

Jody Azzouni: So it's 1993. My first philosophy book is about to be published, and I think: Hey, I'm secure. I won't lose my job. Why not write another novel? I've written one already—but not quite the way I want to, not totally the way I want to. *All dialogue*, goddammit! No description: no indication of who's talking. If you do the voices right, anyone can tell who's talking without the novel having to be explicit about it. Make the people who are talking comicbook characters. Then it's even easier to tell who's talking. (Call the novel *Superman*. Because that's who the novel is about.)

I was obsessed with dialogue. (I kind of still am.) I was listening all the time—hearing *voices* everywhere. (Well, no surprise—everywhere you go people are *talking*, have you noticed that?) I'd sit at parties, listening and writing stuff down. (That can really freak people out: some guy transcribing stuff onto paper while other—illegal—stuff is being passed around.) And I'm recording conversations, on the phone, with friends at dinner, and then later transcribing those conversations onto paper by hand. With permission, of course. You'd be surprised how fast everyone forgets they're being recorded. So the conversations get totally natural after only a few minutes.

Have you noticed? The ordinary dialogue form is totally artificial. Real people talk to each other simultaneously. Their comments to each other *overlap*. They don't take turns. They don't have to. They talk and process at the same time; they respond to questions at the same time they're processing the questions—at the same time the questions are being *asked*. I noticed this because when I'd transcribe what I'd recorded, I had to keep running the tape over and over to get exactly what was being said. Two people (or more) speaking at the same time run interference with each other on tape. Makes it hard to hear what anyone has said.

So now I'm being tortured by the artificiality of the ordinary dialogue form. One person's words in quotes, new line, then another person's words in quotes. *That's not what it's like*. Or like in some of Shaw's plays, putting each voice in its own column with the statement: *said simultaneously*. That's artificial too.

I wanted *real*. After all, dialogue is a whole lot more subtle than it can be depicted as being in these literary forms. There are patterns to how people interrupt each other. Some interruptions are aggressive; others aren't. People can clash just in how they overlap. Or they can be harmonious about it. I wanted to be able to show all of this on paper.

And then it hits me. I remember where I was. Sitting up in bed thinking about this. When I should have been sleeping. Or sleeping with someone. Music. You have each instrument with its own line next to the lines of the other instruments, and you can see *at a glance* when they overlap and when they don't. Do the same thing with *dialogue*.

So I invented a new literary form. (How often does *that* happen?) I dedicated an entire chapter of *Superman* to that form. Call it *synchronous prose*. Some people were into it. Christopher Sorrentino really liked it. Jonathan Lethem really liked the novel; but I can't remember if he particularly singled out that chapter. I think he didn't. Some people complained: *I have to keep moving my eyes up and down—it's really annoying*. Other people said: *It's really swift and natural—ordinary dialogue just looks fake after reading this*.

And it does. It makes the ordinary dialogue form look really fake. I was hooked on synchronous prose for years. Jonathan Lethem had connected me to a literary agent. (He was such a nice generous guy, really pushing my work for a while there.) The literary agent was interested, but uncomfortable representing the novel (*Superman*) that I'd already written. It was way too experimental. Write another one, she suggested. I am, I told her, I'm working on it right now. It's a detective novel. Good, good, she said. I told her some of the plot. Good, good, she said. And then I told her how I was writing it. The entire thing. In synchronous prose. Please don't do that, she told me. And she was sincere. I could hear the sadness in her voice.

I understood. I sympathized. But I was addicted. The mid-nineties were a good period for me in terms of meeting people. I met a lot of writers. In Brooklyn. At parties. At cafes. In bars. For real. I met Jonathan Lethem. I met Christopher Sorrentino. I met Dave Eggers. I met Jonathan Ames. I mean I actually had conversations with these people. Jonathan Ames, for example, whined about his life all the time. Is it really that bad? I ask him. Have you read my stuff? he tells me back. I thought that was fiction, I say. And then there's this awkward silence.

I don't really understand putting autobiography in fiction, by the way. I'm trying to learn stuff when I write fiction. I already know about me. I'm not news to me. Other people are news to me. Even made-up people are news to me.

But meeting writers, and meeting agents, and meeting publishers wasn't going to help me if all I could write was synchronous prose. And that was all I could write. For years. I wrote the detective novel that I had intended to write entirely in synchronous prose. I called it "Ambivalent Carnivores." It's still called "Ambivalent Carnivores," by the way. Jonathan Lethem read it. Um, I don't think so, he told me. That other novel you wrote, he told me, that's a great novel. Try to get that published. Do more of that.

But I can't do anything twice. It's a real problem for me. Maybe it's my episodic memory that doesn't work so well. Maybe something in me rebels because it thinks it's being punished if it has to do something twice. (Writing things repeatedly was punishment in grammar school. Something in me refuses to forget that.)

In 1997, I awoke from synchronous prose like from a nightmare. Or from a stroke. Or from a binge. Or from Buddhism. Something. I took up ordinary prose forms tentatively—trying to talk again, and then write. "Hello," I'd say to people. And then I'd pause meaningfully. Wait my turn. Quietly.

In 2001, I excerpted the beginning of "Ambivalent Carnivores," and rewrote it so it would work self-containedly as a short story. *Wisconsin Review* liked it, and published it in 2002. Sometimes I think about writing more synchronous prose. Maybe a short story. And then the fear comes over me. I start to hear the voices again. All at once.

Phonecall

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—Hello? speaking. I'm in I'm a little in a rush actually I've got
— Yes am I speaking with J. Hillman? And how are we this afternoon? I'm Peter Cacheon

—something umm
—with Nynex and I'm glad you're doing well. Why we're calling you today is that we're
— I don't think I'm interested
—offering a special caller ID service to our very special clients well yes of course and we
— um
—send you free of charge our specially designed phone with caller ID service screen and mild
— a what?
—electrical rebuking system well that's what I'm here to tell you about the first two months are
— I didn't get what the services are
—free and even if you choose not to use the services you may keep the phone I'm getting to that
— I *know* about that what was the other service? Yes?
—one is a caller ID system this is sorry sir? well I was getting to that are you married? Was
— Yes?
—that a yes? Well you sounded unsure but I'm glad to hear you are because studies show
— that men with wives live a long time and we hope to give you many billable hours on the
— thanks where is
—phone during your retirement and I'm quite sure that you and your lovely wife often get
—this going, if I may ask? you keep
—undesirable calls and we have a service that delivers a mild electrical rebuke to unwanted
—saying that but I don't understand what it means. Mild electrical rebuke. Do you mean
—callers Excuse me?

—like I push a button and the caller on the other line gets an electric shock? whatever. I
— well actually it's not a button but a cute dial that even glows in the

—mean what happens to the other guy he gets electrocuted?
—dark which the user Now it's precisely that sort of

—
—misunderstanding I try to avoid by presenting the services in order but no one of course gets

— I press a button and the other guy gets an
—electrocuted even the word pain is something of an exaggeration after all our careful

—electric shock? yesyes I've heard that
—doubleblind studies even shock is too strong we call it a mild electrical rebuke

—several times already I mean is this service already installed I mean I mean are there other
— no sir we need your permission before we can

—people out there I mean could I call someone *else* and get shocked this way? rude hell do
— ah ah yes I suppose if you were rude for example I

—you know how many assholes I mean I can't believe this is even legal.
—suppose you would be liable sir? Sir, I'm glad you asked

— huh?
—that question because we happen to have standing by our very own counsel from the legal

— wait wait, I don't need. No, but
—division who is prepared to answer any questions regarding the legality of these valuable

— Wait. Christ— Yes? wait wait a minute
—services that you may have. Mr. Hillman, I'm Gary Larder with Lithcoft, Liftercoft, Lithcroft

— wait no no that's hardly right I mean
—and Lithcroft and I've been given the impression that you crave legal advice and I'm glad to

— I mean I mean you're trying to sell *me* something, aren't you? no, no I'm
—be able to tell you that if you simply press the star button on your receiver for a small hourly

—not interested I'm hanging up on you, ok? wait no this stupid phone
—fee I can answer at appropriate length any sir? I'm professionally bound to inform you

—wait no that was an accident it doesn't count I mean
—that you have pressed the star button on your phone legally absolving us of any requirement to

— what the fuck does that mean? I'm not responsible
 —respect your fiscal sovereignty well sir, you are now being automatically billed at well sir

—for this I mean wait a minute
 —you'll have to take that issue up in claims court if it ever gets back in session I mean but I

—how much is this costing me?
 —should tell you sir that your legal instincts are very good because in fact the service you were

— as if anyone would have been dumb enough to
 —being invited to purchase *is* still illegal well maybe so but you'd be surprised how many

— Are you even *with* Nynex? look forget it
 —people are unaware that a service like that would, I'm sorry sir that's confidential information

—I'm hanging up now I'm the the what? the what?
 —but sir I still haven't told you about the discharge fee there's a seven hundred dollar discharge

— what do you mean discharge? discharge, you mean you charge me for hanging
 —fee accompanying every call. Well, sir, every good thing comes to an end, doesn't it? This is

—up on you? You can't charge me for hanging up on you everyone hangs up the phone sooner
 —true even of professional advice. Well that's exactly my point you

—or later look I'm paying for this so just answer one question just how much does this? no, per
 —put it somewhat crudely but I'm at your service of course the discharge fee?

—minute well however what's the fee wait I've got another call on the
 —I can't answer the question in that form well as it turns out, the fee is a low thirty cents a

—other line no no way good bye, hello? Hello? No one there. I've got to get that off my
 —second I'm willing to wait

—bill quick where's that phone book? No that's not it that's a cookbook what's a cookbook
 —

—doing in here? Here it is, ok **How to reach us at** here **billing questions** no that's not it it's
 —

—not *on* the bill yet repairs no **buried cable: call before you dig it's the law** oh that again I
 —

—guess it's billing nothing else looks close here goes umm Should I give you
 — How may I help you?

—my telephone number? I'm being charged for a service I didn't ask
— What's this in reference to?

—for. three three one four seven four seven one eight eight five two seven
— Your number? Yes? Yes?

—two seven two. Yes. Ok.
— Yes. Jack Hillman? Just a moment, please.

— Well, there's this star button service? Well see I don't
—How may I help you, today? Excuse me?

—know whether it's actually you guys or a law firm that's doing this but I'm being charged for a
—

—service I didn't request well it hasn't
— I've got your bill up here on the screen, which charge are you

—appeared yet it just happened No it just happened.
—contesting? it's not on your bill? well then there's nothing we

— what? What should
—can do. I have only your bill here, and we have no other record of calls billed to you. You

—I do? and then?
—have to wait until the contested call appears on your bill and then after you pay it we

—but I don't want to pay it I don't even want it to appear on the
—can undertake an investigation. Sir? Sir? we can't undertake an

— The person charging me claimed he was with
—investigation until the charge appears on your bill.

—Nynex. So is that possible? Ok ok but
— So? I can't answer that question I only investigate billing errors.

—you told me you'd investigate the error after I paid the bill why is that? why should I pay a
—

—disputed bill?
— Technically, sir, you don't have to pay the bill. But I should think that you

— But why should my service be interrupted if the bill is
—wouldn't want your service interrupted.

—disputed?

— We investigate whether there has been an error and if so we rectify it. But if you do

— But but I don't understand
—not pay your bill within the specified period, your service may be interrupted.

—if I dispute the bill, and contact you, why do I have to pay the bill?

—Sir? Yes? Sir? I only handle billing

— well then who do I contact?

—errors I do not handle phone services. All the offices for the various

— But
—services are listed in the white pages of your phone book or you can contact an operator

—but this list it's for specific services. But who cuts off all the services?

— Yes? Yes? I really shouldn't

— What? no of course
—have to be explaining this to you, is this your first experience with a phone?

—not I guess I've never had to look who do I contact if

— If your service is cut off, and you feel you

—have a grievance, you may contact the complaint bureau which number you may find in the

— So I should call them? Of course not I'm talking to you

—white pages Has your service been cut off? So what is your

—aren't I? I'm being charged for a service I didn't request wait wait this here under special

—complaint exactly? Sir?

—services you've got a legal department, that's who I should have called I'm sorry bye.

— But sir? But sir that's—

— Shit **she** could have given me that stupid number all that crap about paying my bill before

—it could be investigated Hello? Yes. I've got a complaint about

— Nynex legal department, how may I help you?

—being charged Transfer me? Where?

— Yes. Hold on a minute while I transfer you. Hello?

— Yes. I have a complaint. um Jack Hillman.
—This is Jethro Bentham. How may I help you? And your name is?

— Well I got this call apparently from Nynex offering what they called a mild
—Go on, Jack.

—electrical rebuking system. That's what I said. What they seemed to be describing was
— A what?

—a product, some sort of device that you could use to administer a shock to whoever was
—

—talking on the phone with you. Yes. no no, of course not. But
— Really? And you purchased this device, Jack?

—it turns out what's really going on is that the caller is a representative, a lawyer I guess, from
—

—some legal service where they're charging me some incredible fee for telling me that the
—

—device in question is actually illegal. By the minute on the phone as we were
— Charging you how?

—speaking. No, no, they called me, a star button service or something
— You called a nine hundred number?

— You press the star button if you want to be charged. Well
—A what? And you pressed this button?

—that's not clear. He said I pressed the button. Well I was
— You don't remember pressing the button?

—fumbling with the phone to hang it up and I could have pressed it by accident.
— This can be

—determined, of course. But even if you did press the button in question it's not clear you
—

— that's what I said but and there was this discharge fee seven
—should be held responsible Discharge fee?

—hundred dollars to hang up Yes, I hoped
— Why that's outrageous. This whole thing is outrageous.

