

ON NARRATIVE IDENTITIES AND WORKS OF ART : SOME REMARKS

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In an interesting paper¹, David Novitz has claimed that by recourse to story-telling about ourselves we construct our own identities in order to project our 'self-image' to other and that, such narrative identities are to be regarded essentially as constructions similar to literary narratives or other works of art. In this essay, I shall consider the grounds on which Novitz develops his thesis that constructing one's narrative identity in this manner is quite similar to the process of creating works of art. Further, I shall also look more closely at his view that personal identities made by means of narratives and works of art (literary or of other forms) are susceptible to the same kind of political influences. Finally, I shall argue that the conclusions reached by Novitz are not warranted on the grounds adduced by him as he overlooks an important point of distinction that underlies the activities of constructing narrative identities on one hand and works of art, on the other.

I

Let me begin by outlining the important points on the basis of which Novitz develops his thesis.

(1) According to Novitz, we construct our individual identities by means of telling stories about ourselves "much the way that works of art are produced"². Such narratives, far from being mere flat chronicle of events, have a coherent and unified structure with a definite focus. And, as in a literary narrative it does not matter whether the 'facts' incorporated in it are true or imagined, so it is the case with the narrative identity of the individual self so long as the emergent structure is *coherent* and *unified*.

(2) The narrative identity is constructed for the reason that we have a "moral interest" as to what sort of person we are or want to be, and that, "how we view and think of ourselves influences our behaviour"³. For example, if one finds it possible to invent or construct a narrative structure which would support the conviction that as an individual the person has in the past acted courageously then such a person would also tend to be bold and courageous in all his *future* dealings. The narrative identity guides, to a large extent, our future actions and plans by inventing from a range of different *possible* structures one that may be helpful at a particular point of time. Thus :

"Our narrative identities are neither God-given nor innate, but are painstakingly acquired as we grow, develop, and interact with the people around us. Our identities may, of course, be based on past experience, but such experience, we have seen, is too complicated, amorphous and anomalous (even if accurately recalled) to admit of a coherent self-image. Most often, I have stressed, life-narratives, and the identities to which they give rise, are imaginative construals which people adopt, and in terms of which they select and order past events in their lives"⁴.

(3) It is not always the case that the individual *chooses* an identity for himself. "At times our identities are given to us, and we become the beneficiaries, victims, or playthings of the narratives that others create and push in our direction"⁵. Novitz seems to entertain three different possibilities. First, for whatever reasons, some people may not succeed in constructing narrative identities for themselves, and so, may have to live through life with a *fractured* self, as it were. Second, the individual might be able to construct for himself a narrative identity with at least some degree of *free* choice. Third, the narrative identity may be *imposed* on the individual by others who create and push such identity in his direction. The implications of the third possibility are grave as it has social and political ramifications. By and large, it would be *social acceptability* for certain kinds of identities that would guide or goad people into adopting and preferring some identity structures over others. Political propaganda and media fabrication have often been used for the purposes of swaying the public opinion on issues of vital importance. The process, as Novitz puts it, is "quintessentially political"⁶ since "[i]t is the social acceptability of a narrative identity, and not the *truth* of the narrative that constitutes it, that determines what we regard as natural, worthy, or excellent in human behaviour"⁷.

(4) Finally, Novitz points to some interesting parallelisms between the process of constructing narrative identities and that of making works of art. Both are marked by the principle of selectivity, imaginative linkages and a certain special focus in order to give the product a unified structure. The *literary* narrative as much as the narrative *personhood* are fashioned out by organizing the details on a time-scale in a way that the emergent 'narrative time' turns out to be different from time in real life. This enables the narrative structure to acquire a particular slant or focus on some distinctively preferred value or norm. Further, the social acceptability of works of art and narrative identities depends on their conformability to a set of prevailing values. And so,

'the criticism of works of art thus carries with it the same political dynamics and intrigue that we have found in the criticism of people and ideals of personhood that they favor or project. And just as individual identities or ideals of personhood have broader ramifications within the large society, so too, of course, do works of art; so that the State often assumes an interest in, and a measure of control over, the production and dissemination of both the popular and the so-called high arts''⁸.

The burden of it is that personal identities are quite like works of art : they are made in the same way, they come to be treated by society in the like manner, and they come to be accepted or rejected on similar grounds. In the ultimate analysis, Novitz claims, it is the State that develops a vested interest in encouraging and perpetuating certain kinds of personal identities and works of art. On this view, the sense of personhood one acquires by the use of the narrative is based on its social acceptability.

II

We may now respond critically to some of the major points in Novitz's thesis a brief account of which has been provided in the preceding section. That we develop and acquire a sense of personhood by telling stories about ourselves is an interesting point which Novitz brings out in his essay by indicating the possible situations in which recourse to this means is taken. His basic point that a distinction should be drawn between such narratives and mere chronicle of events in one's life seems quite well taken. The stories that we tell about ourselves are usually carefully crafted so as to project a special *focus* on some

aspect of our personhood. Certain common tendencies are discernible towards this end. For example, we would generally want to be /'seen'' as courageous rather than diffident in matters where we are required to take certain decisions, or generous rather than mean in our dealings with other people, and so on. And so, while constructing a narrative about ourselves we would so arrange the sequences or twist and turn the events in such a way that the emergent structure bears out our claim (even if implicitly held) to certain preferred virtues. It follows that for telling a 'story' about ourselves (i.e., a narrative) (a) we may *selectively* pick on some details, events and situations, (b) interpolate some of the elements that may be based on *imagination*, and (c) put them all together in a sequence and manner that would give the structure a '*closure*' and *finality*. Novitz argues along the line that (a), (b), & (c) are identical to what goes on and into creation a literary or visual work of art. From this he concludes that works of art and narrative identities are created in the same manner and for the same purpose. Now, we would contend that the basic purpose and motivation for creating works of art are essentially *aesthetic* in character while those for constructing narrative identities are mainly *moral*.

We may begin by pointing out in the first place that the stories we tell about ourselves are nearly always for *others* in order to project a self-image to them. Contrary to what Novitz believes it to be the case, the individual has an implicit awareness (or understanding) of his own personhood quite *apart* from the narratives he constructs for others. Awareness of one's own sense of identity is based on actual memory of life-experiences in the past. Of course, the memory may tend to be selective though this does not preclude the possibility of carrying in one's memory both pleasant *and* unpleasant experiences. Our failings and failures are known *to us* far too well even for all our attempts to reconstruct them differently *for others*. This is an important point which Novitz does not seem to take into consideration. In other words, there is a sense of selfhood that we create for ourselves as the past events of our life are recalled to the mind. Perhaps the term "create" in this context is inappropriate, for the process only involves some past life-experiences being given to the mind as our memory recalls them *selectively* though. Were it not so, the individual would not be given to moral reflections.

Consider again the point that we *do* tell stories about ourselves to others. It is not the case that these stories have always a full-blown character' more

commonly, we tend to talk about our own actions and responses to situations from a particular perspective. Even when we do construct such narratives it seems possible to do so only *because* we already have an implicit awareness about our own personhood of whatever kind. It is not so much the case that by telling stories about ourselves we create our identities as that such narratives *can* be constructed by us only on the condition of our having a pre- existent sense of personhood. Recourse to narrative process may be taken when we want to convey to others an image or identity of ours which is *different* from the one we have for ourselves. Narrative identities, even if they be granted as what we are able to construct freely, are only symptomatic of our being already in possession of an intimate sense of selfhood. Novitz seems to take the very symptom of selfhood as what *constitutes* it. But I argue that we are *able* to tell stories about ourselves *because* we have an awareness of selfhood. Thus it would be quite useful to draw a distinction between narrative identities that the individual may create (mainly, for others) on one hand and his *own* pervading sense of selfhood, on the other. If this distinction is not made then Novitz's attempt to delineate different narrative identities would only lapse into the Humean quandary. Multiple narrative structures can exist in a social space if only they belong to some *one*; or else, they would fall outside the parameter of communicative strategies. One can talk about oneself because one has a sense of *identity*. Novitz's suggestion about narrative identities, to our view, must be taken in this perspective. We construct narrative identities for ourselves mainly for presenting or projecting our self-image *to others* : We want others to judge and evaluate our personality favorably. We want them to view or review our actions and responses in the context we provide to them by means of narrative identities. We want to seek others' support and endorsement for our behaviour patterns in general as also for certain specific actions/responses, in particular. Thus the purpose for which we tell stories about ourselves is mainly to get others to see our actions with a sense of *moral* approval. And if such exercise comes through well we tend to draw *moral satisfaction* from it.

What I am arguing for is a distinction that should be drawn between our *own* sense of selfhood and the narrative identity we construct for *others*. Novitz seems to overlook this distinction. And this is responsible for a certain contradiction in his own approach. He does grant that in constructing a narrative self we have a "moral interest". But a little later, while considering the

experience of a lingering feeling of regret about some past failure in life he remarks that such regret "is not moral, but an aesthetic response to what" we regard "as a blemished image, a sullied narrative"⁹. How are we to reconcile his claim about "moral interest" in narrative self with his later suggestion that to our own 'sullied narrative' the response can but only be "aesthetic"? One way to resolve this difficulty would be to recognize the distinction we are drawing attention to : The narrative self we construct for conveying to others is not to be confused with the sense of selfhood we already have. My *own* self identity may also be created by me by selectively taking together certain *facts* about my life, but I may not want to project this sense of selfhood to others and, therefore, construct narrative identities which could be presented to others. Moreover, repeated attempts to construct my narrative selfhood on different occasions and to present them to different people are carried out with the end in view that my image should favorably fit with the ideals that are held up laudatorily by the community or society we live in. The idea or norm *precedes* the making of the narrative identity. This, to my mind, would seem to run counter to the way that a work of art is created. Rather than its conformability to some pre-existent norm or ideal, a work of art is appreciated for its *uniqueness*.¹⁰ A work, of art is valued for its "originality" which is to be taken generally to stand for the extent to which it effects a *departure*¹¹ from the past instance of it. In this respect, personal narratives and works of art can not be regarded as similar in terms of how they are made and how they are judged. Even if we consider Novitz's argument that the state often develops an interest in what sort of artistic works should be encouraged and patronized, on our view, such an approach could only stifle the creative spirit and may thus be responsible for only mediocrity to thrive. It can hardly be denied that a measure of freedom is the necessary precondition for genuine creativity to manifest itself in term of *original* works of art. Nor are works of art created primarily for "moral interest" as is the case for constructing narrative identities. On Novitz's own admission, narrative identities "influence" our behaviour and are also linked to the view that we take of the behaviour of others. This can not be said about works of art, for in making them the artist's main concern is not moral but aesthetic.¹² While we would agree with Novitz that personal identities are complex structures which by means of narrative are "constructed" or "invented" rather than discovered we also contend that these are made for moral and not aesthetic purposes.

III

We may now turn to Novitz's more specific claim that narrative identities are made quite the way that works of art are created. For a critical consideration of this point we would like to draw a distinction between creative structures and mere patterns or designs. This may be elaborated in the following way. Most of the things which are available for use in our consumerist society are marked by their design or pattern which is primarily linked to the functional efficiency of such object. (Whether it is a toothbrush or an automobile its design is based on the kind of function it is required to serve). Design, in this sense, is a rational concept which is based on the means-end relationship. e.g., the best design for a toothbrush would be one which would be most conducive to its smooth and efficient functioning. Even if the appearance or look of a product is taken into consideration while designing it this must always be subordinated to its functional efficiency. What however is of paramount importance for the production of such objects is that their design must be *repeatable*. thus identical looking objects can be manufactured in great numbers, but their compact *design* can not lay claim to their candidature for any serious aesthetic appreciation. All the various machine-made products are only to be treated as so many *instances* of the same design. Repeatability of the same design irrevocably impairs the "singularity" condition which is necessary precondition, on Kant's view, for subjecting anything to aesthetic judgement. Pointing to this "tension" between art and technology, Anthony O'Hear convincingly argues that the products of technology, unlike works of art, have no "inner life" of their own¹³ even if it be assumed that technology could perfectly reproduce look-alike art objects. The *inwardness* of work of art invests its structure with a quality that resists any attempt to repeat or reproduce it. On our view, creative structures are not repeatable, for they are not made by mere rule-following. It is this respect that we would distinguish creative structures from things that may have been modeled on some *design* based on pre-conceived plan or set of rules. This distinction, to our mind, is of crucial importance for our understanding of what narrative identities are like. It must be noted that such identities are constructed on the basis of some *moral ideals* which are either already prevalent in society or are sought to be established for others to follow. The objective here remains that of influencing one's own behaviour or that of others; but in either case the constructed identity implicitly contains a recommendation for future *course of*

action. In contrast, the primary objective for which works of art (or creative structures) are created is not to recommend and much less to influence *actions* and *behaviour* in real life. We contend that this vital distinction is overlooked by Novitz and as a result he takes narrative identities to be similar to creative works of art. This however is not to deny that the principles of selectivity and relevancy are employed in making narrative identities quite like they are used for the purpose of fashioning out works of art. But for the creative artist there are no pre-existent norms or models for guiding him to arrive at the end-product. Works that are imitative of other artistic creations are not themselves creative. On the other hand, narrative identities even as they are made at the promptings of others are identities of sorts all the same. Thus, bringing out the distinction between the moral and the aesthetic, Abu Sayeed Ayyub, in his recently translated book, aptly remarks : "Ethical man, although he is not motivated by self-interest, is nevertheless engaged in action. But the artist is free of the burden of activity and the responsibility of inspiring other to action"¹⁴ What is created by the artist is a world of reality which is *other than* the reality that surrounds us. But in creating narrative identities we are not "free of the burden of activity and the responsibility of inspiring others to action".

Another point that needs some elaboration is this. We have earlier pointed out that Novitz develops his thesis about narrative identities by arguing that in constructing them we often fall back on imagination and that, this is quite like the way we also create works of art. Now, we would not deny that imagination plays an important role in the construction of narrative selfhoods; for, apart from making certain interpolations the total configuration of all the details is a product of *imagination*. But, is the use of imagination confined only to making works of art? In our everyday life, we call upon this faculty to come to our help in different situations. E.g., a detective who tries to solve a case, a lawyer who builds up defense for his client, a teacher who wants to be effective in the classroom (and so on) all use imagination in their task to achieve the desired end. What then is distinctive about the role of the imagination in the context of art? I think it would be useful to draw a distinction, broadly speaking, between what may be termed as the *substantive* use and the *instrumental* use of the imagination. The latter is instantiated in all the common examples we have cited from everyday life. Imagination, in this sense, has a limited role which is subordinated to a pre-set goal. In terms of our examples, the detective wants to

prepare a defense for his client which is purported to be based on the *truth* of facts, the teacher wants to find out the *truth* about how best to get the students in the class interested in his lecture on the chosen topic. Similarly, when we make the narrative identity for presenting it to the others we also stake our claim (even if implicitly) that it is our *true* identity. (Whether this be really that case is another matter). The point is that in its limited role (i.e., instrumental use) the imagination is employed to find out what *is* the case or the truth about it. But we would point out that in the context of art the imagination is used not for finding out what is, but rather what may be *possible*. Here, the imagination is used for its own sake, and not as an instrument for achieving some other goal. On our view, the imagination finds its *substantive* use only in the context of art. Thus, discussing the role of the imagination in art, Daya Krishna rightly points out :

“In art, the function of the imagination has been primarily conceived as not giving us truth or helping in the exploration of truth, but basically as creating a world which is essentially different from the world as it is actually there. It is, so to say, the creation of a second order world which has a reality of its own but which has no relation except that of indirect derivation with the actual world”¹⁵.

The *otherness* of art from life must be deliberately sustained in order that one may respond to art without getting tied down the parameters within which life must be viewed. Now, narrative identities not only lay claim to truth from the standpoint of the actual life but are used for influencing *action* in this world. Far from being removed from life as is the case with the autonomous status of the work of art, the narrative identity is constructed for the purpose of modifying and transforming *life* by guiding action at different levels i.e., individual, inter-personal and societal.

IV

Finally, we may turn to the *process* of constructing narrative identities and the *conditions* underlying the same. Novitz admits that our freedom in making such, narratives is greatly constricted by several factors which among other things, include social acceptability, political sanction and inspired perception of the interest of the State. Moreover different interest-groups try to

impose identities on others who are reduced to "victims or playthings of the narratives". Narrative identities are used, so it seems, as powerful weapons to control public opinion and perception. In recent times, the role of the media has assumed enormous power for changing and modifying the psyche of the masses for what has been termed as "manufacturing consent"¹⁶. In a social space which is dotted over with diverse interest-groups and power lobbies it is difficult to imagine there would be enough freedom in the matter of constructing narrative identities without external influences. Such a situation would be quite opposed to the spirit in which any genuine creative activity can take place. Norms and ideals of human behaviour and conduct if imposed on the individual will leave him with little choice but to conform his narrative identity to what will be socially acceptable. In contrast, every significant creation must be *unique*, and far from conforming to any pre-given norm or standard, assuming if there be any, it must break with the past instances of art. This is not to say that the media and other organized channels of public opinion do not try to uphold, transmit and perpetuate certain favoured values and ideals. To be sure, the art scene is bedeviled by attempts to promote the works of certain favoured artists regardless of consideration for the aesthetic merit of such works. It is also undeniable that, at least for some people and interest groups, art is a mere commodity which is saleable for securing economic benefits and social influence. Marketability of art works brings into play political skulduggery that is widely pervasive in all civilized societies. But we need to draw here a distinction between promoting the narrative identity of the artist and evaluating the aesthetic merit of his work of art. When Novitz speaks of the bizarre political machinations in the matter of how works of art come to gain prominence and social respectability he does not see that often the techniques and strategies for bringing this about fall back on projecting the narrative identity of the *artist* rather than the intrinsic quality of his works. The latter must be able to stand the test of time even if the social acceptability of a work may sometimes be attributable to such aberration in practice.

The process underlying the social acceptability of works of art is one that is often complex with its own vicissitudes as many a time the same work which does not receive much attention during the life-time of the artist may come into prominence after his death, or vice versa. All of this cannot be attributed to the manipulability of critical perception though, as pointed out

earlier, the media and other means do sometimes contribute towards this end. What, however, is important is that the creative mind should find it possible to assert itself over forces from without and create works that are their own justification. The inexorable march of the creative spirit brooks no regimentation in the realm of the imagination which is put to its *substantive* use by the artist. It is true that no work of art is created in a vacuum as a long tradition must envelop it. But tradition is not to be understood here in the sense of a monotonous continuity of sterile practice and fossilized values. Rather it should be taken in its dynamic conception which will not only assimilate deviation and departures from the past but also spur the creative mind to explore new horizons. Artistic imagination cannot be fettered by the reality of the actual life; it must ever be in search of the *possible* worlds and not be fixed on the truth about the actual.

Now in constructing narrative identities we remain far more vulnerable to outside influences to be able to create anything of significance by *free* choice. Contrary to what obtains in the dynamics of creative activity, making narrative identities in conformity with the ideals and norms suggested by *others* is the rule rather than the exception. The reason for this can now be stated clearly enough. For making narrative identities our interest is *primarily* moral and not to seek any aesthetic pleasure from them. In this task, we either imbibe moral ideals and norms from others to weave them into the narratives we make or want to impose some ideals on others.

V

In conclusion, it has been argued that the moral perceptions and concerns that we already share, or want to, with others leave their imprimatur on the narrative identities we construct for ourselves or for others. In constructing such identities we reflect our moral commitment to certain ideals though this might involve justifying our own actions on *moral* grounds and even sometimes denouncing those of others. Novitz, however, likens narrative identities, and the process of their making, to works of art and the aesthetic process. In arriving at such a conclusion he has ignored the point that the *aesthetic* content of a work of art is quite independent of any moral message that such a work of art, even if it be so argued, may sometimes convey. Works of art are created primarily for their aesthetic *significance*; judging them critically is a matter of

aesthetic taste and insight. Narrative identities, on the other hand, are made for the purpose of guiding our *actions* or those of others by focussing favorably on certain *moral* ideals that underlie such narratives. For this reason the parameters for judging narrative identities are moral and not aesthetic. The unified structure of the constructed narratives tends to have stereo-types which draw upon commonly shared moral perceptions at least within a particular community or society. In the domain of art, stereo-types are always at a discount (even if at all acceptable), for aesthetic creativity must unfold itself as structures that should have no clones.*

NOTES

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1. David Novitz, "Art, Narrative and Human Nature", *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 13, April 1989.
2. *ibid.*, p. 57
3. *ibid.*, p. 60
4. *ibid.*, p. 65
5. *ibid.*, p. 69
6. *ibid.*, p. 67
7. *ibid.*, p. 70
8. *ibid.*, p. 72
9. *ibid.*, p. 74

10. In a different though related context Anthony O'Hear has the following to say: "Work of art, then, are human creations, made with skill and craft to evoke and express human meanings. They are also and characteristically singular objects, unique in themselves and reflective of one person's intelligence, sensitivity and skill. Even if a work of art is reproducible, it can not be machine-generator, for that will be to undermine the role of the artist and the role of work of art as something intended as such by another human being." Please see Anthony O'Hear, "Art and Technology: An old tension" in (ed) Roger Fellows, *Philosophy and Technology*, Cambridge University Press, 1995 p. 155
11. For a fuller account on this please see, Ranjan K. Ghosh, "Modern Art-who's afraid of critics" in *The Hindustan Times*. p. 17-23 Dated-4/11/85.
12. It is quite another matter that *some* woks of art also convey or transmit a moral message.
13. Anthony O'Hear, *op. cit.*
14. Abu Sayeed Ayyub. (Tr. Amitava Ray), *Modernism and Tagore*, Sahitya Akademi, 1995, p. 139
15. Daya Krishna, "Arts and the Congnitive Enterprise of Man" in his book, *The Art of the Conceptual* (Explorations in a conceptual maze over three decades), I.C.P.R. Delhi, 1989, p. 126
16. This has received serious attention from well-known intellectuals of our times, notably Noam Chomsky from whom I have borrowed this term.

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