



“If you really want to know about it” ... Engaging the reader through direct address in contemporary American literature

Monica Michlin
Paul-Valéry University Montpellier 3

Much of contemporary American literature can be identified by the direct address that opens the narrative, in an often ambivalent form of engagement. Since Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the homodiegetic narrator has often addressed the reader from the liminary page, simultaneously bonding with, but also challenging him or her, while positing a reading contract that upsets realist literary tradition, either through deliberate intertextual irreverence or through other forms of overt transgression of established literary codes. This paper will analyze the dynamics of the threshold text that uses direct address within the rhetorical construction of an “authentic” voice, the technique often being combined with apparently unedited content (incorrect in its grammar, familiar in its turns of phrase, misspelled, etc..) to give one the impression of “hearing” rather than “reading” and of forms of call and (expected) response. It will focus on how the apparent indiscipline of the first person voice can be seen as an attempt to assert or reassert agency, the use of the imperative (either in a form of wooing or of antagonistic provocation), being almost systematic. Whether shy or in-your-face, rebellious or controlled, the intrusive narrative voice that directly addresses us as readers, calling us out from our space outside the book in a form of metalepsis or positioning us as a specific character within the diegesis, also calls upon us to recognize our essential responsibility as readers, as co-writers and interpreters as well as recipients of the narrative – pointing to the ethical responsibility our role as reader entails.