



Phatic, Polemical, and Metaleptic Addresses to Readers in William Gerhardie's *The Polyglots*

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William Gerhardie's second novel, *The Polyglots* (1925), offers an example – albeit an eccentric one – of the survival of direct addresses to readers in a novel written and published in the heyday of English literary modernism. The autodiegetic narrator repeatedly addresses the reader in a text which turns out to be a novel he is writing in the hope of improving the financial situation of its cast of characters, his polyglottic relatives and acquaintances. Ranging from short phatic expressions to polemical pre-emptive strikes against potential readerly objections and, in a final display of communicative exuberance, to a metaleptic exhortation to alter the fate of the characters by buying the book – still unpublished in the diegetic world – the addresses have a cumulative effect. Besides contributing to the overall humorous and ironic effects of the novel, they form an on-going one-sided conversation and produce a sense of increasing intimacy with the narrator-author. In their most emphatic form, they interrupt the flow of the narrative and deflect the reader's interest from plot progression. Instead, they foreground the relationship between the narrator-author, the text, and the reader, this last participant in the communication triangle being probably best accounted for by Phelan's rhetorical model. If the term "reader" raises questions of definitions and ontological status, so does the expression "narrator-author" in the case of *The Polyglots*, since the temporal and functional demarcation line between the narrated-I and the narrating-I is a shifting and uncertain one. Thus, the intimacy generated by the addresses to readers on the part of the character-narrator performing the diegetic action of writing the novel and also calling attention to his physical presence increases immersion in the story world rather than jeopardizing it. Finally, it will be suggested that the novel's playful disregard for the principle of non-contradiction, evidenced most strikingly in the final metaleptic address, reflects the fact that the narrator is addressing future fictive readers of his yet unpublished book, therefore shifting attention from the writing process to the finished product and its reception. Since his novel is available to us through the reading of a real book, his references to "the book" are felt to concern not only his fictive forthcoming novel but also Gerhardie's novel published in 1925. At this extrafictional level, the exhortations to buy the book read like a humorous form of self-advertisement and a reminder of the economic dimension of the relationship between writers and readers.