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— Walter Benjamin

# What can careers workers learn from the study of narrative?

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Once upon a time careers work was straightforward, modern and scientific. In *Choosing a Vocation* (1909) Frank Parsons was clear that he was harnessing the power of science and contributing to the development of a more rational and efficient society. The ideas of science and rationality remained extremely influential as careers work developed. There are examples of this across its history and across the theoretical spectrum that has influenced its development. Examples are the development of reliable and valid psychometric testing, the developmental models of Super who sought to “measure” vocational maturity (Super, 1974) and the sociological interventions of Roberts (1968) who attempted to create a “general theory”. However by 2006 Law was bemoaning a discipline that only seemed to generate inventories. His cry was for “fewer lists, more stories” and for re-imagining careers work around the idea of narrative (2006, p.1).

Law was not the first to seek approaches to the understanding of career and to career helping that recognised the importance of narrative. Cochran (1997) set out an approach to career counselling that foregrounded the role of narrative. Krieshok et al (1999) explored how the telling of stories could be applied to the vocational rehabilitation of veterans, while Bujold (2004) theorised that this turn to narrative in career studies was part of a broader constructivist approach.

The turn to stories was also evident in disciplines where the translation of the fuzziness of life into

discrete scientific and bureaucratic categories was not only normal, but foundational in both theory and praxis. Greenhalgh & Hurwitz (1999) assessed the value of narrative for medicine and their arguments for its salience speak clearly to practitioners in other fields.

The processes of getting ill, being ill, getting better (or getting worse), and coping (or failing to cope) with illness, can all be thought of as enacted narratives within the wider narratives (stories) of people’s lives.

Narratives of illness provide a framework for approaching a patient’s problems holistically, and may uncover diagnostic and therapeutic options.

Taking a history is an interpretive act; interpretation (the discernment of meaning) is central to the analysis of narratives (for example, in literary criticism).

Narratives offer a method for addressing existential qualities such as inner hurt, despair, hope, grief, and moral pain which frequently accompany, and may even constitute, people’s illnesses (48).

To restate these points in more abstract terms: lives, and episodes in lives, may readily be perceived as narratives because they are lived in that way. Stories enable a deeper or more rounded understanding of a person, and more broadly our judgements (objective and subjective) ultimately rest on our

## *What can careers workers learn from the study of narrative?*

ability to decode patterns of symbols. This decoding of symbols is an activity which is at the heart of the study of narrative. Furthermore there is a global cultural resource in the form of millennia of storytelling (a narrative archive of human experience and wisdom) which modern scientific approaches to imagining and managing human life cannot afford to ignore.

This article will argue that in this pursuit of narrative approaches careers work would be advised to look around and see what can be borrowed from others who create and/or study stories. Literature, folklore and popular culture provide an enormous resource of materials that may develop understanding and spark individuals in their explorations of their own career narratives. Ramachandran & Arulmani (2010) made this point powerfully at the IAEVG-Jiva International Conference where they drew on the story of the Ramayana noting how it “is replete with examples of the meaning of renunciation, the importance of assessing opportunities, the origin of talents and aptitudes, the empowering of personal potentials, dealing with unexpected occurrences and barriers ones encounters.” Stories, they argued, provide a mechanism through which the career counsellor can connect to their client in a culturally relevant and intensely powerful way.

Examining how your own ideas about career intersect with the ideas of others (drawn from as far afield as literature, history, theology and philosophy) offer opportunities for career learning. It also presents a lens through which academic subjects can be interrogated so that learners can engage their learning with their own life narrative. As Ramachandran and Arulmani argue this can provide both fertile ground for exploration and a technique through which the careers worker can encourage the career explorer to stand back and re-examine their own life and career.

The Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky understood how narratives could provide a way of gaining critical distance from your life. In ‘Art as Technique’ (1925), he claimed that this distance was produced by the acts of defamiliarization by which writers challenged our habitual conceptions of our experience:

The author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created “artistically” so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. (Shklovsky, p.16).

The value of art and culture is to make our experience strange to us again, perhaps by having us experience it from different points of view. More recently, Martha Nussbaum (1995) has drawn on this idea of art as defamiliarization – focusing on the significance of standing in others shoes, a quintessentially narrative experience of identification with others - in the development of empathy and of self-understanding in the field of Legal studies. It is clear that such approaches are of potential value to career learning. If engaging with art and narrative can help you to stand outside of your own life, re-experience it and gain greater reflection on it, then it surely has the potential to be a resource for career education that is at least as useful as the statistics, profiles and trends that make up conventional labour market information. What is more, this approach, with its foregrounding of relations between self and other, could contribute to the development of more realistic and more rounded aspirations, and a focus on work-satisfaction and work-life balance, rather than solely on professional identities and remuneration.

For while stories provide a powerful resource for self-exploration they also have the potential to offer critical perspectives that pose unsettling questions about the individual’s relationship with the world of work and the world in general. The history of the novel suggests a continual play-off between exemplary stories (from epistolary conduct novels to Chick Lit) and stories which scoff at the pretension and hypocrisy of advice and didacticism. Frequently the impulses to teach and to play, to edify and to provoke laughter, are combined in the same narrative. Imaginative literature exploits ambiguity and contradiction to have it both ways (literary scholars call this irony), and our efforts to follow or interpret a story lead us to new cognitive and affective apprehensions of our lives. In the current context, the relationships between individual, work and society on the one

hand, and the career narratives that bind these elements together; on the other, may be significantly reappraised in the light of encounters with ironic or defamiliarizing representations. The results of these encounters are not guaranteed to be simplistically affirmative: an important dimension of liberal education as it is practiced in our increasingly vocational higher education system is to provide an interval in which the rejection of ideas of advancement, career development and transition to the labour market can be acted out. In that sense, if no other, student and academic life are marked by traces of an earlier narrative form, the *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman* is the narrative genre of the career *par excellence*, and it is therefore a good example of how narrative and thinking about narrative can provide powerful and unsettling career learning. *Bildung* is a German word which designates not only education but personal formation, and hence points to the co-adaptation of inner development and outer duty which is a basis for conceptions of vocation, profession and career. The *Bildungsroman* is, according to Franco Moretti (2000), the foundation of the Western achievement in narrative in the nineteenth century. The form emerged in societies that were as different as France, England and Russia and amounted to the invention of a new arena for the representation of and analysis of social and individual life, and their co-dependence. Moretti is perhaps our foremost scholar of the novel in its contribution to the evolution and dissemination of modern consciousness, so it is a matter of significance that his account of the *Bildungsroman* is so germane to the discussion of narrative in careers work.

Starting from the example of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6), Moretti argues that the genre helps inaugurate the modern age by asserting that 'youth is the most meaningful part of life' (p.3). *Wilhelm Meister's Bildung* or apprenticeship is therefore bound tightly to the idea of career as a hierarchical progression and a process of self-actualisation. It is 'not progress towards the father's work' but instead 'an uncertain exploration of social space' (p.4). Moretti views the *Bildungsroman* as a symbolic resolution of the

permanent revolution of modernity and the conflict between social and individual imperatives. The containment or curtailment of youth's rejection of authority, the process of socialization and accommodation (which is symbolized by marriage bonds in older comic genres), is the *Bildungsroman's* contribution to the 'curbing' of modernity's dynamism in the interest of making it human, or if you like, meaningful and predictable (p.6).

The career or vocation is, from this perspective, understood as a narrative device for achieving a resolution of warring elements, let's call them desire and duty. The character of the young man on the make - in nineteenth-century European fiction he is often a student- is a component of a social vision in narrative form which achieves a remarkable combination of comprehensiveness and empathy. Balzac, the novelist who styled himself the 'secretary' (an emergent vocational role) recording the social history of post-Revolutionary France, provides us with an example of the career novel in *Père Goriot*. This is ostensibly the story of a retired monomaniac (modeled on Shakespeare's King Lear) but to many readers it is more obviously the tale of the career of Eugene Rastignac. This Law student is recipient of guidance from a number of advisors. The master criminal Vautrin is the most Machiavellian of these:

I have the honour moreover to draw your attention to the fact that there are only twenty posts of Procureur-Général in France and twenty thousand candidates, including some customers who would sell their families to go up a notch (p.96).

Vautrin presents Rastignac with the choice between the relative obscurity guaranteed by the competitive filters along the career ladder, or the celebrity which is his if he consents to a criminal conspiracy leading to an advantageous marriage. The novel of career is juxtaposed with the novel of dynastic marriage in this dilemma. It could be argued that the novel's continuing power over readers is in part down to the uncertainty as to whether Rastignac can continue to resist the temptation laid before him: his declaration of war on Society at the end of the book has undertones of social and moral critique,

## What can careers workers learn from the study of narrative?

but more plausibly Rastignac is embarking on a more aggressive phase in his pursuit of money and positional advantage.

Another aspect of the novel's continuing contemporaneity is that the character of Vautrin sounds remarkably like Zygmunt Bauman, in particular the sociologist's argument, in *Consuming Life* (2007), that socialization is essentially about individuals coming to desire for themselves what the system requires of them (p.68). In other words, a career turns a social desirable into an individual desire. *Consuming Life* is, like *The Art of Life* (2008), a book which takes seriously the idea that we are the authors of our identities, creating ourselves in a manner analogous to the creation of a work of art (p.54). But this self-narration is not a mode of freedom: 'these days each man and each woman is an artist not so much by choice as, so to speak, by the decree of universal fate' (p.56).

This is a bracing corrective to the fantasy that if our lives are story-like in the way we represent them to ourselves, then we can be the authors of our destinies. Instead, the invitation to understand dimensions of career in narrative terms points to the capacity of narrative to model the complexity of human identities in their interaction with social environments, and the capacity of readers to comprehend the outcomes of such interactions as a meaningful, integrated life. This is not to suggest that the *Bildungsroman* holds sway as the type of life-narrative which offers the most potential for using literature to inform thinking about life choices and life-paths, because arguably that genre was exhausted by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Joseph Roth wrote novels in German between the two World Wars, his own career involving a drift from progressive treatments of contemporary social problems to an ironic nostalgia for the lost certitudes of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His finest novel is *The Radetzky March* (1932), which is concerned with the career-trajectory of the family of a military hero who himself could not live with the symbolic importance the Imperial administration placed on him, for instance as an exemplar of heroism in school textbooks. In the novel, the dissolution of the Trottas' state service ethic

parallels the collapse of the Empire in the Great War, and is dramatized in the grandson's leaving the army, or, as he puts it 'the end of a career' (p.306). His resignation is a representation in microcosm of the break-up of a social order predicated on deference and duty. Roth presents this larger judgment in a number of ways, but perhaps most memorably through the sardonic observations of Trotta's friend Chojnicki: 'The career has ended.... The career itself has come to an end!' *The Radetzky March* is a memorial not just to the Empire, but to the *Bildungsroman*, the symbol of social cohesion in the form of a vocational accommodation with traditional structures and values.

A contemporary of Roth's, the critic and intellectual Walter Benjamin, speculated about the broader significance of narrative in the twentieth-century in an essay on the nineteenth-century Russian story writer Nikolai Leskov (his 'Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District', a tragic tale of female emancipation, was the basis for Shostakovich's satirical opera).

An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers... The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. (p.86).

Benjamin's rich speculations pose important questions about bringing narrative thinking to bear on 'counsel either for ourselves or others'. In the first instance, he diagnoses a loss of narratability; not just the eclipse of a genre of storytelling, but a general loss of purchase on experience, an inarticulacy or illiteracy which threatens social and spiritual solidarity. This would seem to deny the potential for narrative to transform understanding that we outlined earlier. But this morbid thought

is modified by the idea that the very problem of advising, of helping someone fix on a course of action, is an act of narration, 'a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding'.

From the normativity of shared stories (and the very idea of a storyteller) to a modern condition of being in an unfolding story, we seem to have moved from consumption to production. We can argue whether this flies in the face of the logic of the later phases of economic modernization, with its creation of the subject-of-consumption, but the historical dilemma as Benjamin presents it, particularly our loss of sharable experience, speaks to the dynamics of stability and change which characterizes thinking about career. Graduates, for instance, are like Balzac's Rastignac: they can model their intended progress on existing stories about how successful lives have been achieved in the past (Doctor, Lawyer, Engineer are characters in archetypal narratives of individual accomplishment, social hierarchy, and the reproduction of tradition) but they are at the same time creating the new economic, professional and ethical circumstances which will transform the life stories and career paths they in turn will represent to a successor generation.

Literary studies does not have a monopoly on the understanding of stories any more than literature has a monopoly on the telling of stories. However as we have already shown there are concepts from literary studies (such as genre, or defamiliarisation) which have the potential to inform the way that we see, discuss and analyse our careers as *narratives*. To these ideas we could add conceptions of character as narrative device, or the way the narrative is framed and disclosure managed. E. M. Forster's (1927) distinction between story (what happened) and plot (how the happenings are selected and presented to make the narrative) provides a further readily usable concept with which to help learners make explicit what is at issue both in representing experience and in planning opportunities. However, as we have tried to show narrative is not just another technique through which life and career can be given order. Narrative exists as at once part of the living, the telling, and the understanding of experience. Critical examinations of narrative are therefore as likely to lead us away from order,

certainty and decision-making as towards it.

The article has argued that there are strong reasons for opening up dialogue between the fields of career studies and literary studies. This is particularly true in the light of the turn to narrative that career studies, like many other social sciences, has witnessed over the last few years. What is crucial is that this turn involves more than the recognition across the field of a unifying metaphor. Narratives are everywhere - nobody thinks twice about references to the narrative of a political candidate, a policy or indeed a product. But the significance of seeing this – of recognizing that what makes ideas, celebrities and things visible is that they are embedded in a story (primarily a media story) – is fully realized, not by a critique of their mythic or socially-constructed character, but by a fluency in decoding stories (Barthes, 1972).

This article only hopes to undertake the role of matchmaker between literary studies and career studies. It would be possible to go much further in examining ideas that could be borrowed from literary analyses of genre by considering how the analytical tools employed by literature specialists could be utilised in career thinking. What kind of narratives are employers expecting from a candidate at interview - realist, modernist or postmodern? Is it wise to lay bare your struggle to come to terms with the necessity of settling down with a *Bildungsroman*-style c.v.? How do ideas about narrative perspective or focalisation enhance the impact that career stories have, and does a practicing awareness of these forms enable the narrator of a life-story to gain fresh perspectives on their life? These are all areas for exploration rather than prescriptions for practice, but it seems likely it will take an extension of narratological literacy beyond the acknowledgment of the importance of stories to capitalize on the potential of narrative approaches for careers work.

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