



The multi-storied self: What is a storytelling animal?

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“Storytelling is healing...”

“... As we reveal ourselves in story...
...we can trace out the paradoxical and even
contradictory versions of ourselves that we create
for different occasions, different audiences ...
...we become aware of ourselves as storytellers,
we realize that what we understand and imagine
about ourselves is a story.
And when we know all this, we can use our stories
to heal and make ourselves whole.”

(Albert, n.d.)

Cit. In McMahon, M. (2006). Working with storytellers: A metaphor for career counselling. In M. McMahon & W. Patton (Eds.), *Career counseling: Constructivist approaches*. London: Routledge, p.16.



Homo Sapiens Fabulans

SELF, MEANING AND TIME

- **Stories / Symbols to live by:**
 - Narrative model of personality (D. P. McAdams)
- **Agency:**
 - “Storytelling animal” (A. McIntyre)
- **Human time:**
 - “Triple Mimesis: narrative prefiguration, configuration, refiguration”
 - “être-enchevêtré-dans-des-histoires” or “being-in-stories” (P. Ricoeur)
- **Self-justification:**
 - “Moral framework” (C. Taylor)



THE SEMIOTIC SELVING SELF

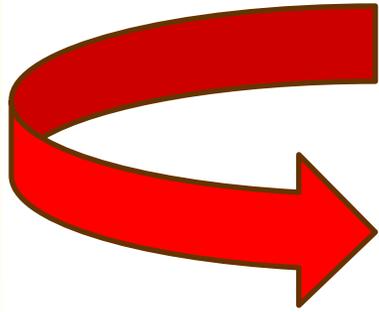


STUDYING THE SEMIOTIC SELVING SELF

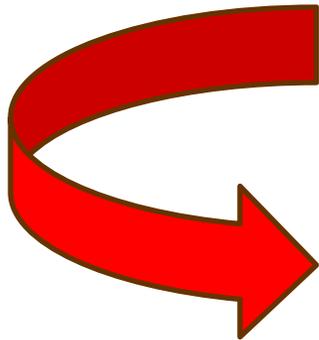
- **“Object”** > the process of meaning-construction in self-narratives as a workshop of possible selves that energize or block certain symbols, relations, courses of action.
- **“Narrative self-theory”** > the conception of personhood as a semiotic dialogical performance that consists in telling and enacting life-stories.
- **“Life-story”** > Narrative discourse that is self-referential, self-valuational, self-interpretive, and thereby essentially an open structure, temporally discontinuous.



Constructivism & Social Constructionism



***Self = lifespan workshop of reflexive
and relational performative semiotic creativity***



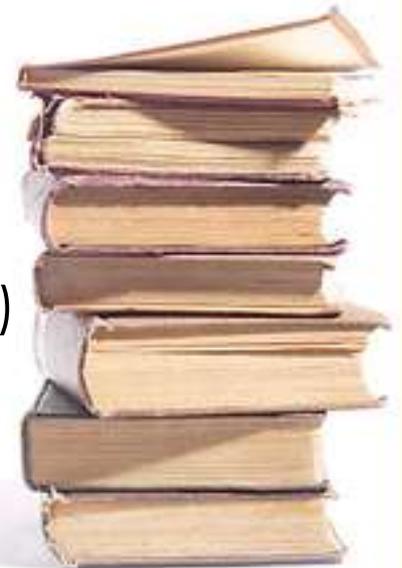
EMBODIED & SITUATED
self-interpretive schemata
self-narrative patterns
self-descriptive styles



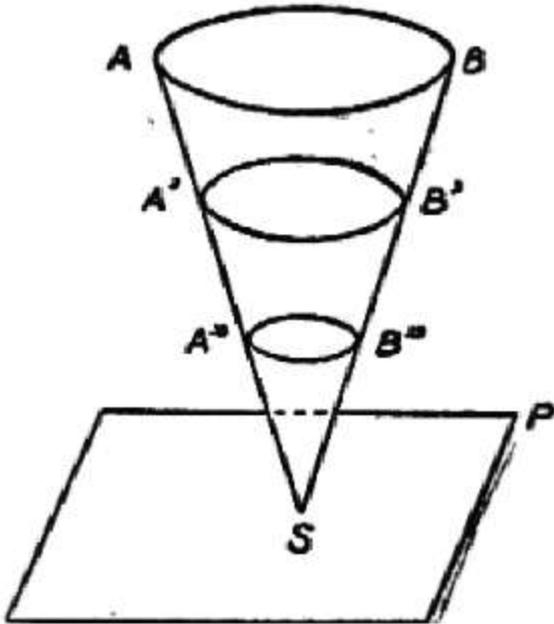
Normal (if not normative)

"narrative pathologies" of selfhood

- Compulsory repetition vs. difference (Freud, 1925, Deleuze, 1968)
- Narrative self-dispossession: psychosocial reification/alienation
- Narrative self-multiplication: polyphony
- Narrators without actors as well as actors without agency
- Synchronic or episodic and diachronic selfhood
- Selfless plots (or the inexorable chain of being)
- Plotless selves (or factless autobiographies)
- Unspeakable, unnarratable: "One narrator's unnarratable can very well be another's narratable" (Prince, 1988)



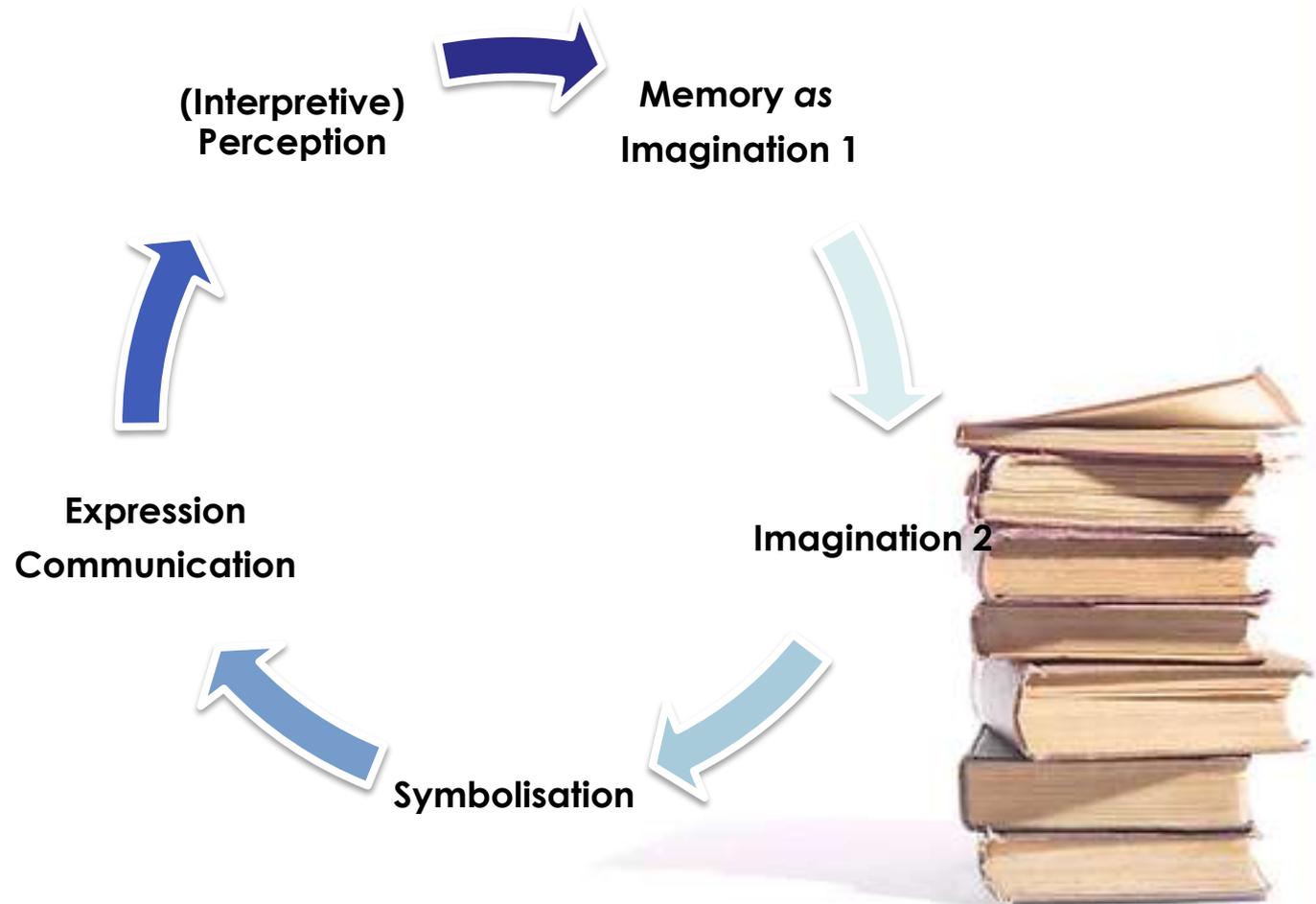
H. BERGSON Matière et Mémoire



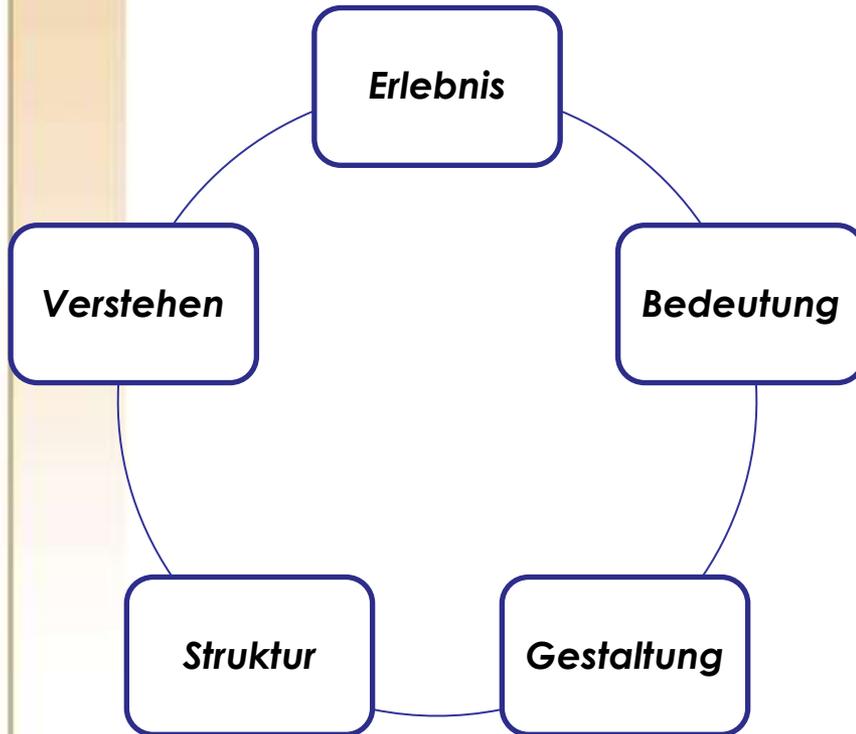
« L'essence de l'idée générale, en effet, est de se mouvoir sans cesse entre la sphère de l'action et celle de la mémoire pure. Reportons-nous en effet au schéma que nous avons déjà tracé. En S est la perception actuelle que j'ai de mon corps, c'est-à-dire d'un certain équilibre sensori-moteur. Sur la surface de la base A B seront disposés, si l'on veut, mes souvenirs dans leur totalité. Dans le cône ainsi déterminé, l'idée générale oscillera continuellement entre le sommet S et la base A B. En S elle prendrait la forme bien nette d'une attitude corporelle ou d'un mot prononcé ; en A B elle revêtirait l'aspect, non moins net, des mille images individuelles en lesquelles viendrait se briser son unité fragile. Et c'est pourquoi une psychologie qui s'en tient au *tout fait*, qui ne connaît que des choses et ignore les progrès, n'apercevra de ce mouvement que les extrémités entre lesquelles il oseille; elle fera coïncider l'idée générale tantôt avec l'action qui la joue ou le mot qui l'exprime, tantôt avec les images multiples, en nombre indéfini, qui en sont l'équivalent dans la mémoire. Mais la vérité est que l'idée générale nous échappe dès que nous prétendons la figer à l'une ou l'autre de ces deux extrémités. Elle consiste dans le double courant qui va de l'une à l'autre, - toujours prête, soit à se cristalliser en mots prononcés, soit à s'évaporer en souvenirs.

« Cela revient à dire qu'entre les mécanismes sensori-moteurs figurés par le point S et la totalité des souvenirs disposés en AB il y a place, comme nous le faisons pressentir dans le chapitre précédent, pour mille et mille répétitions de notre vie psychologique, figurées par autant de sections A'B', AB', etc., du même cône. Nous tendons à nous éparpiller en AB à mesure que nous nous détachons davantage de notre état sensoriel et moteur pour vivre de la vie du rêve nous tendons à nous concentrer en S à mesure que nous nous attachons plus fermement à la réalité présente, répondant par des réactions motrices à des excitations sensorielles. En fait, le moi normal ne se fixe jamais à l'une de ces positions extrêmes ; il se meut entre elles, adopte tour à tour les positions représentées par les sections intermédiaires, ou, en d'autres termes, donne à ses représentations juste assez de l'image et juste assez de l'idée pour qu'elles puissent concourir utilement à l'action présente. »

Self-stories & Self-metaphors



Life-Expression-Understanding ...der Umweg des Verstehens... (Dilthey, 1911)



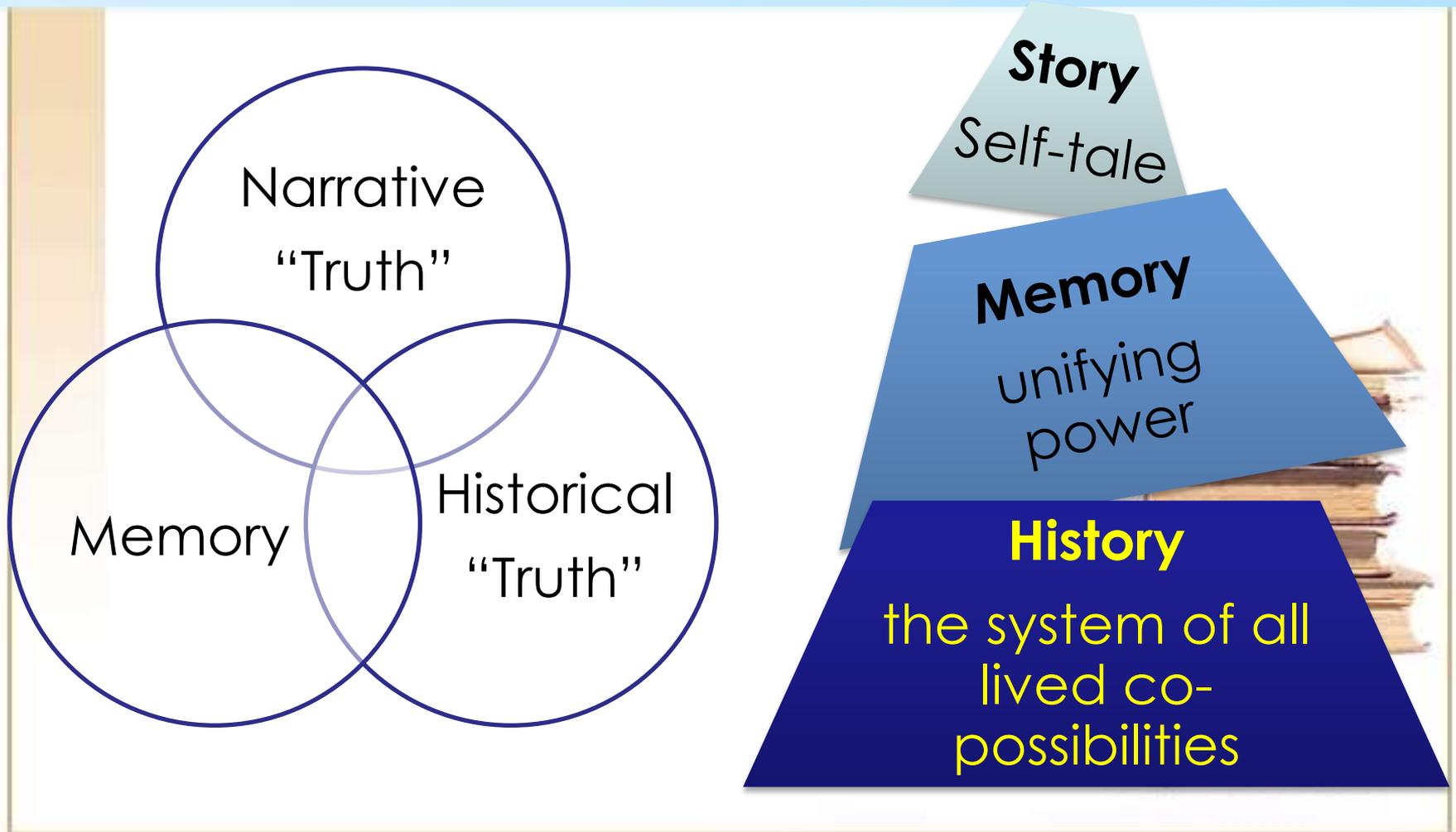
A dynamic system of connections :

- a. lived experience,
- b. autobiographical memory,
- c. imagination: poiesis & semiosis
- d. process of expression and meaning-creation,
- d. understanding,
- g. communication.



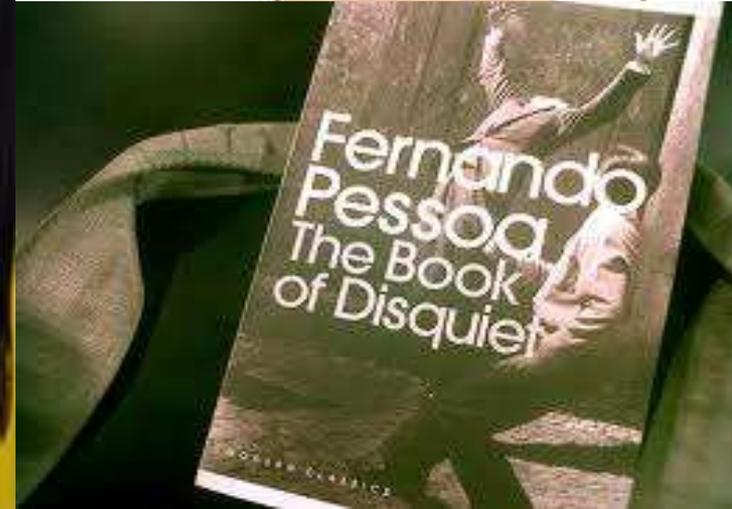
Dynamic Conjunctions & disjunctions:

Semiotic Novelty emerging from the non-coincidence between Life and Meaning



The Man Without Qualities
(An Open Labyrinth:
Virtually infinite possibilities,
Poiesis/mimesis of a World)

The Book of Disquiet
(A Factless Autobiography:
Fragments of nothingness,
Poiesis/mimesis of pure selfhood)



What is a “man without qualities”?

- It's an “**artist**”, a potential man, always moving in the **ontological interval** between possibility and reality.
- He discloses himself by conceiving God as the Mind-of-All-Possibles.
 - EPIPHANY: Ulrich, the man without qualities, ... “wrote in his essay on love of country that anyone who really loved his country must never regard it as the best country in the world ... God Himself probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of possibility... for God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently” (pp.13-14)
 - Is this a blasphemy? Quite the opposite...
- “**Without qualities**” means “instability”, “indetermination”, “openness”.
 - “Do you remember our conversation about the artist?... I explained to you what a living principle of form in a person means. ... What he thinks of anything will always depend on some possible context— nothing is, to him, what it is; everything is subject to change, in flux, part of a whole, of an infinite number of wholes presumably adding up to a superwhole that, however, he knows nothing about.” (pp. 62-64)

Primacy of the Sense of Possibility over the Sense of Reality: **Subjunctive Mood**

- His perception and imagination are ways of worldmaking, but a world that never gains structure and stability. Its morphogenesis is infinitely open and unstable. In the sense of possibility invention prevails over demonstration, and poiesis over mimesis.
 - “...if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility.
Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach **no** more importance to what is than to what is not. The consequences of so creative a disposition can be remarkable, and may, regrettably, often make what people admire seem wrong, and what is taboo permissible, or, also, make both a matter of indifference. Such possibilists are said to inhabit a more delicate medium, a hazy medium of mist, fantasy, daydreams, and the subjunctive mood.” (pp. 10-11)
- This subjunctive mood incites: ontological and moral relativity...
- The “man without qualities” **unqualifies and undetermines** the world. For he knows there is a plurality of worlds and he inhabits in the logical transition between them: a **transworld**.

What is a “disquiet book/self” and a “factless autobiography”?

“I envy—but I’m not sure that I envy—those for whom a biography could be written, or who could write their own. In these **random impressions**, and with no desire to be other than random, I indifferently narrate my **factless autobiography**, my **lifeless history**. These are my **Confessions**, and if **in them I say nothing**, it’s because I have nothing to say. ...

These confessions of what I feel are my solitaire. I don’t interpret them like those who read cards to tell the future. I don’t probe them, because in solitaire the cards don’t have any special significance. ...

To live is to crochet according to a pattern we were given. But while doing it the mind is at liberty, and all enchanted princes can stroll in their parks between one and another plunge of the hooked ivory needle. Needlework of things... Intervals... Nothing...” (Fragment 12)

The EFFORT of self-understanding and self-creation translates into:

- A chaotic, loose bundle of meaningless “random impressions”... that are “unimportant, because everything is unimportant”
- A plunge into the nothingness of **free** and **spontaneous** self-consciousness: the excess of selfhood and its fever of feeling...
- This is the construction of a most delicate and intricate personality without a narrative framework: a full character without any storyline...

The essential fusion: Book = Self

- Self-creation becomes self-destruction... the character is absorbed by the Book and its Labyrinth until utter lifelessness, nothingness...
- Paradoxically, self-writing becomes self-defeating, self-effacing, self-alienating... And no narrative saves the self-ignorant narrator!

"I've made myself into the **character of a book**, a life one reads. Whatever I feel is felt (against my will) so that I can write that I felt it. Whatever I think is promptly put into words, mixed with images that undo it, cast into rhythms that are something else altogether. **From so much self-revising, I've destroyed myself.** From so much self-thinking, I'm now my thoughts and not I. ...

I'm like a playing card belonging to an old and unrecognizable suit—the sole survivor of a lost deck. I have no meaning...

...describing myself in image after image... I end up more in the images than in me, stating myself **until I longer exist**, writing with my soul for ink, useful for nothing except writing. But the reaction ceases, and again I resign myself. I go back to whom I am, even if it's nothing. And a hint of tears that weren't cried makes my stiff eyes burn; a hint of anguish that wasn't felt gets caught in my dry throat. But I don't even know what I would have cried over, if I'd cried, nor why it is that I didn't cry over it. The fiction follows me, like my shadow. And what I want is to sleep." (Fragment 193)

Depressed and Depressing Self-Narratives:

A valuable research and intervention tool

- (1) Depression as symbolic action: it displays the socio-cultural grammars and interpersonal conditions in which self-emotions are constructed and expressed in life-stories with a declining storyline
- (2) Depression appears as a peculiar mode of structuring and interpreting lived experiences and psychosocial trajectories
- (3) Depression is made intelligible by a distinctive narrative syntax, semantics and pragmatics: the selfless narrator in a closed circular flow.



Clinical Vignette 1

Psychologist (P): How would you tell the story of your life? And, therefore, how would you describe yourself?

Speaker (M27): Well::: I'm an active guy. Uh::: I mean I can't be quiet in a corner. Better said, I want to leave a mark in this world.

P: You have a strong purpose! I daresay // **M27:** I dunno// you want accomplish great things! Excellent outlook!=

M27: =I'm afraid not. *(breaks eye contact, long silence)*
Now, I need help. I dunno what kind of help – or if help may exist in my case. *(silence, resumes eye contact, more intensely, then mutters)* I'm los::t, lo::st, utterly lost, lost, period — there's no way out, period. *(louder and clearer)* I'm on the brink of/ *(starts weeping silently, long pause, 2 minutes)*



Clinical Vignette 1 (cont. a)

P: Tell me... How do you feel?... // **M27:** I dunno// Could you tell me more about your thoughts and feelings presently?
//**M27:** I dunno// What's life after all?...

M27: My li::fe—my life seems like small spirals... I mean... On one curve of the spiral, I'm ok, then... on the next curve I feel bad, rea:lly bad... As though I were always back at start line. This is terrible, right?... It's not normal, right? It can't be!... I feel absolutely desperate. I gave up on myself—partly. I know that. It has been a slow death. I understand. It's crystal clear to me. I was in self-destructive mode, vanishing... But now—Something should change. But what? But how? Everything is blocked. I work in a call-center, you can't imagine, that's hell. I hate that. I dunno... What's the point in having a fancy degree in Human Resources?...4 years studying—and being there, calling people, to annoy them and deceive them. It's humiliating and absurd... Sometimes I'd like to say them: "Don't listen to a word! Don't be stupid! These guys are fooling you! Break your contract and save money!" I'd enjoy that. It would be funny! (*laughs*)

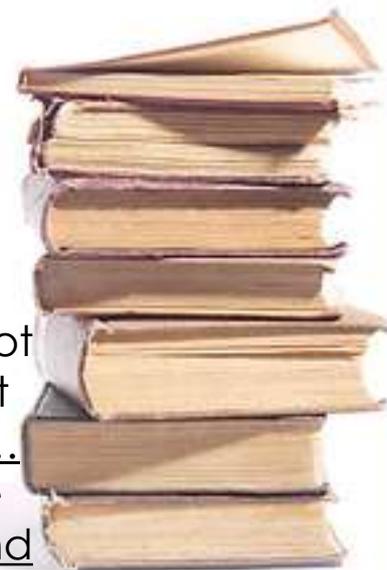


Clinical Vignette 1 (cont. b)

P: What happened in your life? What's problematic for you?

M27: I think... in a sense I gave up on myself. But other people don't give me a chance either. Thus, when my anxiety increases I stop working, I stop everything, I become paralyzed. I spend two days without sleeping. All the past comes to my mind. But uh... More terrifying than the pa::st is my future. Whenever I imagine it... I perspire with fear... My family doctor sent me to a psychiatrist who, then, sent me to the hospital. Well done! *(laughs)* I spent a week there sleeping and taking drugs. *(laughs)* Why are they so obse::ssed with those pills? Useless. Absolutely useless. Does it solve my problem? Truly? I'm done with psychiatrists. *(pause, change of tone)*...

I saw my father depressed sleeping all day. We—I lost my mother... Is there a pill for that?... Ever since, my life is video gaming. World of Warcraft. But I'm not playing much now. I'm not in the mood for it now. I only play five hours a day, from midnight to five in the morning... And my only avatar presently is the Orc... Why? Because he has a... er... a past of slavery. Besides that, he represents the strength of liberation, just like Spartacus, strong and yet doomed. That's me::, partly at least. I hope. *(laughs)*



Being an **Orc** in a *World of Warcraft*

“The green-skinned **orcs** are one of the most prolific races of [Azeroth](#). Born on the world of [Draenor](#), the orcs were brought to Azeroth through the dimensional gateway known as the [Dark Portal](#) and waged war on the [humans](#) while under the influence of the [Burning Legion](#).

The orcs once cultivated a noble, [shamanistic](#) society on Draenor. Tragically, the proud orc clans were corrupted by the Burning Legion and **used as pawns** in the Legion's invasion of Azeroth. The orcs managed to **rebel**, however, and they were ultimately able to help turn the tide **against their demon masters**. Led by the young [Warchief Thrall](#), the orcs have reclaimed their strength and honor. The orcs moved from the [Eastern Kingdoms](#) to [Kalimdor](#), and there they founded the nation of [Durotar](#).

Now, **the orcs stand ready to fight not for the sake of conquest, but for their very right of survival in their adopted world.**” <http://www.wowwiki.com/Orc>



Depressed and Depressing *Dynamics* in the Self-Narratives:

- A **declining storyline** marked by a progressive loss that anticipates nothing but "repetition of the same" and a persistent chaining of changes for the worse.
- A negative **self-valuational** outlook guides the selective process of unifying episodic autobiographical memory.



- A pervasive **lack of agency**: the idiom of action and intention being replaced by the idiom of event and causality
- the **primacy of necessity** over possibility, and of objective explanation over subjective understanding
- the narrating self is not a real character but rather a powerless self-spectator



- The narration alienates the narrator: external locus of control
- monological interpretive stance: inability to take multiple alternative standpoints



Cognitive-Narrative Therapy: from schemata to stories

- Beck's cognitive therapy
- White & Epston's narrative therapy
 - Depression: crystallization of a self-defeating mode of meaning-making
 - Therapeutic Process: the **rewriting** or **reauthoring** of narrative sequences
 - Goal: **regaining authorship** and **imagining** a plurality of possible worlds



Transitions: Narrative prototypes

(1) narratives of loss

- negative self-evaluation
- recurrent tragic themes
- emplotment unfolds a descending order
- dialogical performance pervaded by detachment

(2) narratives of growth

- every experience is assessed as “learning”
- religious or spiritual meta-narrative
- story of increasing learning and coherence

(3) narratives of rebirth

- the theme of urgency and awakening
- vagueness of practical visions for the attained level of self-understanding



Conclusion (1)

SELF-FUTURING as **LIFE-DESIGN**

- Consonance & dissonance between possible and desirable selves
- Elaboration and mutilation of future storylines
- Generation of psychological time
- Generation of existential direction
- Generation of personal unity



Conclusion (2)

Narrative-Dialogical Conflicts:

1. between alternative “holistic ideological fidelities”
2. between auto- and hetero-attributions of intentionality
3. between the perception of narrative cycles and exploratory rewriting



Conclusion (3)

(IM)POSSIBILITY OF SELF-FUTURING

1. Repetition and innovation of narrative sequences
2. Diachronic integration and rupture
3. Discontinuous episodes
4. Characters without stories
5. Divorce: actors / narrators
6. Stories without agents: impersonal processes (grammar of actions vs. grammar of events)



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