You’re Dead

Dying, Living and Narrating in the Second Person

ALICE BENNETT

This paper considers two examples of contemporary narrative fictions which use second person narration: Eric Eve’s electronic text adventure or interactive fiction, All Hope Abandon (2005) and David Eagleman’s collection of short stories, Sum (2009). Both texts are formally innovative when placed in the context of artistic depictions of life after death, and their use of second-person narration is particularly distinctive in this context. The texts play with fictionality through strategies that include explorations of the limitations and possibilities of their own form, and this works to foreground the special power that fiction has to investigate the competing discourses of science and religion circulating around life and afterlife in contemporary thought.

One of the forty afterlives described in David Eagleman’s short story collection, Sum (2009), finds the dead becoming background characters in the dreams of the living: in this life after death, life is but a dream, but “it is not your dream.”¹ The worst part of this, notes the narrator, is the loss of control over our lives, as life after death means entering a storyline plotted by another mind. This paper explores the place of second-person, or “you” narration in contemporary fictions of the afterlife, a form of narration which allows the reader to dream this same dream of an afterlife in someone else’s dream. The dream here is fiction, and the agent of death and entry into the afterlife is second-person narration. Second-person narration destabilises the division between the self-determined, the living and the real-world reader, and the controlled, the dead and the fictional character. It blurs the boundaries between the text and the world, and foregrounds the distinction between life and its afterlife in art. Art, and particularly fiction, is central to an understanding of contemporary afterlives, and the thinking that picks a path between faith and fact.

Afterlife art is a tradition that, in literature, is rooted in the form and ambition of the epic, and in the descent and return to and from the underworld.² This tradition is almost completely inverted in David Eagleman’s very brief and fragmentary story forms in Sum. Eric

¹ David Eagleman, Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), 21.
Eve’s text adventure, All Hope Abandon (2005), exploits the quest narrative of the epic tradition by hanging its gameplay on exactly this narrative thread. Alongside this self-conscious awareness of a tradition, and their own place after that tradition, both texts also engage with contemporary debates about the place of religious belief in secular culture which is informed in both cases by the status of these texts as fictions. It is worth noting for some context at this point that Eve has an academic career in theology while Eagleman’s day job is as a research neuroscientist. This might suggest that they would fall into the rather tired antagonistic positions of the stereotypical scientist and the theologian on matters of faith, but both texts considered here destabilise this opposition through their use of self-conscious and experimental fiction to illuminate this debate. Second-person narration lies at the heart of this process.

We have to descend for a moment into the underworld of contemporary narrative theory in order for me to clarify the significance of second-person narration in these texts. Monica Fludernik has defined second-person narrative as “narrative whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun (usually you),” and goes on to observe:

> [S]econd-person texts frequently also have an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the “you” to (sometimes) the “you” protagonist’s present-day absent or dead, wiser, self.

There is potentially an aspect of self-address here, in which one you is present and the other absent, one dead and one alive, but Fludernik’s apparently quite straightforward definition is haunted by a dead double who only appears late; after the time of the story but in the present-day for the narration.

This definition, however, leaves out an important element of second-person narration that is illustrated by the opening of All Hope Abandon. The action starts with the protagonist, at this point identified as “you” within the conventions of the text adventure, listening to a blindingly dull and ineptly delivered conference paper in a slightly shabby university lecture hall. However, the earliest, opening screen addresses this “you” quite differently by asking, “Have you played interactive fiction before?” This is clearly directed only at you the player, not you the character. Answering Yes leads straight into the game, while answering No gives some guidance on the interface and conventions of interactive fiction. This “you” is, therefore, unambiguously me. Moving into the game itself, it only takes a few more interactions to discover that there is another me operating within the text: here I am male, in my thirties and an academic working in the field of theology. When I enter a command to EXAMINE SELF this brings to the surface further deictic complications: the self I’m examining isn’t me the reader; it’s me in the text. One of the most innovative features in All Hope Abandon interface is the possibility of accessing the main character’s specialist knowledge with the command THINK ABOUT. While the THINK ABOUT command allows access to specialised information for the player, it is also significant that one of the game’s unique features and formal innovations involves the introduction of this view into the character’s thoughts and opinions. This transparency of mind in the character is something that has been identified

3 Eric Eve, All Hope Abandon, http://www.wurb.com/if/game/2763 (2005). Eve is something of a trailblazer in recognising the afterlife’s potential for gaming. In February 2010 EA Games released Dante’s Inferno, a demon-slaughtering romp through all nine levels of hell, culminating in an almost inevitable showdown with the final boss himself.
5 Eve argues very convincingly for this as a didactic feature in his article on the game, “All Hope Abandon: Biblical Text and Interactive Fiction” in Digital
by Dorrit Cohn as one of the primary hallmarks of what narrative fiction does: introduce us into the consciousness of other (albeit fictional) people.

In interactive fiction, the protagonist is generally designated the “player-character”, indicating the yoking together of these two entities (not necessarily unproblematically). Where we began with the potential for the protagonist to completely align with us, for the you addressed and the you described to be one and the same, it soon becomes apparent that these yous are not functioning on the same diegetic or ontological level. When I engage with this text, I soon realise that I am not a thirty-something, heterosexual man with a wide knowledge of Biblical Studies. Further interactions find the character in limbo after apparently suffering a heart attack in the lecture theatre and the rest of the adventure takes place in what seems to be an afterlife. While I can separate myself from the particulars of the character’s identity, common mortality begins to provide the only absolutely certain intersection of player (or reader) and character in these texts. This universal “you” is only genuinely universal when stating that yes, you will die.

We therefore need a definition of second-person narration that accounts for the experience of reading the introduction to *All Hope Abandon*: the situation of reading a text in which we seem to be addressed as readers, but are then drawn into a fluctuating state of involvement in the text, and observation of the character from outside. Second-person narration is therefore defined by its point of reception, and this occasionally queasy and occasionally comic alignment between the reader and the character that refuses any complete separation between the two, or even (as Fludernik’s definition allows) between the narrator and the character.

This fluidity in identity between narrator, reader and characters also holds far-reaching consequences for narratology, and its tendency to prefer solid and unimpeachable categories for classification and analysis. Other commentators on second-person narration have argued that it has a particular importance for assailing those boundaries and potentially producing theories of narrative that are more inclusive and allow for a wider range of potential narratives that are not yet in existence. For instance, Brian Richardson argues that, conventional narratology has had a tendency to characterise the “flagrant fictionality” of much experimental narrative as aberrant:

> [T]raditional narrative theory, implicitly based on the stable nonfictional types of biography (third person) and autobiography (first person), have a difficult time comprehending forms that, like second person and impossible narration, do not or cannot occur in nonfictional discourse.

According to Richardson’s logic, second-person narration which imagines an afterlife is a double strain on narrative theory’s categories, and doubly foregrounds its own fictionality.

Similarly, David Herman argues for narrative theory that uses fuzzy logic to establish categories that are non-exclusive to allow for narratives that are indeterminate and shifting. In his words, second-person fictions, and the double “you” they involve, result in “a fitful and self-conscious anchoring of the text in its contexts, as well as a story world whose contours and boundaries can be probabilistically but not determinately mapped, the inventory of its

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*Humanities Quarterly* 1.2 (Summer 2007). I would add that the text’s double you has didactic, even apologetic functions in and of itself.


7 Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 76.
constituent entities remaining fuzzy rather than fixed." The fact, therefore, that the “you” of All Hope Abandon is an indeterminate mix of both me and the character Dr William Fisher places the deictic reference of that “you” sometimes more in my world as a reader, and sometimes in the world of the story.

In summary, second-person narration carries the markers of fiction in three ways. Firstly, we have already seen above that one of the consequences of the intersection of the reader and character can be a heightened and unusual sense of transparency of other minds. Secondly, the fuzziness inherent in the second person – the way it refuses to settle on a point of reference for its deictic markers, the impossibility of giving a total for its constituent entities – is a distinctive signifier for narratives that are fictional and, more than this, resolutely non-mimetic. In this way they refuse to be “after life” in the way that realist fiction makes claims to be.

The third way in which second-person narratives associate themselves with fiction is through their connection with one particularly disputed form of real-world narrative, but a form which does not purport to describe already completed, verifiable events like an autobiography or biography does. In the quotation above, Brian Richardson noted that second-person narratives are confined to fiction and “do not or cannot occur in nonfictional discourse.” However, there is in existence the second-person narration common to recipes and self-help books, something which James Phelan calls in all its forms the “how-to” narrative. In their “real-life” examples, like knitting patterns or travel guides, these are descriptive texts that are entirely hypothetical: they rely on you deciding to visit Venice or to cast on a pair of socks before they become properly instructive or, most relevant for my argument here, true. They remain at least something of a fiction until “you” carry out the activity. This kind of “how-to” narrative has fictional counterparts in short stories by John Updike in “How to Love America and Leave it at the Same Time” (1979) or Pam Houston’s “How to Talk to a Hunter” (1990). Lorrie Moore’s “How” is another illustrative example which Phelan discusses, and opens like this:

Begin by meeting him in a class, a bar, at a rummage sale. Maybe he teaches sixth grade. Manages a hardware store. Foreman at a carton factory. He will be a good dancer. He will have perfectly cut hair. He will laugh at your jokes.

A week, a month, a year. Feel discovered, comforted, needed, loved, and start sometimes, somehow, to feel bored. When sad or confused, walk uptown to the movies. Buy popcorn. These things come and go. A week, a month, a year.

The possibilities are open at the beginning of this story, and these maybes mark the contingency of this hypothetical future. Moore’s “How” plays with the potential involved in fantasising about a relationship, in contrast with the narrowness and restrictions that the story discovers in loving a real person. Alongside these “how-to” narratives we can place the multiple potential outcomes of interactive fiction, or the second-person page-turning form of Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories. As well as involving readers in quite specific ways, second-person narratives are therefore also united by an interest in the hypothetical, in the possibility that there is more than one competing outcome to events, and that these can be investigated through narrative. They are oriented towards imagining a conditional future,

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rather than recounting a recollected past. In this aspect of future-orientation and conditionality, we can see how they might be allied with ideas about the afterlife and making choices in the present with life after death in mind.

At its loosest, the second-person form signifies the involvement of the reader or audience in the work. In this way “you” becomes something like the hand reaching up from the grave or an invitation to join a dance of death: it’s both a threat and a seduction. In contrast with dead narrators who take charge of their own afterlives with an emphasis on the impossible words “I am dead”, the second-person narrator who says, “You are dead,” has the potential to take over any agency and this becomes a death sentence. Conversely, second-person narration can also foreground issues of choice and free will by emphasising the potential which the future holds, rather than claiming to reflect the world as it is, but actually depicting a world of completed past actions and events from which we are separated. Conventionally, one of the functions of any representation of the afterlife has been as a memento mori: a reminder of your own death and its inevitability, and this has the potential to both open up and close down options for us. The result, then, is a technique which takes hold of us and forces us into consciousness of our own death, with a view to shaping behaviour in the present by appeal to a future afterlife.

A memento mori doesn’t need to be a fiction: death is a certainty. Yet, I have been arguing that the central feature of these texts is their fictionality. To discuss this, I want to come to David Eagleman’s Sum, which is subtitled “Forty Tales From the Afterlives.” From the outset, then, we are establishing a range of possibilities that stand together as a unit and take in the possibility of a God or gods, alien overlords, or an oscillationist universe in which a kind of afterlife comes about through time reversal.

The stories in Eagleman’s collection are brief vignettes, rather than containing sustained descriptive or emplotted elements. In some ways that is quite consonant with the problems that come from writing about the afterlife, writing a narrative of eternity using forms that are arguably primarily adapted to write about time and our experience of it. Some of Eagleman’s scenarios do develop beyond initial situations to introduce unfolding causally related events, and can be read as forty thought experiments, forty how-to narratives for life after death. Eagleman has sparked a minor religious movement after describing himself as a “Possibilian” in an interview in the New York Times, in which he was asked about his own religious beliefs, saying:

> [W]ith Possibilianism I’m hoping to define a new position—one that emphasizes the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities. Possibilianism is comfortable holding multiple ideas in mind; it is not interested in committing to any particular story. (This is why Sum consists of 40 mutually exclusive stories.)

He contrasts his position with both atheism and agnosticism, and is currently writing something like a manifesto for Possibilianism, which should complement Sum.

All of the stories in Sum are narrated in the second person, with much play with the implications of second-person narration. For instance, in the story “Prism”, the problem of how old people should be in the afterlife is solved by dividing each individual into multiple selves, each at different ages. In the story, the “yous” find they have nothing in common, and conclude that the “compound identity” of the earthly self had never really existed at all.

Another story, “Quantum,” investigates the hypothetical aspect of second-person narration...
which, in line with Eagleman’s Possibilianism, can be the foundation for a whole worldview. In this story’s afterlife “everything exists in all states at once, even states that are mutually exclusive.”13 This is naturally very confusing and, as in Lorrie Moore’s “How,” it is in the context of romantic relationships that these problems are crystallised. In the afterlife of “Quantum” an angel finally offers “you” the chance to be alone with “your” partner, and the story concludes as follows:

And then you are here. You are simultaneously engaged in her conversation and thinking about something else; she both gives herself to you and does not give herself to you; you find her objectionable and you deeply love her; she worships you and wonders what she might have missed with someone else.

“Thank you,” you tell the angel. “This I’m used to.”14

All Hope Abandon also moves towards a love plot, and is shaped by the choice to begin a romantic relationship. Catherine Gallagher has identified this high-stakes choice of a life partner as one of the reasons for what she terms “the rise of fictionality” in the eighteenth century.15 She argues that the “flexible mental states” that arise when reading something that we know to be a fiction provides a kind of mental training ground for the demands of modernity, among them the practices of modern romantic love. What she terms “affective speculation” led to readers (and particularly female readers) imagining other partners and weighing up the possible outcomes of these scenarios.16

Gallagher’s argument about fiction’s power to introduce training for an “attitude of disbelief” is taken up by Terry Eagleton in another context: his recent Reason Faith and Revolution (2009).17 Subtitled “Reflections on the God Debate” Eagleton’s book answers the polemics of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchins. Come the end of the book, he finds a place for fiction as a tool for working a space between entrenched positions, arguing that “the story becomes a kind of speculative venture in which one does not invest too quickly, keeping one’s options open and remaining alert to other possibilities.”18 From Catherine Gallagher, Eagleton takes the idea that, while fiction might have been an agent in producing scepticism about religious faith in earlier times, it has the potential today to offer a wider model for “an imaginative exercise in this business of sitting loose to belief” in all kinds of contexts.19

Eagleton’s way out of the polarisation of the God Debate is instructive, and confirms what we have seen of both the form and content of All Hope Abandon and Sum. They foreground their status as fictions primarily through associations that come about through the use of the second person and offer practice in playing, in experimenting and hypothesising, and therefore in sitting loose to belief. These afterlife narratives are therefore offered as something that is doing something different from either a realist novel or a religious text: something that is about fiction and its properties as something other than fact and other than faith.

13 Ibid., 82.
14 Ibid., 83.
16 Ibid., 346.
19 Ibid., 146.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Alice Bennett
English Studies, Durham University
alice.bennett@durham.ac.uk

Alice Bennett completed her PhD in 2009, under the supervision of Professor Patricia Waugh. Her thesis was entitled Narrative and the Afterlife in Modern Fiction: The Meanings of Life After Death. She teaches in the English Studies department at Durham University, and has published on contemporary fiction and literary theory.
The Healer from Nazareth: Jesus' Miracles in Historical Context. By Eric Eve. Patrick Madigan.