

## **Re-storied by Beauty: On Self-Understanding in the Ricoeur-Carr Discussions on Narrative**

**Nathaniel G. Samuel**

### **Abstract**

This essay examines the issue of *self-understanding*, following Paul Ricoeur who characterizes it as one of the three dimensions of a literary work. The essay places the issue in the context of Ricoeur's discussions with David Carr on self-understanding or *selfhood identity*, demonstrating where the two theorists differ, but ultimately proposing how they complement each other to enrich the issue. I argue that the two converge at a significant point - that selfhood-identity is mediated by a host of cultural artifacts, all experienced as narrative. I support this thesis by exploring the way in which the transcultural symbol of sharing a meal can mediate self-understanding, and occasion the narrative re-storying of a life. Attending to the character of General Loewenhielm in Isak Dinesen's (1993) *Babette's Feast*, I describe the feast as *an event of beauty*, arguing how this worked to restore a sense of unity to the General's life.

### **Keywords**

Self-understanding, identity, narrative, Paul Ricoeur, David Carr, beauty, Babette's Feast

I wish to examine the issue of *self-understanding* in this essay, following Paul Ricoeur who characterizes it as one of the three dimensions of a literary work, besides *referentiality* and *communicability* (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 27). In particular, I place this issue in the context of discus-

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**Corresponding Author:**  
Nathaniel G. Samuel  
St. Thomas University  
Email: nsamuel@stu.edu

sions between Ricoeur and David Carr.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, these discussions have previously (and accurately) been framed in terms of the question of referentiality (Kearney, 2006). My aim here is to take up what I perceive to be another dimension of the exchange - that of self-understanding or *selfhood-identity* – demonstrating where the two theorists differ, but ultimately proposing how they complement each other to enrich the issue.

My point of departure will be Ricoeur’s work on selfhood-identity, particularly his proposed role for literary fiction as mediating between “man [*sic*] and himself” (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 27). Next, I bring David Carr’s work - particularly Carr (1986) - into conversation with Ricoeur on the aforementioned themes. I argue that Carr’s thesis on the self and narrative is not as far from Ricoeur’s position as may be imagined. Both theorists appear to subscribe to the narrative quality of human life as a first order, even before that life is represented in literary or historical fiction. This will serve as my first thesis in the essay.

The second, and more significant, thesis concerns the way in which Carr’s ideas can supplement Ricoeur’s triple-mimetic model. I contend that the two authors converge at a significant point: *selfhood-identity may be mediated by a host of cultural artifacts*, themselves experienced as narrative. Ricoeur invites this conclusion - while maintaining the primacy of literary fiction - by stating that fiction is the privileged mediation of self-understanding “among other [cultural] signs and symbols” that can also function in this role. By arguing that narrative is constitutive of all experiencing, Carr’s work warrants the conclusion that these cultural symbols are efficacious in the formation of selfhood and society *because they are narratively engaged*.

To elucidate this thesis, I turn – in the third section of the essay – to the description of the fabled banquet in Isak Dinesen’s (1993) *Babette’s Feast*, which I interpret as offering an example of a cultural artifact that mediates the coming to self-knowledge of the character General Loewenhielm. My analysis will not be at the level of the text itself (textual criticism). Rather, I examine the imaginary world unfolded by the text, focusing on the dialectic between General Loewenhielm’s life and the events surrounding the feast. In the process, I describe Babette’s lavish feast as *an event of beauty*, arguing how this worked to restore (*refigure*) a sense of unity to the General’s life, accompanied by an unexpected recognition of the permeability of daily life to a prodigal and transcendent grace. As such, Babette’s sumptuous feast exemplifies how cultural artifact may serve a transformative and mediatory role in the process of self-understanding.

### **Ricoeur on Self-Understanding**

The problem of self-understanding, as conceptualized by Paul Ricoeur, stems from the difficulty (even impossibility) of answering the introspective *who* questions in life – notably: “Who am I?” or “Who is that person?” From experience, it may be apparent that answers to such questions are

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<sup>1</sup> The formal exchanges between Paul Ricoeur and David Carr have often been considered as a “debate” in the literature. For example, see (Kearney, 2006, p. 477). I opt for the term “discussions” on the belief that, to characterize the discourse as a debate, places too much emphasis on the differences between the positions, rather than on the rich insights to be found in the convergences and divergences between Ricoeur and Carr.

not simply reducible to *what* one does (by way of an activity or profession), or even to a person's character, idiosyncrasies, and dispositions. To be sure, declaring an occupation ("I am a teacher") or confessing a certain affinity ("I love being a parent") may indeed reveal something of a person's identity, but these assertions do not exhaust the mystery or indeterminacy of the consciousness that poses the question "who am I?" in the first place. Identity is aporetic precisely because of its immanence *and* transcendence to the realm of action, disposition, and character. The question, therefore, of *ascription* - locating the particular entity behind an action, disposition or character - remains intractable. In addition, Ricoeur believes that the same can be concluded for the question of *imputation* - the assigning of moral significance to an action - that entails "accusation, excuse or acquittal, blame or praise" (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 191). Imputation implies being responsible to the other who needs me, and who asks, "Where are you?" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 165) The ethical response notwithstanding, there remains considerable mystery about this self who is called by the other. In light of this, the "who" question at the level of imputation becomes, "Who am I ... that ... you should count on me?" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 168).

The problem of identity is essentially a search for coherence or permanence-in-time. Ricoeur's conceptual framework casts the issue in terms of a dialectic of identity-as-selfhood (*ipse*) and identity-as-sameness (*idem*) (Ricoeur, 1991b). Selfhood-identity is what is at issue in human being, and Ricoeur observes that it may be established anywhere along a proposed spectrum. At one end, selfhood coincides with sameness. The question of "who" is answered by an assertion of a "what" (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 198). At this limit, identity is described as absolute and immutable to evolving, exemplified by popular fairy-tale characters like the "big, bad wolf" or the "evil stepsister" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 148). Ricoeur argues that everyday selfhood-identity is inadequately conceived at this end of the spectrum.

Approaching the other end of the spectrum, characterized for Ricoeur by such virtues as self-constancy, selfhood is entirely distinct from sameness. The merit of conceiving selfhood in this way is that the self is not simply reduced to matters of character. In fact, instability in a person's perceived character would in no way be seen as negating selfhood. As stated before, one is always more than what one is or does. At the limit of this end of the spectrum, an identity constituted by sheer character-effacing change is indeed imaginable, if only realizable in the world of fiction.

Given this spectrum of possibilities, the issue of identity for Ricoeur becomes "what sort of permanence [in time] is appropriate to a self?" (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 192). How is a sense of self retained in relation to these polar alternatives of "absolute identity" and "sheer change"? Ricoeur's answer: *narrative configuration and refiguration*. The narrative self exists between these poles, providing a sense of coherence and unity even through the volatility and discordances of life, without reducing personhood to fixity of character. Hence, even in the midst of a crisis of self, one can still make the assertion "Here I am!" and "Here I stand!" before the "other" who calls me to account.

Ricoeur's central thesis concerns the role that literary and historical fiction plays in mediating narrative identity. Essentially, the existential aporia of selfhood-identity is "elevated to a new level of lucidity and also of perplexity" (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 195) that ultimately serve to illumine the very real process of self-understanding. Here, the selfhood-sameness dialectic is subjected to

a myriad of “*imaginative variations*” - from the structured plot and sedimented characters of the classic fairy tale, to the pastiche and disjointed plot of the stream of consciousness novel.

The limit case of contemporary literary fiction is particularly important to Ricoeur, because such novels serve to bring selfhood-identity into focus by “taking away the support of sameness” (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 149). In this narrative genre, the relation between character and plot is inverted – the plot serves the character, and introduces such volatility that “the character in the story ceases to have a definite character.”<sup>2</sup> There is a seeming loss of identity - evinced by the admission “I am nothing.” Yet, the very fact that there is still a “who” that can assert, “I am nothing,” preserves the validity of the question of ascription. “Who am I, who am nothing?” If anything, the limit cases of fiction demonstrate the persistence of the “who” question in fiction and in life.

These limit cases also highlight the durability of imputation. The moral obligation to the other does not dissolve with loss of character or identity. The character development of the contemporary novel may rest on multivocality, but the characters themselves are not beyond the ethical import of their actions and decisions. In this case, Ricoeur rephrases the question of imputation as: “Who am I, so inconstant, that *notwithstanding* you count on me.” (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 168) The limit cases from fiction serve to illustrate that, in both cases - ascription and imputation - the question of selfhood-identity persists, even when unmoored from sameness identity.

The reader may recognize Ricoeur’s triple-mimetic structure unfolding here. Mimesis I (prefiguration) refers to the existential condition of the subject in quest of an identity, buffeted by the myriad of signs, cultural symbols, and life stories that constitute a social milieu. It forms the matrix within which the self must be identified within the dialectic of sameness and selfhood. Mimesis II (configuration) refers to the mediation of literary narrative, with its profusion of imaginative variations that present a virtual “*laboratory of selfhood*” to the reader.

At the stage of refiguration (Mimesis III), the dialectic of selfhood-identity - played out in multiplicity by diverse literary plot - is appropriated in real life through reading.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the self “turns out to be a *figured self*” (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 199) Transposed from the world of the text into reality, the question of selfhood becomes the horizon that keeps the hermeneutic engagement of text and the search for narrative coherence going.

Narrative thus plays a critical - though not unique - role in the discovery of the self. Ricoeur (1991b, p. 198) reminds, “the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts which are articulated on the symbolic mediations which always already articulate action and, among them, the narratives of everyday life.” Self-knowledge is in fact self-interpretation for Ricoeur, and “self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, *among other signs and symbols*, a privileged mediation” (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 188, emphasis added)

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<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur provides the example of Robert Musil in *The Man Without Qualities* to this end. See (Ricoeur, 1994, pp. 148-149).

<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur’s theory of reading is made plain in this respect; reading affords an “exegesis of ourselves” – we read ‘ourselves’ when we read a work of literary or historical fiction.

Of note in the last quote is Ricoeur's assertion that literary narratives constitute only one of the possible classes of cultural signs and symbols that mediate identity - albeit a privileged one. Ricoeur (1991b, p. 188) points to the "narratives of everyday life" as another mediating symbolic system. This includes, I suggest, the virtual stories that "play out in our head" and gives structure to daily action and human existence. It is precisely at this point that I find congruence with David Carr's thesis on the narrative quality of experience. The narratives of daily life, which give a sense of coherence and unity to life, are crucial in his discussion of referentiality, and his theory of self.

### **Carr on Self-Understanding**

Carr's work on narrative is a significant response to the assertion that "real events do not have the character of those we find in stories" (Carr, Taylor, & Ricoeur, 1991, p. 160), a position he attributes to such theorists as Frank Kermode, Seymour Chatman, Roland Barthes, Hayden White, and Louis Mink. Accordingly, the narrative form of fiction, biography, and history is a feature of narrative composition and does not subsist in the reality that these discourses attempt to capture. In short, narrative form is imposed on reality. Carr names this position *the standard view*.

He counters, "narration, far from being a distortion of, denial of or escape from 'reality', is in fact an extension and enrichment, a confirmation, not a falsification, of its primary features" (Carr, et al., 1991, p. 162). He draws on Husserl's theory of time consciousness to support his thesis, arguing that the criteria for having an experience at all is that the object of experience is foregrounded by what preceded it (retention), and by what is expected to follow (protention). This means that human reality can hardly be considered a sequence of discrete events. Rather, we experience the events of life as "charged with the significance they derive from our protentions and retentions" (Carr et al., 1991, p. 163).

This protentional-retentional perception gives a unified, coherent and, hence, meaningful structure to individual experiences and events. On the more complex level of the experiencing of a whole life, the same kind of temporal reflective gaze operates, albeit on a far more comprehensive level. Carr compares this temporal gaze to Dilthey's conception of *Besinnung*, which entails a form of taking stock of what has gone before, anticipating what will come in the future, so as to shape present action. As such, the standard position of reality - as a discrete flow of events - misleads even at the level of a whole life. Human reality is not simply meaningless temporal sequence.

The one difference between literary narrative and life, Carr points out, is that the former has a distinct author! Life "fails to live up to the formal coherence and the clear-cut authorship of some stories" (Carr et al., 1991, p. 166). He grants the standard theorists this point concerning the divergence of life and narrative. While there is continuity in the narrative form, the authorship of literary composition is far more refined, with the ability to choose which events are included in the plot so as to provide a logical and satisfactory progression to the story's denouement. In life, however, the same level of choice is not there, "everything is left in...*because* there is no narra-

tor in command, no narrative voice which does the selecting” (Carr et al., 1991, p. 165).<sup>4</sup> He agrees with Ricoeur on this point: we are not the authors of our life story.<sup>5</sup> We can narrate, but ultimately we do not choose the material or events that compose our life. Neither can we see the conclusion.

Yet, this is not to say that *no selection* takes place in life. “Our very capacity for attention, and for following through more or less long-term and complex endeavours [*sic*], is our capacity for selection. Extraneous details are not left out, but they are pushed into the background, saved for later, ranked in importance” (Carr, et al., 1991, p. 165). However, we make these selections from the perspective of a narrator, rather than that of an author. Carr writes:

Unlike the author of fiction we do not create the materials we are to form; we are stuck with what we have in the way of characters, capacities and circumstances.... We are constantly having to revise the plot, scrambling to intercept the slings and arrows of fortune and the stupidity or stubbornness of our uncooperative fellows, who will insist on coming up with their own stories instead of docilely accommodating themselves to ours. And the fact that we are ourselves sometimes among that recalcitrant audience, that each of us has his own self to convince and cajole into line, puts paid to any pretensions we might have to anything like being author of our own lives: not only do we not control the circumstances, so that they conform to our plans; we do not control our plans, or even the self who plans, whose identity is threatened in the internal dialogue whereby we become our worst enemies. (Carr et al., 1991, p. 166)

Life is an ongoing narrative and we are its narrators, sifting through its vicissitudes in search of a coherent and progressive story of our existence.

Therefore, the question of identity (or self-understanding) comes down to that of the *coherence of one’s life story* (Carr, 1986, p. 74). From the perspective of an ever-changing now, we as narrators take stock of the experiences, events, actions, roles, practices, relationships that make up our lives (planned or contingent, short and long-term), through a temporal reflective gaze (*Besinnung*) that seeks coherence and a sense of wholeness and meaning. Carr describes this process of cultivating, maintaining, and restoring narrative coherence over a life as a struggle. As indicated before, personal stories frequently intersect, plans go askew, and daily life is subject to contingency, not the least of which is the ever-present threat of death. Life is messy!

As such narrative identity, understood in terms of the unity of the self, is something to be achieved (Carr, 1986, p. 97). Human beings do so to varying degrees of success, but the challenge endures literally until our dying day. With this thesis, Carr departs from Kant’s and Hume’s idea that the self is ultimately “pre-given” – that it is the very condition for the possibility of experience (Kant), or that it is not to be found in experience (Hume). Rather he insists that unity of self makes no sense unless it implicates the way in which that self is experienced. Our experience of selfhood is ultimately tied to our experience of narrative coherence.

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<sup>4</sup> Carr treats author and narrator as equivalent here.

<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur describes life in terms of co-authorship: “By narrating a life of which I am not the author *as to existence*, I make myself its coauthor *as to its meaning*” (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 162).

## Comparing Ricoeur and Carr on Identity and Selfhood

At this point, some interesting convergences emerge with Ricoeur's thesis on narrative identity and selfhood. First, Carr's observation of the messiness of life and the consequent challenge to narrative coherence and identity parallels Ricoeur's thesis on the interplay of concord and discord in life (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 31). For the latter, it is particularly the discordant in life – the contingent – that spurs us to restore a sense of coherence. The type of existential employment by which one's identity is constituted, seeks to achieve a synthesis of very heterogeneous events and experiences that constitute daily life.

Second, Ricoeur describes narrative identity as something *discovered* through a process of interpretation (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 32). The subtle difference with Carr's idea that narrative identity is something to be *achieved* is quite interesting. On the one hand, it may simply be a matter of semantics. There is considerable convergence in both authors position that identity is something that one works out. Whether discovered or achieved, narrative identity is the result of an active process of meaning-making within the flow of events and experiences of life.

On the other hand, there is a sense in Ricoeur that narrative identity is not something that is entirely in our grasp. There remains a certain mystery to our being, which escapes even the meaning-making ability of our temporal reflective grasp. This point is made clear through Ricoeur's example of the limit cases of fiction, and by extension, the limit cases of life. Recall that, at these limits, identity was divorced from anchorage to character and sameness. This is the dark night of identity when narrative coherence is muddled and the question "Who am I?" resounds in the emptiness of appropriate answers. What this example of the dark night seems to suggest is that, even if a perfectly coherent life can be imagined, the question "Who am I?" would still retain a measure of unanswerability. The question of ascription and imputation is not closed off by the power of our temporal reflective gaze.

Third, both Ricoeur and Carr seem to agree that selfhood entails taking up the responsibility for not only living one's life story authentically, but for *choosing* that story wisely. As Ricoeur points out, we are beings "entangled in stories" (Ricoeur, 1991a, p. 30), and some measure of intentionality is involved in finding our own truth, or our unique guiding narrative. Somehow "the wandering that may well result from the self's confrontation with a multitude of models for action and life" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 167) must be halted. Ricoeur (1994) further writes:

Between the imagination that says, "I can try anything" and the voice that says, "Everything is possible but not everything is beneficial..." a muted discord is sounded. It is this discord that the act of promising transforms into a fragile concordance: "I can try anything," to be sure, but "Here is where I stand!" (pp. 167-168)

At stake in the choice of life story is one's responsibility to the "other" in life – family, neighbor, the stranger, the impoverished, and the earth. That is *the* pervading horizon for the search for selfhood – what kind of person *for others* do I understand myself to be, and do I want to be!

However, Carr and Ricoeur diverge (among other places) on one essential point – the way in which narrative identity is established. Ricoeur understands narrative identity as something

*mediated*. Short of being paralyzed in the face of the myriad of stories that compete for one's attention, human beings need the break from this existential realm to the imaginative thought-experiment realm of literature. The return to life (Mimesis III) will hopefully be from a more informed and wise perspective. In contrast, David Carr does not explicitly establish the mediation of literature as necessary in the process of selfhood. Rather, he emphasizes that one's main task is "telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others, the story of what we are about and what we are (Carr, 1986, p. 97). Carr seems therefore to privilege the role of *everyday life narratives* in contrast to Ricoeur's literary narratives.

Carr's thesis may, in the final analysis, suffer from this lack of a theory of literary narrative, particularly if it is to serve as a comprehensive narrative theory. This may be beyond what the author set out to achieve in his *Time, Narrative and History*; the work seems to be bracketed by the task of responding to the standard theoretic position (the "standard view") that he outlines. Carr makes little room for a determined questioning of how literary narratives relate to everyday life narratives, *à la* Ricoeur's triple-mimesis.

That, in my opinion, is the most significant critique of Carr's ideas, if they are to serve as a theory of narrative. They may more adequately be conceived as a *theory of life narrative*, explicating how coherence/identity/a sense of selfhood is achieved on a day-to-day basis at the level of ordinary introspection. Indeed, conceived as a theory of life narrative, Carr's work is of supreme importance. The average human being spends much more time in his/her head than in reading books. The kind of temporal reflective gaze by which Carr asserts we pull together a life story, might better capture how the average persons finds meaning on an ongoing basis.<sup>6</sup>

This discussion flows naturally into the following revelation: the inescapability from the cultural signs and symbols that mediate human life and understanding. This is where the divergence between Ricoeur and Carr's position may be better perceived as characterized by nuance rather than discord. Ricoeur argues for the privileged mediation of literature, but maintains that it is just that – a *privileged* mediation. In this way, he leaves room for other means of mediating narrative identity. He makes this point in a quote that warrants repeating. "Self-knowledge," he claims "is an interpretation; self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, *among other signs and symbols*, a privileged mediation" (Ricoeur, 1991b, p. 188, emphasis added). Ricoeur does not elucidate on the constituent elements of the set of "other signs and symbols," but the implication that mediation extends beyond the literary world is inescapable.

The fact that cultural artifacts can shape human identity is implied in Ricoeur's Mimesis I, which insists that human beings are birthed into a world of stories. We are beings-immersed-in-stories, and these stories set the symbolic landscape within which society and human relationship can

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<sup>6</sup> This, of course, is not to belittle the significance, or the interplay, of literary narrative. It is virtually impossible to escape being shaped by it (at least indirectly). Even if one never read such an archetypal tale as the three little pigs, one could surely learn the benefits of proper planning from the mores and norms one's socio-cultural milieu. But we do read, everything from novels to sacred texts, and so are directly shaped by the ethical-imaginary world of literature. Notwithstanding, human reflection is far more prosaic than reading.

subsist harmoniously.<sup>7</sup> But it is also possible to arrive at this role of cultural artifact from Carr's thesis. Indeed, one can extrapolate from his observation of the narrative configuration of human experience, events and actions, the conclusion that cultural symbols that shape human life can successfully do so because they are experienced as narrative themselves. They help story and re-story our existence. They shape our reality as we engage them through the protentional-retentional gaze that unifies our experience. Literary fiction is one such artifact that is particularly important in modern Western post-enlightenment culture. But, the matrix of mediation can make room for other cultural forms that represent poetic configurations of life.

A simple, yet powerful example is the transcultural symbol of sharing a meal. Anthropologists would attest to the significance of communal dining in history. It is in many ways foundational to reinforcing the norms, codes, and mores that are the basis of family life, and more broadly human society. In what follows, I explore the way in which a meal can function as mediating self-understanding. My data is extracted from the plot of Danish writer Isak Dinesen's (1993) *Babette's Feast*. As stated in the introduction, I approach the text at the level of the world being narrated, rather than at the level of textual criticism. In short, my analysis invites what Keen (2006) calls *narrative empathy*: to get into the world of one of the characters in the plot – General Loewenhielm – and the atmosphere of the fabled feast, so as to glean how the latter, as an event of beauty, worked to re-figure or re-story the General's life.<sup>8</sup>

### Babette's Feast

Dinesen situates her masterful narrative in a small, puritanical Norwegian village – Berlevaag – where two elderly sisters (Martine and Philippa) living a frugal existence, take into their home a French refugee (Babette). After unexpectedly winning a large sum of money, Babette prepares a prodigal feast of French cuisine for her hosts, crafted from the finest ingredients sourced from her home country. Besides the two sisters, the guest list comprises a motley collection of villagers, united by longstanding allegiances to the deceased patriarch of their religious community (father to Martine and Philippa).

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<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur (1971) has also ruminated on the nature of human action as a form of text. While he does not explicitly consider the ramifications of this thesis for his ideas on narrative, I suggest that, indirectly, his work on the textual qualities of action may provide theoretical grounds for considering how action – as cultural artifact and text – configures human life, and how it does so according to a narrative logic.

<sup>8</sup> My choice of *Babette's Feast* and my focus on General Loewenhielm are for illustrative purposes. However, the choice is not arbitrary. Dinesen's classic tale is about how a transcultural symbol – a shared meal – may serve, through its consummate artistry, to refigure human life and clarify self-understanding. The meal's symbolic potency is unveiled as the reader grows in appreciation of the storied lives gathered around the table. By focusing on the character of General Loewenhielm, I am able to suggest one way that cultural symbols achieve the refiguring of life narratives – through aesthetic appeal or beauty. The general is particularly suited for bringing out this theme since he is the only one at dinner who truly appreciates the contingent bonanza of gustatory delights bestowed by Babette's hand.

Also attending is General Lorens Loewenhielm – a well-decorated military-man, cultural aesthete and past suitor of a young Martine. His significance to the dinner’s plot is that, among the guests, he is the only one able to truly appreciate the singularly splendid quality and contingency of the meal. Indeed, this revelation occasions a remarkable turn in the General’s self-understanding and a move towards self-reconciliation. The remainder of the essay illustrates how the narrative of the General’s life was refigured by the deep aesthetic of Babette’s feast.<sup>9</sup>

### General Loewenhielm: Refigured by Beauty

On page 44 of Dinesen’s text, the General is portrayed as driving to Martine and Philippa’s dinner in Berlevaag, having returned from a Parisian post to recuperate at his aunt’s house. He is going through a dark night of identity. In the twilight of an acclaimed life, he broods over his own mortality, over the perspicacity of the decisions of his youthful self, and over the apparent vanity of his subsequent life. Dinesen describes the General’s existential restlessness as an anxious musing:

He was a moral person, loyal to his king, his wife and his friends, an example to everybody. But there were moments when it seemed to him that the world was not a moral, but a mystic, concern. He looked into the mirror, examined the row of decorations on his breasts and sighed to himself: “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!” (Dinesen, 1993, p. 45)

This discernment of a mystical dimension of life is evocatively captured elsewhere in the chapter through the metaphor of sight. In his youth, Loewenhielm had chosen career over a labor of love for the beautiful Martine. The older General now fears that, with this choice, he had forfeited the “gift of second sight” – the vision of life’s transcendent contours beyond the veil of daily and material concerns. Having experienced deeply what the world had to offer (“first sight”), the General anticipates a deeper truth: that life was more than concern for wealth, adventure, and accolade.

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<sup>9</sup> I recognize that, in focusing on the General, I am neglecting the interestingly complex and nuanced lives of the other characters, including the ways in which the meal was pivotal to their own coming to renewed self-awareness. Presumably, other themes besides beauty could be developed out of these narratives. For instance, analyzing how *Babette’s character* was impacted by the meal would be intriguing, particularly in a conceptual framework that attends to the interplay of narrative and issues of power. Preparing the feast was deeply cathartic for Babette because her artistic genius was stifled by a life of servitude and austerity in the home of Martine and Philippe. Unfortunately, this genius was only apparent to the General and, arguably, rendered subject to his validation. From an alternative standpoint, one may also argue that there is an exchange of power between Babette and the General occasioned by the hospitality of the meal, with the latter’s felt-sense of superiority at the dinner table, in some respects, acceding with the recognition of the culinary mastery of the former. Issues of gender relations, socio-economic status, religion, culture and ethnicity all converge to shape the unique power dynamics that are central to Dinesen’s story and that are impacted by the meal event. Indeed, there are many possible directions to be taken in a discussion of power and the narrative overlays of meal and dinner guests. Prudence dictates, however, that such treatments – compelling as they may be – are better served in a separate essay.

He approaches Martine and Philippa's home hoping to expunge his existence of its inherent contradictions. He would experience again the sparse, rustic milieu that had once held love's invitation – with its traditional meager cuisine of haddock and a glass of water. He would affirm how miserable such a life would have been. In this way, the brooding General would “make his account with young Lorens Loewenhielm... [and] let the youth prove to him, once and for all, that thirty-one years ago he had made the right choice” (Dinesen, 1993, p. 46) when he spurned love and the simple life for career and glory.

In terms of themes developed in this essay, one finds here an example of someone deeply at odds with the prevailing narratives of his life. He was, as Ricoeur would put it, a being-entangled-in-stories: his life comprising a narrative imbrication of war glories, royal favor, a stable but unsatisfying marriage, career success and societal prestige, all tempered by a deep disquiet and an unreconciled story of long-lost love. General Loewenhielm's character exemplifies a life in search of a new narrative, or in search of re-storying. Life, as a whole, is experienced as discordant, even when individual events (like a remembered dinner at Paris' *Café Anglais*) and life achievements (such as his military career) maintain their narrative cohesion, and even as the promise of a nascent wholeness (second sight) emerges in fleeting moments. There are strong resonances with both Ricoeur's and Carr's arguments here.

The General's eventual self-reconciliation would synthesize this heterogeneity of his life – with its discordant and concordant notes. Narrative refiguring would also reconcile the General with the moral decision imputed to his younger self. In the crisis of self that ensued from his failed relationship with Martine, the young Loewenhielm made a vocational decision in favor of career. In essence, this is the “Here is where I stand!” that Ricoeur (1994, p. 168) states is the core assertion of moral selfhood. It is precisely this assertion that needed revisiting and reaffirming in the older General's mind.

Babette's feast occasioned this sense of narrative coherence that the General sought. But how did the meal produce a breakthrough in self-understanding? What elements specifically came into play? First, the feast could be considered as bringing together diverse constituents in a kind of plot. It brought together elements of surprise; mystery; delight; exquisite food; cheerless guests; puritanical villagers; an adorned General; diverse worlds (Paris and Norway); time remembered and time present; as well as the various aims, hopes, and fears of the participants. Certainly, unusual and heterogeneous elements are being synthesized with culinary splendor into a unified story. It must also be pointed out that the feast was not simply reducible to a meal, however exquisite. It was rather the composite experience of food, fellowship, and festivity, which gave the event a layered, thick, and narrative quality.

Second, the General's familiarity with the cuisine established the dialectic of concord and discord that unfolded with the feast. He knew the food intimately, having dined at the *Café Anglais* in Paris where it appears Babette was lead chef. He was the only one at the table that appreciated its exquisiteness and was at home with its subtleties. Who else at the table knew (or cared about) *Veuve Cliquot 1860*? In effect, the meal allowed the General's story of prestige and privilege to continue. Yet, paralleling this congruence was a sense that the *meal was misplaced*. This was not a prestigious café in Paris, but the humble abode of two Lutheran sisters in Berle-

vaag. Colonel Galliffet and the other distinguished guests from memories of the *Café Anglais* were not at table. Indeed, the lavish meal was seemingly squandered on the unsophisticated palettes of the villagers.

This surprising and discordant coincidence of rich familiar fare with rustic setting occasioned a cathartic “pause” by the General. To make the point in terms of a key thesis in this essay: the multilayered feast was a compositional act that, in its enjoyment (akin to Ricoeur’s reading-act in literary narrative), engendered a felt sense of wonder, surprise, and excitement that would compel a re-assessment (or re-figuration) of the General’s narrative understanding of life. His co-participation (with the villagers) in the feast enabled the narrative re-figuring or re-storying of the General’s life.<sup>10</sup>

The General’s felt-sense of wonder, surprise, and excitement effectively clued him into deep truths about the beneficence of life (what he calls “grace”). To be sure, a process of reflection accompanied the felt-sense. In effect, the General needed to make reasonable sense of the events as they were transpiring, even if he had already experienced an inner (pre-reflective) conviction of the presence of a new truth. The fact that refiguration emerged through employment of his mental faculties *and* through bodily awareness is significant, and is, I contend, consequent to the particular form of mediation – a feast. The distinct texture of the unique compositional artifact that is a feast – the gustatory delights and the relationships cultivated, furthered and restored – are all highly emotive of the embodied mind.

It is also significant that the result of this sensing-reflective process is the recognition of a gift, or of a grace.<sup>11</sup> The passage in question, which heralds the General’s transition to refiguration, is memorable and poetic:

We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite. For this reason we tremble ... before making our choice in life, and after having made it again tremble in fear of having chosen wrong. But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another! (Dinesen, 1993, p. 52)

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the General was not the author of the feast. Indeed, the feast itself escaped the control of any one “author.” Obviously Babette played the central role in creating the meal. But the setting, ambience (or lack of it), conversation, relationships – everything that made the occasion into a feast – were co-authored by all persons present.

<sup>11</sup> In a general sense, “grace” seems to refer in the text to a gratuitous gift or to the munificence of life. However, other interpretations, particularly religious interpretations, are proper to the text.

The gift of second sight had undoubtedly and unexpectedly erupted into his life at that moment. With it, he perceived a grace – a gratuitous largesse – permeating everyday moral concerns (the realm of first sight). And, again, it was the discordant-concordant feast (food, fellowship, festivity) that inspired this revelation.

The fact that his new self-understanding entailed an unexpected transcendent dimension is remarkable. Not only did the General evidence a re-storying of his life, but also the narrative unity of his life took on a new and unexpected trajectory in perceiving life's innate sacramentality. Indeed, I propose that *it is the contingent quality of beauty in the meal that inspired the tangential break in the General's life narrative.*<sup>12</sup>

Hopefully this thesis is apparent from the arguments made so far. Nonetheless, a certain rephrasing is warranted. Babette reveals in the conclusion of the story that she is an artist. She is the creator of an exquisite meal, and the co-creator of a transformative feast that was efficacious in leading the spirit of the guests beyond the existential confines of place and time. It mediated the recognition that there was a transcending “more” to life. Further, this “more” was beyond the compositional grasp of Babette or the dinner guests. It was certainly adventitious – the grace-full act of an ultimate author of life. In short, the desirability of the feast extended beyond the contours of the meal, to include what may be considered a contingent spiritual in-breaking.

As such, I consider the feast to be an event of beauty – beautiful not only in the artistic qualities of the meal, but also in the eruption (from the General's perspective) of an inspiring and reconciling truth. Following Ricoeur's definition, the feast was an event inasmuch as it contributed to the unfolding of the plot of the General's life. While the reconciliation occasioned by the dinner was largely unexpected, the evening takes on a certain “narrative necessity” for the General by the end of Dinesen's account.<sup>13</sup> But the feast was also an event of beauty, evoking gustatory desire, as well as a sense of wonder and awe. After all, the General himself describes the power of the chef of the *Café Anglais* (Babette) to transform a dinner into “a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!” (Dinesen, 1993, p. 52)

And once more, it is the feast, understood now as a thing of prodigal beauty, which brought a sense of meaning to General Loewenhielm's life, rescuing him from its myopic interpretation. The sublime and mundane, transcendent and immanent, grace and human life, they all cohere in the narrative of the meal, to re-story a life. Rich fare indeed!

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<sup>12</sup> There are strong spiritual resonances in *Babette's Feast* that cannot be substantially addressed in this essay. Indeed, my use of the term *beauty* may offer an entry point into a theological hermeneutic of Dinesen's text. For an extended treatment on a theology of beauty see Hart (2003).

<sup>13</sup> For more on Ricoeur's distinction between an event and an occurrence in terms of narrative necessity, see (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 142)

### Summary

I have attempted to address the issue of *self-understanding*, identified by Ricoeur as one of the three dimensions of a literary work, through an examination of the Ricoeur-Carr discussions on narrativity. I concluded that the two authors converge at a significant point – that selfhood-identity may be mediated by a host of cultural artifacts, which themselves are experienced as narrative. Where Ricoeur privileges literary and historical fiction as archetypal in his framework, Carr mentions the role of everyday life narratives as playing the mediational role.

My excursion into the world of *Babette's Feast* through the eyes of General Loewenhielm was meant to illustrate the thesis that a feast, as a cultural artifact of symbolic weight, can occasion the narrative re-storying of a life. The details of Babette's feast however reveal something particularly interesting – that sharing a meal is particularly potent because it may engage the individual's entire corporeal existence – mental, physical, and spiritual. In this way the feast, as a cultural artifact, contrasts in its mediational role from literary text. For what the former loses to the latter in terms of a proliferation of "imaginative variations," it gains, in its holistic engagement of the person. In short, mediation is channeled not simply through the employment of mental faculties, but also through corporeality, felt-sense, and spiritual sensitivity. This observation is an important extension of Ricoeur's and (to a lesser extent) Carr's theses.

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