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## **Auster's autobiographical 'you' in Report From the Interior: multi-faceted (inter)subjectivities**

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# Auster's autobiographical 'you' in *Report From the Interior*: multi-faceted (inter)subjectivities

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# Auster's autobiographical 'you' in *Report From the Interior*: multi-faceted (inter)subjectivities

Sandrine SORLIN

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## 1. Introduction

<sup>1</sup> In his autobiographical works, Paul Auster makes the unusual linguistic choice of speaking about himself in the second person. Although there are more and more second-person novels (as first inventoried by Fludernik *Second Person Fiction; Introduction*), Auster's work stands as an exception to the autobiographical genre<sup>1</sup>. One of the aims of this paper is to investigate the specificities of its use in an autobiography.

<sup>2</sup> Both *Winter Journal* (2012) and *Report from the Interior* (2013) that the author himself considers as a diptych, as well as the first part of his first autobiographical work *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), are written in this particular person. Doing so, Auster had no intention of renewing the genre however; the form seems to have come to him as the only way to express what he wanted to relate:

And so, I didn't arrive at a solution before I started, I simply found it as I was writing. It seemed necessary to do it that way. It wasn't a desire to be different so much as to find a way to tell what I had to tell. Then, if it came out sounding different from the conventions of the genre, so be it. (Auster *Conversations* 17)

<sup>2</sup> This article examines the effects triggered and produced by such a choice at the level of the narration in *Report from the Interior* (where the adult Auster addresses himself or his younger self with 'you') but also in the communicative act 'you' engages at a metatextual level. I will show to what extent the use of a second-person pronoun proves to be particularly appropriate to Auster's goals in this work. Not only does it allow self-reflection to unfold in a singular way but also serves a purpose at the level of the whole autobiographical enterprise<sup>3</sup>, as the multiple references, natures and functions of this pronoun are especially apt to mirror the vulnerability of self-knowledge and fragmentation of subjectivity.

- 3 This paper has four parts: the first one discusses what I call the “distancing-immersing” effect of the second-person pronoun which, besides being a pronoun of address, is also a liaison pronoun between the first and the third one. Part 2 evinces what the less “ego-centered” choice of ‘you’ enables to express, reflecting on Auster’s difficult attempt at reconstructing a fully centred and unified ‘I’. The third and fourth parts dwell more specifically on the positioning of the reader through the second person which is construed here as a metaleptic “space-opener” inviting the reader to take part in the narrative “by the writer’s side” (section 3), making it possible for ethical counter-movements between self and other to occur in the shareable space the pronoun opens up (section 4).

## 2. Between ‘me’ and ‘him’ is a ‘you’: immersion and distance

- 4 Grammatically speaking, in the pronominal hierarchy, the second-person pronoun falls in between the first-person pronoun and the third-person one. In *Report from the Interior*, the pronominal choice reflects this in-betweenness: ‘you’ normally denotes the speech role of the addressee in the discursive intersubjective I/you dyad but in Auster’s autobiographical work, it also tilts towards the two other pronominal poles in a significant way: ‘you’ is indeed here an ‘I’ in disguise but it can also be construed as someone about whom Auster speaks and thus has something of the third person (or the “non-person” in Benveniste’s [251, 255] terms as it stands outside of interpersonal exchanges). Richardson (*Unnatural Voices* 22) speaks of an “irreducible oscillation between first- and third-person narration that is typical of second person texts”. Indeed, dis-lodging the “I” from its traditional autobiographical central position, Auster enters into a dialogue with himself, externalising his own self, so to speak, without going all the way towards adopting a third-person perspective.<sup>4</sup> What he says about the pronominal choice of ‘you’ in *Winter Journal* in an interview with I. B. Siegumseldt is relevant here as well:

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that its effect would be to open up a little space between myself and myself in which I would engage in a kind of intimate dialogue with myself. I wanted to look at myself from a distance – but a small one, and the distance of the third person would have been too big. (Auster *Conversations* 55)

- 5 That Auster engages in a dialogue with himself is clear from the beginning of the book when he seems to address his younger self: “Who were you, little man?” (4)<sup>5</sup>. This attempt at understanding the person he is no longer sometimes requires the use of the third person. Reading the letters that he had written to his ex-wife, Lydia Davis, he is trying to reconnect with the young man he was and that he has “lost contact” with:

(1) Forget twenty-three and twenty-four, then, and all the years that follow. It is **the stranger** who intrigues you, **the floundering boy-man** who writes letters from **his** mother’s apartment in Newark [...] – for you have lost contact with **that person**, and as you listen to **him** speak on the page, you scarcely recognize **him** anymore. (182)

- 6 The third-person pronoun marks the distance with an earlier self from which he now feels estranged. Reflecting on an extremely lonely childhood in a family of unhappy parents, he infers the potential advantage of loneliness, using the third person male pronoun after the second person: “for that was where **you** taught **yourself** how to be

alone, and only when **a person** is alone can **his** mind run free" (44). The inwardness has carried him on from a lonely boy to a solitary artist: "to be part of that disaster when you were a boy no doubt drove you inward, turning you into **a man** who has spent the better part of **his** life sitting alone in a room" (48). The middle-ground second-person pronoun thus seems to be an easy springboard to a third-person perspective.

- 7 "Constantly threatening to merge [...] with another grammatical person", the second-person pronoun is "dubious" in comparison with "the traditional 'I' and 'she', which we ordinarily have no trouble processing" (Richardson *Unnatural Voices* 20-21). It both places the subject at a distance from himself, while reducing the distance through the illusion of intersubjective exchange. By contrast, as Katie Wales says, 'I' can merely refer to the person who says 'I'.<sup>6</sup> The 'you' narrator seems at times to directly address a (separate) 'you' narratee (Auster's younger self), not so much to expect answers from him as to teach him what he could not know at the time: "The Cold War was in full bloom then, the Red Scare had entered its most poisonous phase, but **you** were too young to understand any of that" (59). In the "deictic transfer" (Margolin *Dispersing* 190-9) from 'I' to 'you' performed by Auster, 'you' appears at times to enter a psychoanalyst-patient relationship, in search of psychological explanations, as in the instances when Auster tries to account for his destructive drive against a 1940s family radio at the age of five:

(2) What possessed you to attack that old Philco, to eviscerate it and render it useless, to annihilate it? Were you angry at your parents? Were you striking back at them for some wrong you felt they had done to you, or were you merely in one of those fractious, rebellious moods that sometimes get the better of small children? You have no idea. (54)

- 8 If the last 'you' in the present tense of narration ('you have no idea') is less addressive than the previous ones inserted in questions, the second-person pronoun conveys some dialogic dynamism that the first person can hardly produce. Indeed, in replacing the second-person pronouns with their first-person counterparts in (2), one can measure the added value of 'you'. Besides creating some artificiality (the self-addressed questions with 'I' seem more unnatural), 'I' fails to foster an intersubjective relation with a younger self that the second person invariably engages:

(2') What possessed me to attack that old Philco, to eviscerate it and render it useless, to annihilate it? Was I angry at my parents? Was I striking back at them for some wrong I felt they had done to me, or was I merely in one of those fractious, rebellious moods that sometimes get the better of small children? I have no idea.

- 9 Thus the intermediary position of 'you' in the pronominal hierarchy makes it the perfect candidate for both the deictic transfer (*you is me*) and the observation (*you as he*), which explains the dynamism of the pronoun that moves between identification (the egocentric pole), address (the addressee pole) and distance (the non-person pole), sometimes collapsing all positions inextricably.
- 10 The middle position of the second-person pronoun also supports the stylistic balance Auster establishes between the raw emotions of the experiencing 'you' and the more mature reflecting comments from the narrating 'you'. The writer indeed mixes or alternates between plunges into the world of the little boy and distancing comments referring to the moment of writing. This is also evident in the writer's ways of expressing the little boy's emotions as if he were re-experiencing them. The following extract is one example of this:

(3) you could tell a lie when the situation demanded you tell one, even if you knew that God would eventually punish you for it. But better God, **you thought**, than your parents. (56)

- 11 Auster's choice of reporting in (3) both "authentically" registers the feelings and thoughts of a boy brought up in fear of god and parental authority at that time ("better God than your parents") and takes a distance from them through the reporting clause "you thought" of this "semi-free" indirect speech (see De Mattia-Viviès 161), creating humour in the process.<sup>7</sup> The second-person pronoun incarnates the missing link between the "I thought" / "he thought" interpolated clause in traditional reporting. Let's compare again with the first-person:

(3') I could tell a lie when the situation demanded I tell one, even if I knew that God would eventually punish me for it. But better God, I thought, than my parents.

- 12 'I thought' in (3') seems to less explicitly instantiate the distance between the experiencing and the narrating 'I', the two levels being better differentiated with the pronoun of address.
- 13 Using Oatley's empathy scale (446), Auster's style can be said to maintain an empathic balance between "overdistance" (the "spectator stance") and "underdistance" (overwhelming emotions as if they were "happening directly to the self"). The second personal pronoun contributes to that intermediary "distancing-immersing" effect. This double movement does not undermine the force of the emotions narrated however. As Burroway claims in her textbook of advice for writers to be, the second-person pronoun is particularly apt to describe traumatic events "as its slight sense of detachment mutes possible melodrama and mirrors the sense of shock" (304). The mitigation of potentially melodramatic emotions through the use of the second-person pronoun paradoxically highlights the young child's feelings in a more intense way. The simultaneous "push" (away from the immediacy of an 'I' actor) and "pull" (into the dialogic interaction) of the pronoun<sup>8</sup> generates both detachment and intensity. The distance induced by the deictic transfer from 'I' to 'you' is indeed both created and undermined at the very same time by the addressivity potential of the pronoun.
- 14 As the next part will evince, the second-person pronoun also plays a role in Auster's overall project of remembering, as it brings to the fore the vulnerability of memory and sense of who one is.

### 3. Deixis and de-centeredness

- 15 In serving the functions spelled out in section 1, through the pronoun Auster also reflects on the wider issue of life writing and its limits. It will be shown that the nature of the pronoun mirrors Auster's feelings of being de-centered and placed in an 'object' position at various stages of his early years.
- 16 In *Report from the Interior*, the writer exhibits the difficulty of "capturing" a human being "in words" (Auster *Conversations* 7), of giving an accurate account of whom one thinks one was, especially in the absence of material traces; Auster has indeed lost track of tangible elements that could have helped him reconstruct his past. The multiple negation forms (that the whole text is suffused with) foreground the absence and the emptiness around him:

(4) All the stories and poems you wrote in your boyhood and adolescence have **vanished, no more than** a few photographs exist of you from your early childhood

to your mid-thirties, nearly everything you did and said and thought when you were young had been **forgotten**, and even if there are many things that you remember, there are more, a thousand times more, that you **do not**. The letter written to you by Otto Graham when you were turning eight **has disappeared**. The postcard sent to you by Stan Musial **has disappeared**. The baseball trophy given to you when you were ten **has disappeared**. **No drawings, no examples of your early handwriting, no class pictures from grade school, no report cards, no summer-camp pictures, no home movies, no team pictures, no letters from friends, parents, or relatives.** (177)

- 17 The repeated expression of loss through negatively connoted lexical verbs (“vanish”, “forget”, “disappear”), as well as the fragmented memories (more is forgotten than remembered), the scarcity of safeguarded photos (“no more than”) and the long list of objects expressing what could have been there but are gone (the N-negator ‘no’ is repeated 8 times) exposes the difficulty of reconstructing a complete whole on emptiness and incompleteness. For me, the second-person pronoun perfectly serves to reflect these shortcomings: rather than being written in a more “assured” self-centered I<sup>o</sup>, Auster chooses a form that could bring together the different “fragments” of his life. Metonymic avatars of a missing whole, the different ‘you’ of the text can hardly fit into a well-organised continuous narrative. The image of the “poem” he uses in reference to *Winter Journal* in the following quote works well for *Report from the Interior* as well, as the two works are creative attempts at gathering scattered pieces of himself around a forever missing unified ‘I’:

It’s a book composed of autobiographical fragments shaped like a piece of music. It’s a poem rather than a narrative. One would normally write something like this from a first-person point of view. Had I done that, my own story would have been in central focus, and that’s not what I wanted to do. (*Conversations* 55)

- 18 Besides, the detachment and self-effacing effect of “you” perfectly express Auster’s recurrent sense of estrangement from himself. Indeed, the writer confesses experiencing uncanny feelings of disjunction at times:

(5) Every now and then, for no apparent reason, you would suddenly lose track of who you were. It was as if the being who inhabited your body had turned into **an impostor**, or, more precisely, into no one at all, and as you felt your selfhood dribble out of you, you would walk around in a state of stunned **dissociation**, not sure if it was yesterday or tomorrow, not sure if the world in front of you was real or a figment of **someone else’s** imagination. This happened often enough during your childhood for you to give these **mental fugues** a name. *Daze*, you said to yourself, *I’m in a daze*, and even though these dream-like interludes were transitory, rarely lasting more than three or four minutes, the strangeness of feeling hollowed out like that would linger for hours afterward. (44)

- 19 The writer uses the word “impostor” that happens to be the term employed by Collins and Postal (5) about “pronominal impostors” which are not what they seem. Auster’s grammatical ‘you’ is such an impostor, as it notionally stands for an ‘I’/himself and in that sense could be said to be particularly appropriate a choice of pronoun to account for the author’s sense of “bodily” imposture as mentioned in (5). This temporary feeling of standing apart from oneself is fittingly conveyed through the distancing ‘you’, bordering on the third-person outside of the pronoun (see section 1), further away from a fully “inhabited” ‘I’:

(6) An uncanny sense of having fallen asleep with your eyes open, but at the same time knowing you were fully awake, conscious of where you were, and yet not there at all somehow, floating outside yourself, a phantom without weight or substance, **an uninhabited shell of flesh and bone, a nonperson.** (45)

- 20 The displacement or temporary absence of Auster from his own self finds a self-reflexive echo in a pronominal mask concealing and de-centering the 'I'.
- 21 The choice of the second person can be said to fit Auster's goal in one more sense: for one thing the author construes himself as an "object" of study and for that purpose the second-person pronoun is more suitable than an "I" which is inherently more agentive. I'm here referring to Dixon's 1994 Nominal Hierarchy (Figure 1) which shows that the first-person pronoun has the greatest "potentiality of agency" on a scale that goes from pronouns to common nouns (see Gardelle and Sorlin) and tends to be used more in a transitive subject function (A) rather than a transitive object function (O):

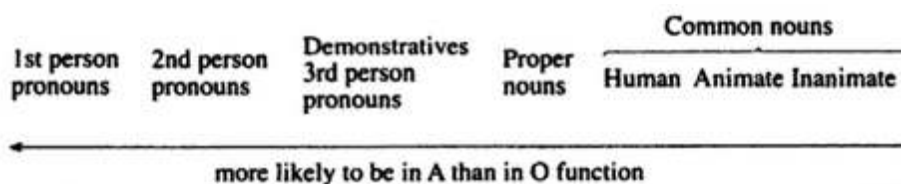


FIG. 1 DIXON'S NOMINAL HIERARCHY

- 22 If we are to follow this scale, 'you' would potentially be slightly less agentive than 'I' and be more naturally placed in O function than in A function than its first-person pronominal counterpart. This can be verified by going back to the change in pronouns I performed in example (2') above: "What possessed me to attack that old Philco...?", with "me" as a slightly more awkward transitive object than 'you' in "What possessed you...?" of Auster's text. If 'I' had been used, the structure would probably have reinstated a more agentive subject of the type "what was I thinking when I decided to attack..." for instance.
- 23 The 'you' pronoun very often appears in transitive object function, reflecting the powerful forces that have "acted upon" the writer. Especially in his childhood and early adolescence, Auster sometimes felt himself "objectified" by external forces that turned him into a hapless and invisible victim:
- (6) from the moment you understood that you were not only an American but a Jew, your dreams were populated by gangs of Nazi infantrymen, night after night you found yourself running from them, desperately running from your life, chased through open fields and dim, maze-like forests by packs of armed Nazis, faceless German soldiers who were bent on shooting **you**, on tearing off **your** arms and legs, on burning **you** at the stake and turning **you** into a pile of ashes. (70)
- 24 Auster naturally places himself as an "object-of-discourse you", since what is central to him is to register the impact that dreams, films, events, or others may have made on his younger self rather than narrating what "I" was doing at specific times. The selection of the two films that have left marks on him forever is part of this project of analysing how the self is affected by what surrounds him rather than cataloguing past actions in which "I" would be the active agent. As a matter of fact, the films selected feature heroes that are victims either of circumstances or of some crushing economic system: in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Scott Carey is slowly forced into invisibility, and the other movie describes the sombre descent into nothingness of James Allen unjustly accused of a crime in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* that Auster describes as "the next cinematic earthquake of your life, the next film that blasted in on you and altered the composition of your inner world" (135). These films echo Auster's own feelings of alienation and incompleteness in an America that fails to be totally inclusive (namely of

Jewish people): “they were those who felt you didn’t belong, that even in the place you called home, you were not fully at home” (72).

- 25 In looking at himself from ‘outside’ through ‘you’, Auster also evinces the extent to which any ‘I’ is inevitably populated by others. The addressive ‘you’ sometimes embodies external forces that have come to permeate his impressionable young self. The ‘you’ commandments of politeness in this single detached paragraph with no reporting clauses are the first traces of a discourse addressed from outside:

Forgive others, always forgive others – but never yourself. Say please and thank you. Don’t put your elbows on the table. Don’t brag. Never say unkind things about a person behind his back. Remember to put your dirty clothes in the hamper. Turn out the lights before you leave a room. Look people in the eye when you talk to them. Don’t talk back to your parents. Wash your hands with soap and make sure to scrub under your nails. Never tell lies, never steal, never hit your little sister. Shake hands firmly. Be home by five o’clock. Brush your teeth before going to bed. And above all remember: don’t walk under ladders, avoid black cats, and never let your feet touch the cracks in sidewalks. (16-17)

- 26 Auster here echoes back these commandments emerging from external sources. The “plurivocity” (Bakhtin 277) of this addressed discourse illustrates how much “the inside” is informed from “the outside”. This is also visible in Auster’s parroting utterances that all American children have been brainwashed with. If the source of enunciation is mentioned at the beginning (*your teachers told you*), the following litany of reported utterances without quotation marks reflects the internalization of the drills:

No country could compare to the paradise you lived in, your teachers told you, for this was the land of freedom, the land of opportunity, and every little boy could dream of growing up to become president. The courageous Pilgrims had crossed the ocean to found a nation out of raw wilderness, and the hordes of settlers who’d followed them had spread the American Eden across an entire continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from Canada to Mexico, for Americans were industrious and clever, the most inventive people on earth, and every little boy could dream of growing up to become a rich and successful man. It was true that slavery had been a bad idea, but Lincoln had freed the slaves, and by now that unfortunate error was a thing of the past. America was perfect. America had won the war and was in charge of the world. [...] Every day brought further progress, and extraordinary as the American past had been, the future held even more promise. [...] to be an American is to take part in the greatest human enterprise since the creation of man. (56-7)

- 27 The performative force of the “order-words”<sup>10</sup> imposed upon America’s kids transpires through this indirect speech whose reporting source fades away after the first mention. While Auster indicates that in the end becoming an artist implies “turning himself inside out” (260), he also shows to what extent the subject is constituted by external discourses. Through its interpellating force, the choice of the pronoun ‘you’ serves well to mirror this process of “subjection” (in Althusserian words 113). The second-person pronoun of address thus works on multiple intersubjective levels: the address to the young Auster by the older one (see section 1) but also the young Auster addressed from outside, highlighting the plurality of addressors that have had an impact on ‘you’.<sup>11</sup>
- 28 Lastly, the descriptive and interactive nature of ‘you’ gets confused in the last part of the book when Auster quotes himself by inserting extracts of his letters to Lydia Davis when he was a young man. From one paragraph to the next, ‘you’ may switch from addressing Lydia (the letter’s addressee) to coming back to the original cognitive frame

of the autobiography, compelling the reader to keep track of whom 'you' refers to, from one paragraph to the next:

(8) You'll hear from me in 2 weeks of so...

[line feed]

You kept your promise and wrote to her in November third, roughly two weeks later (218)

- 29 Similarly, at the end of the book, Auster quotes verbatim an extremely long letter, making readers lose track of the cognitive frame (the letter genre they are reading), confusing boundaries between letter and book. This purposeful blurring of frontiers is for me self-reflexive of the multifarious shifting (inter)subjectivities exposed above. Annotating his own letters, rectifying factual errors or explaining references and allusions, Auster turns into a biographer of his own life sources. The use of 'you' in the footnotes he adds to the letters written in the first-person pronoun further differentiates the selves contained in two different temporal frames. While re-reading his sources, Auster confesses to having mis-remembered his state of mind during and after his return from Paris and thus somewhat falsely reported about it in previous texts, highlighting the fragility of memory in the belatedness of autobiography. In a similar vein, speaking about his previous autobiographical work *Hand To Mouth. A Chronicle Early Failure* (1997), he says: "You have touched on all these events before, but the letters weren't available to you then, and there was much that you had forgotten or misremembered when you sat down to write those pages in 1996" (200). Auster's book thus speaks about the vulnerability of being and remembering, reflected in the choice of a vulnerable pronoun that is marked by referential uncertainty as the next section more thoroughly displays.

## 4. The attracting power of 'you'

- 30 As highlighted in the literature studying "you narratives" (Morrisette, Hopkins & Perkins, Prince, Bonheim, Hantzis, Kacandes, Margolin, DelConte, Clarkson, Richardson, Macrae, Sorlin, Macrae & Gibbons among many others), the second-person pronoun is characterised by a semantic and referential ambiguity that is exploited by writers. To give an example of this referential instability, I have adopted Kluge's (504) continuum of the potential references of "you" in interactions (Figure 2), changing it slightly so that it can be adapted to genres in which writers/speakers and readers/viewers/listeners cannot be in face-to-face interactive communication (see Sorlin *The Second-Person Pronoun*). I have added the two poles: the one on the right-hand side (the reaching-out-to pole) makes the interpellating force of the pronoun more explicit, reflecting the original "interpersonal", "addressee-oriented" base of 'you' (Wales 59). The pole on the left-hand side concerns the more egocentric nature of 'you' that runs from the far left down to the middle<sup>12</sup>:



Fig 2. Two poles induced by the second person pronoun in written discourse

- 31 In Auster's text, as pointed out in part 1, the second-person pronoun is inherently egocentric ('you' can be easily replaced by an 'I' in the following examples: "none of

this happens as you thought it would”, p. 8 or “Until then, you had always considered the act of writing to be a gesture that moved from the inside to outside, a reaching out toward an other” p. 179) while retaining its addressive power, giving the impression of addressing an identified narratee (a plurality of Auster’s selves at different stages in the writer’s life), as is often the case in “you narrations” where the principal actant in the story (mentioned as ‘you’) is also the narratee who is being told his/her story by the narrator (see DelConte 207-8)<sup>13</sup>.

- 32 But in *Report from the Interior*, ‘you’ can sometimes (but rarely) occupy intermediate positions between the two poles. ‘You’ meaning “I as representative of a larger entity” can be found in a letter to Lydia while he was in Paris, writing about the possibility for all Parisian smokers to find cheap cigarettes: “I smoke ‘Parisiennes’. **You** buy them for 18 centimes in tiny blue wrappers of four – that’s 90 centimes for 20” (202). There are also (rare) instances of “impersonal you”. I have spotted only two examples that could belong to this category. The first one appears on the first page where the reader may not yet be totally sure about the reference of this ‘you’ at first reading. The writer speaks about an anthropomorphic man-moon: “**you** could see his face looking down at **you** from the night sky” (1). ‘You’ can also be read as closer to ‘anyone’ in the narration of the episode of the tree Auster had set his mind on cutting in his family garden: “a trunk so slender **you** could encircle it with your two hands” (54). Moving to the right-hand side of the continuum, ‘you’ as representative of a larger unit of addressees occur when ‘you’ refers to all American kids being told in school to “never forget how lucky **you** are” (56). Another instance of ‘you’ referring to a collective category of addressees—that is the US citizens being bred into the American dream ideology—can be found in a comment on Allen’s short-term successful social ascent within the bridge factory in *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*: “American success story, living proof that hard work, ambition, and intelligence can propel **you** into a world of meaningful accomplishment and wealth” (163).
- 33 Readers are also being addressed through specific structures (not through the personal pronoun though). When commenting on Allen’s fate for instance, Auster’s question seems indeed to interpellate the reader as well, creating suspense as to what is in store for the character: “Is Allen’s scheme perfect?”. Or when describing his surprise to get the phone call from a famous baseball player that a friend of his parents’ (Roy B. nicknamed Whoops) had arranged, the expression “lo and behold” can be said to be reader-oriented: “One weekday night in the spring of 1956, just as you were about to go to bed, the telephone rang, and lo and behold, there was Phil Rizzuto on the other end of the line, the one and only Scooter, the Yankee’s shortstop from 1941 until his retirement earlier that month, asking if you were Paul, Whoops’s young friend” (39). However, although the pronoun ‘you’ is not specifically used as a direct address to the reader, readers tend to feel addressed nevertheless. Indeed as shown by many scholars (McHale, Fludernik, Herman<sup>14</sup>), the reader is very often brought to assume the position of addressee even though ‘you’ does not and cannot refer to her. More recently, De Hoop & Tarenskeen have shown that “self-ascription”<sup>15</sup> as addressee always comes first before being (potentially) “overruled by the context in which you is used” (173). In fact, as demonstrated by Sorlin (*The Second-Person Pronoun*), readers can feel invited to “self-ascribe” the position of addressee throughout the categories mentioned in the continuum, by virtue of our natural tendency to hear ‘me’ each time ‘you’ is used. As Ryan puts it: “Despite their different references, all of these uses [of you] play on our

instinctive reaction to think *me* when we hear *you*, and to feel personally concerned by the textual utterance” (138).

- 34 Thus even when ‘you’ does not refer to the reader at all, as is the case in most of Auster’s ‘you,’ the reader does feel “pulled in” by the pronoun, invited to participate somehow in the dialogue that is played out for her. Empirical evidence in psychological and cognitive research attests to the more involving quality of the second-person pronoun as compared to other pronouns (Ruby and Decety, Brunyé et al, Ditman et al, Sanford & Emmott, De Hoop & Hogeweg)<sup>16</sup>. Engagement with the ‘you’ narrator/narratee could be said to be even increased in the specific genre of the autobiography where the reader knows that what is confessed is supposed to have truly happened outside the text-world – this is part of the “autobiographic pact” (see Lejeune). The impression generated here by Auster’s autobiographical ‘you’ is one of being pulled in on the writer’s very side. The second-person pronoun opens a metaleptic space, welcoming the audience to the scene. Readers are invited – and this is not a forced interpellation as it can sometimes be<sup>17</sup> – to leave their position as “out of frame eavesdroppers”<sup>18</sup> to remember Goffman’s insight about the theatrical audience. ‘You’ in Auster’s inner dialogue offers the reader the unique position of “by-sider”, as if she was invited to join him in experiencing what is narrated, bringing her to mentally share his “mental space” by being placed “within it” (Kluge *Generic Uses* 501; 507). Indeed ‘you’ pulls the reader out of her external observing position into a more immediate experience, giving her “a palpable sense of ‘being there’” (Brunyé et al *Better You than I* 31). I would indeed suggest that the “pulling-in” and “space-sharing” effect of the second-person pronoun in *Report from the Interior* annihilates the traditional vertical hierarchy (writer ‘I’/reader ‘you’ as implicit addressee<sup>19</sup>), making some space for readers as “horizontal” co-participants in the reading/writing of Auster’s life. The proximity generated by ‘you’ triggers some form of solidarity with the reader that I will now further delve into.

## 5. The dialectics of singularity and shareability: meeting ‘you’ half-way

- 35 The implication of the reader seems to be one of the American writer’s goals in using the second person as he did in his previous autobiographical piece (*Winter Journal*). In his own words:
- At the same time I wanted to implicate the reader. In many ways, the book is an invitation to the reader to explore his or her own memories, to think about his or her own life. I hope it can serve as a sounding board for people to remember the kinds of things I’m remembering about myself in the book. (Auster *Conversations* 55)
- 36 This interpersonal mode calling over the reader to do the same is present in the imperative forms at the very beginning of *Report from the Interior*:
- (9) Dig up old stories, scratch around for whatever you can find, then hold up the shards to the light and have a look at them. Do that. Try to do that. (5)
- 37 One can hardly fail to hear in these self-addressed imperatives invitations to the reader to try to recompose the fragments of her own life. Through Auster’s absent traces of himself (“no drawings, no examples of your early handwriting, no class pictures from grade school, no report cards, no summer-camp pictures, no home movies, no team pictures, no letters from friends, parents or relatives” 178, see section 1), the reader is

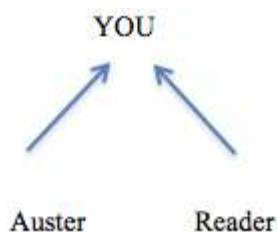
brought to ask herself the question: what about me? How would I go about remembering who I was? What traces of myself have survived? Auster evokes the positive versions<sup>20</sup> of these traces through the very negations, that is their potential existence, giving the reader a list to ponder over.

- 38 The willingness to share with the reader is even more apparent in the switch from the second to the first-person plural:

(10) Our lives enter a new dimension at that point, for that is the moment when we acquire the ability to tell our stories to ourselves, to begin the uninterrupted narrative that continues until the day we die. (12)

- 39 The author sometimes leaves the subjectivity of pronouns to opt for the definite article in generic statements, potentially valid for all humans: “The era of pimples and braces had begun. Mercifully, those days come only once” (92).

- 40 As Schmitt (11) nicely puts it, reading an autobiography is a collusion of two desires: the “will to tell and the will to know go hand in hand: this is a crucial aspect of autobiography, one that is too often overlooked” (11). In *Report from the Interior*, ‘you’ is instrumental in allowing the meeting of lives: that of the writer’s singular one and, through it, sharable aspects of a life narrative that the reader may identify with. Indeed, reading Auster’s autobiographical memories may spark personal memories of our own, especially when he focuses on universal feelings such as injustice. One can identify with the young Auster (as I did) unjustly accused (by his English teacher) of lying about the number of books he had been able to read in the allocated time. Identification is however a centripetal movement that always “brings us back to” ourselves (Schmitt 90). In Langacker’s terms, we would say that we can only empathise with what bears a resemblance to what is like us in an egocentric way (see Gardelle & Sorlin). For the reading of an autobiography to be successful (really putting ourselves in the other’s shoes and not feeling only concerned by what “resonates” in us), Schmitt suggests that “the reader must acknowledge that she must find a way to turn the centripetal nature of resonance into an empathic counter-movement” (90). I have tried to show that Auster’s choice of the second-person pronoun facilitates such a “counter-movement” as it embodies the very ‘tension’ between contradictory (centrifugal/centripetal) forces. Indeed, it both takes the reader by the writer’s side (section 3) to share his mental space and his role in it (centrifugal movement), and addresses the reader, inviting her to remember (centripetal movement). In the very dialectic between singularity and shareability it embodies, it bears the possibility of mirror effects in the shareable space it opens. ‘You’ allows writer and reader to meet halfway as sketched in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3: MEETING HALF-WAY**

- 41 The second-person pronoun facilitates the reader’s entry into what is traditionally “claustrophobically anchored in the autobiographer’s mind” (Schmitt 144). Through the complementary acts of writing and reading, ‘you’ relate both writer and reader to

each other, making it possible for both the writer's 'I' and the reader's 'I' to emerge. As Schmitt demonstrates, drawing from Hayat on Levinas, in order for the other to affect me, the other must remain external to me: "In his introduction to Emmanuel Levinas's *Altérité et Transcendance* (*Otherness and Transcendence*), Pierre Hayat describes a similar balance: 'For a genuine transcendence to take place, the other must affect my self, while remaining external to it. But above all the other must, through her very externality – her otherness – bring the I out of the self'" (91). 'You' warrants this ethical externality that leaves space for bidirectional counter-movements to circulate between self and other. The second-person pronoun is the vector through which reader and writer meet themselves and each other. Figure 4 illustrates the bidirectionality of the arch that goes from writer and reader and back via "you":



**FIG. 4: ETHICAL SHARING OF EXPERIENCE THROUGH "YOU"**

- 42 Through the second pronoun as vector of mutual care, Paul Auster's singular autobiographical account indeed opens onto shareable ways of being-in-the-world.

## 6. Conclusion

- 43 Auster's 'you' is clearly an autobiographical 'I' in disguise and in this sense it can be said to lack the ambiguity of references that can be exploited in "you narratives". I have pointed out however that the added value of the pronoun in the genre of the autobiography stand in its de-centering effects from the ego-centricism of a first-person pronoun and the blurring of intersubjective frames, which reveals much about Auster's conception of subjecthood and subjectivity: exposing the difficulty of remembering especially in the absence of original traces, Auster's choice of pronoun conveys the fragmentation of "Is" that can hardly be gathered in a singular totalising pronominal centre. It also makes room for the reader by the author's side, bringing her to experience narration in a forceful way, transforming thereby the autobiographical act into an act of communication in which both writer and reader can meet their own selves because they meet each other. To the pulling/inviting effect of the pronoun is indeed added its addressive force, facilitating the "meeting of minds" (Oatley). The complementary processes of writing and reading are enhanced by the space opened by the second person where both reader and writer meet half-way in a willing ethical act of caring (for one another).

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## NOTES

1. In response to I. B. Siegumseldt ("I don't think I've ever seen an autobiographical work written in the second person"), Paul Auster confirms: "Nor have I. Of course, there are novels written in the second person" (Auster 2017 54). But as indicated by one reviewer to this article that I wish to thank here, the exceptionalism of Auster's stylistic choices should not be exaggerated. We only need to think of Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* (1983) to find a comparable dialogic strategy.
2. Some works also combine autobiography and fiction. For a stylistic study of 'autofiction,' see Gibbons 2018.
3. As a second reviewer quite rightly pointed out, self-reflexivity is a well-established feature of Auster's non-autobiographic writing (and of most post-modernist writing more generally), as amply shown in the literary criticism of Auster's novels. His autobiographical work can be said to be self-reflexive as well in that the choice of pronoun is also a comment on the (difficult) art of self-writing.
4. The second half of Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) adopts a third-person perspective.
5. Page numbers refer to the Picador edition. All emphases in bold type in the following quotes are mine.
6. One exception is mentioned p. 69.
7. At times the reporting presence is totally absent. The following instance would partake of what is called Free Indirect Thought (Leech & Short) as the young Auster wonders about the existence of stars: "The work of God's land, yes, but what in the world had he been thinking?" (6)
8. See Macrae (2015, 2018) who calls it the "push and pull effect of the you". Although referring to the reader's potential feeling of being addressed (pull) through 'you' and the impossibility of being the one or the only one addressed (push), it can be applied here to the way Auster reports to himself his own feelings and past emotions as he remembers them. For the reader's potential implication, see section 3 and 4 below.
9. Literary studies have aptly shown that the 'I' is always already more split than self-assured (as illustrated in postmodernist works). Besides, many contemporary memoirs also deal with the theme of the vulnerability of being and remembering addressed by Auster here. But my point here is that the choice of the second-person pronoun *enhances* the constitutive vulnerability of the 'I'.
10. For Deleuze and Guattari, the order-word (*le mot d'ordre*) is characterised by a repeated performativity: "The order-word itself is the redundancy of the act and the statement. Newspapers, news, proceed by redundancy, in that they tell us what we 'must' think, retain, expect" (87).
11. Auster also mentions the impact that reading American literature had on him: "You were reading more now as well, the barrier that had once stood between you and what you considered to be first-rank literature had fallen, and off you ran into that immense country that is still your home, beginning with twentieth-century Americans such as Hemingway, Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, and Salinger..." (133).
12. For Wales, even impersonal 'you' (close to 'one') can keep its inherently egocentric nature as impersonal descriptions are always "coloured by [speakers'] subjective attitudes and experiences" (78).
13. Here is DelConte's precise definition of what counts as "second-person narration": "a narrative mode in which a narrator tells a story to a (sometimes undefined, shifting and/or hypothetical) narratee—delineated by you—who is also the (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) principal actant in the story" (207-8).
14. Herman (1994) speaks of "doubly deictic you" when the reader is both addressed and not addressed at the very same time through 'you', bringing them to occupy the impossible/paradoxical position of both addressees and external observers.

15. De Hoop & Tarenskeen (2015) use Wechsler's 2010 self-ascription theory to account for the fact that 'you' is not addressing the reader and yet invites her to self-ascribe "the property of being you" (see also Sorlin *The Second-Person Pronoun*).

16. Not only does the second person seem to require more attention (Sanford & Emmott 173), it also increases readers' engagement in the narrative both in spatial and emotional terms (Brunyé et al. *Better You than I*) as it fosters identification in a way that other pronouns fail to achieve (de Hoop and Hogeweg).

17. See for instance the use of 'you' breaking the fourth wall in the TV series *House of Cards* (Sorlin *Language and Manipulation*).

18. Indeed Goffman (139) would maintain a tight separation between the audience and what occurs on stage that for him clearly belongs to "a self-enclosed, make-believe realm" – even soliloquies, which yet acknowledge the audience's presence, are no exceptions to the rule for Goffman.

19. Psychologically speaking, Sanford and Emmott (168) describe the structure of first-person narration in these terms: "We can say that first person storytelling has the basic structure 'I (narrator role) tell [you] about when I (experiencing role) was involved in certain events', [...] and with the 'you' addressee being either explicitly referred to or elided".

20. As Jeffries (107) points out, *she did not kill him* evokes at the very moment it is denied the possibility of murder (*she did kill him*).

## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the choice of the second-person pronoun in Paul Auster's autobiographical work, *Report from the Interior* (2013). Unusual in the genre, this article demonstrates that it serves several functions within the economy of the narration but also across it (in its reaching out to the reader). Sliding between different potential referents as is the case in traditional "you novels," the pronoun is always on the verge on merging into the first or third person pronoun, while assuming its addressivity at all times. Dislodging the 'I' from its egocentric position, it also enables different intersubjective frames to co-exist, in keeping with Auster's conception of life-writing as inevitably fragmented and non-linear. As argued, the pronoun is a metaleptic "space-opener", opening the autobiographer's mental space for the reader to share as a "by-sider": the second-person pronoun is what ensures an ethical encounter of selves in the dialectic of singularity and solidarity/shareability that Auster's work fosters.

Cet article est centré sur le choix du pronom de deuxième personne dans l'œuvre autobiographique de Paul Auster, *Report from the Interior* (2013). Inhabituel pour le genre, l'auteur montre que ce pronom sert différentes fonctions dans l'économie interne de la narration mais aussi à travers le livre (dans le contact qu'il établit avec le lecteur). Dans les glissements qu'il opère entre différents référents potentiels, à l'instar de son instabilité référentielle exploitée dans les romans écrits à la deuxième personne, ce pronom menace toujours de se muer en première ou troisième personne du singulier, tout en conservant son rôle d'adresse. Délogeant le 'je' de sa position égocentrique, il permet également la coexistence de plusieurs cadres intersubjectifs, mettant en exergue la conception que Auster se fait de l'écriture de soi comme fragmentaire et non linéaire. L'auteur propose de qualifier ce pronom métaleptique d'« ouvreuse » d'espace mental, invitant le lecteur à prendre place « aux côtés » de l'écrivain. Elle montre que

'you' est ce qui garantit une rencontre éthique entre deux vies dans la dialectique de la singularité et de la solidarité/ « partageabilité » sur laquelle repose l'œuvre d'Auster.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** pronoms personnels, autobiographie, fiction à la deuxième personne, you, egocentrisme, intersubjectivité

**Keywords:** second-person pronoun, autobiography, you narratives, egocentrism, intersubjectivity

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