Pronouns, Presence and Authority in John D'Agata's "Collage History of Art, by Henry Darger" (2001)

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Introduction

1. Whether through his own or through the anthologies he has curated as an editor, American writer John D'Agata (b.1975) has relentlessly interrogated the form of the essay, its aesthetic power and the practice of its pioneers. His signature blend of poetic observations and factuality exploits the lability of the genre while brushing off any essentialist take on what may constitute nonfiction in general, embarking his reader into a reflection on the modalities of transmission. Such is the case of *Halls of Fame*, a collection of essays he published in 2001, whose pieces are not to be considered as philosophical nor as journalistic reportage per se. It is rather the epistemological implications of the essay that his prose examines: refusing to consider nonfiction as subordinated to facts, D'Agata has stated that the experience of the essay is akin to "sharing the experience of thinking"[1] – a perspective which may recall the endeavours of narratology if one considers Fludernik's emphasis on anthropomorphic conscience as the main parameter of identification in fiction for instance (see Fludernik 2001).

2. This in turn begs the question of the status of authorial voice: under the narrative rules of nonfiction, authorial presence often oscillates between purveying information and dramatizing its posture – or in other words "between the subject and the self", to quote from the book's own blurb. Within this framework, D'Agata's authorial interventions are not to be construed as mere intrusions providing self-reflexive commentaries, but rather as the linchpin of text structure itself from which our comprehension radiates, urging the reader to engage with the meaning and effect of our adjacency with the voice of the text.

1 In an interview, D'Agata has stated: "That experience that we're allowed to share with the writer feels very pure because the whole movement of an essay is propelled by a fundamentally human impulse to want to figure things out. That's the thing that moves an essay forward, that inquiry. It's not narrative posturing or poetic costuming. It's just thinking, and sharing the experience of thinking." (Lewiton 2016)

3. Along the lines of these refractions of authorial presence, a subtle game with deixis takes place. As a natural consequence, shifters (in the initial comprehension of Jakobson, that is, as markers that can only be decoded in relation with a specific situational context) are central in *Halls of Fame*: waltzing from the "I" to the "you" to the "we", the collection offers a relational approach to literature, conceived as conversation, weaving a poetics of intimacy.

4. This paper wishes to take on a stylistic approach to D'Agata's specific use of deixis in order to investigate the extent to which the notion of address configures his writing, and more specifically whom it might address, how and to what effect. I posit that his prose could be described as relational (as opposed to informative) in that it is constantly concerned with dramatizing presence – that of the objects depicted, that of the reader to the text, that of authorial voice in the narration. This invites us to relate to the latter, perhaps more than to identify with it, within a game of proximity and distance that will be discussed throughout this paper.

5. To that end, I will focus on one particular piece from *Halls of Fame*, "Collage History of Art, by Henry Darger". I begin with interrogating the modalities of its enunciation so as to apprehend in the following section the challenges that the reader faces when encountering the pronouns "I" and "you" in a nonfictional context; and in the last section of the paper, I engage with the presence effects that are notably brought on by the use of "we" as well as the imperative mood throughout the essay.

Addressing the Factual Pact

6. Dealing with the pronominal paradigm in narrative nonfiction necessarily means dealing first with the specific positioning of the authorial voice, however difficult it may be to delineate. This brings into consideration what Vincent Colonna, in the context of autofiction, has termed the "nominal protocol" (Colonna 37), a notion which Genette later engaged with to comment upon the triple identity produced by the genre, wherein author, narrator and character are the same person. While the nonfiction author is not to be approached per se as a fictionalized character of their own work, but rather perhaps like Booth's "implied author" (Booth 71) as far as narrative positioning is concerned, this coalescence necessarily interrogates what pronouns such as "I", "you" or "we" actually span within the context of nonfiction. Are narrator and author (real and/or implied) to be distinguished at times, or are they always to be conflated? Can the implied author be considered as a

character in the text? And how do effects of address aimed at one's readership possibly differ from fiction's, within the specific "scene of enunciation" (Maingueneau) of a nonfictional discourse? Such are the issues to be addressed when examining D'Agata's frequent use of "we" and "you" for instance, which invites the reader to adopt a self-reflexive stance and to interrogate her understanding of "you" (the polysemy of which makes it a particularly flexible pronoun; see Sorlin 2022[2]), while prompting her to participate in the building of a supposed discursive community.

7. I will attempt to do so in "Collage History of Art, by Henry Darger", an essay which is divided into sections of varying length – about thirty – delving into the life of American outsider artist Henry Darger (1892-1973) while simultaneously exposing D'Agata's own musings about his subject. A biographical and aesthetic promenade of sorts, the essay borrows from Darger's own artistic idiosyncrasies, mainly the art of collage and fragments, accumulation and plurality. Henry Darger, who spent most of his adult life as a semi-recluse, is mostly known for his 15,145-page fantasy manuscript (whose generally abridged title is *The Story of the Vivian Girls*), which he composed and richly illustrated over a period of sixty years with drawings and watercolors using traced images cut from magazines or children's books that he generally collected in the trash. The work has an epic resonance, alternating between the representation of idyllic interior scenes or Edenic landscapes full of fantastic beasts and scenes of horrifying carnage and torture amid the war which opposes martyr children (mostly little girls, yet often drawn with penises when naked) and evil adults (called Glandelinians). The novel actually incorporates Darger himself, as a protective figure to the young heroes that populate his story.

8. As for D'Agata's pointillist biography of Darger, it takes us on a tour of the artist's room in Chicago all the while producing a number of ekphrases of his mixed media collage art, which remained unknown to the public until the artist's death and the subsequent unearthing of his works in his shabby apartment. The fourth section of the essay opens with the sentence "HERE IS WHAT I KNOW" and later reads:

> 1896: due to complications during labor, Henry's mother and infant sister both die at the Alexian Brothers Hospital, Chicago. The infant is immediately given up for adoption. She comes home in a basket. Enjoys piano and dance. Henry himself is sent to an orphanage. He is sent to an asylum. He experiences a period of unrecorded years. 1896-1900: the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble Minded Children houses the nation's "most violently deformed and retarded patients under the age of seventeen," according to a 1901 House Committee Report on Children. Number of beds for 1,562:

2 "If 'I' most of the time can only refer to the person who says 'I', and if the reference of a third-person form can most of the time be easily retrieved, the flexible, diverse and sometimes ambiguous reference of 'you' renders any simple classification illusory, as has been underlined by many a 'you narrative' specialist." (Sorlin 9)

> 900. Henry is there because his father is dead. Because his father is tired. Because Henry was caught setting a warehouse fire in which several hundred dollars worth of prized rabbits were killed. Why is Henry there? "Little Henry's heart is not in the right place," according to patient evaluation, 1905. (D'Agata 2001, 163)

9. In this vignette, the use of the present tense, almost of aoristic value, seems to efface narrative voice at first while enforcing a resolute sense of immediacy for dramatizing purposes: we are presented, vividly yet quite matter-of-factly, with biographical elements from Darger's childhood. Yet the logical incongruity of the passage is instantly striking: "Henry's mother and infant sister both die at the Alexian Brothers Hospital, Chicago. The infant is immediately given up for adoption. She comes home in a basket. Enjoys piano and dance". And the reader to wonder: is the sister dead or alive? D'Agata's paratactic style here prevents us from favoring any clear answer, while the statement is further complicated by the mention of "she comes home" whereas "she comes back" or "gets home" might have disparaged the ambiguity by making us construe "home" as Henry's, not as the child's adoptive household. This guides our reading towards various possibilities here: the narrative voice might be offering to reconstruct young Henry's projections, where he would be imagining his sister in a new home – Darger in fact never knew her, since the infant indeed lived and was given up for adoption. Yet it could also suggest a reconfiguration of events, where Henry was told that the child was dead. A dozen pages later, the text reactivates this possibility by way of a supposed quotation from Darger's journal, almost related in free direct speech as shown by the choice of the present tense at the end:

> Beginnings, Henry wrote, are hard. He remembered his father first telling him this when he dropped the boy off in the driveway of his new home, the Lincoln Asylum for Feeble Minded Children. Henry's young mother and unborn sister had just died during a labor that lasted twenty-three hours. Beginnings, Henry reasoned, don't even exist. (D'Agata 2001, 177)

10. In our previous quotation, other devices inject a similar sense of uncertainty, as with "Henry himself is sent to an orphanage. He is sent to an asylum". Here, the syntactic repetition implies that Darger goes from one to the next (as confirmed by his biography) but might also be suggestive of an epanorthosis – that is, of an orphanage actually deemed to be an asylum. The irresolution harbored by the passage concerning Darger's sister then recurs with the mention of his father: "Henry is there because his father is dead. Because his father is tired. Because Henry was caught setting a warehouse fire in which several hundred dollars worth of prized rabbits were killed. Why is Henry there?". Here, the anaphoric mode presents the narrative voice as possibly unreliable: is the father dead or tired? Is "dead" to be understood as hyperbolic or as a potential shift of focus to

the viewpoint of the facility's staff for example, who might not have cared about the family's situation? Similarly, the interrogation "Why is Henry there?" could be read as a narrative cue preparing the insertion of the quotation from young Darger's evaluation ("Little Henry's heart is not in the right place"[3]). While the question is framed by some data delivered in parataxis which emulates a sense of factuality ("Number of beds for 1,562: 900"; "according to patient evaluation, 1905"), it could however also be read as a rhetorical question serving as a possible marker of disapproval within a subjective narration.

11. This morbid portrait of a spectral family, either dead or alive, helps to characterize Darger as a forlorn figure overall,[4] but these rhetorical indecisions can also be understood as the indirect formulation of a pact with the reader regarding textual authority: by injecting undecidability through anaphoric ambiguities and aporetic parallelisms in syntax, the implied author here runs the risk of possibly appearing unreliable, as if mainly oriented by the aesthetization of facts. The reader is thus placed in an uncomfortable position regarding the negotiation of what Monika Fludernik has termed the "factual pact", after Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact", and which concerns texts "taken to be making statements about the real world" (Fludernik 2020, 62):

> Failure to follow the rules of evidence or abide by the cooperative principles and sincerity codes will entail negative consequences on the legal or institutional plane, since such failure will be interpreted as lying, cheating, misrepresentation or incompetence. [...] The factual pact is thus nothing but a different name for the Gricean maxim of quality, which is part of the cooperative principle applying to all communicational exchange. It can be partially violated (or better: set aside) in order to privilege politeness, or irony, and it will be truly violated or infringed upon by lying. (Fludernik 2020, 62)

12. Bearing in mind Grice's maxim of quality ("where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence" Grice, 1975), one may then interrogate the age-old trope of art as artifice: is the stylization of facts we are here presented with akin to lying? Whether Darger was sisterless, fatherless, brought to an orphanage or an asylum, or both, his portrait remains shaped by an authority which subtly signals its presence by way of providing a specific composition of information, only to refuse certainty in the end, decentering our attention away from any purely informative quest towards the aesthetic pleasure of dramatizing the presentation of facts.

3 Darger's assessment brought the further precision of "self-abuse" as diagnostic, a euphemism for masturbation at the time.

4 This also indirectly insists on his post-mortem and ex-nihilo rise to fame, much in keeping with outsider art's canonization of artists generally confined to anonymity in their lifetime, as they were to their institutions and the artistic world within themselves.

13. Another long-standing debate here looms, that of the pitting of facts against fiction. When trying to account for "variable truth criteria" in an array of nonfiction genres (which, she says, generally "represent states of affairs"), Marie-Laure Ryan comes up with a generic categorization which rests on the following distinction:

> (2) weak factuality, where the narrator is granted some freedom from the truth for the sake of tellability, as in narratives of personal experience, autobiography, New Journalism and travel writing;
>
> (3) weak fictionality, where the fictional world is very close to the real world and its closeness to reality is a major source of appeal, as in faction (sometimes referred to as true fiction or as nonfiction novel), autofiction or romanced biographies;

She further comments saying:

> The border between (2) and (3) can be fuzzy, but in (2) the narrator and the audience are bound by what Monika Fludernik calls a factual pact, so that the accuracy of the narrative can be challenged, for instance by accusing a conversational narrator of exaggerating (not a diplomatic move, but it can happen), while in (3) the audience regards the fictional world as a plausible and more knowable though not necessarily faithful version of the actual world, but also adopts an aesthetic attitude that gives free rein to the storyteller's imagination. In a model of verbal narrative that regards the distinction author/narrator as distinctive of fiction (Genette 1993), in (2) they are the same person, while in (3) they are distinct, though the narrator can be a fictional alter ego of the author. (Ryan 83)

14. If D'Agata's collection definitely falls into to the second category per the generic indications it provides (starting with the mention of "essays" on the front cover), I would contend that it also adopts "an aesthetic attitude that gives free rein to the storyteller's imagination", as in Ryan's third category, by voluntarily blurring the contours of facts and fiction. Considering the paradigm of triple identity in such works of "weak fictionality" as with autofiction, we must yet bear in mind that D'Agata's texts are not primarily centered on the self (as in "écriture de soi" or "récits de soi", as French appellations would go). Rather than an economy of remembrance or an identity quest via the theatralization of the I, what is at stake in D'Agata's stylized essays is a fictionalization of action rather than of the self, as a gateway towards aesthetic reflection within a global distortion of the factual pact: his essays tend to aestheticize the real, rather than to simply report it or to build a fictional emulation of it, by harboring various "signposts of fictionality". Nünning draws a list of those which notably includes the representation of consciousness, free indirect discourse, dialogues, the possibility of an unreliable narrator, metafiction and self-reference, the possibility of non-chronological temporality, and the semantization of space and objects (Nünning 36) – staples which are almost all displayed in D'Agata's collection. Hence, D'Agata's prose seems more akin to what

Rabau refers to when she quips the term "fixemblable" in French – a portmanteau derived from "vraisemblable" ("plausible"; "credible"), where "vrai" ("true") is substituted with the first morpheme of the word "fiction" – and which she defines as "the opposite effect of verisimilitude, whose aim would be to create an impression of fiction within the telling of facts" (Rabau 2002, 235; my translation). As a result, many of D'Agata's essays brim with a feeling of undecidability, foregrounding an impossible arbitration between facts and fiction, between what has been objectively lived and what could be considered false and/or imagined – an indecision which here seems to lean towards the performative considering Darger's both fantastic and violently autobiographical material. This further complexifies any clear distinction between author, implied author and narrator, which in return complicates our notional apprehension of the pronoun "I".

"Here Is What I Know": Authority in the Making

15. D'Agata's relentless distrust for the importance of facts in narrative nonfiction indeed naturally affects discourse deixis in terms of self-positioning and the nature of the "I". His essayistic concerns appear to be chiefly poetic, with referentiality not to be approached as an informative strategy but rather as indexed on Jakobson's "poetic function of language". A former Creative Writing student in a poetry program, he seems to say as much when commenting on the recent evolutions of creative nonfiction:

> The recent burgeoning of creative nonfiction and the personal essay has yielded a fascinating subgenre that straddles the essay and the lyric poem. These 'poetic essays' or 'essayistic poems' give primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. They forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation. The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form. (Tall & D'Agata, 7)

16. D'Agata's introduction to *The Next American Essay* (one of the three anthologies of essays he edited at Graywolf) further engages with the matter. After compiling data on the essays collected in the book (the authors' nationalities, age, the number of books they wrote, the genres they tried their hand at), he states:

> I'm telling you this now, at the start of our journey, because I know you are expecting such facts from nonfiction. But henceforth please do not consider these "nonfictions". I want you to be preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts. A fact comes from the Latin word *factum*—

> literally, "a thing done"—a neuter past participle construction which suggests a fact is merely something upon which action has happened. It's not even a word that can do its own work. From the same Latin root for fact we get the words "artifice", "counterfeit", "deficient", "façade", "infect", "misfeasance", and "superficial". "There are no facts," Emerson once wrote, "only art". Let's call this a collection of essays then—a book about human wondering. It begins in 1974, an arbitrary date as far as dates go because it does not mark the start of the essay. It marks, instead, the start of my own wondering—the only story I have any authority to tell. (D'Agata 2003, 1)

17. "The only story I have authority to tell": such a statement places D'Agata's literary enterprise under the guidance of a heightened authorial subjectivity, which makes the process of mediation visible and decenters narrative power away from a supposed effacing neutrality or the pressing issues posited by the concept of the "death of the author". While this "I" in nonfiction can generally be read as "here is what I selected, interpreted and arranged for you", D'Agata's specific rhetorical positioning in "Collage"'s section title "HERE IS WHAT I KNOW" furthermore departs from any traditional conception of an all-encompassing authority hovering over the text since it also conveys a sense of vulnerability, notably by beckoning us to think about what the "I" doesn't actually know. Circumscribed by a subjectivity conceived as a limit more than as a demiurgic potency, the "I" in "Collage" is often characterized as lacking certainty, as if in a state of constant probing for the contours of what is focused upon. The following section can be considered a case in point:

> I'M SORRY IF I MISLED YOU into thinking this would be fun. That a paragraph could stand in for Henry Darger's room. That this essay could be a gallery you could walk through on your own, that you could get to know Henry on a Sunday afternoon. What I meant to say is that Henry never had any guests. I didn't mean to say *apartment*, but maybe *stanza* instead. (D'Agata 2001, 184)

18. Such a direct address takes the shape of an avowal here: that of an illegitimacy of sorts, a sense of powerlessness which taps into the trope of the failure of representation and implicitly calls for the reader to identify with the implied author and to co-create meaning by opening up a space of negotiation which would make room for dialogical possibilities. This is precisely what the "you" in the above quotation arranges: while also a shifter in the sense that its irruption provokes a sense of transition between episodes (namely from a descriptive section, that of Henry's journal contents, to a metanarrative one), the pronoun activates the "I/you" dyad to conceive of the text as a communicative process, whose ideal staging would be that of an in-person, synchronized interaction. Its strong personalizing effect is here intensified by various modulations such as "I didn't mean to say *apartment*, but maybe *stanza* instead",[5] or "What I meant to say is", whose

5 D'Agata is here fiddling with an interlingual pun ('stanza' meaning 'room' in Italian), and more generally with the implication that his own text spatializes Darger's own personal space.

function as self-comments would be to anticipate or provide answers to truncated questions from the part of the co-participant, all the while adopting markers of orality which build on a sense of proximity with the reader.

19. However reminiscent of the metatextual regime, these effects of address do not specifically ambition to lift the curtain on the text in the making, just as the unveiling of fictionality might challenge our suspension of disbelief in the context of fiction: they rather signal themselves as parts of an enterprise of humility, where the various relativizations of authority serve to subjectify the implied author and facilitate the process of identification amid an imaginary, punctured dialogue. This ambition for a direct, personal exchange with the reader, albeit illusory by definition, fuels a poetics of authenticity which would aim at reinforcing the ethical and intimate powers of the reading pact: by contributing to the passage's self-reflexivity, these vestiges of an aborted conversation offer a vision of literature as an *endeavour* before all, more attempting than assertive, and whose authentic quality would be upheld by the staging of the author's self-admitted incompetence.

20. This staged sincerity of the author's limits therefore paradoxically reinforces the ethics of the pact generated by the expectations of the nonfiction reader; and in return, this rhetoric of imperfection gives a certain latitude to the implied author – for how to find fault with an authority which confesses to its occasional inaptitude?

21. Within this framework, D'Agata's playfulness with discursive posture and referentiality overall ends up subtly reasserting the narrative voice's undisputable agency, placing us in a metatextual double-bind of sorts: the implied author calls for the participation of an empowered reader all the while strengthening his own authority by exploiting referentiality in often ambiguous ways. This is the specific function of deictic ambiguity in D'Agata's text, as when referentiality shifts or destabilizes our comprehension in the making. For instance, when he states "Henry begins writing, in 1911, the story known to you as 'The Realms of the Unreal'" in the "HERE IS WHAT I KNOW" section (163), the pronoun "you" could refer both to the author himself, as a form of self-address (if we do consider with Guillaume that "the third person is everywhere"[6]), as well as to his audience. This appears to be a case of what David Herman calls a "doubly deictic you", where hesitation is built between internal reference (to a protagonist) and external reference (to the reader)

6 Gardelle and Sorlin efficiently sum up this hypothesis: "[Guillaume] considers that in the personal pronoun paradigm, "the third person is everywhere" (*la troisième personne est partout*): in other words, it is included in the first and second. For instance, in *je souffre* 'I am suffering', *je* includes both the *I* who speaks and the *I* construed as the person being talked about. Similarly for *tu* 'you', which includes both the *you* who is being talked to and the *you* who is being talked about." (Gardelle & Sorlin, 4)

– hence "neither a term of address, nor *not* a term of address" (Herman 363). Moreover, since Darger's manuscript has never been published in any traditional sense, the preference of "known to you" rather than "known as" may appear puzzling. If we are to identify with this "you", we are potentially activating the irony carried by the pronoun itself since we are to be potentially assigned to a place of ignorance: unless the reader is particularly well-versed in Darger's (rather confidential) art, this is the first mention of his book's title in the essay. The use of the verb "know" therefore ends up dramatizing our probable incompetence that the presence of the pronoun ironically ignores, and which contrasts with D'Agata's own mediating posture, as the bearer of biographical knowledge – an ironic effect which is all the more prolonged when one considers that the actual title of Darger's manuscript reads in full: "The Story of the Vivian Girls, in **What Is Known as** the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion" (emphasis mine).

22. Referential shifts, as in the following passage, point to similar rhetorical strategies:

> Year Henry begins to write autobiography: 1966. Number of pages: approximately 5,000. Number of times in autobiography Henry Darger mentions he is an artist: none. Number of pages detailing Henry's dishwashing adventures: approximately 5,000. Number of times, per day, Henry attends mass: 4. Sometimes: 7. Years Henry chronicles the local weather forecast: 13. How often do you do this: he does this everyday. When do you die: 1973. […] How many bed linens, pillows, blankets do you have: for weeks on end I imagine Henry simply couldn't find his bed. (D'Agata 2001, 183)

Here, D'Agata once again resorts to a paratactic style which emulates the principle of collage and creates a veneer of depersonalizing factuality which serves as a counterpoint to the deictic shift in "how often do you do this". Addressing direct questions to Darger (to the point of absurdity, as with the ironic incongruity of "When do you die"), D'Agata here stages an impossible dialogue with his subject just like he otherwise attempts to do so with his reader.

23. The shift from third to second person reasserts the preeminence of an authorial voice who provides both questions and answers while performatively enacting an imaginary interview. Such staged one-sided conversations seem anchored in what could be termed a presentative logic rather than a representative one, as if D'Agata strived to *un*mediate textual matter while at the same time refusing to forego the privilege of commentary, as when he projects upon Henry's way of living ("How many bed linens, pillows, blankets do you have: for weeks on end I imagine Henry simply couldn't find his bed"). Rather than his desire to actually interview Darger, D'Agata here signals that his posture is fundamentally dual, founded in both mediation and spectation – a duality which

is particularly made apparent in the frequent use of the pronoun "we" throughout the essay, which I will now comment upon.

Communication as Communion

24. There are indeed many occurrences of the first-person plural pronoun in "Collage", as in the following passage:

> "HENRY ON THE STAIRS" IS A PHOTO you've probably seen. It depicts the artist as a lonely, scary old man. Unshaven, unwashed, unaware of why we've come to stare, he's been somewhere so sad for so long that his eyes, God help him, cannot look up. But earlier than this, in 1910, Henry makes a photograph at the Midway with a friend. He and the boy each pay eleven cents, then climb up a platform before a makeshift set. The object of the photograph, according to the backdrop, is for the young men to pretend that they are at a ball. The huge scrim sinks behind them toward a party. Above their two heads a chandelier is abloom. Henry's young friend sits cross-legged, hatless, staring us down. He's taken off his overcoat, rolled up his sleeves. He's about to reach out and take us for a spin, maybe even ask if we have a cousin for his friend. Henry, meanwhile, looks past the camera's lens. (D'Agata 2001, 165)

While "a photo you've probably seen" once again creates a preemptive effect on the knowledge we supposedly share with the implied author, it also fuels a sense of complicity which is fully achieved by the use of "we" throughout the quotation. Via the concatenation of the present tense and the use of the "we" pronoun, the passage oscillates between ekphrasis and hypotyposis, once again weaving D'Agata's poetics of presence by staging an ever-recurring desire for synchrony. This is for instance visible with "unaware of why we've come to stare", whose perfect aspect looks to reduce the temporal gap which separates us from any contemporaneity with Darger. More generally speaking, the presentification of the scene consolidates the author-reader intimacy by inviting us to play along the subjective game of speculation, as when the author ventures into the projective mode with "He's about to reach us and take us for a spin, maybe even ask if we have a cousin for his friend": the moment is here seized as both suspenseful and suspended within the narrativity that D'Agata assigns to this picture, gradually animating.

25. Within this logic of bonding, where D'Agata presents himself as an agent of his own narrative in which we are also invited to immerse, the function of "we" could be compared to that of the expression of collective imagination within the tale tradition. The representation of our common receptive posture via the use of "we" also forces us to consider the possibility for both narrator and

narratee to undergo a literalized characterization – that is, to be turned into actual characters –, which seems to proceed from this strategy of presence effects, as Sorlin, after Brunyé *et al.*, reminds us ("The best way to give a reader a stronger 'palpable sense of "being there"' is to 'address her as protagonist'" Sorlin, 21). Similarly, and however intensely humanized Darger might be by such presentifying devices, the use of "we" could also be said to activate the traditional opposition in the deictic scheme between "us" and "them": this polarity would further consolidate the reader-author axis as well as objectify Darger as the focal point of our observation here, and more globally as a case study, dignifying him with the posture and posterity of an artist whose supposed remoteness and inaccessibility would go hand in hand with the canonization process of artists.

26. Ultimately, such passages using the first-person plural show how D'Agata's prose globally strives for a sense of communion, however fragile: the usual rhetoric of metanarrative discourse is here reversed, eschewing to pit narrator and reader against one another, rather positing that they share the same vantage point – that of being spectators. By presenting himself as part of the audience he projects, the implied author also enacts a certain homogenization of his audience via the use of "we": the reception process is here made visible without any reckoning of the problematic referentiality of this "we" that we are offered to occupy on a supposed equal footing – and perhaps as problematic as the "you" pronoun in second-person narratives, which we may refuse or choose to identify with, as previously demonstrated by Sorlin.[7] Overall, this authorial posture fluctuating between spectation and mediation somehow negates the security of traditional narrative frames for the addressee, who remains caught in a simultaneous allegiance to the comfort of her passivity and the interpretative agency which she is exhorted to, in a way that is reminiscent of the functioning of metalepsis in the context of fiction.[8]

27. More generally speaking, the presence of "we" is often to be found in passages which seemingly lament the fundamental impossibility of dialogue:

> In the distance is some lightning, calligraphy on hills. And above the mountain distances are blue skies embracing clouds in full view. If his paintings had windows we could point to what we feel. If

7 "My contention is thus that potentially the reader can self-ascribe the property of being the addressee even if she is not primarily addressed. Of course, as we shall see, the potential degree of 'address' differs depending on the nature of 'you'. In the case of You4, the address is not potential, it is linguistically cued by the text ('you the (authorial) reader'). What remains uncertain regarding You4 is how the actual audience would want to respond to the direct address. The real reader is always free not to accept the position the text assigns her. She can indeed refuse to self-ascribe and occupy the authorial audience's position." (Sorlin 20)

8 Parker says as much about "you" inclusions in fiction when he remarks: "As a symbolic marker of recognition of another's subjectivity, the pronoun you's 'empty sign' (Benveniste 1966, 254) is often metaleptic in itself in literary texts, crossing an essential boundary: that between two self-imagined subjects on ontologically distinct narrative levels." (Parker 110)

> Henry's paintings were a window, would we agree on what we feel? Am I the only one, for example, who sees Shirley Temple? (D'Agata 2001, 172)

The use of such rhetorical questions, in keeping with D'Agata's conception of essays as experiences "about human wondering", seems to reverberate a certain nostalgia, that of the possibility to engage with one's addressee within a situation of living, embodied communication. In her study of "fictions of presence", where she reconsiders the specificity of the notion of voice in literature, Rabau comments on the matter by evoking Derrida's criticism of logocentrism as a tendency in Western philosophical thought to envision voice as retaining supremacy over the written mode, in return primarily considered as a loss:

> One of Derrida's tasks in *De la grammatologie* (1967) is to deconstruct the idea of writing as an enterprise of defeat, always secondary to the living orality of presence. This deconstruction notably requires a critical reading of Rousseau, Saussure and Husserl: in Western thought, writing is always considered subaltern, since its sole function is to reproduce language. This reproduction, which points to an absence of either the signifier or the voice, is understood negatively as a "non-presence to oneself" (Derrida: 29), whereas speech is presence: the presence of the signified to the signifier, of the voice to the body. (Rabau 2000, 52; my translation)

On that account, Rabau posits that "at the very origin of the desire to write is the desire to preserve orality, and to make writing the very means of this conservation" (Rabau 2000, 122; my translation), all the while acknowledging the pervasiveness of such a conception of the writing process as irrevocably productive of absence rather than presence:

> What is transmitted is the inscription of absence, not "the reading voice". Above all, even if the reader's voice were to "reactivate" the voice of inscription, it would still only be a symmetrical experience of absence, this time the absence of the speaker. If I'm asked to lend my voice, it's because there is no voice; if I'm asked to become the speaker, it's because the speaker is absent. (Rabau 2000, 131; my translation)

My own contention is that the "we" pronoun in D'Agata's essay directly plays into the ambiguous posture of a horizontal relation between reader and writer while at the same time relegating us to the reckoning of our impossible participation due to this inevitable regime of loss. This ambiguity seems to be precisely ingrained in the use of the imperative mood that is often used in the essay's various ekphrases, as in the following occurrences:

> In some of his paintings, notice running. (D'Agata 2001, 174)

> When did you first notice something missing in the world? Henry Darger died and was then brought to life. When his paintings were discovered they were 'mounted', 'framed', and 'hung'. They were

> 'lit'. Look at the painting of Henry's girls in a cave, huddled together beneath the red hard clay, and ask yourself why we bury what leaves. (D'Agata 2001, 176)
>
> Henry's girls—granted—are already dead, but imagine in his paintings that they are living instead. Imagine, for example, how you would kill for art. (D'Agata 2001, 178)
>
> Now let's play a game! When the girls who look like they are picking flowers bend, think to yourself that they are really lifting stones. When the girl mixing cake batter in a large bowl at her waist raises a spoon as if to stir, know that she holds a drumstick instead and is really in the midst of playing a snare. And when the forest animals gather in the clearing to play, be honest with yourself: they have come for the scrapes of war. This is a game that Henry likes to play: a gray wash over everything familiar to make the seams around our memories fade. (D'Agata 2001, 180)

It is interesting to note that D'Agata's ekphrases generally remain partial ones: they mainly narrativize details, somehow leaving the reader under-exposed to Darger's material by eschewing a global description, especially when considering that the essay does not include any reproductions. Although inviting us to directly engage with Darger's work (as indicated by the semantic scope of the verbs used in the imperative form i.e mainly verbs of ideation: "imagine"; "notice"; "look" ; "ask yourself"; "know"), such passages mainly turn us into witnesses of the author's own encounter with art: it is the interpretative apprehension of it by the author-turned-tour-guide that is at stake; and this seems to relate to the purpose of the essayistic genre according to D'Agata himself, namely that of the "sharing [of] the experience of thinking".

28. The conversational tone conveyed by the use of the imperative mood is all the more interesting if we consider that the present tense and the second person (the essay's select devices) are precisely among its distinctive markers; incidentally, it is yet a choice where intersubjectivity is grammatically effaced. This could be said to be in keeping with D'Agata's rhetorical strategy overall, where his authorial presence is subtle yet ever-present, both overt and covert, but this also seems to partake of an implicit comment on the limits of ekphrasis, which are ironically highlighted by both the medium (a written essay devoid of pictorial reproductions) and the imperative mood itself. Indeed, the invitation to act upon the world that the imperative produces presupposes a strong deictic anchorage, since it generally points to the exophoric environment of enunciation ("Look at this painting"), and which accounts for the effacing of pronouns.

29. More precisely, the imperative mood is fashioned by what Jary and Kissine call "the potential status of imperatives" as directive speech acts (Jary and Kissine, 119): they notably contend that "potentiality is a semantic feature of the imperative sentence type that specifies it for directive illocutionary acts" (139), adding that "a directive speech act can—but need not—lead the addressee

to the decision to bring about the truth of its propositional content" (122). Hence, "a prerequisite for the directive interpretation of an utterance is that the addressee has control over the actualization of its content" (144): in this sense, the use of the imperative mood connects with the ambiguity of D'Agata's relational approach in that "the actualization of the content" from the part of the addressee is precisely precluded by the reality of the written word. Ultimately, what we are left with is an ethical plea to engage with art, more than the actual result of it: in the specific instance of the above quotations, this rather seems to relate to the possible hortative value of the imperative mood (a speaker exhorting a co-enunciator to bring about an action), more than to the actualization of the action prescribed by the utterance.[9]

30. In other words, we firstly learn that it is vital to engage with art in general more than it is to derive interpretative pleasure from specifically contemplating Darger's works through D'Agata's ekphrases.

Conclusion

31. Let us now conclude our present analysis by taking a look at the very beginning of the essay:

> PACK: SOMETHING WITH WHICH TO SEE. Bring trousers as well for the vegetation is thick. Sometimes storms, so a poncho would be smart. Also, war: in which case follow the instructions of your guide. A box lunch is provided. Do not drink the water. Please note the schedule of the moon's fall and rise as detailed on the back of your itinerary, enclosed. Memorize this. It will be your best friend. It will be on the test. It will be in your best interest to carry wrapped gifts for our hosts—men, women, children, parents, long-lost friends, sleek-winged beasts—but do not, under any circumstances, carry cash on your person. Cameras may be cumbersome but by all means sketch. Ready? Questions? Not now. Go! (D'Agata 2001, 159)

Inviting us to enter a Darger picture as we enter the essay itself, this peculiar incipit reads as a sort of how-to guide whose pastiche of a professor-like, almost infantilizing tone gently prepares us for the author's upcoming role as curator. More generally speaking, this beginning contains the seeds of all the presence effects that we have examined so far (among which direct addresses via the imperative mood, the supposed competence of the reader – "sleek-winged beasts", storms, or war for example being among the obsessive motives of Darger's art –, possible ellipses of answers to

9 It is however to note that Jary and Kissine precisely advocate for terms like hortative to be carefully summoned in the analysis of imperative forms: "Terms like hortative should then be reserved for forms that are not morphologically and syntactically homogeneous with the second-person imperative but that otherwise fall under our definition of the imperative, like the English let us construction." (Jary & Kissine, 132).

questions from the narrative voice, and non-contextualized shifters within an ambiguous referential system).

32. All these elements converge towards an ironic treatment of ekphrasis and a problematization of the notion of address that will recur throughout the essay, mainly via the manipulation of deixis: such devices actually raise not only a fundamentally pragmatic question (who is speaking to whom?) but also further address questions in essence related to power distribution – who may exert power over whom? As a directive speech act connected to illocutionary force, the imperative mood seems particularly apt to span the direct relation D'Agata wishes to contrive with his readers, as both an expression of desire and a call for action, activating, if not restoring, literature's performative power. This acts as a potential reconciliation between what could arguably be postmodernism's theatralization of our quest for meaning, emphasizing the construction of meaning itself as a cognitive and aesthetic quest, and the revitalization of a substantialist claim of sorts to the physical effect of reading as a "production of presence", to borrow Gumbrecht's notion (qtd by Holland 155). Mary K. Holland has discussed such a shift relying on Gumbrecht's analysis when exploring David Foster Wallace's fiction[10] in terms of a "larger shift from presence to absence" (156):

> [Wallace] identifies the Romantic belief that textual meaning derived from the intention of a unified author with presence; the New Critical reaction to that, which derived textual meaning not from the author but from the text; and then the poststructural reader—response exaggeration of the New Critical stance, which located meaning in the reader and required the absence of author as knowable and intentional force, and the absence of determinable meaning. Such a shift implies a wholesale surrender of the text to Gumbrecht's meaning culture. Instead, much contemporary fiction returns to an emphasis on present things and meaning, derived from the text, but still quite apart from any Romantic/Renaissance notion of the unified, intending subject, reversing meaning culture's increasing separation of language from world, word from thing, and sign from meaning. (Holland 156)

While Wallace's prose often focused on the solipsistic compared to D'Agata's, both their styles share the same aspiration for an "intense personification" (Holland 166),[11] which is to be

10 The back cover of *Halls of Fame* includes a few words from Wallace who championed D'Agata as follows: "John D'Agata is one of the most significant U.S writers to emerge in the past few years. His essays combine the innovation and candor of David Shields and William Vollmann with the perception and concinnity and sheer aesthetic weight of Annie Dillard and Lewis Hyde. In nothing else recent is the compresence of shit and light that is America so vividly felt and evoked."

11 A phrase she uses to comment upon John Ashbery's self-reflexive poem, "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" (1980), whose last line is "The poem is you": "Still possibly invoking that tautologic that has so notably plagued the self-reflexive thinking of postmodern literature, this identification-replete ending harnesses such intense personification, and such a tender tone, that one feels left more in the presence of a caring author and/or text than in their snide disaffection. Metafiction always has this choice to make: to construct an onanistic game that leaves the reader out, or to invoke the presence of text and/or author precisely in order to build through them a longing toward something

contextualized within an almost anti-platonic ambition to forego representation and substitute it for effective communication. Holland similarly expands on Wallace in the following fashion:

> Indeed, part of Wallace's legacy to American letters must be that he became one of the first postmodern American fiction writers consistently to reestablish language as a mechanism for communicating affect and meaning—not by ignoring the poststructuralist turn either in his novels' concepts of language or in their own linguistic structures, but through the mechanisms of mediation and irony that have long seemed to substitute language tricks for meaningfulness. (Holland, 176)

33. I will here leave aside the claim that postmodernism before Wallace was not preoccupied with meaningfulness but I find that Holland's global argument very much echoes D'Agata's constant theatralization of mediation, which invites us to reflect upon how we choose to conceptualize textual community as possibly enabling the communication of sincerity and affect. In the end, "Collage History of Art, by Henry Darger" is a vivid actualization of this ambition, whose fragmented, kaleidoscopic approach counterbalances any essentialist apprehension of the truth and fossilization of the real, while harking back to philosophical questions about their nature and the means to access them. These questions are all the more critical as the relation between reality and its representation deploys itself along different axes in nonfiction, with the author supposedly organizing the real rather than mimetically fabricating it. Ultimately, whether such ambiguous posturing might reflect one's vital urge to respond to art or constitute a sort of performative prolongation of its ambivalence (especially in the case of Darger's disturbing universe, both violent and enticing, both visually imposing yet textually unreadable), pronominal games pointedly recenter our attention towards authorial intention and let us consider the genre of the essay above all as a form of subjective mediation, capable of revealing one to oneself.

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meaningful and shared that needs the reader to occupy the other end of that longing." (Holland 166).

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