Chapter 3

From vocational calling to career construction: Late-career authors and critical self-reflection

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Introduction

A challenge that sometimes arises when contemplating contemporary writers is that their later works seem to suffer through critical comparison to earlier work for which they have already become known. In some cases, this is a sin of omission, the later works simply not attracting as much critical interest as the previous. *Graham* Swift's *Wish You Were Here* (2011) has not been discussed nearly so widely as his Booker-Prize winning *Last Orders* (1996), and far less energy has been expended on the appreciation of Sebastian Faulks's work since *A Possible Life* (2012) than on *Birdsong* (1993) or *Charlotte Gray* (1998). In others, it is an act of commission whereby the later works are actively judged to be inferior to those that came before. Salman Rushdie's work since *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) has not only failed to generate as much critical attention as *Midnight's Children* (1981) or *The Satanic Verses* (1988) but has also attracted more opprobrium than those two, where it has been discussed at all. Likewise, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Buried Giant* (2015) has generally been written about less often but more critically than *The Remains of the Day* (1989).

Clearly this is not an assumption that would hold true in every case, especially not of canonical writers from earlier periods in literary history, and it may be related to the changing forces at play in the modern marketplace. Within the contemporary world, however, it is a situation that can result in writers being primarily associated with one or two specific works produced years—or even decades—earlier, in a way that hinders a positive reception of the later work. This situation raises a theoretical question about how we define the contemporary;

and another about the mechanics of canonisation more generally. Moreover, until recently, the concept of a literary career, with certain material properties of its own, had received inadequate critical scholarly attention—although Guy Davidson and Nicola Evans's *Literary Careers in the Modern Era* (2015) is an important exception.

This chapter has two goals. First, by applying career construction theory to a discussion of the late stage of the authorial careers of contemporary British writers, it presents career construction as a new theory of authorship, with potential application to analysis of artistic careers in different media and art forms. In doing so it will construct a framework for considering what is specific to late-career works when compared with those produced during earlier stages, in a bid to avoid the negative comparison mentioned above. Implicit in this is the suggestion that late-career works are likely to receive more positive interpretation if we treat them as such—that is, if the means by which we judge them is consciously different from how we judge the earlier works. Second, it draws attention to forms of creative self-reflection in which writers are able to engage during the later stages of their careers. In doing this, it also assesses the extent to which such forms of reflection entail a merging of individual vision with wider social themes and collective aspirations.

The Emergence of Career Construction Theory

Among the first major contributions to analysing the vocational aspect of writers' lives were Edward Said in *Beginnings* (1975) and Wayne C. Booth in *The Company We Keep* (1988). Said's key argument is that prior to the twentieth century, writing was a vocation rather than a profession as such, so that the works of twentieth-century authors are distinguished from their predecessors by an increasing preoccupation with the career of the writer (227). However, his suggestion that writing as a vocation was supplanted by writing as a professional career at that time fails to account for the fact that even today, writing remains a

vocation for many people, especially at the start of their writing life when they cannot be certain of achieving sufficient commercial success to turn it into a professional career. In other words, to many contemporary writers, writing can be both vocation and career at different stages of their life. Booth assigned more significance to the vocational element than Said, and, as one of the pioneers of reader research, his interest lay in documenting how different readers told him that the reading of particularly cherished books had inspired them to make specific ethical or vocational decisions (279). He was not, however, able to adduce any proof that the books in question really had made the telling contribution to the decisions that his interviewees claimed they had.

Beyond the insights of Said and Booth, a new way of thinking about literary careers has therefore become necessary, for which I draw upon the tools of career construction theory. Although this is a branch of social psychology more concerned with training career guidance counsellors than with literary study, it has the potential to illuminate our understanding of the writer's vocation. This is because it entails a shift away from forms of vocational guidance based on aptitude tests and computer databanks, instead using a narrative method based on the telling of life stories. In the counselling relationship, the purpose of elucidating life stories is to enable the person seeking guidance to make some type of decision about the next stage of their career, metaphorically becoming the 'author' of the next chapter in that narrative (Savickas 2011b, 179). If the individuals in question happen to be authors, that metaphor becomes oddly literal in the sense that authors enter a new phase of their career as such when they start writing new kinds of work. This means that, without consulting career counsellors, they are enacting the same kinds of symbolic behaviour that career advisors develop in the people they advise.

Career construction theory was developed by Larry Cochran (1997) and Mark Savickas (2011a) in the context of three major developments. The first of these was the fact

that patterns of life and work in the Western world had changed dramatically in the last quarter of the twentieth century, such that, whereas people of the preceding two generations might commonly expect to work in the same field—even for the same employer—for their whole working life, people at the turn of the millennium were much more likely to need to change both employers and areas of work on multiple occasions. Secondly, the development of career construction was given a major impetus by the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, a period typified by financial uncertainty and the concomitant closures of businesses at every level from the very small to the transnational, such that changes between different employers and careers became increasingly necessary. During the same period, the increased average lifespans of people in the Western world generated a third context in which career construction arose, in the face of systematic increases in state retirement and pension ages causing people to work for longer than ever before.

One of the goals of career construction is to build qualities of resilience, the capacity to live with uncertainty and comfort in experiencing change. For both Cochran and Savickas, encouraging their clients to tell their life stories helps elucidate certain recurring themes and aptitudes which are discernible across very different life experiences, which can be used to foster the aforementioned qualities and thus help them negotiate complex transitions in their working life. Interestingly, Cochran and Savickas each assert that the life stories people tell their counsellors need not be true in a verifiable, factual sense. What is important are the meanings that the individuals associate with the stories they tell, whether or not they are empirically accurate, because such meanings inform future career decisions.

Thus the order of truth associated with the life stories told exists at the symbolic and emotive, rather than factual, level. The same is true of the recently emerged literary genre known as *autofiction*, in which authors typically write autobiographies using techniques derived from experimental novels. The experiences so narrated are real, but their precise

veracity is less important than their symbolic truth, which incorporates a degree of uncertainty because of the fallibility of human memory. To career guidance counsellors, therefore, telling life stories is a matter of elucidating cyclical patterns of symbolic behaviour to which can be ascribed feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment, thereby enabling people to seek professional roles that will provide similar feelings in the future and so facilitating the process of constructing a career.

Career construction theory treats individuals as archives or repositories of memory and feeling. Excavating those archives is then the principal purpose of this form of vocational guidance, directing the individual's attention towards their own internal resources and opening up the potential for those resources to be reapplied in changing roles and new environments. As living archives, people have myriad rich and complex stories to tell, which is why narrative approaches to vocational guidance are potentially beneficial in thinking about changes between different life and career stages. In this sense, the general tendency of people to live and work longer illustrates an important facet of specifically authorial careers. Authors, like composers, visual artists and others (though performing artists are often different) tend not formally to retire at all, or as Roger Grenier puts it, 'few writers have willingly put their last words to paper' (2014, 105). This means that the traditional model of a lifespan divided into the three stages of youth and education, followed by working life, then retirement (Laslett 1996, 5) no longer applies to these types of careers. Career construction therefore provides a potentially illuminating alternative way of thinking about the stages within an authorial career.

Life Stages and Career Trajectories

Figures 3.1–3.6 depict a series of indicative career trajectories typically experienced by authors, where degrees of critical and/or commercial success vary over time. Clearly, the

question of how to define ‘success’ is variable from one author to another, depending on what precisely each author aims to achieve. This might be very commercially focused and hence measurable in a quantitative way; or it may depend on a degree of innovation that is less tangible, less easy to document and by its nature less concerned with achieving measurable outputs, even though it might result in significant critical acclaim. The latter would be especially true of creative artists who concurrently work in higher education institutions, or what Howard Becker (2008) refers to as *academic artists*. Although David Galenson has provided a highly innovative means of quantifying success statistically in *Artistic Capital* (2006), for the purposes of this chapter there are no specific units of measurement. Rather, the charts should be taken to indicate an abstract, generalised raising or lowering of success over time.

It should also be noted that only those artistically active portions of a career have been considered, not those dedicated to performing other areas of work, even though in many cases the intersections between these and writers’ careers can be intricate and complex. From a materialist perspective, the stability that arises from the effective engagement in another kind of work might create the requisite degree of financial security to allow these people to write at all. Professions from which contemporary authors have emerged include law (Alexander McCall Smith), medicine (Khaled Hosseini), teaching (Michael Morpurgo, Joanne Harris), politics (Michael Dobbs) and banking (Polly Courtney). On the other hand, the mere fact of devoting a significant portion of one’s time, creativity and mental energy to those spheres also conflicts with the demands of being a writer, which in the prior sense they enable. The relationship between writing and other work is therefore highly ambivalent as well as dialectical. In many cases, the pressures created by that work and by other life experiences are too great and the vocation to write is sacrificed to them.

Figure 3.1 maps out the indicative trajectory of a career in writing for an author who has not yet become established as such. The level of success (however measured) remains relatively low throughout the whole period dedicated to writing. This might be because the author has created a work that has been badly received and struggled to make a critical or commercial impact; or it might be that the other personal and professional commitments have precluded them from producing a single written work (or, having produced one, from publishing and publicising it). The kinds of work typically created during this kind of career might be common, but are unlikely to come to the attention of a wide readership, as the manuscripts languish unpublished in drawers or linger on the remainder shelves of warehouses. Then again, Laura Dietz (2015) has drawn attention to how the rise of self-publishing via the Internet and other forms of new media has somewhat lessened the power of traditional gatekeeping roles within the industry (such as publisher, agent or commissioning editor) so that some of these early 'unpublished' works can still be made available in the public domain. Even in these cases, however, a low level of success in a quantifiable sense need not be interpreted to mean *no* success, especially for individuals whose writing has been undertaken with the specific aim of self-reflection and self-development rather than with any necessary market orientation. This is increasingly true of writers who practise the genre of autofiction, and Mark McGurl (2011) points out that it is also important to students enrolled in certain kinds of creative writing programmes.

[Figure 3.1 near here]

Figure 3.1: Only a low level of success is ever achieved.

Figure 3.2 shows a contrasting indicative career trajectory for authors who achieve a major breakthrough early on in their careers *as writers*, and thereafter manage to retain a

comparably high critical and/or commercial standard throughout subsequent stages of their authorial careers. Again, it should be emphasised that the start of the career *in writing* does not necessarily coincide with the start of the author's working life, and in many cases two different careers are pursued in tandem. This means that the beginning stage of an authorial career is not necessarily defined by age: a debut novelist is not necessarily young when measured by the career stages of other industries. Tim Lott published his first book, *The Scent of Dried Roses*, in 1996, the year in which he turned 43; Tessa Hadley's debut *Accidents in the Home* (2002) came at the age of 46 and Clare Morrall published her first novel, *Astonishing Splashes of Colour*, in 2003, her fifty-second year. By the same token a relatively young person, not yet ready for retirement in any other industry and certainly not drawing near the end of their career as novelist, might be considered a 'veteran' if they have already published several works: David Mitchell and Ali Smith are good examples.

[Figure 3.2 near here]

Figure 3.2: Early break-out is consolidated by a high level of subsequent success.

Examples of real-world authors whose careers have followed the trajectory indicated in Figure 3.2 are sadly much rarer than those in Figure 3.1. Among contemporary writers, J.K. Rowling might be considered such a figure, having achieved such broad commercial success and such public worldwide visibility that her status has eclipsed that of *mere* author and has become that of a policy-maker and advocate of the literary arts more generally. All sorts of complicating questions arise in her case, first of all about the relationship of the specialist field of children's literature to commercial success and then about the impact of Rowling's subsequent role with UNESCO on any future attempts she might make to continue writing. Indeed this may be an ironic counter-foil to those instances where the need to make a living

in other kinds of work render dedicating sufficient time and mental energy for artistic success difficult to achieve in practice. In Rowling's case, it is a question of her having been excessively rather than insufficiently successful, her great success propelling her into the orbit of an advocate, policy leader and public figure which risks taking her out of the domain of writing altogether so that her career becomes what Fred Inglis calls an extended 'performance' of her celebrity status (2010, 3). Indeed, early critical responses to her fictional output subsequent to the *Harry Potter* series have been much less enthusiastic, and her successful reinvention as a crime writer under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith seems to have relied in large part on the audience's discovery that the two authors are one and the same. This might indicate that her success as an innovative writer (which in any case is only one way in which to understand success) might in fact be closer to that indicated in Figure 3.3, in which an early major break-out is followed by a gradual lessening of artistic achievement.

[Figure 3.3 near here]

Figure 3.3: Subsequent work struggles to live up to early successes.

The opposite case is indicated in Figure 3.4. This maps the career of a writer whose breakthrough is much less sudden and dramatic than that of an author like Rowling, but who nevertheless labours away over a long and sustained period of time such that a successful authorial career is constructed in stages. Among contemporary writers, Jim Crace sits in this category as well as, possibly, Shena Mackay. Galenson refers to artists of this kind as 'experimental innovators' because their careers evince a commitment to many different attempts at stylistic, aesthetic and formal innovation over time (2006, 174). This contrasts with artists whom he terms 'conceptual innovators' who typically achieve one specific innovation in a particular work during their career, and then repeat the same practice in

subsequent works (27). Jonathan Buckley's repeated experiments in various forms of fictional biography, and Sarah Hall's defamiliarisation of the landscape of her native Northwest England in a number of different novels, are contemporary examples.

[Figure 3.4 near here]

Figure 3.4: The career is slowly and gradually developed.

It would however be a mistake to assume that career narratives are best understood by recourse to a model of linear progress that brings nothing but improved standing within artistic communities and/or higher levels of commercial reward over time. Although many writers continue to expand their degree of innovation, formal accomplishment and the size and reach of their readership over time, in reality this is rarely experienced as a one-way narrative of development. Degrees of formal experimentation, commercial acumen, aesthetic innovation and readerly pleasure are all prone to fluctuations over time, so that a writer's career trajectory may feature slight dips and inclines as well as gradual climbs. But in a case such as that indicated by Figure 3.4, the overall trajectory is likely to be upwards (whereas in Figure 3.3 the overall movement is in the opposite direction).

[Figure 3.5. near here]

Figure 3.5: The overall career trajectory experiences a 'peak'.

It would also be misleading to assume that in cases like Figure 3.4, the achievements of the author go on slowly increasing forever. It is much more common that the writer's status reaches a high point at some point during the career and then either ceases to grow or positively declines thereafter. Figure 3.5 indicates this typical career trajectory, with a peak

followed by a gradual decline. Again, allowing for the inclusion of lesser degrees of gradation at specific points, this shape maps the most commonly experienced general career trajectory. A good example is A.S. Byatt, whose early novels received little attention and whose accomplishments reached a high point with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Possession* (1990), and whose subsequent work, though still admired, was less widely read. It did however, achieve a second, lesser peak following her award of the Man Booker Prize for *The Children's Book* (2009). This shows that ultimately Byatt's career evinces elements of both Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.6, where the latter describes a form of inverted peak: the successes achieved during the early stages of the career give rise to a period where the author is still active but the success attained—whether measured through critical response, commercial success or artistic innovation—struggles to match what was achieved early on, until a noted upturn in fortune takes place somewhat belatedly. This career trajectory is somewhat rare, but Kingsley Amis could be considered an example: the early success of *Lucky Jim* (1954) was succeeded by an output that was prolific but qualitatively mixed in the 1960s and 1970s, before a significant degree of innovation was achieved with the late *Old Devils* (1986).

[Figure 3.6 near here]

Figure 3.6: The overall career trajectory experiences an inverted peak.

Lateness Interrogated

Three of these models equate the later stages in an author's career with lesser achievement. There are many possible reasons for this. It may be that the works produced by certain authors in the later stages of their careers really are less innovative, less aesthetically pleasing or less formally accomplished than what they achieved in earlier periods. It might be that

they are driven out of the limelight as artistic fashions change and critical attention shifts elsewhere. It may simply be a matter of having said all that there is to say. Or it could be a question of sociological positioning: the success of earlier works at the high point of the career peak itself sets up an expectation for what kind of work the author should produce such that to deviate from that expectation is to be found wanting (whereas to meet it is to lay oneself open to the charge of repetition and unoriginality). Authors in the later stages of their careers are often thus in a peculiar kind of double bind. Indeed, the idea of a narrative of decline whereby levels of creative achievement diminish over time is very commonly associated with authorial careers. In this sense the careers of authors are not very different from other kinds of career, where retirement and withdrawal from the workforce give rise to a lowering of both social status and economic power.

What typical decline narratives fail to interrogate, however, is the category of lateness itself. Thus in *On Late Style* (2005), Edward Said argues that certain late-career works of art have a special ability to speak truth to power and hence expound a form of critique with regard to the prevailing social order. This, he argues implicitly, is because artists at such a stage are to some degree insulated against the material pressures associated with building a career in specific institutional contexts so that their status is liberating and allows a degree of outspokenness. However, Charles Rosen suggests that this view gives rise to a number of quite dubious critical judgements on Said's part, such as his evaluation, reached via a reading of Adorno, of Beethoven's last piano sonata (Rosen 2012, 261). Moreover, if Said says much about the *style* of late style, he has less to say about the *lateness* of late style. He identifies various different ways in which a work could be considered 'late', but never marshals these into a systematic programme, so that a casual definition of lateness pervades his thinking despite efforts to consider its different forms. Gordon McMullan and Sam Stiles, by contrast, have presented a number of much more nuanced analyses in *Late Style and its Discontents*

(2016). Its general trend is to liberate the concept of lateness from an unspoken association with biological age and the apprehension by the artists of approaching mortality, and to suggest instead that lateness itself is perhaps better defined as a relational concept, constructed as such through its association with what has come before, with late works then being produced in a range of different specific material and cultural contexts.

Using career construction theory to conceptualise the different stages of an authorial career has the effect of taking this emphasis on materiality even further. This is useful for a number of reasons. First of all it demystifies the status of authorship as such, by treating it as a field with material properties and characteristics just like other careers and disciplines, subject to discernible fluctuations and vicissitudes like any other. As such, it need not be considered a special case. Secondly, career construction employs a dialogic method to construct a narrative trajectory of an individual's career through a synthesis of two distinct timeframes. One of these emphasises continuity and commonality across all the phases of that career; the other identifies discernible stages therein and then considers the distinct properties of each. As we have seen, career construction treats individuals as both characters in their own narrative arc and, crucially, as authors of that narrative, capable of writing the next stage in their life story. Thus periods of career or vocational uncertainty are analogous to experiences of 'writer's block' (Savickas 2011b, 179), which it is the counsellor's business to assist the client in overcoming.

This emphasis on the co-creation of a life story told by the client and related back by the counsellor chimes with much recent scholarship about the category of authorship which has placed increasing emphasis on the collaborative networks and relationships in which all authors are necessarily involved. One of the main points to arise from applying career construction theory to hypothetical discussion of authorial careers is this identification of the importance of collaboration and joint authorship. By the same token, just as the model of 'the

author' is interrogated and altered, so too the different stages that comprise an authorial career turn out to be something other than they first appeared. This is because the different stages that comprise an overall career should not be seen as empty chunks of time but are better understood as the sum total of activities and relationships in which a person is involved during different periods, and to which he or she assigns deep sources of meaning and value. In the case of an author's career, this means that a new stage exists when a new kind of work—or related set of works—begins to be created.

The new way of thinking about career stages has significant implications for how we conceptualise the properties associated with authors' late works. It was noted above that Said theorised a form of material stability for artists at that stage that he believed made possible a degree of outspokenness with regard to the social and political order. This, in his account, gives such works a special critical power. It was also noted however that this sharp theoretical critique is difficult to discern in some of the literary works he discussed. For example, it is not easy to read into Lampedusa's somewhat nostalgic novel *The Leopard* the historical rage against a changing social structure that Said seems to ascribe to it. Part of the problem might be that although it was written when Lampedusa was 61, it was also his first (and only novel) so that the status of the late-career writer, which Said suggests enables vociferous social critique, is not necessarily applicable. To try and avoid this problem, Said moves towards arguing that all works of art in the twentieth century and beyond have an inherent lateness relative to the full depth of prior literary and artistic history, which is also how Giorgio Agamben (2009) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2009) each define the 'contemporary'. To Said, the fact of coming after a long, rich and deep cultural history in itself endows such works with a status and set of properties that earlier works and writers could not have possessed. This perhaps places a useful emphasis on the historical specificity of twentieth-century experience in its relation to what had gone before; and a corresponding emphasis on

what is newly specific to the twenty-first century might also be helpful when considering contemporary writers. However, it also has the unfortunate effect of conflating all those different writers and works that Said associates with an inherent historical belatedness, and then categorising them in a surprisingly ahistorical way.

An alternative means of thinking about the nature of the 'afterwards' in the context of literary careers is generated by Meg Jensen (2018). Drawing on the research of Lynn Hunt and Joseph Slaughter into the relationship between the development of human rights law and the evolution of confessional literary genres such as the *Bildungsroman*, Jensen argues that the material history of the former was strongly inflected by the development of the latter. Specifically, she points out that in a *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist typically progresses from the status of an outsider relative to some social, cultural or moral norm, towards incorporation and acceptance within those norms by sloughing off the experiences, attitudes or characteristics that had previously marked their outsider status. What interests Jensen is the degree to which the same may be said of the history of the development of the discourse of human rights. Here too individuals are brought within the sphere of a legal-political system based partly on the guarantee of rights, partly on the discharging of responsibilities and ultimately on the acceptance of legal and political structures of authority. Those who do not accept such authority therefore avoid acquiescence in the discharging of responsibilities and correspondingly cede (whether willingly or not) a portion of their legal rights.

By drawing attention to this parallel between the histories of the *Bildungsroman* and the discourse of legal rights from the late eighteenth century to the present day, Jensen argues that each 'informed' the development of the other (2018, 68). This sense of interrelation enables her to suggest that the *Bildungsroman* has been the primary literary genre by which art mediates and constructs (as opposed to merely reflecting) a certain legal and political version of the human subject. As she notes, 'Through its relation to rights law ... the

Bildungsroman privileges a certain type of human experience as having universal value and deserving human dignity' (69). In turn, this process of privileging one type of human experience over others had the effect of constituting in a legal sense what it means to be human at all. Human experiences that do not conform to the dominant type are therefore implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—not afforded the same human status and become marginalised. Ethically speaking, this is a troubling realisation for authors, readers and literary scholars because it reveals that literature itself has historically been implicated in the dissemination of a highly differential version of legal equality owing to its complicity with the evolution of human rights discourse, and the selective privileging of some forms of human experience over others.

The main argument of this chapter is that career construction theory uses the methods of storytelling and concepts and models found in literature such as the occupational plot, the narrative arc, the author as protagonist and the creation of new career chapters. If career construction arose by drawing on concepts from literature, this chapter reverses that process, re-applying the concepts from career counselling back to the field of literature. But as the example of human rights discourse indicates, the development of new fields in the wake of literary models is not free from the dominant forms of ideology prevalent in the period when the new development takes place, and in fact it is highly circumscribed by them. In effect the human rights example reveals a tendency, modelled on literary antecedents, to treat all human beings as equal, but some as more equal than others.

Unlike Said's belief that artists late in their careers are relatively free to deliver various forms of critique towards existing sources of authority, Jensen's more nuanced account follows those of Hunt and Slaughter in generating a sociological blueprint of the interrelation between legal discourses and literary genres in which the latter, far from expressing dissent towards the dominant structures of legal and political power, are

incorporated within them. The construction of the sovereign subject depends on the recognition and fulfilment by the individual of certain social expectations based on participation within civil society, so that the sovereign subject turns out to be highly social in nature. Thus the distance between individual and society collapses, and space from which to articulate effective critique of the latter is squeezed out. To the extent that career construction posits the individual subject as sovereign, it too risks limiting forms of collaboration or collective action in opposition to a given socio-economic order. Can it be applied to forms of literary analysis in a way that avoids this squeezing out of the social?

Career Construction and the Construction of the Subject: From Individual to Social

On the surface, it might seem that career construction is a practice implicated in the construction of the bourgeois individual Western subject in the same ways that human rights discourse and the *Bildungsroman* are both also implicated. In each case, the sovereign subject is interpellated as such on behalf of structures of social and political authority which ironically offer to guarantee forms of liberty and equality. Indeed, were it the case that career construction practitioners were only ever concerned to enhance the benefit of their individual clients *as* individuals, this might vitiate the capacity of the field to evoke meaningful social contribution.

In an endeavour to address this limiting approach to constructing individual careers, N. Mkhize suggests that the 'the notion of an object, sovereign self' should be 'rejected' by career counsellors, in favour of 'a relational stance to the object of one's knowledge' which in the context of career counselling 'may involve active attempts to change the plight of those who may be less fortunate than us' (2011, 97). Jean Guichard, Jacques Pouyaud and Bernadette Dumora go even further, pointing out that individualistic approaches to career counselling 'could appear to be progress for those who have a margin of choice, but could

constitute social regression and thus a psychological ordeal for vulnerable workers who are placed in the paradoxical situation of being made to feel responsible for their own career path over which in fact they have no control' (2011, 70). This leads them to doubt whether the imbrication of vocational guidance with individual self-management, which has been the dominant paradigm in the West, is sufficient to equip humanity to face the major challenges of today such as economic and environmental crises, the rise of the precariat, large-scale economic and political migration and an increase in fundamentalism. They thus conclude by asking: 'Should we not accept that the individual's reflection about his/her development goes beyond mere self-concern and includes concern for the other?' (ibid.).

This discussion illustrates one key point: that whether career construction exists primarily to elicit capacity for self-improvement at a strictly individual level, or whether it can devise a means for marrying individual aspiration to social contribution, remains an open question. One means of combining personal fulfilment with a wider common purpose is to reflect on the kinds of contribution that an individual can meaningfully make given their available range of skills, experiences, interests and aptitudes. In this final section of the chapter, this idea of reflection, and more specifically, of critical self-reflection, will be brought to bear upon the type of work authors tend to produce during the later stages of their careers (where *later* is again defined in the relational sense outlined above).

Within career construction research, Hazel Reid has identified a distinction between reflection on action, reflection in action, and reflection for action—where each of these can be seen as gradations within a continuum of ascending degrees of self-criticality (2011, 106). An enhanced capacity for self-awareness or critical self-consciousness need not be a function of age or even of experience, but the pattern of behaviours associated with self-reflection typically takes the form of a cycle. It begins with an action that somebody has performed and then that person evaluates the action in order to find ways to improve similar actions in the

future. Thus the distinction between reflection on a given action or intervention and reflection for action is that the former takes a mainly remedial approach to the correction of error, whereas the latter overhauls the dichotomy between success and error and creates constant opportunities for improvement as an end in its own right.

What Reid's tripartite model of reflection on, in and for action does not encompass, however, is the possibility of seeing reflection *as* a form of action in and for itself. Yet critical self-reflection as an activity in its own right, rather than as a stage in the evolution of other actions, appears most germane to a consideration of the work produced by authors during the later stages of their careers. This may be because, as we have seen, few authors consciously retire from writing and instead appear vocationally impelled to continue producing new works and new forms of work as if to improve upon, or at the very least supplement, what they have already done. To put it another way, because it is a creative calling, the vocational aspect of the career means that authors are often more attached to their *next* piece of work than to any *previous* work, even in cases where a previous work has been well received. Genette goes as far as to suggest that from among an author's entire oeuvre, his or her own 'preference' naturally 'inclines' towards those works least valued by critics, audiences or the reading public (1997, 255).

Career construction theory emphasises that what constitutes success for an individual at one stage in their career is not necessarily the same as what constitutes success at another. For authors, this implies that the definition of good work is not itself a given, but is highly provisional and subject to continual modification and redefinition through a process of self-reflection as a new form of creative intervention. Or, writing new work at a later stage may be considered successful by the author if it represents the adoption of new aesthetic values that he or she did not hold earlier on, so that the criteria for measuring the qualitative value of the work varies at different career stages. This chapter therefore adumbrates the modest idea

of self-reflection and self-criticality as forms of aesthetic innovation that are more likely to arise in the latter stages of an authorial career. Authors in those stages can be described as evincing an ongoing concern with the conditions of authorship in general, and with their own authorial practice in particular—so much so that late-career works are often identifiable by their deployment of a specific form of metafiction, as authors build so many fictional avatars for themselves into their work, specifically in order to be able to reflect on it. This form of reflection-as-action is notable, for example, in Angela Carter's final novel, *Wise Children* (1991); in V.S. Naipaul's last works *Half a Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004); and in the later work of Ian McEwan, especially *Sweet Tooth* (2012).

There are four different ways in which late-career authors practice reflection-as-action in their writing. First there is the retrospective self-commentary, in which the author reviews his or her writing so far in the form of essays or articles written about specific works. Typically these are written in the form of a new introduction to a work that was published years earlier, possibly heralding the publication of a re-issue or a new edition, or marking a landmark occasion such as an anniversary. Genette variously refers to these as 'later' prefaces (1997, 239), or, in cases where authors feel it will constitute their own last word on the original work, as 'delayed' prefaces (247). A.S. Byatt's self-commentary in the 1991 introduction to her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), is a good example, as is Graham Swift's introduction to the 25th anniversary edition (2008) of his novel *Waterland* (1993). On the other hand, there is no *a priori* reason why retrospective self-commentary need be addressed to specific works, or to creative work as such. V.S. Naipaul's penultimate book *A Writer's People* (2007) represented a belated summation of his commitment to the world of writing per se, rather than to any particular work within it. Jonathan Dollimore's *Desire: A Memoir* (2017) is more concerned with the life than with the writing, but retains the suggestion that certain key episodes in the former were crucial parts of the writer's

intellectual formation and therefore are not entirely extricable from the critical, non-fictional works for which he became known.

It has by now become a commonplace observation within biographical and autobiographical studies that the easy distinction between purportedly factual genres such as biography and criticism, and purportedly imaginative ones such as fiction, is not in practice as clear-cut as it seems. This is partly because, as the example of Dollimore's account of his intellectual formation shows, for a writer, writing about one's life is to some extent bound up with writing about one's own writing as well. In other words, the distinction between fact and fiction does not necessarily hold at the level of content. By the same token, neither does that distinction easily hold at the level of form. The second general category for forms of writing in which writers late in their careers carry out the process of reflection-as-action on their earlier work is that which Heather Kerr (1995) has termed *fictocriticism.* Here, the writer engages in the retrospective self-commentary of specific works as mentioned above, but often in a loosely imaginative and creative way (as opposed to the scrupulous analytical rigour associated with literary research and scholarship). Gillian Clarke's re-imaging of herself as a mythic avatar of Shakespeare's Cordelia, first in the narrative poem *The King of Britain's Daughter* (1993) and subsequently in a different form in the memoir *At the Source: A Writer's Year* (2008), are clear examples of this fictocritical practice.

A third form of late-career reflection-as-action, and a natural complement to Kerr's fictocriticism, is the recently emerging genre of autofiction, which arose in France in the 1970s through the work of Serge Doubrovsky and which has latterly been gaining momentum in the English-speaking world both as an object of analysis and a subject of fictional practice. In autofiction, authors effectively create fictionalised autobiographies. That is, they narrate memories, incidents, events and relationships that are empirically true. But whereas biographies and autobiographies tend to adhere to the semblance of verifiable factual

accuracy, autofiction uses the experimental techniques of modernist writing, foregrounding the gaps and aporia that exist in memory and hence its fundamentally flawed nature and overall unreliability. This means that writing autofiction is often tantamount to a process of trying to remember, and of assigning emotional significance and meaning to what is remembered. Autofictions are so many self-reflective quests for truth, but the truths that emerge are of a symbolic, provisional and unstable nature, rather than the kinds of factual information we would find in a reference book or encyclopaedia. There is no necessary reason why autofiction should arise late in the author's life as defined by biological age, but autofictions tend either to be written in the aftermath of some traumatic experience or simply after a period of time has elapsed between what is narrated and the act of narrating. For this reason, autofictions are often delayed (in Gerard Genette's sense of the term): they are primary written works in their own right, but there is a mimetic gap between them and the events they represent. The 'repositioning' of 'the relation between the self and the fiction' (Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 33) is a feature of Jeanette Winterson's oeuvre, with John Burnside's 'serial forms of self-expression' (Menn 2018, 165) of different fictionalised episodes from his empirical life being another prominent contemporary example.

Finally, there is a specific form of fictional self-retrospect that is sometimes to be found in literary texts produced by authors late in their careers. No critical term has yet been coined for such works, but they could accurately be described as late-career metafictions. Typically in such works, authors revisit themes, structures, events or even techniques that they had already employed in works produced earlier in their career and for which they are probably better known. However, it is not merely a question of revisiting or simple repetition. What is distinctive about such works is the addition of a newly critical authorial self-awareness to the existing forms and themes. Such critical self-awareness is both enabled and demonstrated by embedding within the text so many avatars for the author function. The

typical protagonists portrayed in late-career metafictions are often characters who are themselves authors, storytellers, filmmakers, artists, letter writers or others whose fictional vocations enable the flesh-and-blood author to inscribe within their construction a whole series of explorations into the role and nature of authorship. This is why, just as so many debut novels evince a philosophical concern with the question of what it means to be an author (and often explore the environment and conditions in which the practice of authorship occurs), so too late-career metafictions are concerned to explore those same questions from a different career standpoint. For example, in A.S. Byatt's novel *The Children's Book* (2009), many of the themes and interests portrayed bespeak a widespread continuity with the works produced earlier in Byatt's oeuvre. Adding to those interests a protagonist whose vocation also happens to be that of a storyteller elevates the work into a profoundly metatextual orbit whereby, rather than merely repeating what has gone before, Byatt meditates on her role in the creative process and uses that meditation as the basis for further creation. A similar point may be made about Graham Swift's novel *Wish You Were Here* (2011) with regard to his earlier and better-known works. The concerns with vocation, domestic tragedy, memory and nostalgia that have been recurring preoccupations throughout Swift's career as a novelist are again represented, with the addition of a metafictional component through which Swift is able to insert a quasi-author figure into the work and hence apply the process of reflection-as-action to the task of creating a new and distinctive metafictional work.

Conclusion

This chapter commenced by suggesting that for some authors, the works written late in their careers have tended either to receive less critical interest than works from the earlier or middle stages of their careers, or to be more negatively received than them. Clearly it is not an assumption that holds true in every case or in every branch of the arts. Indeed, it may be a

more significant phenomenon in literature than in music, for example, where the very late works are often taken to have a special significance. But there is sufficient critical evidence to suggest that it is a fairly common situation in the literary arts, specifically fiction.

Having suggested this general tendency within literature, the chapter identified a series of possible career trajectories, mapping varying levels of success over the course of a writer's career. It drew extensively on career construction theory to argue that the different stages comprising a career should not be seen as discrete chunks of time, but rather as series of works produced over time, which relate to each other in a thematic, stylistic or aesthetic way. The natural implication of this is that the stages are non-linear and non-successive: over the same period of time, authors might be involved in work associated with qualitatively different stages of their careers.

This emphasis on the qualitative paved the way for the second main argument of the chapter, again derived from career construction theory as implemented by practising vocational guidance counsellors, which is that the definition of good work is itself apt to vary over time. As such, the definition of success has to be actively constructed anew each time a new career stage is entered into. Since for authors to enter a new career stage often entails writing a new work, or a new set of related works, this has the implication that how we evaluate the success of such work is particular to it. If we looked for the same qualities in qualitatively different kinds of work, we would inevitably judge some more negatively than others and very often this would be because we would be looking in later work for a repeat of the same qualities that we found in an earlier work, and failing to find them. This might explain why late-career works have so often been misjudged. It also suggests that works from one stage of the author's career might be more effectively evaluated if we look for different qualities in them.

Finally, the chapter has drawn on career construction theory to argue that one of the important ways by which people achieve satisfaction in their working life is by generating fundamental sources of value and meaning for themselves through their work. Very often this entails using that work to make a wider social contribution. Thus it was argued that one of the properties that often characterises late-career writers is their tendency to engage in a form of fictional self-reflection on the work they have already undertaken. In effect this endows late-career works with a metafictional dimension that is particular to them and could not be possible in earlier works where there is no element of reflection. At the same time, as the discussion of career construction theory has sought to demonstrate, critical reflection of this kind entails not merely looking back at the works the individual author has written, but also to their capacity to imagine forms of collective action, to heighten the collective critical or political consciousness, and to express forms of social solidarity. Since the form of metafiction associated with late-career fiction of this kind elevates the practice of self-reflection from an individual to a social plane, I suggest that late-career works bespeak an ethical commitment to identifying exactly what happens when individual interest and collective commitment merge.

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