THE SECOND-PERSON ENIGMA

> Prendi la posizione più comoda: seduto, sdraiato, raggomitolato, coricato. Coricato sulla schiena, su un fianco, sulla pancia. In poltrona, sul divano, sulla sedia a dandolo, sulla sedia a sdraio, sul pouf.[1]

Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is perhaps the best recognised and well-known second-person text among contemporary readers. Published in 1979, the novel is a strange narrative collage composed of the beginnings of ten different novels which are interrupted by a second narrative strand in which a Reader (the protagonist of the novel) is in search of some missing pages of the book he is reading, the same book that the actual reader (*you* or *I*) has in hand. Thematising the composition of his own book and addressing the Reader directly, Calvino surprised both the readers and critics of his time with the striking way in which he addressed formal questions of narration through the operation of *address*, a gesture that caused a long-lasting debate on the style and literary virtues of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* in general and second-person storytelling in particular.

Indeed, the suspicion and doubt expressed in relation to Calvino's book is not something new when it comes to second-person fiction. Second-person novels have frequently been treated as experimental novelties that either deter a readership from engaging with them or, on the contrary, attract the attention of readers by their *catchy* technique irrespective of their literary virtues. Paradoxically this technique that is often seen as tricky or even unpopular has been a narrative mode continuously employed throughout the history of literature, and in many instances even acclaimed in prize-winning novels such as Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte* that was honoured

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1 | Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. 1979. (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1994) 3.

with the Group 47 prize in 1952. Also puzzling is the fact that while many authors have reported problems getting their books published due to the employment of the second-person technique in the past, the situation lately seems to be completely reversed as we witness a rapid growth of second-person texts emerging on the literary scene, especially in the Anglophone world.

In an attempt to defend his work, Calvino in December 1979 published an essay in the "Alfabeta" journal in which he rephrased the title of the novel as *Se una notte d'inverno un narratore*[2] in response to Angelo Guglielmi's criticism of his novel's challenging style and form. Five years later, at a conference held at the Institute of Italian Culture in Buenos Aires in 1984, he defended his novel and his compositional choices, emphasising the self-reflective character of his book, the pleasure of reading and, of course, that of writing.

L'impressa di cercare di scrivere romanzi "apocrifi", cioè che immagino siano scritti da un autore che non sono io e che non esiste, l'ho portata fino in fondo nel mio libro *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. È un romanzo sul piacere di leggere romanzi; protagonista è il Lettore, che per dieci volte comincia a leggere un libro che per vicissitudini estranee alla sua volontà non riesce a finire.[3]

As a patchwork of literary beginnings of books that the author could have written but didn't, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* not only reveals vital components of the writing process but it also highlights the reading process by exposing it to the reader and making it a central theme of the novel. Calvino's book is a marginal self-reflexive text in which the employment of the second-person narrative voice establishes the unique reader-author relationship that the author treats as a major theme of the book. The playful way in which Calvino decides to address his readership and the fragmented char-

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2 | Calvino (1979/1994), v-xiv.

3 | Italo Calvino, *Il Libro, i Libri.* (Buenos Aires: Nuovi quaderni italiani, 1984) 19.

acter of his narrative not only challenge the norms of traditional storytelling but also any reading of the book itself, as readers have to deal with having their position put under scrutiny in various ways: through the theme of reading, by being addressed by and identified with the Reader of the narrative, by struggling with a work of fragments and missing pages that constantly gets interrupted just as the main character of the story (the Reader) is.

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore puts a double emphasis on the Reader, firstly by presenting him as the main character of the narrative and secondly by its composition in the second-person narrative mode in which the concept of address dominates. The second-person technique presupposes, or demands, *active* readers who continually accept or reject their involvement in the story. The continual challenge and ambiguity outlined above presented by reading *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* can be described as the enigma of second-person storytelling. It is an enigma that can also be found, to varying degrees, in response to other second-person texts. In Calvino's novel, however, since the reading challenge also dominates the plot, the enigma is expanded from rhetoric to a more theoretical and metatextual context. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is unique as it discusses theory (that of the second person and Reader Response theory) by being it.

This novel has been the foundational text of my research and its starting point, giving rise to concepts and thoughts on second-person narrative technique and how the concept of address operates. It establishes revealingly the link between the employment of the second person and the reader (the addressee) as well as the association of the technique with self-reflexivity and intertextuality, and it does so in a ludic and hence experimental narrative. These are all features that belong to second-person storytelling. However, though *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* has been essential to setting the cognitive grounds of this study, as my research evolved it proved to be a less good example for understanding the second person as it emphasises the Reader-Author constellation at the expense of the rhetoric of the second person *per se*.

With the aim of understanding the second-person technique, this project has developed a basic typology of address. It reflects a continuous shifting between different addressees which is derived from the classic notion of *apostrophe* and expressed rhetorically as such; it also reflects a mid-distance between narrator and narrated as seen in narratives in which the narrator is not alienated from the narrative but neither is he/she involved the actual moment of narration; it further reflects the second person as an open and ambiguous form, a placeholder for the indefinite and undetermined in the discourse thus, in many cases, enabling narrative depth and complexity.

The above typology is the result of reading and attempting to classify, or at least identify, common features in the long history of second-person literature. In the second part of this project four narratives have been selected for a detailed analysis. They reflect this basic typology and classification and offer the grounds to explore vital aspects of the technique in detail. The texts chosen belong to German and French cold- and post-war period literature, and by addressing different themes they employ the second person in different forms (*tu* and *vous, du*) and narrative modes.

The first novel discussed, *Kindheitsmuster* by Christa Wolf (1976), is the story of a narrator who, after several failed attempts at composing her childhood autobiography in the traditional first-person narrative form, decides to do so in the third, making a narrative persona out of her past self and conducting a continual self-inquisitive (second-person) dialogue while writing. Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* is a fine example of the different levels of distance the pronominal forms reflect in the discourse. Her example is followed by *La Modification* by Michel Butor (1957), a novel reflecting the *nouveau roman* period and showing the process of decision-making on a train journey that coincides with the main narrative in progress. In Butor's self-reflexive narrative the second-person technique is employed to depict the making of a narrative persona and a novel. Here the second-person technique reveals in detail the character's surroundings, and through the consistent use of the polite *vous* it

invites the reader into the fictional world, which is being composed the moment it is read. The generation of the novel in Butor reflects the generation of its key persona as the plot chronicles a process of self-awareness and story of re-establishing self-authority.

The third novel discussed is *Un homme qui dort* by George Perec (1967), a text often associated with Butor's *La Modification* due to their temporal and linguistic proximity and the employment of the second-person technique. Perec presents a *tu*-narrative rich in intertextual implications that shows a student performing an experiment in social detachment by abandoning his own *I,* which is constantly addressed in the second person. Perec's narrative echoes earlier texts that summarised indifference or that involved similar narrative modes and offers a basis for focussing on intertextuality and its role in understanding the second-person technique. What is important to mention here is that in Perec, the second person functions as a narrative figure throughout the narrative; it generates a constant shifting towards different addressees – the heroes and references from other texts – and designates a narrative *topos* that includes all references and literary influences that coexist in Perec's narrative persona until the latter becomes concrete and can be referred to with the pronoun used (*tu*).

The last text discussed in the project is Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte* (1949), a most enigmatic and complex text that challenges the reader with its theme as it shows episodes from the life of a dying woman in a hospital bed in reverse and is interrupted by a narrative level external to the woman (third person). Ilse Aichinger presents a rather short text in which an indeterminate voice, undefined until the end of the narrative, keeps addressing the woman throughout her situation and tells these life episodes in reverse order. Striking is the fact that this reversed flow affects the meanings of the events and their relationship, hence reasons appear as results and connotations of happiness or sadness have a reverse implication. Aichinger, like Perec, creates a story without a legitimate narrative figure, introducing a voice narrator and a dying main narrative figure who is a passive recipient of the narrative. Intriguing also is the fact that in

Spiegelgeschichte, the analysis is subject to this reversal as well, since the main question to be answered here is not the referent of the second person but its origin as well as the relationship the woman shares with this voice.

The texts outlined above are not presented in chronological order but according to the complexity of the narrative strategy of the second person they employ; this order of presentation aims to clarify the various issues and questions associated with or arising from the use of the second-person narrative mode and serves the understanding of the technique gradually. It is the ambivalence and contradiction inherent in second-person narrative that deserves further discussion. Intriguing, moreover, is the fact that second-person narrative is possible in all forms of storytelling, and for reasons related to its audience-oriented character and its effect on the *I* it is found in different media, even in non-fiction: Theatre, Cinema, Video Games, Advertising, Social Media platforms and Hypnosis. Its versatile appearance in different media and in literature and its ambiguous though resilient nature *per se* make the second person an exciting phenomenon to study, though it is rather challenging to choose an appropriate angle from which to do so.

The fundamentals for pursuing this close-reading analysis and the basic tools of this inductive research are listed in the first part of this project. This part focuses on establishing a fundamental understanding of the second person, starting from the essentials of grammar and rhetoric and discussing the fundamental category of person and pronoun, gesturing towards understanding more precisely what the second *person* and the second-person *pronoun* are. To explain this review and methodology, the first part involves a brief and selective summary of theoretical contributions that centre on second-person fiction but that have proven insufficient for this research since they do not reflect the historical continuity of the phenomenon and its versatile employment in different poetic forms. Hence in this part of the project a historical overview of the phenomenon is included, one that traces its development through the years: based on a rich anthology of second-person narratives, the

rhetorical tropes and figures that appear systematically within the technique are summarised. This section stresses the continuity and importance of the technique and the problems associated with its study which are linked to the fact that often the obvious, for example the problem of *person* considered as (purely) grammatical or not,[4] is the most difficult to talk about.

The thesis ends with a chapter that outlines and elaborates on what was discussed so far and compares the four narrative examples expanding on some of the major assumptions mentioned only briefly along the way and listing the final conclusions regarding the poetic value and rhetorical impact of the second person in fiction. *Because of You: Understanding Second-Person Storytelling* aims to show the potential of employing the narrative *you* in a text and improve its understanding. By doing so it aspires to draw some conclusions on what it is about the second-person perspective that makes it so appealing and intriguing for readers and writers alike, despite being discouraging at times.

THEORY

Attempts to theorise the second-person narrative technique have so far proved ill advised due to the nature of the research object, which is too resilient and broad to be classified as a genre. Given that the second-person narrative technique participates in different genres involving numerous employments, functions and characteristics, it is hard to formulate a summary (theory) based on a single example that would reflect the mode as a whole. Another obstacle to the theorising process is the binary thinking of traditional theorists (and their successors) that bases thoughts and assumptions on pairs of oppositions that can only show the second person as a special case, an experimental and exceptional narrative phenomenon.

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4 | Émile Benveniste. *Problèmes de linguistique générale I.* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) 226.