[*]Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iasi, lucianbaiceanu@gmail.com

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)

category includes many examples, from the famous novel by Michel Butor, *La modification*, to an example from the Romanian literature, Mihai Zamfir *Late education.*

2. Another type of relationship is one in which a narrator talks about a *YOU* which is another character. In this case we can not talk about an disguise of an *I*, but a disguise of an *HE* (the character), which is in a direct relationship with the narrator, being somehow aware of the words of the narrator: thus *HE* becomes a *YOU*. This category is called *autotelic form* (Richardson, 1991: 311). Mathematically we propose the following formula: *EU ≠ YOU = HE*. In the Romanian literature, a good example is the novel *Ce ne spunem când ne vorbim (What do we say to us when we speak to us) by Chris Simion.*
3. A third form of relationship is the one in which the *YOU* is not a participant of the narrated events, but even the reader. In this case we are talking about a narration built almost like a speech, the whole text is addressed to an interlocutor, the reader. The *YOU* is not not an *I* or a *HE*, because the whole speech is directly focused on reader. Called *autotelic form* (Richardson, 1991: 311), it has mathematically the following formula: *I ≠ YOU≠ HE*. A well known example is the novel of Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. In the Romanian literature, we find a good example in the novel *O sută de ani de zile la Porțile Orientului* (*A hundreds of years of days at the East Gate)* by Ioan Grosan.
4. The fourth form refers to a rhetoric situation in which the addressing does not refer to a particular person. *YOU* can simultaneously be an *I*, a *HE* or retain his value. Called *subjunctive form* (Richardson, 1991: 311), the mathematical formula which would define it is: *I = YOU = HE*. Although it is the rarest category, we find an example in the Romanian literature: the novel *The God of love* by Felix Aderca.

The narrator is represented by the formula of a *narrative-YOU*, the nature of his identity being just one of the problems that brings the new type of fiction. Another unknown is the question: *Who says the story?*. This "shape-shifting quality" (D. Schofield, 1998: 11) is a source of constant ambiguity, a textual mystery that permanent inciting the reader. Hence, the high dynamic quality of a text written at the second person.

Directing their attention to the first category of second person prose (standard), the most common, many theorists have created a myth: that all the texts written at the second person always hide the mask of the I in the pronoun *YOU*. In other words, the narrative-YOU is nothing but an alter ego and the entire second person prose is a textual construction at the first person, hidden under the mask of the second person. As we already shown, there is indeed a category of second person prose in which the *YOU* is the mask of an *I*, but it is not the only form of text narrated at the second person prose. Also, when we talk about that, we can not put equality between the prose written at first-person and the second person prose. This is the reason why, in this article we have chosen to talk about the relationship established between the *narrative-YOU* and the concept of *alter ego* and *alterity*. We use both concepts (alter ego and alterity) to show the significant difference between them and how it manifests in relation with the *narrative-YOU*.

The claim that the second person prose built through the pronoun *YOU* an alter ego of the *I* is half true. As we demonstrated in other articles (cc: bibliography), in the *YOU* pronoun, not only hides the intention to disguise the ideas of an *I*, but also the

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)

desire to transform the text into a speech in which is involved also the reader, and in which the subjectivity is multiplied, realizing what Dennis Schofield called *intersubjectivity*. This is why we believe that the most appropriate term to describe the pronoun *YOU* is the concept of alterity, analyzed and discussed both in psychology and in philosophy. The alterity includes in its essence also the concept of alter-ego, but leads the idea to another level, to integration in his scheme to both the *I* and the *Other*.

Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume, in *Figures of alterity*, agree that all the texts submitted to *Another* (*l'autre*) are „un soi de travaliu, de doliu paradoxal, în forma renegării, în fața unei componente care, în altul, ar fi dispărut sau e pe cale de dispariție"(Guillaume, 2002: 6) /"a kind of labor, a paradoxically grieving , in the form of denial, in the face of a component which, in the other, it have disappeared or is disappearing"(Guillaume, 2002: 6), a component that researchers call "radical alterity": „în fiecare altul (*autre*) există Celălalt (*autrui*) - ceea ce nu este eu, ceea ce este diferit de mine, dar pe care-l pot înțelege, chiar asimila - și există de asemenea o alteritate radicală, inasimilabilă, incomprehensibilă și chiar inimaginabilă"/"in each *Another* (*autre*) exist the *Other* (*autrui*) - which is not *I*, which is different from me, but which I can understand, even assimilate - and there is also a radical alterity, which can not be assimilated, even incomprehensible and unimaginable "(Guillaume, 2002: 6). And the second person prose represents a text which is addressed to *Another*, represented by the *YOU* pronoun. Who is the *other* (*autrui*) in the *YOU* pronoun? The answer is very simple: the reader, who is different from the *I*, that is behind the *narrative-YOU*. In this idea stands the difference between the prose at the first person and the second person prose. If in the first case we are talking about narrative subjectivity, in the the second case we are talking about a multiplication of subjectivity, about *intersubjectivity*. The transition from *Autre*(*another)* to *Autrui(other)* is "a huge faustian labor" (Guillaume, 2002: 11), but it seems that in the second person prose it becomes much easier to understand and achieve, the literature space becoming a direct insertion of the reader in text.

Marc Guillaume considers the fiction of *The Other*, done by literature, a product of a exacerbated freedom and he sees it lacking of veritable because of lack of object. The researcher proposal is to build a "mixed fiction" as producing of alterity: „ceva care este construit plecând de la un real și care este umplut apoi cu o cantitate de imaginar, de ficțiune"/ "something that is built starting from a real and which is then filled with an amount of imaginary, of fiction"(Guillaume, 2002: 35).The example that the author gives is the one of the mixed fiction, of geographical origin, where the actual geography may be reproduced through fiction, achieving an alterity: „nu e vorba de a inventa, de a propune un Maroc complet imaginar, de exemplu. Dar nu e vorba nici de a lua o poziție etnografică și de a dezvolta descrieri minuțioase ale realului. Ceea ce e interesant e a vedea în ce fel se deformează la un moment dat realul, tocmai în căutare de alteritate"/"is not about inventing, to propose a completely imaginary Maroc, e.g. But, also, it's not about to take a ethnographic position and to develop meticulous descriptions of reality. What is interesting is to see how the reality is deformed at a given moment, precisely in search of alterity"(Guillaume, 2002: 35). Thus, the mixed fiction would be an intermediate species between a real and an imagined product. A mixed fiction is, also, the second person prose: the real element preserved and incorporated into the text is the reader. Whatever the type of the second person prose that we talk about, the reader mark will be felt in the *narrative-YOU*.

The alterity is understood by Edgardo D. Carosella as a desired change, as a stage in the individual evolution, as a model: "être soi, c'est à la fois devenir autre et

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)

s'appropier cette altérité nouvelle; cette appropriation d'une altérité nouvelle est la capacité d'évoluer dans son identité"(Carosella, 2010: 33). In the second person prose, the *narrative-YOU* contains a sum of all external models, specific to readers, which can set up an internal *I* attributed to the original idea proposed by the author. The most compact formula which can characterizes the alterity is very well illustrated in the following sentence: „Incorporer l'autre pour construire sa propre identité"(Carosella, 2010: 191). This is the process that is realized in the text at second person: the *I* is not enough to narrate and becoming the *narrative-YOU* can simultaneously incorporate the reader, the author and the narrator, by multiplying the subjectivity and producing a complex textual identity.

For Martin Buber, the organization of the world stands under the sign of the double: „pentru om lumea este dublă după cum și atitudinea lui este dublă."/"for humans the world is doubled as also his attitude is double." (Buber, 1992: 29). The researcher sees the *I-You* relationship as a couple that forms a "fundamental word", together with other fundamental words such as "I-That" where *That* can be replaced by *She* or *He*. The conclusion of these relationships is that *I* can exist only in relation to his double: „Cînd este rostit *TU*, este rostit în același timp *EU* din perechea verbală *EU-TU*; Când este rostit *Acela*, este rostit în același timp *EU* din perechea verbală *EU-Acela*."/"When is pronounced *YOU*, it is pronounced at the same time *I* from the verbal pair *I-You*; When *That* is pronounced, it is pronounced at the same time the *I* from the verbal pair *I -That*."(Buber, 1992: 30). However, only the relationship between *I* and *YOU* can form a whole, an equivalence: „Cuvântul fundamental *EU-TU* poate fi rostit numai cu întreaga ființă. Cuvântul fundamental *EU-Acel*a nu poate fi niciodată rostit cu întreaga ființă."/"The fundamental word *I-You* can only be spoken with the whole being. The fundamental word *I-THAT* can never be spoke with the whole being."(Buber, 1992: 30). In the second person prose, the used person often hide the mask of an *I*, being a mask which nevertheless maintains an umbilical cord attached to the *I*. In contrast, in the first person prose, the report is split, the *I* cut the contact with the whole being, expressing only a partial projection. Consider therefore that the second person prose is superior at the level of reflection of the character's psychology, just by sketching an *I* completed by the alterity, an *I* unchained by censorship, which feels free to say everything, because of anonymity conferred by the second person pronoun.

Martin Buber believes that „*TU* nu reprezintă un lucru ca obiect, căci acolo unde există un lucru vorbim despre Acela. TU-ul există doar în relație. Astfel, lumea experienței reflectă legătura *EU-ACELA*, pe când lumea relației e reprezentată de legătura dintre EU și TU"/"the *YOU* doesn't represent a thing like an object, because there where it is one thing we talk about *THAT*. The *YOU* only exists in relationship. Thus, the world of experience reflects the *I-THAT* connection, while the world of relationship is the link between *I* and *YOU"*(Buber, 1992: 32). We believe, however, that in the second person prose the pronoun is a hook which binds both the *I* and the *THAT*. The perfect example is the four type of second person prose, the one in which the narrative-YOU is indefinite and placed under the mathematical report *I = YOU = HE*.

The *I-You* relationship overlaps not only forms of alterity, but also make direct reference to the relations between *I* in front of another person, as *YOU* of mine, understood by Martin Buber as an element that establishes a reciprocity with the *I*. In this case, the *YOU* „umple orizontul întreg; nu pentru că n-ar mai exista nimic în afară de el: ci pentru că toate celelalte trăiesc în lumina lui"/B"fills the whole horizon; not because there would be nothing out of him but because all the other live in his

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)

light"(Buber, 1992: 35). *Mutatis mutandis*, this relationship finds place in two specific forms of second person prose: the case where we talk about the address to the reader and the case where the *YOU* is used as an address to another character. In both cases we are talking about reciprocity and relationship. The *I* is not canceled, it is melted in the *YOU*, became superior person, whose presence depends the entire narrative structure.

In the case of intervention to the reader, the *YOU* encompasses the totality, the undefined infinite, the *I* (the emitter) is certainly the author. So, it succeeds a spectral multiplication of subjectivity, the perception and the comprehension of the text being dependent by the permanent relationship between *I* (the text) - *YOU* (the reader) or *I* (the text producer, the author) - *YOU* (the reader, the receiver). In the second case, when the second person is used in the dialogue between two characters, the action being carried out, also, by the discursive interaction, the *I-YOU* relationship is equally present: both courts are principal, concrete generators of action and of discourse.

Martin Buber believes that "the *You* can not be experienced." (Buber, 1992: 37), it can only be approached, integrated into the *I*, but never lived. The choice to use the second person pronoun in prose is dictated by the wish to bring the reader closer to text, shock him, contrary him. Whatever the type of second person prose, the *YOU* has, among other objectives, that to produce a shock of reading which can approach the reader to the text or irritated him. Either way, the text achieves its goal. Martin Buber believes that between *I* and *You* there is no pre-knowledge and there is no need it. But is there a pre-knowledge between text and reader? The structuralist theory speaks of the absence of a original first reading, the reading being always *a second act*: there is no reading, just rereading. The theory is developed also by Matei Calinescu, who focus the attention on the fact that a literary theme and a subject of a text no longer have how to be original, and, also, even if this first condition would be achieved, we talk often about the texts that we do not ever read them, but about which we have heard, about we were told or have read something about them. It is through these arguments is suspended the -*first*- characteristic of a reading. But what happens in a second person prose? We still speak about a pre-knowledge of the subject or of the text? It will be a reread? Our opinion is that the second person addressing breaks the wire of textual expectations and lead to the existence of a first reading: the text is addressed to me, the reader, named in text – *YOU*. Our opinion is strengthened by another idea proposed by Martin Buber: "the present is born only because that *YOU* becomes present"(Buber, 1992: 39). Therefore, the readings obtained the characteristic of first reading, the text becoming a speech that is produced when the the reader discover it with the physical eye and with the mind's eye. Furthermore, this kind of text can be refused by the reader, rejected and considered outrageous. What distinguishes the second person prose from other types of writing is, therefore, the fact that it forms a reciprocity between *I* and *You* (as the reader, character and alter ego), a relationship that requires the existence of a prime-reading, a reading of the present.

The personal pronoun *YOU* used in the second person prose must be often put in relation with the concept of alter-ego, but is connected to another more comprehensive concept: the alterity. Called a form of alterity, the *narrative-YOU* becomes an unique pronoun, met under the same form, but in different narrative scheme, in all four categories of second person prose. However, we must specify that the psychological and philosophical theory of looking at and interpreting the *narrative-YOU* is just a variant which must be next to the linguistic and literary interpretations. Thus, we considered that is required a careful discussion of this interpretative aspect of the second person prose, topic often discussed, in our opinion, incorrectly, which led

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)

many theorists to interpret the text as a variant of first-person prose, canceling all this spectacular form of manifestation of this narrative construct. Also, we would like to specify that this article discusses the subject of second person prose only from the theoretical perspective, following that in a future article to accomplish a study case on novels from all four categories of second person prose.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean, Guillaume, Marc, *Figuri ale alterității*, traducere de Ciprian Mihali, Editura Paralela 45, București, 2002.

Baudrillard, Jean - *Celălalt prin sine însuți*, Editura Casa cărții de știință, 1997, Cluj-Napoca.

Băiceanu, Lucian, *The Second Person Prose avant Butor: Felix Aderca - The God of Love*, în volumul *Communication, Context, Interdisciplinarity - 3rd Edition*, ISSN: 2069 - 3389, Editat de The Alpha Institute for Multicultural Studies, publicat de „Petru Maior" University Press, Tîrgu-Mureş, 2014, p.494. (http://www.upm.ro/cci3/?pag=CCI-03/vol03-Lit).
http://www.upm.ro/cci3/CCI-03/Lit/Lit%2003%2063.pdf

Băiceanu, Lucian, *The Second Person Prose: From Michel Butor to Mihai Zamfir*, în Management Intercultural Volumul XVI, Nr. 2 (31), 2014, p.393.
http://www.mi.bxb.ro/Articol/MI_31_49.pdf

Buber, Martin, *Eu și tu*, traducere din limba germană și prefață de Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Editura Humanitas, București, 1992.

Carosella, Edgardo D., Pradeu, Thomas, *L' Identité, la part de l'Autre. Immunologie et philosophie*, Ofile Jacob, Paris, 2010.

Culler, Jonathan, 1984, *Problems in the Theory of Fiction*, Diacritics 14 (1): 2-11.

Richardson, Brian, 1994, *I etcetera: On the Poetics and Ideology of Multipersoned Narratives*, în Style, 28 (3): 312-28.

*1991, *The Poetics and Politics of Second Person Narrative*, în Genre 24 (3): 309-30.

Schofield, Dennis: 1998, *The Second Person: A Point of View? The Function of the Second-Person Pronoun in Narrative Prose Fiction*, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia, (http://members.westnet.com.au/emmas/2p/index2.htm).

BDD-A24508 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:59:23 UTC)