Café Philosophy

THE NARRATIVE SELF

Story as the basis of the Self

LIFE IS AN ACTIVITY AND PASSION IN SEARCH OF A NARRATIVE

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ARTICLES

Editorial
Tom McGuire

Don Quixote and The Narrative Self
Stefán Snaevarr.

Ideology and the self
Will Wilkinson

Narrative and Identity
José Ángel García Landa

Entangled in Stories
Norbert Meuter

Spinning Narratives, Spinning Selves
Pauline O' Flynn

Reading fiction improves Empathy,
Alison Flood

Poem—*Words*
Yahia Lababidi

Artwork

Verlaine & Mathilde
Chloe Dollet
(back Page)

Arthur Rimbaud
Andy Hope 1930
(Page # 7)

8

Narrative and Identity by José Ángel García

Identity and narrative agree well from a broadly Heideggerian perspective which argues the constitution of being through language. We could in fact go as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides if we find that a more general identification of being and thought is relevant to the subject, but one can easily get lost within such broad ascriptions especially when their relevance to narrative and identity is only implicit. Consequently I will concentrate on a line of thought which is more congenial to me, and one which I think is a more immediately relevant classical locus to ground any relationship between self-identity and narrative. I am referring to Hume's assumption that our sense of self is constituted through our associations of ideas, as an effect of memory. Narrative, though not explicitly mentioned by Hume, is certainly one basic instrument in associating memories and providing a sense of identity. Hume's discussion of personal identity begins with a more general reflection on the concepts of identity and diversity:

"*We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time; and this idea we call that of identity or sameness. We also have a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation: and this to an accurate view affords as perfect a notion of diversity, as if there was no manner of relation among the objects. But tho' these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even contrary, yet 'tis certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with each other."* (Hume 1896: 253).

If Hume's diagnosis is accepted, it will readily be seen that a narrative connecting a diversity of events will easily lead to the generation of an ideal object (e.g. a historical event) whose identity is the product of narrative configuration. Both narratives and selves seem to be among the clearest instances of the general principle which generates the identity of ideal objects--even if the principle itself is questioned as a basis for the generation of all manner of ideal objects.

The identity we ascribe depends, as usual in Hume, on habit as much as on direct experience: certainly, "where the changes are at last observ'd to become considerable, we make a scruple of ascribing identity to such different objects" (1896: 257). But if identity is created by the "uninterrrupted progress of the thought" (1896: 256)--then any interruption of the thought will also interrupt the unproblematic ascription of identity. Therefore, we might add, debate over identities which questions received notions and mental habits can seriously shake the means whereby identities are usually conveyed--or constituted.

One more interesting aspect of Hume's conception is that identity is ascribed by the observer, it is not inherent in the associated things themselves. (1896: 260). Actually, personal identity seems to require for Hume a reflective dimension, as it is ascribed by the self-observer, in his reflective capacity, not by the spontaneous connection of ideas in the mind. Identity is cemented by repetition, by semiotic doubling, whether in the form of reflection, or in the form of memory:

"*the memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. . . . As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be consider'd, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity.*" (Hume 1896: 261)

The fluid concept of the self which rears its head in Hume's conception finds a decidedly modern formulation in the work of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the self is not a substance, but a becoming, a construction, which turns back on itself to know and remake itself indirectly through signs and symbols of self-interpretation (Polkinghorne 1988: 154). Less spectacularly

perhaps than in Nietzsche, the modern self as theorized by the existentialists and by hermeneutic social science after Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, is a self which has a narrative dimension as an essential constituent. To quote Donald Polkinghorne,

“human beings exist in three realms--the material realm, the organic realm, and the realm of meaning. The realm of meaning is structured according to linguistic forms, and one of the most important forms for creating meaning in human existence is the narrative. “(Polkinghorne 1988: 183)

From the point of view of hermeneutic psychology, the self is a product of action and of representation, with narratives of the self as a major representational and structuring principle. In this sense reality is interwoven with narrative fictions. Ricoeur's analysis of temporal configurations in Time and Narrative, of the interpenetration of history and fiction in any narrative representation, is perhaps the major contemporary theoretical statement in this line of thought.

In Narrative and the Self, Anthony Paul Kerby notes that the implications of narrative hermeneutics are equally relevant for historiography, literary theory and psychology:

“The stories we tell of ourselves are determined not only by how other people narrate us but also by our languages and the genres of storytelling inherited from our traditions.” (Kerby 1991: 6)

Self-narration is an interpretive activity: the meaning of the subject's past is refigured in the present: "our conscious narratives inevitably refigure and augment the pre-narrative level of experience" (Kerby 9). For thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Hannah Arendt, self-understanding involves the employment of one's experiences: we are "storytelling animals" (MacIntyre 1981, quoted in Kerby 1991: 12). As I argued in my discussion of Hume, there is a link between access to memory and employment (cf. also Kerby 28). The narrative structuration of memories generates our understanding of the past. There is no definite meaning of the past, as we cannot escape "the historicity of our gaze and our interests." For Kerby, "our talk of the self is self-constituting rather than referential to an ontologically prior subject. . . . The meaning of a life can be adequately grasped only in a narrative or story-like framework" (Kerby 31, 33). The distance noted by analysts of the novel between the experiencing self and the narrating self is essential for the study of subjectivity at large (Kerby 38).

Narrative is a cognitive instrument which conveys social articulations of identity. Each act of communication involves to a greater or lesser extent an act of interpretation and reconfiguration. Narrative patterns, therefore, are communicated, but they are also transformed in their application to specific instances. This is all the more the case when the narratives are self-reflective, deliberately experimental. If narrative is configuration of meaning and time, complex configurations such as are developed by artistic narrative are essential models and prototypes for creative social communication.

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The paper appeared in a collective volume, Interculturalism: Between Identity and Diversity. Ed. Beatriz Penas Ibáñez and Mª Carmen López Sáenz. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006. 207-26.

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