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THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF THE NARRATIVE SELF IN J.M.COETZEE'S YOUTH: A STRAWSONIAN PERSPECTIVE

Keywords: *Narrative self; Narrativity; Non-Narrativity; Diachronic self; Episodic self; Teleological; Deontological; Art/artist; Self-experience; Artificial, constructed self*

Abstract: *In the contemporary Philosophy of Mind the self can be approached from two possible perspectives when we agree that there is such a thing as the self: a pro-narrativist and an anti-narrativist perspective. The British philosopher Galen Strawson takes an anti-narrativist position arguing against the fashionable narrativist view of the self. He argues that it is natural to think that there is such a thing as the self but the most important issue is to investigate if such a thing exists and to ask questions related to its nature. In his essay Against Narrativity Strawson's main concerns are phenomenological and ethical matters about the human self. In this paper I examine Strawson's view on narrativity with regard to self-experience and I am trying to show how this view applies to J.M.Coetzee's protagonist in the novel Youth. The aim is to argue that the protagonist of Coetzee's novel fails to understand himself when reflecting upon his experiences; he tries to justify his lack of self-realisation in ethical terms. This tendency to look for a coherent story in one's life can be a "gross hindrance to self-understanding" as Strawson puts it. This lack of self-understanding is reflected in the confused and depressed state of the protagonist which springs from the conviction that he should be able to see his life in narrative terms having a coherent meaning.*

Introduction

The British philosopher Galen Strawson has an interesting argument about how self-understanding can be constrained by preconceived ideas about how to live a good life. I am going to present his view about the self and narrativity and his proposal that a mismatch of a certain phenomenology of the self (experiencing or apprehending oneself) and the demands of a rigid ethical approach to the self can create a great conflict within a person and ultimately lead to his or her destruction. The Strawsonian perspective can be illustrated by different literary examples (Galen Strawson himself uses a lot of literary models). In this paper I intend to investigate the life of J. M. Coetzee's main protagonist, John, from a Strawsonian perspective. In other words, to show how the protagonist's reflections on his own self-experience have a destructive nature and muddle his understanding of not only his life but life in general.

Galen Strawson's view

The philosopher Galen Strawson recognises that although there is not a consensus about what kind of entity the self is, knowing how to start its investigation is paramount. He finds the concept of the self one of the most elusive concepts in contemporary discourse; he gives examples of different types of selves used in recent debates:

...the cognitive self, the conceptual self, the contextualised self, the core self, the dialogic self, the ecological self, the embodied self, the emergent self, the empirical self, the existential self, the extended self, the fictional self, the full-grown self, the impersonal self, the material self, the narrative self, the philosophical self, the physical self, the private self, the representational self, the rock bottom self, the essential self, the semiotic self, the social self, the transparent self and the verbal self (Strawson 1999: 484).

Because the most challenging difficulty in the debate about the self is the large variety of existing conceptions regarding the self, Strawson proposes a phenomenological approach to the self. He chooses the phenomenological perspective over the metaphysical one because he thinks that it is undeniable that we have an experience of what we call the self while we do not know that there are such things as selves. He thinks that the phenomenological approach should be the starting point in explaining the metaphysics of the self (its existence and its nature). Although there are many interesting criticisms of the phenomenological approach (E.T. Olson, J.L. Bermudez, D Zahavi or J.Parnas) I intend to briefly present Strawson's view of the "distinct sense of, or experience as of, the self"¹ without discussing the criticisms. Also it is worth mentioning that the Strawsonian phenomenological approach is not the continental approach of Husserl or Heidegger but a simplified version which deals only with the character of the experience of the self.

The Four Temporal Temperaments²

Galen Strawson thinks that there are four psychological tendencies, "four natural ways of experiencing life in time": *Diachronic*, *Episodic*, *Narrative* and *non-Narrative*. With regard to narrativity Strawson believes that many different disciplines fashionably promote two theses about narrativity:

The Psychological Narrativity Thesis = humans beings typically see or experience their lives as a narrative or as a story of some sort or a collection of stories. It is an empirical, **descriptive** thesis about how ordinary human beings actually experience their lives.

The Ethical Narrativity Thesis = experiencing or conceiving one's life a narrative is a good thing, a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well lived life to full personhood (**normative** thesis)

For Galen Strawson there are four possible combinations regarding the descriptive and the normative narrativity:

The descriptive one true and the normative one false (we are deeply narrative in our thinking and this is wrong) - e.g. Sartre's protagonists in *Nausea*

The descriptive one false and the normative one true (we are not all naturally Narrative, but we should be) - e.g. Plutarch

Both are true (we are all naturally Narrative and this is crucial to a good life) - the accepted view

Both are false – Strawson's view.

Galen Strawson argues that both the psychological and ethical theses of narrativity are false because there are other different ways in which persons can experience their being in time and live a good life. He considers himself a *non-Narrative* and argues that there are a lot of people who do not construct narratives about their daily lives or whole life. Moreover, the philosopher sounds the alarm about the danger of accepting that there is

..only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time": "[these] views hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic context. (Strawson 2005: 64)

Strawson's anti-narrativist position is an attempt to move away from the fashionable pro-narrativist view (from the post-modern U-turn in literature after the 60's which advocated the importance of storytelling and a conception of identity as dependent of structured and coherent stories). He would reject the view of philosophers like MacIntyre, Ricoeur and Dennett who consider that narratives play an essential part in our experience and construction of ourselves. His anti-narrativist position is consistent

¹ I believe that Strawson's view of the sense of the self is an interesting and unusual one and it can have rewarding applications.

² Strawson terminology from "Episodic Ethics" in *Real Materialism*

with his view of the self. His main argument is a phenomenological one; when we reflect upon ourselves there are two ways in which we experience ourselves:

Experiencing oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a **human being taken as a whole**

Experiencing oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an **inner mental entity or self**.

For Strawson the way we consider the inner or mental self is a most interesting mode of experiencing oneself and his whole view of the self is based on this certainty that we experience something like an inner or a mental self. He argues that this self-experience of a mental self can be divided in: **Diachronic** and **Episodic**

Diachronic

[D] one naturally figures oneself considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future

- ▶ Something that persists over a long time
- ▶ For Diachronics the past is still present or alive *as* the present
- ▶ You are most likely to be a Narrative

Episodic

[E] one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future

- ▶ No sense that the self will be there in the past or in the future
- ▶ For Episodics the past is present or alive without being present or alive *as* the past
- ▶ You are not a Narrative

The Diachronic- Episodic Spectrum³

Experiencing oneself as a mental entity or self is what Strawson calls self-experience. For Strawson self-experience is definitely not: the experience of the person as a whole, the experience of an immaterial soul, the experience of the body and the same as self-awareness. He will use I* (me*, Mine*, etc.) to denote his experience when he apprehends himself as a mental or inner self.

Our tendency to apprehend ourselves* diachronically and episodically has to do with the way we experience our being in time; the way we understand our self-experience - as a persistent self or a series of 'present' selves. These two temporal modes of self-apprehension are "radically opposed but they are not absolutes or exceptionless" (Strawson 2005: 65). The two style of temporal being which are the 'extremes' of the spectrum do not have rigid places. The most interesting Strawsonian suggestion is that the two experiential modes although radically opposed can intersect. In certain circumstances both can be used to describe one's outlook on his/her own self. We are naturally Diachronic or Episodic but sometimes a Diachronic individual can experience Episodicity or an Episodic individual can be connected to his/her past or future in a Diachronic way.

"Predominantly Episodic individuals may sometimes connect to charged events in their past in such a way that that they think that those events happened to them – embarrassing memories are a good example- and anticipate events in their future in such a way that that they think that those events are going to happen to them – thoughts of future death can be a good example. So too predominantly Diachronic individuals may sometimes experience an Episodic lack of linkage with well remembered parts of their past" (Strawson 2005: 65)

EPISODIC

DIACHRONIC

non-Narrative

Narrative

³ "The Diachronic- Episodic Spectrum" is my term

Strawson argues that one's position on this spectrum can "vary significantly over time according to what one is doing or thinking about, one's state of health, and so on; and it may change markedly with increasing age" (Strawson 66). Someone can have a natural disposition to be a Diachronic (Strawson thinks that most people do) but there can be many factors that can induce variations in the way this individual experience his/her mental or inner self. If we take the basic Strawsonian position that the Episodic/Diachronic/Narrative/non-Narrative spectrum reflects a possible mode of experiencing one's life in time, then two interesting questions arise:

What does it mean to say that we naturally figure ourselves as Diachronics or Episodics? Strawson states that the fundamentals of temperament are genetically determined; "we have here to do with a deep 'individual difference variable'" (Strawson 2005: 65). The philosopher relies here on a terminology borrowed from evolutionary psychology –then, can we talk about a genetic predisposition towards Diachronicity or Episodicity?

What are the factors that provoke changes in the way we experience ourselves? Strawson mentions state of health, what one is thinking about or age. How do these changes affect the way we experience ourselves? Are they gradual changes or earth shaking changes? Are there any other types of changes?

We can add to these questions other perspectives of discussion regarding the way we experience our being in time. For example: do different types of cultures have certain individual variations on the spectrum? Strawson asks: can a "revenge culture" be essentially diachronic? Case studies of different cultures can reveal fascinating details (a traditional society where revenge can be seen as a duty or examples from literature such as 'Romeo and Juliet').

To summarise: the Strawsonian view is that there are four psychological tendencies or four natural ways of experiencing life in time: *Diachronic*, *Episodic*, *Narrative* and *non-Narrative*; these ways of experiencing our own mental selves are not rigidly ascribed to one type of person, or to an individual's chronology or to a certain evolutionary period of humanity. Strawson's challenging view could be used as a fresh framework for interpreting human life and its ethical dimensions. Using this Strawsonian terminology I intend to analyse and evaluate the life of an interesting literary character created by J.M Coetzee in his novel *Youth*. The South African novelist succeeds in portraying some of the complexities of an inner self and the ethical dimension of an assumed mode of existence. The main protagonist of Coetzee's novel is called John and his inner experiences and his narrative outlook are an excellent material for investigating different perspectives on human nature.

***Youth* by J.M Coetzee**

J.M. Coetzee's protagonist is a student from the South-Africa of the 50s who wants to become a poet and live his life according to an idealised view of poetry and romance. He moves to Britain desperate to fulfil his great destiny as a poet. In this new country he lives the life of an immigrant who believes that what he brought with him (knowledge of mathematics and literature) will be sufficient to transform him.

From the first page the protagonist is presented as a character that lives a life in the making – because he is not what he seems (an "odd and dull" person). His main aim is to convince the people around him (including the readers) that he is someone else. This someone else is a future self which he hopes he will be able to achieve by careful self-building. With surgical precision, Coetzee describes the central project of the protagonist - the creation of his future self as an artist/poet:

He may not believe in God but he does believe in love and the powers of love. The beloved, the destined one, will see at once through the odd and dull exterior he presents to the fire that burns within him. Meanwhile, being dull and odd-looking are part of a purgatory he must pass through in order to emerge, one day, into the light: the light of love, the light of art. *For he will be an artist that has long been settled.*⁴ (Coetzee 3).

⁴ The italics are my emphasis. The protagonist describes his future self with a precise certainty: "...he will be an artist that has long been settled". This predetermination accounts for an obsessive and narcissistic attitude.

For the protagonist the “highest test of art” is not to give up the romantic ideal of literary success, no matter what. This test of endurance is measured only against biographical and literary accounts of his heroes, writers and artists: Pound, Eliot, Flaubert, Henry James, Henry Miller and Picasso. This young man cannot see himself as an autonomous being living in the present, he sees himself as the perfect modelling material for a prescribed life – the life of others (he would argue that there is nothing wrong with this because he has chosen who ‘the others’ are and that should be sufficient for living a good life, all in the name of art).

Coetzee describes the protagonist’s repeated worries concerning his literary talent. Is he going to be a well recognised artist or not? Does he have what it takes? All these questions seem a natural part of the creative process but the protagonist subsumes every crucial question to the writers’ biographical gallery:

T. S. Eliot worked for a bank. Wallace Stevens and Franz Kafka worked for insurance companies[...].His choice was to wear a black suit as they did, wear it like a burning shirt, exploiting no one, cheating no one, paying his way. In the Romantic era artists went mad on an extravagant scale. Madness poured out of them in realms of delirious verse or great gout of paint. That ear is over: his own madness, if it is to be his lot to suffer madness, will be otherwise – quiet, discreet (Coetzee 60).

A Philosophical Interpretation of the Protagonist’s Life

There are two philosophical dimensions ascribable to the protagonist’s struggle:
A teleological one, his ultimate goal – literary success:

His plan, when he entered the university, was to qualify as a mathematician, then go abroad and devote himself to art. That is as far as his plan went, as far as it needed to go, and he has not thus far deviated from it. (Coetzee 22)

The other, a deontological one, which is captured by the protagonists’ strict ‘ethical’ demands⁵:

While perfecting his poetic skills abroad he will earn a living doing something obscure and respectable. Since great artists are fated to go unrecognised for a while, he imagines he will serve out his probationary years as a clerk humbly adding up columns of figures in a back room. He will certainly *not* be a Bohemian, that is to say, a drunk and a sponger and a layabout⁶ (Coetzee 22).

It can be argued that the struggle of the protagonist takes place within himself, between his rigid teleological outlook on life and his strong deontological attitude towards day to day travails. For the protagonist this struggle appears to be genuine but it is in fact a superficial one, caused by a misapprehension of literature and art and by an unyielding morality. The protagonist believes that resolving the struggle within him will end with the birth of his future self – the great poet.

Interpreting John’s continuous inner lamentations we discover that we could answer the questions raised by a Strawsonian perspective of the sense of the self. The two questions previously posed: what does it mean to naturally figure ourselves as diachronic or episodics and what are the factors that provoke changes in the way we understand our inner selves can be circumscribed to the teleological

⁵ Although the protagonist seems to have strong moral principles, a careful revision of his ethical views will unveil a repressed and a puritanical character.

⁶ My italics.

and deontological dimensions of the main protagonist's interior dialog (emphasising his narrative outlook regarding his past, present and future).

The destructive nature of narrativity exemplified by the protagonist of *Youth*

It can be argued that John's inner dialogue shows a diachronic personality (his obsession with the past and the future) but the direction of this narrativity betrays an episodic nature. By direction, I refer to John's slow and painful transformation from having a strict teleological outlook to accepting a healthier goal (living the present and giving up, at least partially, the corrosive narrative outlook).

As Strawson shows, the four temporal modes of existence (Episodicity, Diachronicity, Narrativity and anti-Narrativity) are not rigidly defined. John's interior life is dominated by one outlook – the narrative one, but his life changes with the imposition of time and new experiences. Ultimately the newer life will be an episodic life without a strong narrative aspect. In the next paragraphs I will attempt to show that the protagonist's narrative outlook and his obsession with the past and future had a destructive nature but his "salvation"⁷ will come by accepting a more flexible goal and less rigid and unnatural ethical demands.

Why is John a narrative and a diachronic? One possible answer is that he continuously and relentlessly reflects upon his experiences in an attempt to justify his lack of self-realisation; this type of self-experience is described in a masterly way by Coetzee:

South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding? How much longer will have to grit his teeth and endure before he is able to say, 'Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England?' (Coetzee 116)

There remains the question of what to make of the episode, how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself. He has behaved dishonourably, no doubt about that, behaved like a cad. He deserved to be slapped in the face, even to be spat on. [...] Let that be his contract then, with the gods: he will punish himself, and in return will hope the story of his caddish behaviour will not get out. Yet what does it matter, finally, if the story goes out? He belongs to two worlds tightly sealed from each other. In the world of South Africa he is not more than a ghost, a wisp of smoke fast dwindling away, soon to have vanished for good. As for London, he is as good as unknown here. (Coetzee 130)

The protagonist tries to use his self-reflections in a normative way: reflecting 'loudly'⁸ upon his life. Diachronics are narrative in a tendency to give some form to their lives: "...because they become distressed by the 'one dammed thing after another' character of their lives" (Coetzee 76). In other words a Diachronic like John can not cope with the variety of experiences in life. He needs to "talk with himself" and punish himself because he does not want other people to share his weakness; he believes that repeating his goal as a mantra will help him to obtain it. His Diachronic disposition is carried like a burden: his past is emotionally imprinted on his present self, South Africa is still there like "a wound". He would like to live in the present to have real emotions (not those described by someone else). J. M. Coetzee allows us to glimpse the protagonist's real present self ("*those flashes of illuminations*").

⁷ By salvation I refer to the possibility of escaping a morally limited life which John imposed upon himself because of his naive and rigid understanding of literary success and of how to live a good life. Was he really "saved"? There will be a lot of criticism (I suppose from a lot of young idealists) which would argue that loosing your main goal means failure, spiritual death.

⁸ J.M.Coetzee wrote *Youth* in the third person but John's inner dialogue is 'loudly' written. The reader hears John's repeated moral lamentations as clichés, or idealised views based on writers' biographies which point towards a naive understanding of human relationships and the role of literary models.

The tragedy of this young man lies in his erroneous self-understanding, his obsession with a high ideal and the unflinching belief that human life needs “the unity of a narrative quest”⁹ (MacIntyre 3). This is mainly because the protagonist’s narrativity is not self-critical and this is the cause of his self-centred attitude and lack of empathy with what is going on around him. Not reflecting himself in others is a dangerous and destructive thing. Why is this dangerous for John? Because his only reference points and guides are his literary ‘knowledge’¹⁰ and his unsuspecting belief in his literary talent. This attitude to his life is perpetuated by a continuous rhetoric with himself. He is committed to a certain future, he can not make peace with his past and he does not recognise any other authority then the first person: HIMSELF.

Conclusion

According to Galen Strawson not all people have a natural tendency to experience themselves as something that persists over a long period of time and not all people apprehend their lives as a narrative with a coherent unity (different people have different phenomenologies). Hence the Strawsonian distinction between Diacronicity, Episodicity, Narrativity and non-Narrativity. I have tried to present the most interesting aspect of Galen Strawson’s view: the conviction that creating narratives about your own life is not always desirable and necessary for achieving a good life.

I have argued that using J.M.Coetzee’s novel *Youth* one can find a very valuable example of the dangers of an assumed narrativity. The self-reflections of the protagonist are self-destructive because he thinks he is trying to live a good life but actually he is living a lie, constructing narratives about himself that are based on other people’s biographical details, which do not have links with any lived experience. Having an obsessive self-awareness and repetitive outlooks towards the past (or the future) means in Strawsonian terms that it can “impoverish ethical possibilities and close down important avenues of thought” (Strawson 2005: 64). The destructive nature of narratives rests on this limitation of ethical possibilities and a lack of critical thinking skills. The protagonist of Coetzee’s novel had a prolonged adolescence¹¹ because of his uncritical outlook on life and his complacency - that of an artificially constructed self.

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⁹ Strawson will disagree with the necessity of a narrative quest proposed by MacIntyre. He would argue that this unity is not necessary for living a good life although he will not deny that some people do need narrativity to make sense of their lives.

¹⁰ John’s literary ‘knowledge’ was formed without a definite critical approach. He had chosen certain aspects of the life of literary figures: only those aspects which fitted his nature; he never tried to reflect upon more challenging aspects and on advice from literature.

¹¹ Adolescence, because Coetzee’s novel can be seen as a coming of age novel. John was not able to live his own age in the present (his adulthood was delayed in order to be replaced with literary maturity).