

# Transformational Texts: Genre, Discourse and Subjectivity in the Self-Help Book

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## Abstract

This research used selected structuralist and post-structuralist theory to investigate the notions of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the contemporary self-help book. It argues that these texts have links with classical and modern ethics of optimum living and are predicated on an ontology of transformative possibility which is expressed through typical rhetorical strategies. Furthermore, that the publications are a significant element in the therapeutic discourse prevalent in contemporary society. It suggests that as well as being a highly successful commodity, the self-help book is theoretically remarkable for two reasons. Firstly it operates as a redemptive paradigm for the reader; secondly it is an 'actantial' genre because each text participates as a 'protagonist' in the 'heroic' narrative of transformation which it articulates. Furthermore a self/subject dyad inhabits the genre because while advice literature is predicated on a humanistic discourse of essential, *telic* selfhood, critical analysis detects the underlying dynamics of socially-constructed subjectivity. Three levels of subject activity in the self-help book are distinguished: *sub-stratum* (ontological level of humanistic assumptions), *inter-stratum* (archetypal level: the reader as 'hero'; the book as 'helper' etc.) and *super-stratum* (the level of every-day matters). The research concludes that the self-help book is a paradoxical phenomenon for the cultural theorist because it asserts the survival of personal agency in the postmodern episteme which has seen the discrediting of grand narratives and the decentring of the human subject. Additionally, the lexicon of genre studies is extended by the coining of new terms to better describe the emergence of 'symbiotic' commercial materials and a generic twelve-step sequence of discourse emergence is also offered. This traces the discourse of post-traumatic stress from its diffuse beginnings to its present linguistic entrenchment in commercial publications. The research is thus original at two levels: it provides a detailed exploration of the self-help book *qua* text and extends the reach of critical theory.

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## Introduction

### Aims

This research uses selected structuralist and post-structuralist theory to investigate issues of genre, discourse and subjectivity in relation to the contemporary self-help book. It focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the cultural matrix of the contemporary self-help book?
2. To what extent is this genre part of the 'therapeutic turn' which some commentators detect in contemporary society?
3. What kind of discursive strategies are characteristically used to promote personal transformation in the reader?
4. How is the self-help book a theoretically distinctive genre as well as being a commercially successful one?
5. How do demotic assumptions about essential selfhood and the critical notion of constructed subjectivity coexist within the genre?
6. To what extent may the self-help book be considered a typical postmodern phenomenon?

Clearly, the phenomenon of self-help discourse is not confined to real or virtual books. Indeed it has become a pervasive preoccupation of Western society which is channelled through a variety of media such as television, radio and the World Wide Web. There are many support groups, blogs and agony columns. However, the present research focuses mainly on printed texts available through bookshops because this parameter makes it possible to isolate significant structural aspects of genre, discourse and subjectivity more securely for discussion and also facilitates the provision of exemplary material.

## Originality of the Thesis

This thesis is original in its approach because it treats self-help books *qua* texts for critical analysis rather than primarily as a social, historical or psychological phenomenon that is not worthy of close theoretically-informed study. In so doing, it makes a number of original points which are summarised here.

Firstly, that the self-help genre is predicated on a fundamental 'ontology of transformative possibility' which is expressed through diverse discursive strategies in individual publications. Furthermore, that it has contextual links with classical and modern ideologies of self-determination and 'optimum living'.

Secondly, that the genre is unique in theoretical terms because each self-help book operates as an 'actant, that is as an active participant, in the narrative of reader-transformation which it articulates.

Thirdly, that a remarkable self/subject dyad permeates the genre. This is because the discourse of un-problematized 'self-hood' (albeit with personal issues) is the domain of readers and writers, reflecting the essentialist and universalising values of liberal humanism. Meanwhile the simultaneous dynamics of socially-constructed subjectivity can clearly be discerned by the critical theorist.

Fourthly, that there are 3 levels of subjective activity in self-help books: *substratum* (the ontological level); *inter-stratum* (the archetypal level); and *super-stratum* (the contingent, epistemological level).

Finally, that inasmuch as it maintains traditional humanist values of essential selfhood, progress and the possibility of personal agency in the post-modern episteme which has seen the discrediting of grand narratives and the decentring of the human subject, the self-help book constitutes a paradoxical phenomenon for the critical theorist.

But in addition to the above findings about matters specifically pertaining to the notions of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book, several unanticipated and more generally applicable critical insights emerged, as explained below.

Firstly, it was observed that commercially successful self-help publications like *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* (Jeffers 1987), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey 1989), *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray 2002) and *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) generate a penumbra of 'symbiotic' texts which can be characterised as 'peri-genres' and 'para-genres'. The terms 'symbiotic text', 'peri-genre' and 'para-genre' are coined in this thesis to denote distinct groups of materials, often commercially realised, which are generated and 'nourished' by an original source text, eventually becoming a distinctive phenomenon in their own right (see Chapter 6, The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre below). Likewise, the term 'granulation' has been introduced here as a metaphor to describe the way in which a new discourse gradually 'precipitates' into demotic consciousness. Furthermore, the term 'ontosphere' has been coined to denote the notional space in which certain 'givens' about what is real operate among certain communities. For example, the readers of self-help books assume that there really is a true self which can be transformed for the better. However critical theorists would beg to differ (see Chapter 7, The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-help Book, below). It is considered that the above coinages facilitate the discussion of generic phenomena and that therefore they usefully extend the lexicon of critical theory.

Secondly, as a result of the preparatory work for this thesis, twelve steps were distinguished in the emergence and 'granulation' of a new discourse. The notions of addiction and post-traumatic stress, which are the subject of much self-help literature, serve as the main examples here (see Chapter 4, Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn, below). However it is considered that this sequence of discourse emergence can be mapped to a greater or lesser extent onto other discourses. Therefore this structure is considered to be a generically significant contribution to discourse studies.



Thirdly, as a result of tracing the sequence of discursive change described above, three mechanisms which bring about linguistic transformation were identified and named: 'renovation', 'neologism' and 'democratisation' (see Chapter 4 Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn, below).

Fourthly, the processes of collocation and separation which are fundamental to any act of classification, not just a study of genre such as the present one, were reified using the organisation of a supermarket's stock for illustration (see Appendix D, Issues of Classification: The Supermarket, below). This allowed the inescapable yet problematic issues of 'hospitality' and 'separation' to be observed more clearly.

The above findings were not anticipated in the original research questions. However, since it is considered that they make an original contribution to the discourse of critical theory, they are recorded here.

### **Primary Subject Matter**

Sometimes called 'popular psychology', 'personal growth' or 'body mind and spirit' books in shops and the media, self-help texts are defined in this thesis as "books which help an individual improve, modify or otherwise understand his or her physical or personal characteristics" (Katz 1985: xv). They are characteristically pragmatic rather than literary publications.

Various kinds of self-improvement text were circulating long before a recognisable, self-help *genre* began to crystallise in Britain and America during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Indeed some people might consider the Bible, the second-century CE meditations of the Stoic Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (2006; Irvine 2009), the observations of Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) about how to live prudently in the New World (1982; 1996; 2007), and the European conduct books of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which offered advice about appropriate behaviour in various social situations (particularly for women) to be self-help books (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987; Armstrong 1990; Newton 1994). For they all contain, *inter alia*, some practical suggestions for living more 'effectively'. However more deliberately

prescriptive advice publications than these began to play a significant role in the wider culture of self-development during the Victorian period (Barnes 1995) which also saw the foundation of evening schools, reading rooms, mechanics' institutes and the production of much 'improving' fiction (Rose 2001: 62-69; Cawelti 1965: 46-75; Huber 1971; Neuberg 1977: 192-194; Weiss 1988 Anker 1999; Woodstock 2007). When Samuel Smiles produced *Self-Help* in 1859, he inadvertently named a whole commercial genre and provided a succinct descriptor for such famously enduring titles as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 1936), *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill 1937), *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale 1952) and all the examples of advice literature mentioned in this thesis.

Now self-help books are a mainstay of the contemporary publishing industry in the West and are produced in ever-increasing numbers (Heelas *et al* 2004: 69-70; *Booksales Yearbook* 2004; Whelan 2005; *Bookseller*, 24 January 2006). In July 2004 Amazon.co.uk offered 40,848 items in the category 'books: self-help'. It listed 81,607 such publications in August 2009 and 121,671 in August 2010. Currently there are 137,760 items in this section of the store (May 2011). Even though some of these are duplicate editions, the genre's continuing popularity is clear. Moreover, as a commercial rather than a theorised, taxonomic category, the class 'self-help book' has elastic boundaries which may sometimes embrace spirituality, new age texts, health publications and even fiction. Indeed, certain novels are among the genre's most remarkable bestsellers: for example *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran (1923), *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield (1994), *The Alchemist* by Paul Coelho (1993), and *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin S. Sharma (2004). Well-established sub-categories within the commercial 'uber-genre' include books on 'anxiety', 'depression', addiction, 'recovery' 'career', 'relationships', 'co-dependency', 'stress', 'positive thinking', 'prosperity' (Santrock 1994; McGee 2005: 195), 'thrifty living' and the so-called 'law of attraction' (see Appendix C: Self-Help Subgenres, below) Meanwhile John C. Parkin's artfully oxymoronic *F\*\*k it: The Ultimate Spiritual Way* (2008) is a hybrid apparently designed to appeal to a wide audience.

As a truly remarkable cultural and commercial phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century, the self-help book has attracted the attention of historians, sociologists and bibliographers such as Merrit (2003), Gunnell (2004), Dolby (2005), Salerno (2005) and McGee (2005). Moreover, inasmuch as it may be considered a significant element in the 'new age' engagement with capitalism charted by Redden (2002) and Heelas (2008), the self-help genre is an important contributor to the therapeutic discourse whose praxis (the reflexive relationship between ideology, conventions and lexicon) has come to inform the current episteme at many levels (Curtis 2002; Furedi 2004). Thus Ecclestone and Hayes write:

One feature of the [contemporary] ethos is an exponential extension of counselling, psychoanalysis and psychology into more areas of social and political life, policy and professional practice [which offers] a new sensibility, a form of cultural script, a set of explanations and underlying assumptions about appropriate feelings and responses to events, and a set of associated practices and rituals through which people make sense of themselves and others (Ecclestone and Hayes 2008: x).

This demotic therapeutic discourse, predicated on the humanistic notion of an essential, autonomous and telic 'self' (Porter 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 1999; see also Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, below) which can be 'helped' or developed, can be seen to have survived and indeed flourished alongside a decline in religious practice (Reiff 1986: 48-65) and the growth of secularisation (Beckford 2003: 30-72) during the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time as traditional ethics were to some extent retreating, issues of subjective well-being were being increasingly discussed (Heelas 1996; Heelas *et al* 2005: 49-76; Foley 2010), not least in self-help books, whose *raison d'être* is to make confident assertions about personal agency and individual entitlement (Seligman 2007: 27-29). The extent of the genre's coverage can be seen in Tucker-Ladd's bibliography (un-annotated) of self-help books (<http://www.psychologicalselfhelp.org/>, accessed 24 March 2011). Likewise, Butler-Bowdon's series of annotated bibliographies, though superficially descriptive rather than theoretically-informed, provides a useful record of outstandingly popular texts (Butler-Bowdon 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008). Amazon.co.uk produces an occasional 'Guide to Self-Help Books' (<http://www.books4selfhelp.com/top-20.htm>, accessed 16 March 2011) and there are

numerous anecdotal 'personal selections' on the Net and in the press (e.g. Merritt 2003; *Liverpool Daily Post* 2001; Gunnell 2004). Clearly there are thousands of self-help books in print, and numerous items are referred to during this thesis. But 15 famous bestsellers which are often mentioned in the popular press are listed here to show the variety of material which the genre is able to accommodate. Appendix A, Case Study Texts, below provides full publication details about these items, together with some textual extracts to indicate the stylistic variations between them and some meta-commentary for each one which shows the reception they received. The rationale behind the selection of primary texts and various types of supporting material is further discussed in Chapter 1: On Methodology, below.

**Indicative list of 15 'star' self-help books with original publication dates  
(see Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below for full details)**

- Byrne, Rhonda (2006) *The Secret*  
Canfield, Jack and Hansen, Mark Victor (1993) *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories that Restore Your Faith in Human Nature*  
Carlson, Richard (1997) *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff ... and It's All Small Stuff*  
Carnegie, Dale (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*  
Covey, Stephen R. (1989) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*  
Dyer, Dr Wayne W. (1976) *Your Erroneous Zones: Escape Negative Thinking and Take Control of Your Life*  
Gray, John (1992) *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*  
Jeffers, Susan (1987) *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*  
Norwood, Robin (1985) *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change*  
Robbins, Anthony (1991) *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny*  
Peck, M. Scott (1978) *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*  
Seligman, Martin E.P. (1993) *What You Can change ... And What You Can't*  
Smiles, Samuel (1859) *Self Help: The Art of Achievement*  
Peale, Norman Vincent (1952) *The Power of Positive Thinking*  
Tolle, Eckhart (1999) *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*

### **Literature Review: Secondary, Tertiary and 'Quaternary' Material**

There is little written academically about self-help books as primary texts for critical analysis. Early studies tend to be descriptive rather than theoretical (Starker 1989; Santrock 1994), while others (Cawelti 1988; Dolby 2005; McGee 2005; Whelan 2005; Mur Effing 2009) focus on extrinsic issues like sociology, economics and ideology, not close reading and textual 'intrinsic' like genre, subjectivity and discourse as is the case here. Various sociologists and historians refer to self-help books in passing as an element in the contemporary therapeutic discourse which has suffused popular culture (Lasch 1979; Cushman 1995; James 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 1999; Hazelden 2003; Furedi 2004; Pearsall 2005). Illouz (2008) looks at the diffusion of psychoanalytic discourse into advertising and self-help literature, Redden (2002) deals with self-help as a market force, Heelas (2008) discusses it in the context of spirituality and Ehrenreich (2010) critiques the cult of positive thinking. Askehave (2004) provides brief textual analysis.

Meanwhile, although the comparatively recent school of Positive Psychology (Seligman 2002; Keynes and Haidt 2003; Layard 2005; Haidt 2006) is concerned with 'well-being' rather than psychopathology, and thus examines the strategies which people use in order to 'flourish', it mentions self-help books only in passing and not as primary textual material for semiotic attention. Wilson and Cash (2000) examine public attitudes towards self-help books, while Bergsman (2008) notes how self-help books 'popularise' insights from psychological science, drawing particularly on the work of the Positive Psychologists. But his analysis of fifty-seven best-sellers in the Netherlands concentrates on the *aims* of self-help books rather than their discursive characteristics, concluding that while these publications may be the most accessible source advice for their readers, they are not necessarily the most reliable. Whelan's PhD (2005) investigates the production and consumption of self-help texts and Lee (1999; 2002) focuses on the psychological approach to spirituality which some offer. Redden (2003) deals with selfhood and New Age ideology, Swan (2003) looks at personal development practitioners and their relationships with clients, while Neville (2004) is concerned with popular psychology and ethical strategies. Meanwhile, Scott Cherry's thesis (2009a) offers an ethnographic study which examines how the term 'self-help'

may be applied both to a set of publications and to various practical group activities such as workshops. In particular he notes the paradox within the term 'self-help' which, on the one hand, connotes the presence of an autonomous agent, and on the other connotes a reliance on others to facilitate the process of 'helping'.

Some self-help authors themselves reflect briefly on the origins of their genre (e.g. Hodgkinson 1993; Santrock 1994; Gillooly 1996). However they tend uncritically to reproduce popular myths, for example about the American pioneering spirit, and do not theorise their texts. Self-help literature is mentioned by popular commentators such as Wheen (2004) and Salerno (2005) and there have been a number of satirical responses such as Marinaccio (1994), Buckely and Tierney (1998), Beaton (1999); Tied (2001), Hochberg (2003), Ferguson (2002) and Chandler and Kay (2004). Other publications combine *mimesis* and critique: for example *Sloth* by Wasserstein (2005), *Positive MEinforcement* by Peiken (2006), *National Lampoon Help* by Rubin (2007) and *How to be a Successful Bastard* by Maille (2009). The effectiveness of all such 'responsive' texts depends upon their authors' careful analysis of the self-help genre's distinguishing features; a process which is satirically anatomized by Chandler and Kay (2004) in *How an Idiot Writes a Self-Help Book*. Meanwhile Stine (1997) suggests genuinely pragmatic strategies for would-be self-help authors gleaned from her experience as an editor, thereby providing a useful checklist of signifying practices commonly found in the genre. However she is not a textual critic.

Some of this non-scholarly commentary is further referenced below in this thesis because the present research is situated within the field of Cultural Studies which investigates world-views (Barker 2002: 2-7) and examines practices and meanings (Hall 1997: 2-7; Smith 2001:5). 'Responsive' texts such as the popular publications mentioned above are therefore considered to be a justifiable 'quaternary' source of information inasmuch as they complement more conventional primary sources, secondary critiques and commentary and tertiary reference material such as dictionaries and handbooks. The phrase 'quaternary sources of information' is coined in this thesis to distinguish demotic commentary from the traditionally sources used in research whose function is discussed at the following sites: University of Maryland Libraries (n.d): <http://www.lib.umd.edu/guides/primary-sources.html>

and Finnish Institutions (2010): <http://www.uta.fi/FAST/FIM/RESEARCH/sources.html> (accessed 17 March 2011).

In addition to reviewing material which touched upon the notion of self-help in various ways and examining past and present ethics of 'optimum living', preparation for this thesis also involved engaging with the theoretical debate which surrounds the notions of 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity'. Therefore chapters begin with some consideration of relevant historical, philosophical, social and critical sources in order to situate and stabilise the subsequent discussion. Additionally the work of Selden (1989), Strinati (1995), Green and LeBihan (1996) Smith (2001), Barker (2002) and Storey (2010) is gratefully acknowledged here because their anthologies of seminal theoretical texts and critical responses made it possible to discern a critical canon, thus helping to inform the necessary preliminary decisions about what issues and authorities would merit subsequent detailed attention within the parameters of this research.

### **The Issue of the URL**

A significant number of the resources referenced in this thesis originate from the Internet. Therefore, although their details are recorded in the bibliography alongside printed materials, their URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) have been retained in the main body of the document. This is because it is likely that at some point this material will be transmitted electronically and so it seems appropriate to give the reader of the virtual text the option to go directly to the electronic sources.

### **Methods of Investigation: The Flexible Case Study**

This part of the introduction briefly describes the methodological background to the present case-study of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book. Thereafter Chapter 1, On Methodology, below acknowledges some of the methodological problems common to all research.

The findings presented in this thesis have resulted from the heuristic (investigative) and hermeneutic (interpretative) use of selected structural and post-structural theory to inform an empirical investigation of best-selling Western self-help books on personal transformation published mostly during the second half of the twentieth century to the present. As an in-depth qualitative investigation of a notable contemporary social phenomenon in its context, namely the commercially successful contemporary self-help book, the present research constitutes a 'case study'. For according to Yin (1994: 3, 13), a case study may be both descriptive and explanatory and may examine a single source or multiple sources of evidence (cf. Kleinig and Witt 2001). However it must be based on clear theoretical foundations which guide data collection and analysis (see Chapter 1, On Methodology, below). Vallis and Tierney (1999) Pegram (2007) and Gerring (2006) endorse the usefulness of this flexible research approach when seeking information on cultural phenomena, as do Mills *et al* (2010) in their exhaustive work of reference on case study methodology and Gomm and Hammersley (2000: 259-270) in their annotated bibliography. Meanwhile Patton (1990: 169) advises that it is important to select informative and rich examples for study in depth. Therefore the present research includes detailed examination of certain selected texts (see Chapter 5, Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, and Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below).

The systematic yet non-standardised case study has been much used in political, sociological and business studies which involve the observation of a single subject such as an "event, a culture or ... an individual life" (Runyan 1984: 121) resulting in a description and interpretation of a defined phenomenon which adds to previous knowledge. Of more specific relevance to the present textually-focused work are the genre-based case studies produced for example by Palmer (1978; 1991), Cobley (2000) and Dowd and Eckerle (2007): theorists who respectively take the thriller, the pot-boiler, the American thriller and women's life writing as their subject matter. Furthermore, the utilisation of broad and narrow research *foci* to produce contextualised knowledge is advocated by Coupland and Jaworski (2001: 134), Fairclough (1992a: 1-11) and Cobley (2001c:184). These authorities suggest that in order to understand discourse in action it is necessary to consider both language use on particular occasions and the social, historic and economic practices from which it emerges (cf. Hodge and Kress 1993: 5; Fowler *et al* 1979; Fairclough 1992a;



Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Van Dijk 2010). This is because the creation of any message (not least those in self-help books) entails socially-constrained decisions about what content should be included, what excluded, and how the material should be arranged (Cobley 2001c:145). Therefore, the present qualitative research into the theoretically distinctive characteristics of the self-help book as a site of signifying practice and matrix of subjectivity begins with a number of contextualising chapters which situate the genre historically, philosophically and socially in order to inform the discussion which follows and support the arguments which conclude the thesis.

However 'case studies' are sometimes criticised on the grounds of subjectivity and lack of controls (Runyan 1984: 124). Nevertheless, Runyan believes that the application of selected theoretical frameworks to qualitative data, such as 'life stories' or clinical case histories, can reveal significant patterns in behaviour and between phenomena such as similarities, differences, oppositions and 'family resemblances': the latter phrase having been employed by Wittgenstein (2001) to explain how phenomena may be connected by means of more than one feature, even though no one feature is common to *every* item in the notional group. As Ragin and Becker (1992:1) note: "Implicit in most social science notions of case analysis is the idea that the objects of investigation are similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon. This assumption underlies the present work on the self-help book. Clearly the genre embraces diverse subject matter and approaches. But it has been possible to show how a number of 'typicalities' related to the critical notions of genre, discourse and subjectivity operate within it.

## Chapter Summaries

This Introduction reflects upon matters specifically germane to the scope of the present project: such as the decision to adopt the case study method and the selection of source materials. Furthermore, it offers a preliminary over-view of the contemporary self-help book's salient characteristics. However, some methodological issues are intrinsic to the research process *in general* and it was therefore considered that these would benefit from some early attention for the sake of thoroughness (see Chapter 1, On Methodology, below). Thereafter, the second, third and fourth chapters, in different ways, seek to contextualise the contemporary phenomenon of the self-help book in preparation for the theoretically-informed discussions in chapters five, six and seven which make frequent reference to the historic and current social forces which shape behaviour and communication.

Thus Chapter 2, 'Provenance': From the Puritan Legacy to the Culture of Narcissism, below examines some of the religious and secular ethics which have left their mark in today's self-help publications and is primarily concerned with the effects of prescriptive ideology. It notes that many self-help publications are American in origin and discusses the lingering influence of the American Puritan legacy, the discursive effects of Revivalism and the Transcendental movement, the internalisation of the pioneering spirit in the American Dream, the 'narcissistic turn' which some commentators detect in today's society and the 'quest' meme which is realised in the imperative towards self-development which is articulated in self-help books.

Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, is less concerned with historical issues but complements the previous chapter by considering the metaphysical matrix from which the notion of personal agency has emerged. Although it observes that the self-help phenomenon is necessarily *telic* and predicated on the assumption that people are entitled to make choices about their life, it is not an exploration of free will *per se*, nor is the discussion located in a particular ideological arena. Rather the intention is to stress that whether people make their choices for good or ill, the assumption that they are entitled to shape their lives as they wish is a

comparatively recent emergence to which self-help literature has enthusiastically responded. Yet ironically, at a time when there are more opportunities for personal '*bricolage*' than ever before, at least in the West, there is some evidence that too much choice can undermine people's sense of well-being. Therefore it is suggested that people hold tenaciously to the small narratives of personal experience which are communicated in demotic discourse in order to experience some sense of closure and control in their lives, even as metanarratives disintegrate around them. Furthermore, that deciding to purchase a self-help book is one of the ways in which they can engage with the discourse of self-development and at least appear to assert some control, however circumscribed that might be. Thus whereas Chapter 2 looked particularly at some of the historical, notably American, antecedents of the self-help book as a phenomenon, this one deals with the metaphysical emergence of the implied readership.

Both Chapter 4, Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn and Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below, deal with discursive activity in regard to the self-help book. However, the first examines the relationship mainly at a 'macro' level and the second mainly at a 'micro' level; this distinction having been adopted as a heuristic stratagem in order to facilitate systematic discussion. After reviewing some theoretical notions of 'discourse' to examine mechanisms of acceptance and power, Chapter 4 suggests that the discourse of self-help is not always benevolent because it can encourage people to define themselves by their problems. Furthermore, it identifies the self-help book as a contributory element in the wider therapeutic discourse which a number of commentators now detect in contemporary society. Having noted that any field of discourse activity, not least in the area of self-development, is always going to fluctuate, it distinguishes three critical mechanisms by which a particular lexicon may be expanded: 'renovation', 'neologism' and 'democratisation'. The notions of 'addiction', 'co-dependence' and 'Positive Psychology', which are the subject matter of many self-help books, are used for illustration. Thereafter, this chapter proposes a twelve-step sequence of discourse emergence, basing the model on the phenomenon of 'post-traumatic stress' which is now a significant topic for the self-help market. It is argued that this sequence can be mapped, to a greater or lesser extent, on to any area of discourse. Therefore this

chapter not only offers information about the social and cultural matrix from which self-help publications emerge, but also extends the discourse of critical theory itself by introducing three new terms and a new structure for understanding the process of discursive change.

Chapter 5, *Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade*, continues to focus on discourse but deals with some of the characteristic tropes found in self-help books themselves. It firstly identifies the 'persuasive imperative' which all these publications share, regardless of topic; secondly explores in more detail the link between narrative and personal reinvention which was touched upon in Chapter 3, *The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual*; and thirdly suggests that the self-help book is a contemporary realisation of the universal 'monomyth', or 'hero's journey' from 'death' to 'rebirth', thereby foreshadowing the more detailed examination of the self-help book as a 'paradigmatic' genre which is a significant part of Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Genre: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre*, below. Finally it offers a close reading and comparison of two famous self-help publications: *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles (1859) and *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2010). This demonstrates how the self-help genre is able to accommodate ideological extremes: notably the 'Apollonian' ethic of discipline and effort and the 'Dionysian' ethic of emotion and mysticism.

Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Genre: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre* firstly acknowledges the challenges of defining the term 'genre' as a theoretical notion before examining how the self-help book operates as a generic phenomenon in the market-place. It then shows how the structuralist insights of Vladimir Propp, his disciple and critic Algirdas Greimas and the script consultant Christopher Vogler make it possible to discern a deep paradigmatic structure in the self-help book beneath the commercially-responsive surface variables of topic and approach. Finally it argues that the self-help book is a special kind of genre because it participates as an 'actant' in the narrative of transformation which it articulates. That is, it plays the role of helper and guide to the reader.

Chapter 7, The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book complements the text-oriented observations made in the previous chapter by further examining the role of the reader as subject, thereby revealing a paradoxical 'dyad' at the heart of the genre. This is because although each publication is predicated on the traditional notion of an essential 'self' which can be helped to live a more satisfactory life, theoretically-informed analysis reveals three *strata* of 'a-personal' subjective activity. These are the *super-stratum* (epistemological), *inter-stratum* (archetypal) and *sub-stratum* (ontological). It concludes that the self-help book can be considered a postmodern paradox because, whilst it paradigmatically maintains the teleological, liberal-humanist grand narrative of essential self-hood, in praxis it participates in the restless ethos of postmodern subjectivity which is characterised by narcissism, anxiety, fantasy, desire and entitlement.

The Conclusion revisits the research questions and summarises the main findings. It also distinguishes the ways in which this thesis makes a contribution to knowledge and suggests possibilities for future study.

The Bibliography lists material mentioned in the text or directly cited and uses the Harvard Method. Electronic sources are listed both here and in the main body of the text. This is because it is anticipated that the thesis may at some time be read in electronic form.

The Appendices provide additional illustrative material to support the points being made in the body of the thesis.

## Chapter Functions

As the chapter summaries above indicate, this thesis begins with contextualising materials before focusing on the specific issues of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book. Therefore, inasmuch as this research has taken a panoramic approach to its subject of investigation, some topics are mentioned in more than one place in the text. However each chapter has been designed to have a particular function in the thesis and these are distinguished as follows in the table below:

M = Methodological material which establishes the research parameters

C = Contextual material providing historical, social and cultural background

D = Descriptive material involving close reading of selected primary texts

S = Summative material containing theoretically-supported arguments

C = Concluding matter revisiting the research questions

R = References

I = Additional illustrative material (Appendices)

Chapter Functions		
Introduction	M	Aims. Working definition of the self-help book. Research questions. Originality of the thesis. Primary subject matter. Literature review: secondary, tertiary and 'quaternary' material. The case study method. Chapter summaries. Chapter functions. The self-help book today.
Chapter 1 On Methodology	M	Discussion of research strategies. Methodological problems: e.g. the hermeneutic circle, the empiricist dilemma etc.
Chapter 2 'Provenance': From the Puritan Legacy to the Culture of Narcissism	C	Historical background to the self-help book. The American Puritan legacy. Frontier ideals. The influences of Revivalism. Traces of Transcendentalism. The narcissistic turn.
Chapter 3 The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual	C	The emergence of the 'instrumental individual' in Western society. Choices of 'good' and notions of 'virtue'. The paradox of too much choice. How localised agency trumps discredited metanarrative in self-help books.
Chapter 4 Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn.	C	Notions of discourse: <i>macro</i> and <i>micro</i> levels. The therapeutic turn in contemporary societal discourse. Three mechanisms of lexicon expansion detectable in the discourse of self-help: 'renovation' (e.g. addiction), 'neologism' (e.g. co-dependency) and 'democratisation' (e.g. 'positive psychology'). A generic model of discourse emergence which uses post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for illustration.

Chapter 5 Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade	D/ S	The persuasive imperative and rhetorical tactics. Narrative and reinvention in the self-help book. The self-help book as 'monomyth' and 'romance'. Ideological extremes in the genre. Examples: <i>Self Help</i> and <i>The Secret</i> . 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' ethics.
Chapter 6 The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, Unique 'Actantial' Genre	S	Genre in theory. Genre in praxis. The self-help book as responsive commercial genre; as redemptive paradigm; as an 'actant' which plays a leading role in the narrative of transformation which it articulates to the reader.
Chapter 7 The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book	S	The notion of constructed subjectivity. The self/subject dyad in the genre: a postmodern paradox. Three levels of subjective activity in the self-help book: <i>super-stratum</i> (epistemological); <i>inter-stratum</i> (archetypal); <i>substratum</i> (ontological).
Conclusion	S	The research questions revisited. Summary of findings. Future possibilities.
Bibliography	R	List of sources mentioned in the text or directly quoted from (Harvard Method).
Appendices	I	Additional illustrative material (see below)



Appendices	
Appendix A	15 Case Study Texts
Appendix B	Some Characteristic Signifying Practices Found in Self-Help Books
Appendix C	Self-Help Subgenres
Appendix D	Issues of Classification Reified in the Supermarket
Appendix E	Foucault's 'Classification Scheme'
Appendix F	Sceptical Texts
Appendix G	Poems

### The Self-Help Book Today

A visit to the self-help shelves of any bookshop shows that in practice what the writers and readers of this genre consider 'helpful' to effect individual transformation and promote life satisfaction is very diverse: there are very many subgenres (see Appendix C: Self-Help Subgenres, below). But such topical proliferation is surely unsurprising because publishers are always seeking new angles with which to lure readers to spend money. This imperative can also be observed in the way that many self-help books enumerate specific objectives on their covers, thereby adopting a rhetorical technique often found in commercial mission statements (Talbot 2002) in order to attract attention and communicate a text's 'unique selling proposition' or USP (Reeves 1961: 46-48). However if the self-help genre as a *whole* is examined synoptically, it is possible to detect remnants of more general 'wisdom traditions' concerning the conditions required for people to experience a sense of well-being (Wentz 1990; Myers 1993; Argyle 2002; Layard 2005; Haidt 2006; Nettle 2006; Williams 2008). Clearly people have always

yearned for happiness and security (Cahn and Vitrano 2007; Schoch 2007) and although the activities and attitudes which give an individual satisfaction must necessarily vary according to that person's cultural matrix and immediate situation, there is evidence to suggest that *anyone* is likely to flourish best when they can connect their life up "with some greater reality or story" (Taylor 1992: 43). Thus although the honour code of the ancient warrior fighting to protect his people, the ideals of classical civic participation, Christian morality, Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic individualism and progressive modernity (MacIntyre 1981: 167-70, *passim*; Taylor 1989: 111-199, *passim*; White 2005) are ideologically diverse, all can be viewed as manifestations of what Taylor considers to be an innate drive in the individual psyche to live 'well' in its particular context. But it also seems that many people find adequate localized fulfilment in devoting themselves to their family, religion, a political ideology, the acquisition of wealth, or some form of self-development such as education, spirituality or physical fitness. Meanwhile others have worked towards possibilities of professional advancement, 'a second chance' for themselves, or some sort of spiritual epiphany.

Nor is an individual's circumscribed life story necessarily without social effect according to Taylor who argues that comparatively small-scale epistemic metanarratives, such as finding one's vocation, acquiring wealth, or even living more simply, may become cumulatively significant constituents of an epoch's characteristic subjectivity which he terms the "social imaginary" (Taylor 2007: 171-176). What may start off as theories or opinions held by a few people in elite or self-selected groups may gradually become fashionable and even axiomatic. For example the environmentalist ideology which informs even corporate conversations today (Hoffman 2001) emerged from a long series of small-scale initiatives (Pepper 1996: 1-6). Likewise the 'survivor' ideology present in much self-help discourse owes much to the practices of early Alcoholics Anonymous groups. See Chapter 4, Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn, below for a discussion of addiction culture. In *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992) Taylor returns to the argument, which he first rehearsed in *Sources of the Self* (1989), that there is an intrinsic human drive towards 'the good' which has been experienced differently in different epochs and involves engagement with the phenomena of daily experience at least as much as adherence to abstract ideals or 'virtues'. Thus in his memorable phrase "the affirmation of ordinary life", with its emphasis on individual

experience and personal values somewhat at the expense of outward-looking community ones, has become a defining characteristic of contemporary subjectivity (Taylor 1989: 20-23, 209-286). Furthermore, in describing what he calls the contemporary "age of authenticity" (Taylor 2007: 473-504), he suggests that personal ethics has become as much to do with what it is possible to *be* as an introspective 'self-realized person' existing in a capitalist society, as with what may be morally right to *do* on certain occasions according to an extrinsic value-system.

In consonance with this comparatively recent 'demotic' ethic, a preoccupation with private and personal satisfactions rather than with one's contribution to a wider community can be seen to influence self-help books during the twentieth century. Early evidence for the 'domestic' turn can be found for example in the substantial bibliography of advice material about the practicalities of daily life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries at Adam Matthew Publications (2011): [http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/digital\\_guides/advice-literature-in-america-part-1/Contents-Of-Reels.aspx](http://www.adam-matthew-publications.co.uk/digital_guides/advice-literature-in-america-part-1/Contents-Of-Reels.aspx) accessed 16 April 2011). Many of the publications listed here focus on 'little narratives' of personal experience rather than on 'grand' ones of ethical idealism - to co-opt descriptive terms from Lyotard (1984). Furthermore, MacIntyre detects a pervasive attitudinal shift in society towards an 'emotivism' which valorizes feelings and opinions alongside or even above more objective, rational judgments about what might be considered 'good' (MacIntyre 1981: 210; cf. Honderich 1995: 853). Put another way, the discrediting of traditional grand narratives which offered consensual frameworks for making even personal judgments (Lyotard 1984) seems to have produced an ethical relativism and increasing valorisation of subjective, emotional response. Thus according to Batchelor (2004) the self-help genre has taken an inward turn compared with earlier advice texts about religious practice or social norms and activities.

Classic psychoanalysis, which explores the psychic landscape of an individual, is surely one locus from which the inward-looking contemporary self-help book has developed, because its theories about psychic activity, albeit mostly re-expressed, have become so influential in popular culture (Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 56-9; Van Deurzen 2008). Freud himself takes a practitioner's view of happiness and distress, observing that while people search for comfort, they nevertheless remain constantly insecure. In his

opinion, happiness has both positive and negative aspects: it may result both from the absence of pain or discomfort *and* from experiencing strong feelings of pleasure (Freud 1989: 25-6; Thompson (2001) <http://www.ifpe.org/President/Address-2001.pdf> accessed 30 June 2010). But Freud also observes that one's security is constantly at risk from three kinds of threat: firstly bodily pain; secondly external events which may overwhelm the helpless individual; and thirdly unstable relations with others. He considers the last of these to be the most distressing, observing that: "We are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love" (Freud 1989: 32-33). It is therefore no surprise to find that that bookshops are full of titles like *How to Mend Your Broken Heart* (McKenna and Willbourn 2003), *Addiction to Love: Overcoming Obsession and Dependency in Relationships* (Peabody 1994), *The Real Rules: How to Find the Right Man for the Real You* (De Angelis 1997), *Women Who Love Too Much* (Norwood 2004) and *He's Just Not That Into You* (Behrendt and Tuccillo 2005). Remarkably, the latter has become a feature film: *He's Just Not That Into You*. (<http://www.hesjustnotthatintoyoumovie.com/> accessed 19 April 2011).

Freud makes no distinction between the sexes when it comes to the devastating effects of emotional pain. Yet he believes that although some measure of bodily and mental suffering is inevitable, there is no reason why people should not seek happiness or try to alleviate their distress as best they can and make the most of their lives (Freud 1989: 34-6). Psychotherapy is, of course, too expensive for most individuals, but while self-help books obviously cannot provide a truly dynamic therapeutic relationship between counselor and counseled such as that described by Kahn (1997), they do at least offer some affordable comfort and inspiration for those seeking to live better. Indeed, as Cameron puts it, whereas psychotherapy is supposed to give people access to uncomfortable, hitherto repressed information about themselves, self-help books offer a discourse of reassurance: "making readers feel better by reaffirming their existing interpretations of experience" (Cameron 1995: 207). Certainly people's urgent desire to know what might make them 'happier', or at least more subjectively at ease, is clearly demonstrated by the 136,911 publications which were listed by Amazon.co.uk when the search term 'happiness' was used on 26 June 2010. Naturally some of these will be duplicate editions. But of the first sixty volumes checked, only five were fiction, while

the others ran the gamut from painstaking scholarly works such as Richard Layard's *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005) through to the cheerfully anecdotal *The Happiness Project: Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun*, by Gretchen Rubin (2010). And inevitably there is *Happiness for Dummies* (Gentry 2008).

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Haidt poses the question 'How can a good life be lived?' as a mechanism by which to contrast and compare old and new ideas about 'happiness' which have found re-expression in the discourse of popular psychology, not least in the self-help book (Haidt 2006: 24). Like Taylor (1999: 13-17) he asserts that every culture has a notion of 'wisdom' and the associated 'good life' which may at times be articulated formally by philosophers and teachers, but which is also handed down through the generations as 'folk psychology': a body of vernacular 'knowledge' and beliefs which is anchored both in experiential life and in mythemes which constantly adjust to contemporary exigencies (Honderich 1995: 283; Thomas 2001; Hutto 2009). Meanwhile Gilbert finds three broad areas of intense importance to people's sense of well-being in the postmodern epoch: emotional happiness (for example in relationships of all kinds); spiritual happiness; and 'judgmental' happiness (for example when one approves of something which has happened, such as a marriage or a new job) (Gilbert 2007: 33, 37). Similarly, a number of projects conducted with heterogeneous populations have revealed four experiential areas where people seek 'life-meaning' (Emmons 1999; Wong and Fry 1999; Emmons 2003: 108). These seem to mirror the broad sub-genres of self-help literature identified by Santrock (1994) and are as follows:

- achievements and work
- relationships (particularly intimate ones)
- religion and spirituality
- the desire for self-transcendence and generativity through creating things

In more general terms, Haidt observes that happiness arises from getting what one wants (materially and spiritually), cultivating an inner attitude of acceptance and detachment and experiencing beneficial external conditions such as relatedness,

security and various kinds of love (Haidt 2006). Along similar lines, Myers (1992: 48, *passim*) and Diener and Biswas-Diener (2008) stress the experiential nature of well-being, arguing that 'happiness' for the contemporary individual is not just an abstract goal, or even a set of desirable life circumstances which can somehow be acquired, but a *process* of self-realization. Likewise, research into both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of individual motivation (Deci and Flaste 1996: 44-56; Marshall Reeve 2004) indicates that the establishment and *pursuit* of personal goals is very often as much part of human satisfaction as their attainment (cf. Maslow 1968; Austin and Vancouver 1996; Karoly 1999; Persaud 2005; Boniwell 2008: 49-55). These views are consonant with Csikszentmihályi's famous notion how of 'flow' (1990; 1992; 1998), an experience of sustained, self-motivated engagement with a pleasurable activity, is a dynamic component of happiness. There is also resonance with the personal 'quest' meme identified by Taylor (1989: 52; 1992: x). Perhaps the importance of 'process' for the health of the psyche goes some way to explaining the constant market for self-help books because people enjoy the sense of making some progress, even if they do not expect to achieve ultimate 'closure'.

Though happiness is clearly a subjective experience inasmuch as different people may feel differently about the same situation (Keynes and Haidt 2003), it seems that it can only emerge, or indeed be perceived as lacking, when individuals engage with the specifics of life. It cannot exist in a vacuum and is therefore often linked by self-help writers with goals which involve defined activities - even if this simply involves thinking positive thoughts. For example some people may want more money, health, better relationships, more fulfilling work, a healthier body, more 'freedom' etc. (Reis and Gable 2003; Lyubomirsky 2007: 13; Hecht 2007: vii-viii). However for other people happiness may be associated less with the pursuit of external 'acquisitions' and objective correlates than with internal, holistic matters. Thus *their* search for a contented life may actually entail having *fewer* material 'engagements'. For example Foster and Hicks (2004) and Tolle (2005) endorse the cultivation of intention, accountability, appreciation and truthfulness as the way to achieve contentment. Similarly, Matthieu (2007) advocates mindfulness and compassion, while O'Toole (2005: subtitle) asserts that: "It's Not Just About the Money" in a book which attempts to apply the thinking of Aristotle to present day situations. The view that humans often find pleasure and insight

through the process of working towards their goals is one with which pedagogues would concur (Bruner 1977; Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991). Or as the Chinese proverb has it; "The journey is the reward."

While beginning to locate the self-help book in its wider social and bibliographic contexts as preparation for closer critical examination of certain primary texts during this thesis, it became clear that the genre as a whole may be considered a characteristically postmodern phenomenon. This is firstly because it assumes that identity can always be re-negotiated and that the 'self' may be transformed *ad infinitum* and secondly because, as a highly successful commodity, it is extremely sensitive to cultural change and market forces, transforming itself into ever-proliferating subgenres (see Appendix C: Self-Help Subgenres, below) as fashion dictates. For as Gergen notes: "Under postmodern conditions persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction: it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated" (1991: 7).

However, the self-help book's ontological assumption that personal transformation is possible and that happiness is an entitlement also resonates with an older humanistic 'grand narrative' (Lyotard 1984) of enlightened individualism, optimism, stability, and progress which was famously proclaimed thus by Kant in 1784: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity ... '*Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] Have courage to use your own understanding!'" - that is the motto of enlightenment" (Kant 2010: 1). In promising its readers access to 'authoritative' information, a set of beliefs in which to situate themselves, and the assurance that personal agency is possible, a self-help book explicitly offers them not just relief from existential crises and uncertainties, but the possibility of personal 'empowerment', to use a popular term from the lexicon of self-help (cf. Roberts 2011). Thus for the critical theorist, this genre is a paradoxical cultural phenomenon which, while it implicitly exploits the possibilities for the psychic '*bricolage*' (Macey 2001: 52) and renovation which pluralistic postmodern culture appears to offer (Schrag 1997), actually perpetuates the liberal-humanist metanarrative of the essential, *telic* self which has always been the focus of traditional ethical advice.

Clearly a researcher must recognize the relativistic turn of the postmodern episteme noted above. Yet any academic argument must have terms of reference against which it can be evaluated and this is a particularly challenging issue in a thesis which deals with highly volatile critical terms such as 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' while also making frequent reference to abstractions such as 'ontology', 'epistemology', 'the Enlightenment project', 'modernity' and the 'postmodern condition'. Therefore the chapter which follows looks in more detail at some issues of methodology, including the empiricist dilemma and the hermeneutic circle, in order to show that the slippery quality of these notions has not been underestimated and to stabilise the extended critical discussion of genre, discourse and subjectivity which is the heart of the thesis.



## Chapter 1

### On Methodology: Issues and Choices

In delineating portraits, composing narratives, or providing accounts of human action, one always finds it difficult to decide how to begin. Perplexity becomes intensified when one realizes that there are no necessary starting points. All starting points are contingent. One could always choose another beginning. And the quandary of this peculiar predicament is further compounded by the realization that in a consequential sense one is already begun, situated in *medias res*, as it were, searching for an entry into a conversation and a positioning in a state of affairs that is always already on its way.

Calvin O. Schrag *The Self after Postmodernity* (1997: 2)

#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses some of the methodological decisions which were made at the early stages of the research: for example when beginning to identify a primary *corpus* of self-help books for particular attention and choosing appropriate secondary, tertiary and 'quaternary' texts for consultation. It also contextualizes the work presented in various chapters by acknowledging the diversity of critical theory available to scholars, accepting that it is necessary to be selective in choosing authorities, and recognising that theory may have both heuristic and hermeneutic functions.

Moreover, having noted that information may emerge as a result of deductive, inductive or abductive processes, it explains how a combination of empirical and rationalist approaches has informed the present work. The thesis contains evidence gained from analyzing a number of popular self-help books which is discussed in terms of selected theory relating particularly to the notions of 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity': the inverted commas here being a reminder that these terms constitute sites of intense critical debate. Certain inescapable constraints on *all* research, in particular the empiricist's dilemma and the hermeneutic circle, are noted. Likewise, the challenge to 'normative' understanding posed by postmodern theory is acknowledged; the

complexities of this issue are usefully summarized by Best and Kellner (2001: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/postmodernturn.htm>, accessed 16/03/2011). Indeed, since Derrida questioned the essentialist and universalizing assumptions of traditional Western philosophy in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (Derrida 1970), thereby demolishing the notion of the 'transcendental signifier' and formulating '*différance*' to indicate that there can be no immediate access to reality not mediated through a socially constructed language, it has been difficult for scholars to ignore the phenomena of 'semantic slippage' (Vanhoozer 2003: 80) and the endless deferral of meaning (Edgar and Sedgwick 2002: 116). However, as well as demonstrating that it is impossible to escape the differential nature of language or the '*aporias*' of discourse, i.e. the indeterminacy of meaning for which no resolution seems to be possible (Selden 1989: 88), Derrida also acknowledges that in practice it is also impossible for human beings to exist without some reliance on metaphysical commitments: or what might more prosaically be termed 'working definitions'. Thus some notional stability is returned to the investigative process. Accordingly, the present research into genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book is predicated on pragmatic working definitions of these much debated terms, which are further discussed at the beginnings of Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, below.

Furthermore, the long-term reflections on postmodern culture and its associated epistemology which accompanied the production of this thesis proved to have more than just methodological significance because they helped to reveal the intrinsically paradoxical nature of the self-help genre itself. Inasmuch as self-help books are highly popular and protean commodities, predicated on the notion of infinitely 'transformable' identity, they may be considered characteristically postmodern 'artefacts' (Harvey 1991: 7). Nevertheless, their characteristic address to the instrumental individual and *telic* valorisation of personal agency links them to the long-standing, liberal-humanist metanarrative of essential self-hood which has been the subject of much postmodern critique. These parallel issues are, accordingly, revisited throughout the thesis.

## 1.2 Issues of Selection

### *Primary Texts*

The selection of a primary corpus for analysis is a key methodological challenge which faces all genre theorists (Altman 1989). Thus initial reading for this project examined how some earlier genre scholars, for example Propp (1968), Wright (1975), Tudor (1970; 1974), Palmer (1978) and Cobley (2000), established their own *corpora* for investigation and justified their choices. Wright, for example, decided to limit his study of westerns to those that had been included in the film industry list of the top money-makers of the year, based on distribution receipts (Wright 1975: 13). Therefore, in consonance with his example, it was initially decided to concentrate on a group of self-help 'best-sellers' in order to isolate a manageable sample for particular discussion in the present research. However it soon became clear that this accolade, though very often found on book-covers, is actually difficult, if not impossible, to define because best seller lists are both haphazard and manipulable and the term 'bestseller' is regulated by neither the publishing industry nor the book trade. There are many different kinds of bestseller lists which rank the relative sales of particular kinds of publication at certain outlets within a defined period. However they do not tell which books are most successful in *absolute* terms. Thus a book which sells 20,000 copies during its first week is likely to appear on a bestseller list, whereas one which sells 200 copies a week for ten years will not (Truit 1998: <http://www.slate.com/id/3504/>, accessed 20 April 2011).

Book sales statistics were not collated by the trade for comparative purposes until the 1970s (Bloom 2002: 6). Moreover the categories eventually used to group publications for trade evaluation have always been very broad and even now reliable information about book sales is scarce (Palmer 1991: 39; Bloom 2002: 76-77). For example, the *New York Times* best-seller list, while highly influential in terms of recording market success for individual publications (Sorensen 2006), is neither definitive nor cumulative, and therefore does not help the genre theorist. Similarly *Nielsen Bookscan*, which is widely used by publishers to track current trends, relies on point-of-sale data from a number of major outlets, thus producing a mass of undifferentiated material (Milliot and

Zeitchik 2004) of immediate interest to the book trade, but of little use to the academic. Moreover, different lists use different methodologies (*Bestseller Math* 2001: [www.riverdeep.net](http://www.riverdeep.net) accessed 22 July 2011) and sales statistics can be commercially manipulated (Reddick 2009: <http://ezinearticles.com/?How-to-Create-a-Successful-Amazon-Bestseller-Campaign&id=1992681>, accessed 16 March 2011). Furthermore, even though *The Market for Self-Improvement Products and Services* (Market Data Enterprises November 2010: <http://www.marketdataenterprises.com/SIMktTOC2010.pdf>, accessed 16 March 2011) offers an almost overwhelming mass of industrial data, this is not focused in such a way as to benefit an academic study such as this one.

It was therefore decided to concentrate on well-established self-help books, issued or reissued during the last twenty years, which have sustained a notable physical presence in bookshops (for example through being periodically selected for 'face-out' displays on the shelves) and which have been regularly mentioned in the press (e.g. *Liverpool Daily Post* 2001; Merritt 2003; Gunnell 2004) or critically distinguished as classics (e.g. Butler-Bowdon 2003; 2004). For although the publishing world lacks the same kind of freely-available, statistically-underpinned fiscal documentation as that produced by the film industry (for example at Box Office Mojo (n.d.): <http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm> accessed 16 March 2011), it is clear that some self-help writers have achieved a remarkable commercial success which puts them in a distinct 'superstar' class (McAdams 2006: 119, 319). Moreover, publishers, like film studios, know that, "certain performers [are] greater attractions than others [and thus have] capital value" (Hayward 2006: 349). As Balio notes, and Neale concurs, film producers seek to minimize their risks by relying on stars (Balio 1993: 101; Neale 2000 238-40). Likewise, self-help books by 'star' authors such as John Gray, Susan Jeffers, Stephen Covey, Wayne Dyer, Anthony Robbins and Paul McKenna are regularly distinguished by heavy advertising and special display strategies in shops and on the World Wide Web. Indeed publishers seek to turn successful writers into author 'brands' (Olins 2008; Wheeler 2009; Aaker 2010) because this entrenches them in public consciousness and builds consumer loyalty (Meyers n.d.: [http://www.blumooncommunications.com/white\\_papers/author\\_branding.htm](http://www.blumooncommunications.com/white_papers/author_branding.htm), accessed 16 April 2011). Of course authors may also become well-known for their

media appearances, for example Dr Phil McGraw, Eckhart Tolle and Rhonda Byrne on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (Dembling and Gutierrez 2003). For an in-depth profile of 35 self-improvement celebrities, see *Market Data Enterprises* (November 2010: 39-153: <http://www.marketdataenterprises.com/SIMktTOC2010.pdf> accessed 20 December 2010)

Eventually a title itself may become a 'brand', acquiring an identity which transcends editions or formats. Again, there is a parallel with the film industry, where studios seek to protect their investment and reduce risks by making films in a franchise series: for example the *Halloween* and *Harry Potter* sequences. "Once successfully launched, a series creates loyal and eager fans who form a core audience. By keeping production costs in line with this ready-made demand, series are almost guaranteed a profit (Balio 1993: 101). For example, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, which began as a one-off compilation of encouraging anecdotes produced by motivational speakers Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield, now has nearly two hundred sequels in a franchise series which constantly discovers new market niches (Dalgic 2005: 5) for homespun exhortations to optimism in the face of adversity. These are contributed by members of the public and then edited to fit into the '*Chicken Soup*' 'template' whose external trade dress is easily recognisable from across a bookshop (*Chicken Soup for the Soul* (2011) <http://www.chickensoup.com/newsroom.asp?cid=new.history>, accessed 16 March 2011). Current volumes include *Chicken Soup for the souls of Expectant Mothers*, *Prisoners*, *Adoptees*, *Christian Teens*, *Golfers*, *Cat-Lovers*, *Entrepreneurs* and *Military Wives*. There is also a vast website and a huge range of associated licensed products (peri-genres) including greetings cards, gifts, CDs, nutritional supplements and pet food. As a result, sales of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* branded merchandise exceeded \$ 1.3 billion by the year 2,000 (*Chicken Soup for the Soul* (2011) <http://www.chickensoup.com/cs.asp?cid=about>, accessed March 2011).

As well as a being an example of franchise publishing, the best-selling *Chicken Soup* series might be called a 'template genre', because although it began with a one-off publication, each subsequent volume has conformed to a fixed editorial framework governing the content, length and style of individual chapters, into which a seemingly infinite series of topics can easily be inserted. Likewise, although John Wiley's 'best-

selling' *'For Dummies'* series began with *DOS for Dummies* in 1991 and initially concentrated on advising lay people how to use new information technology (For Dummies (2011) <http://www.dummies.com/Section/The-For-Dummies-Success-Story.id-323929.html>, accessed 16 March 2011), the template currently accommodates 1,700 titles (June 2010), many of which deal with self-development, health, relationships and spirituality. Indeed, the series seems set to run for as long as people want plainly expressed advice about *any* aspect of life, which has been summarized as "get in, get out information" and is supported with icons, 'cheat sheets', cartoons and many check-lists. As the series' publicity says: "Do Anything - Just Add Dummies". So, for example, there are currently volumes on Arthritis, Islam, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), CVs, Diabetes, Divorce, EBay, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), Rugby Union, Ethics, Eating Disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress, Saltwater Aquariums and Ferrets. (See also Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre*, below).

Wiley clearly considers that the format of the "*# For Dummies*" franchise is as much a hook for readers as the content. Indeed, the series' distinctive yellow and black covers and 19 x 24 cm shape have created what might be described as a 'livery genre' which is easily recognised from a distance. But this series is also a 'template genre' because each volume, whatever its subject matter, uses many standardized headings, short paragraphs, numbers, bullet points, tables, diagrams, icons and typefaces. Whether the topic is asthma or accountancy, the 'house style' dominates. Clearly there is much that could be said about this phenomenon, not least about what may be deduced about its readership. But with regard to the present research, the mass publishing strategies which have produced best-selling series such as the ones described above have also made it more difficult to define individual best-sellers according to sales statistics. Thus it was eventually decided that it would be unhelpful to use the term 'bestseller' as a way of selecting a manageable *corpus* of representative self-help books for more detailed attention. Therefore a selection of indicative primary texts for consideration was eventually identified using the following more localised empirical methods:

- visiting bookshops (real and virtual) to observe the shelf stock
- visiting public libraries to observe the shelf stock
- talking with booksellers and librarians to identify particularly popular publications and trends (such as the current turn to frugality)
- observing special displays and promotions which distinguished certain publications
- scanning commentary in the press and on the World Wide Web

Relevant critics were also consulted to find which self-help titles tended to feature in their academic discussions (e.g. Butler-Bowdon 2003; McGee 2005; McAdams 2006: 119-126; Salerno 2005; Dolby 2005). Promising items were then double-checked using Amazon's 'User Reviews' and Google to confirm that they really were being widely discussed and, in the case of older titles such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie which was first published in 1936, being regularly re-issued. Alan Yentob's BBC programme 'The Secret of Life', which was broadcast by the BBC on 19 February 2008, was also viewed because it set out to examine the enduring popularity of prominent self-help writers like Samuel Smiles, Dale Carnegie, Anthony Robbins, Susan Jeffers and Rhonda Byrne. As a result of the above strategies, the fifteen 'star' self-help texts mentioned in the Introduction were chosen for particular attention (see Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below). According to Sainte-Beuve's definition these may be considered self-help 'classics'. For if, as he suggests, a classic text is one canonized by admiration and authority (Sainte Beuve 2011: <http://www.bartleby.com/32/202.html>, accessed 17 March 2011), then these items surely merit the accolade because they have many admirers who have been prepared both to pay good money for them *and* to recommend them to others. However it is stressed that many other texts are also referred to for illustration during this thesis.

### ***Supplementary Sources***

The research process for this thesis has been iterative and cumulative. Once the scope was outlined, a working title chosen, and a range of potential primary sources reviewed, a list of secondary materials was compiled on research methods, ontology, epistemology, genre, discourse, subjectivity, myth, narrative and the historical and ideological background to self-help texts. The aim here was to compare and contrast the relevant analysis, interpretations and overviews which secondary texts can offer in order more fully to engage with the primary material. In addition to traditional bibliographic sources, *JSTOR*, *QUESTIA*, *NEXIS*, *INFOTRAC*, *BLOPAC*, *EthOS*, *Google Scholar* and *Amazon.com.uk* proved to be useful on-line repositories of both scholarly and journalistic information. But as well as observations arising from close reading of both primary and secondary texts, reference was sometimes also made to tertiary sources such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias and companions in order to check facts and seek clarification (University of Maryland Libraries (2011)

<http://www.lib.umd.edu/guides/primary-sources.html>, accessed 17 March 2011).

Reference was also made to what might be called 'quaternary sources', such as the commentary about self-help books which regularly appears in magazines, publishers' catalogues and Web pages. For although such materials are clearly unregulated and protean, they nevertheless constitute a significant field of demotic textual engagement and thus contribute to the discursive phenomenon noticed by Stock (1983) who observes how, from early times, textual communities have tended to coalesce around certain works. Thus according to Wright (2007: 117), the text becomes "a shared object, a replicable unit of information that [can] move freely through the social body of the literate population". Furthermore the latter specifically notes that many self-help books generate an efflorescence of informal discussion on the Web:



Many commercial Web sites – like Amazon.com offer independent reviews to accompany their product listings. Typically these come in two flavours: “expert” reviews, usually licensed from publications, and customer-written reviews contributed by users. Frequently, these reviews appear side by side, yet separately. Customer reviews seem to fit Ong’s [1982] criteria of an oral medium; they acquire value additively and aggregatively – that is, we look at the cumulative customer ratings for a product more than an individual review; they are empathetic – usually written in the first person – and participatory, insofar as they invite conversation. Editorial reviews, by contrast, bear the hallmarks of literature culture: they are subordinative – that is, presuming a voice of authoritative judgement – analytic and objectively distanced, and abstract (usually written in the third person) ... Most readers easily make the distinction between the two forms, and they may award more authority to the individual editorial review over the individual customer review. But the cumulative “oral tradition” of the customer reviews may often carry more weight than the individual editorial review (Wright 2007: 233-4).

Finally the *Wikipedia* phenomenon had to be considered because it now has a significant influence on the transmission of information. Self-described as “the free encyclopedia which anyone can edit” (*Wikipedia* 2011: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), accessed 25 April 2001), it is clearly in some respects an unstable repository of information. Yet studies have suggested that in some fields, though not others, it is almost as reliable as institutionally-produced encyclopaedias. Certainly it is more responsive to social nuances and ideological shifts (Giles 2005; Fallis 2008). Holman-Rector (2008) finds that it has an accuracy rate of 80% compared with 95-96% accuracy within institutionally-produced online sources such as *Encyclopedia Britannica* or *American National Biography*. Meanwhile Giles (2005) suggests that *Wikipedia* comes close to *Britannica* in the accuracy of its science entries. Therefore the postmodern researcher can hardly just dismiss the biggest reference tool in the world, particularly if he or she is studying discourse. Accordingly, *Wikipedia* has sometimes been consulted during this research for the following purposes:

- to gain a preliminary overview of a topic
- to look for emergent critical trends and discourses
- to identify significant debates
- to find interesting, sometimes off-beat. citations which can then be followed up and linked with more traditional ones

But *Wikipedia* itself is well aware of the dangers which surround its indiscriminate use. For example the page on 'self-help', which contains an eclectic mixture of opinions and sources, is introduced with a warning that the article has multiple issues and that its neutrality is disputed (*Wikipedia* (2011): [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), accessed 25 April 2011). Therefore *Wikipedia* has only ever been used as a departure point for further reflection during the present research and is not formally cited in this thesis. Nevertheless some consideration of 'quaternary' sources during this project was believed to be justified for the following reasons:

- self-help is constantly referred to in the popular media (Strinati 1995: 224; McAdams 2006: 119-143);
- there is a growing cross-over between academic and popular material in self-help texts themselves (Reis 2008). For example Myers (1992; 1993), Goleman (1996), Layard (2005) and Lyubomirsky (2007) support their observations and advice to the public with scholarly references;
- the present research is located within Cultural Studies (Edgar and Sedgwick 2002: 100) which adopts a multidisciplinary approach to the world of artefacts, institutions and language (McGuigan 1997: 25; Peters 1999).

It was therefore considered that observations made in non-academic texts might sometimes complement scholarly material because "each person makes use of the cultural resources which are available to him or her" in order to fashion their identity (McAdams 2006: 277). Thus reference is sometimes made to plays, poems, newspaper articles and advertisements where it is considered that these connect with what Taylor calls "the commonsense language of everyday experience that attributes feelings motives and intentions to human action" (Taylor 1999: 15).

### 1.3 The Theoretical Co-Ordinates of the Thesis: More Issues of Choice

It was important to establish the theoretical coordinates which would inform the analysis (Blaxter *et al* 1996: 36; Preece 1994: 3) because selected theory provides the hermeneutic tools which impose a sense of order on both physical and metaphysical data. Theory justifies the prioritization of some things over others (Stoker 1995: 16; Eagleton 2004: 94), shows the connections between them, and allows the research process to be retraced and validated. Grix asserts: "[It is] by abstract connection of theoretical concepts with observation [that] concepts gain in empirical meaning" (Grix 2001: 38) and Stoker agrees:

Good theories select out certain factors as the most important or relevant if one is interested in providing an explanation of an event. Without such a sifting process no effective observation can take place. ... Theories are of value precisely because they structure all observations (Stoker 1995: 16-17).

Likewise Eagleton acknowledges how, at its best, a critical theory picks out certain features of a work so that it can be better understood within a significant context. Moreover he is clear that different contexts will disclose different features, concluding that theorists are pluralists in this respect and that there can be no set of concepts which will open up a work for someone in its entirety (Eagleton 2004: 94).

Cultural Studies is highly theorized (Abrams 1953; Lodge 1972:1-26; Smith 2001; Barker 2002; Edgar and Sedgwick 2002). Indeed it embraces critical discourses which are sometimes oppositional. For example the formalist insistence on the autonomy of the text (Hawkes 1977: 61) contrasts strongly with post-structuralist methods of reading which look beyond the page or artefact: for example psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, feminism, gender studies, ethnic studies and the new historicism (Rivkin and Ryan 1998: v-ix). The rich diversity of theory available to the contemporary scholar becomes obvious when the chapter headings used in two anthologies of critical writings (Jefferson and Robey 1986; Rice and Waugh 1992) are examined. Each volume contains material on Russian and Anglo-American formalisms, structuralism, and various 'post-structuralisms': Marxist theory, reader response theory, psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, queer theory, new historicism, post-colonial theory etc. Clearly

there are many theoretical discourses in circulation and thus many debates between those who work with them (Derrida 1978b, in Lodge and Wood: 2000: 92). Furthermore, since different critical approaches reveal different things about the same material (Selden 1989), *each* theory could be said to have ontological and epistemological implications because ways of 'reading' the world condition ways of 'being' in it. As Hamlet observes, sounding like an early advocate of the neuro-linguistic (NLP) 'reframing' technique (Bandler and Grinder 1981) advocated in numerous self-help books: "There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet* Act 2, Scene 2).

Furthermore the anthologies mentioned above show how certain seminal critiques go on to stimulate further critical response, either through development or opposition. For example, the insights of Marx (Carver 1991), Saussure (Sanders 2004), Derrida (Cohen 2002) and Foucault (Gutting 1994) opened up new areas of debate for structuralists and post-structuralists in many disciplines (cf. Hassan 1987). Clearly theoretical constructs are invaluable heuristic and hermeneutic tools. Indeed without theory it would be impossible to share and debate information in depth because there would be no agreed conventions of critical discourse and areas of common ground on which scholars could meet. Thus the present work is informed by selected structuralist and post-structuralist theory and gratefully acknowledges the work of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Frye, Greimas, Foucault, Lacan, Taylor, MacIntyre and Schrag.

#### **1.4 Complementary Research Methods: Induction, Deduction and Abduction**

While reading material about genre delineation, it became clear that although some theorists may claim to be working empirically when selecting a *corpus* as the basis for their content analysis (e.g. Palmer 1991: 18-24) there is a limit to how far they can actually do so. Certain *a priori* assumptions are always necessary in order for critical discussion to proceed (Wright 1975: 197). Moreover it also became clear that there are different, yet complementary, ways of undertaking research and that empiricism and rationalism may both inform the same project. A deductive approach applies previously

established premises and reason to a body of material, such as a corpus of self-help books (Mautner 2000: 124), while an inductive one collects and observes facts and data from real phenomena, such as members of a *corpus*, before shaping them into a theory (Mautner 2000: 273; Grix 2001: 38). As Hesse-Biber and Leavey (2008) observe, grounded theory starts with an inductive logic but moves into abductive reasoning as the researcher seeks to understand emergent empirical findings.

Indeed, it is the synthesizing, *abductive* approach to research which has proved most useful for the present work, because it recognizes the predictive function of theories; thus facilitating the heuristic formation of hypotheses (i.e. proposed explanations) which can then be tested empirically on primary material (cf. Copley 2001c: 151). Russell likewise finds induction and deduction complementary, thereby implicitly endorsing the process of abduction:

There is real utility in the process of deduction, which goes from the general to the general, or from the general to the particular, as well as in the process of induction, which goes from the particular to the particular, or from the particular to the general (Russell 1998: 44).

Likewise, Grix acknowledges the effectiveness of the 'hypothetico-deductive' process (cf. *New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* 1999: 773) which proposes hypotheses and then evaluates their acceptability or falsity by checking that their logical consequences are consistent with empirical data (Grix 2001: 133). The point is that all researchers must have some idea of what they are looking for before they start. Otherwise how could they write their research proposals?

Therefore it was necessary at the start of the present research to assume the existence of a phenomenon which could be called 'the self-help book'. It is easy to see that booksellers pragmatically distinguish a commercially-successful genre, called 'the self-help book' whose place in the lucrative 'advice industry' is noted by McKnight-Tronz (2000), Rosen (2004) and Wilson (2004). Likewise, public librarians, whose work involves grouping large numbers of broadly-related texts together on library shelves for the convenience of readers, have similar recourse to 'literary warrant' (Satija 2007; *Dewey Decimal Classification System Glossary* (OCLC 2011: <http://www.oclc.org/support/documentation/glossary/dewey/#> L accessed 16 March

2011). That is to say, everyday classification occurs when empirical observation and common sense rather than taxonomic theory is applied to grouping items (see also Appendix D: Issues of Classification Reified in the Supermarket).

But having initially assumed for the sake of practicality that a broad class called 'the self-help book' exists, this research sought to provide more specific sources of evidence to support its observations about discourse and subjectivity within the genre. Thus the notion of 'synecdoche' was borrowed from the sampling methodology used in the sciences and social sciences (Hunter 1990: 111-128). This approach, wherein items selected from a group of texts or other entities may be taken reasonably to typify the whole has been explained thus:

Every scientific enterprise tries to find out something that will apply to everything of a certain kind by studying a few examples, the results of the study being as we say "generalizable" to all members of that class of stuff. We need the sample to persuade people that we know something about the whole class. This is a version of the classical trope of synecdoche, a rhetorical figure in which we use a part of something to refer the listener or reader to the whole it belongs to (Becker 1998: 67).

When genre theorists select a representative group of texts to analyse, they can claim to be working empirically and inductively. But in linking their interpretations with theory, they are exploiting the deductive process too. This hybrid approach has been called 'pluralism' by Booth (1979) who suggests that since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* which was published in 1781 (2007) most philosophers have come to accept that things in the world can never be encountered 'as they are in themselves', but only in the forms in which human perceptual systems enable them to be seen (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Thus: "Different historical periods have made very different assumptions about what literature is and have consequently come up with startlingly different accounts of the 'same' text" (Furniss and Bath 1996: 388). In consonance with this view Abrams (1953), having defined himself as a 'pluralist' critic, helpfully schematizes the shifting perspective of literary studies from Plato to the New Critics, acknowledging that different theories enable productive textual readings to take place, even though these readings may not ultimately be reconcilable and, to use Derrida's term, there are sometimes '*aporia*'. He warns that:

Because many critical statements of fact are ... partially relative to the perspective of the theory within which they occur, they are not 'true', in the strict scientific sense that they approach the idea of being verifiable by any intelligent human being, no matter what his point of view. Any hope, therefore, for the kind of basic agreement in criticism that we have in the exact sciences is doomed to disappointment (Abrams 1953, in Lodge 1972: 1-26).

Clearly there may be different approaches to the same text, genre or cultural phenomenon (Abrams 1953; Furniss and Bath 1996: 388; Derrida 1976; Butler 2002:16). Thus genre specialists, such as Propp (1968), Palmer (1978) and Cobley (2000) who use an abductive synthesis to comment on a primary *corpus*, can claim to be working both empirically and inductively. Similarly, while the present research deductively acknowledges the postmodern theoretical orthodoxy of the socially constructed subject which is situated in "a complex web of belief, naturalized notions, biases, and entrenched valuations" (Hall 2004: 26), it also inductively observes how the text of individual self-help books inscribes the traditional, essentialist notion of self-hood present in 'folk psychology' (Murray 2001), 'folk psychiatry' (Haslam 2003) and folk mythology.

To conclude, although self-help books are not literature in the traditional sense of having some deliberately fore-grounded aesthetic quality, they are certainly a textual phenomenon whose linguistic, semantic and structural aspects may be both inductively observed and deductively examined through the lens of selected theory in order better to understand their cultural significance. Accordingly, this thesis contains a certain amount of 'close reading' of primary material, particularly in Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below. Nevertheless, its principal aim is to present a theoretically-informed critique of a generic discourse phenomenon, the self-help book, and not to offer an interpretation of individual texts.

## 1.5 The Empiricist Dilemma and the Hermeneutic Circle

Although some genre scholars may emphasize their empirical approach in deriving their findings from evidence extracted from a *corpus* (e.g. Altman 1999) as discussed above, they must inevitably encounter the 'empiricist dilemma' identified by film theorists such as Tudor (1970: 35) and Neale (2000: 18) when initially speculating about what they might discover. In other words, certain epistemologically-based assumptions are necessarily required for that 'pre-understanding' which Ricoeur says: "Precedes all the properly epistemological difficulties that the social sciences encounter under the names of prejudice, ideology and the hermeneutic circle" (Ricoeur 1981: 243). Thus a certain amount of knowledge, for example of a genre's characteristics, has to be assumed before any discussion of its supposed members can take place. For example: "The films which one selects in order to study the western will determine how one eventually defines the genre" (Jankovich 2001: 15).

The inherent problem with empiricism as a research method, in both the sciences and the humanities, is that it is ultimately unsustainable. Certain parts of human knowledge are essentially *a priori* and cannot be deduced entirely from first principles: that is they are independent of experience. For scientists, these include the phenomena of space, time and causality which are the essential bases upon which all scientific empirical knowledge is founded (Audi 2002). Likewise, textual empiricists working on a *corpus* must also accept a set of fundamental analytical propositions and phenomena as being 'true' before they can proceed. This paradox has been called the 'empiricist dilemma' (Tudor 1974 135-8) and the 'hermeneutic circle' (Abrams 1953; Cuddon 1991: 405); the latter metaphor referring to how, in a search for the significance of a text, action or set of ideas, the interpretation of a part necessarily requires some prior knowledge of the 'whole' to which that part is assumed to belong (Fowler 1987:109). But the 'whole' is made up of its parts. Thus "investigation [inevitably] occurs within the horizon of a theoretical paradigm" (Fowler 1987: 111). For example "a genre is understood through the works that belong to it" (*Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* 2000: 247). Fortunately Popper (1934) reassures researchers that a systematic use of abduction enables the hermeneutic circle to be transformed into a 'spiral' which offers iterative and infinite



possibilities whenever previously discovered knowledge is respectfully fed into subsequent research through a dialogic process (cf. Bakhtin 1981; Cobley 2001c: 151). In consonance with this proposal therefore, the present research has been pluralistic and hybrid; yet it is grounded on the observation of a defined exemplary corpus of self-help texts. That is, it first had to assume the existence of a genre called 'the self-help book' before discussing in detail what the characteristics of that genre might be and also how the notions of self and subject might be manifested through discursive praxis within individual texts.

### **1.6 The Categorisation and Sequencing of Information: What Should Go Where?**

All research eventually involves the categorisation and sequencing of information into a written text. But the process of classification is a fundamental survival skill and may be considered a "human universal" (Brown 2000). This is because all living things must engage in discriminations of vital importance, albeit often unconsciously, whenever they decide what is and is not safe to eat (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 17). Moreover there appear to be some intrinsic discriminatory 'givens' in daily life. For example, every known culture makes distinctions about age, behavioural propensities, body parts, colours, fauna, flora, inner states, kin, sex, pace, tools, and weather conditions (Brown 2000). However critical theorists recognise that many classes are cultural constructs, not absolutes (Wright 2007: 22-38, 239-249). Thus Foucault asserts:

"Literature" and "politics" are recent categories, which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an interplay of formal analogies or semantic resemblances; but neither literature, nor politics, nor philosophy and the sciences articulated the field of discourse, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as they did in the nineteenth century. In any case, these divisions -- whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under examination -- are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types; they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics (Foucault 1972: 22).

Every conscious act of classification, whether of coins (Ganz 2008), clouds (Pretor-Pinney 2007), or notional genres (Frow 2006: 29-50), necessitates the simultaneous collocation of some items and the separation of others (Batley 2005; Read 2007). Therefore the categorical distinction between 'included' and 'excluded' in the classification process is essential and constant. Various influential works on genre acknowledge these fundamental matters, setting out their stall in some detail before examining selected texts according to their chosen critical stance (Neale 2000: 9-47). For example, Cawelti explains the organizing principle of his book on popular formulaic texts, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, and justifies his pluralist approach thus:

I have tried to define the major analytical problems that confront us when we seek to enquire more fully into the nature and significance of formulaic literature, and to use a variety of different formulas to illustrate with some specificity how these problems might be explored. Thus I hope [to] combine some of the advantages of generality and particularity, [developing] a general methodology that can, I believe, be profitably applied to popular formulas other than those treated in this book [*Adventure, Mystery and Romance*] (Cawelti: 1976: 2).

Undoubtedly the production of any thesis necessitates much classificatory activity because important critical terms and salient issues must be defined and certain material must be selected for inclusion in the text while other equally interesting, yet less immediately germane material must be saved for a future project. Finally the body of findings must be arranged in the order which will best support the argument being proposed (Cryer 2000: 235). Therefore, mindful of these issues the present writer seeks to combine the advantages of generality and particularity in the present exploration of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book.

## 1.7 Issues of Definition and Terminology

A fundamental issue of research methodology in any discipline has to do with the challenge of defining phenomena to be discussed whilst also accepting that such 'definitions' may be ultimately unsafe (Wilson 1963: 4). For example Lévi-Strauss (1967) finds in both primitive and scientific thought an intense effort to create conceptual order (cf. Wright 1975: 20) through definition and classification, deeming this to be an intrinsic imperative. However as the passage below shows, even concrete

phenomena will have different significance for different people; thus no definition can ever be considered completely secure:

It is a mistake to think that [the term] 'fish' means one thing and one thing only. If you are a professional biologist or an expert on fish, you will probably say that a whale is not a fish, or 'not really' a fish: because biologists classify creatures in such a way that mammals come into one group and fish into another. Creatures which are mammals, like whales, are by this not allowed to count as fish: the concept of fish excludes mammals. But if you are working in the ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (which deals with whales along with everything else that swims in the sea), you will probably not pay much attention to this biological classification: you will have a classification of your own, which will include whales in the concept of fish. The ordinary person, unless he happens to know some biology, would probably also call a whale a fish. *Thus whether you call a whale a fish or not depends entirely on what angle you look at it from* [italics added]. Nor can we say that one view point is better than another ... One view point is better for some purposes, another for other purposes (Wilson 1963: 4).

Sometimes, as new sciences or cultural phenomena emerge and critiques arise in support of or opposition to what has preceded them, language must be either newly coined or co-opted from other discourses to describe and 'define' the innovatory concepts and paradigms. For example, the language of psychoanalysis, which originated in clinical practice (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974; Moore and Fine 1990: xix-xxiii) and drew heavily on the lexicon of classical Greek, has now infiltrated demotic communication in a deracinated form, not least in self-help books (Heussenstamm 1995), thereby acquiring the pejorative descriptor 'psychobabble' (Rosen 1977). Nevertheless as Fonagy observes:

Psychoanalysis provides a range of essential descriptions and constructs without which it would be far harder to talk about ourselves or to understand our own and other people's lives. No doubt, this is why so many psychoanalytic technical terms have found their way into everyday language (for example, 'Don't be so defensive', or 'He is foul to her because he subconsciously fancies her' etc.) (Fonagy (2000: <http://www.psychanalysis.org.uk/fonagy1.htm> accessed 25 April 2011).

Likewise the critical terms 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' which appear in the title of this thesis would seem to suggest that these notions can be defined and discussed with a certain amount of security. But there is extensive debate amongst theorists about the significance of each one; some of which is usefully outlined in the individual volumes devoted to them as part of the *Routledge New Critical Idiom Series* (Frow 2006; Mills 2004; Hall 2004). The term 'subject', in particular, has undergone considerable alteration in meaning (Williams 1976: 308-312), becoming indispensable to

the contemporary theorist in many fields (Macey 2001: 368; Cardiff School of Social Sciences 2008). Therefore the beginning of Chapter 7, *The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book*, below, discusses its 'definition' in detail. Indeed the whole issue of definition is particularly important for a genre theorist who seeks to go beyond localised description of selected texts to find "models with which masses of literary data may be classified and explained" (Lodge 2000: 137) and who also seeks to explore the slippery concepts of 'discourse' and 'subjectivity'. Therefore chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, below, each begin with heuristic consideration of how these theoretically-loaded terms have been 'stabilised' in order to facilitate discussion.

### 1.8 Issues of Ontology and Epistemology

The necessary processes of definition and classification, together with the concomitant issues of separation and inclusion described above, present empirical challenges to *any* researcher. But the more diffuse issues of ontology and epistemology (respectively 'what exists to be known' and 'the ways in which it can be known') are perhaps even more problematic for a study of self-hood and subjectivity because they lie at the very heart of what humans have at various times believed themselves and their personal experience to be (Olson 2007). Indeed these related notions must be considered particularly germane to a thesis about how individuals may transform their lives for the better through reading self-help books. For as Barker notes:

Our maps and constructs of the world are never simply matters of individual interpretation but are inevitably part of the wider cultural repertoire of discursive explanations, records and maps of meanings available to members of cultures (Barker 2002: 99).

In other words, a person's ontological assumptions about how their world 'is' can only emerge as a result of the particular epistemological context which 'educates' them, formally or informally, into an understanding of their existence. According to Eagleton (2004: 157), the connection between ontology and epistemology is "a transformative continuity" whose interdependence becomes clearer when the profound psychic effects of various scientific revolutions on human understanding and fundamental assumptions are considered. That is, when holistic paradigm shifts (cf. Kuhn 1962; Okasha 2002:

81) periodically infiltrate previously unchallenged ontological 'givens', thereby altering a community's collective belief system. So for example Smith observes that:

In the Middle Ages philosophers looked to authorities external to their own philosophical reasonings to confirm their ideas, notably to the church and to the works of the ancient Greeks. Seventeenth-century thinkers rejected such limitations on their speculations ... The work of such men as Copernicus, Galileo and Newton presented changed views of the universe which led philosophers to speculate anew about it and about man's place in it (Smith 1972: 154).

Alongside the post-Reformation emphasis on personal responsibility for what happened to the body on earth and the soul after death, memorably expressed though the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' which asserts the equal standing of *every* Christian before God (Britannica.com (n.d):

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/475966/priesthood-of-all-believers>

accessed 16 March 2011) came the development of 'scientific method' with its questioning of traditional ideologies and the suggestion that there might be more than one way of understanding the world. Therefore, during the late seventeenth century the Western notion of essential selfhood began to be transformed as certain 'new' conditions for acquiring knowledge emerged and were disseminated. Interest in metaphysics, logic, ethics, politics and the physical sciences began to sweep aside much earlier religious practice and superstitious belief about the 'theocentric' nature of reality in which religion permeated all aspects of human existence and in no sense constituted a 'sphere' of its own (Taylor 2007: 2). Furthermore, from the seventeenth century onward new ideas were increasingly transmitted in the vernacular, albeit with co-options from the classical lexicon (Graddol *et al* 1996: 171-179), and were disseminated in print more easily than ever before (Yolton 1991; Gomez 2003).

So extensive were the effects of this epistemic revolution that while in, say, 1500 it was virtually impossible for a member of Western society not to believe in God, by the turn of the millennium many people were finding such belief to be inconceivable (Taylor 2007:25). Indeed the Enlightenment changes in Western epistemology which marginalised and mechanised God while elevating scientific method and reason may be said in part to have contributed to the emergence of the self-help book because they swept away so many of the old beliefs on which people had previously relied for security and comfort (see Chapter 2: 'Provenance': From the Puritan Legacy to the

Culture of Narcissism and Chapter 3, *The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual*, below). Thereafter, even uneducated people must sometimes have had to think about what it meant to be alive in an impersonal, apparently deterministic cosmos after having for so long considered themselves to exist in a theocratic, geocentric one where their life on earth was assumed to be merely a preparation for a glorious heavenly reward; the way to which had been revealed by Christ, and access to which was mediated by the church. But putative 'liberation' from traditional shared beliefs does not necessarily make for an easier life. Indeed Barker observes that:

It is no accident that western culture is witnessing an unprecedented rise in anxiety and depression along with an associated fascination with self-help book. This is attributable not only to capitalism and consumer culture, for there are other factors in play (e.g. the loss of contact with issues of life, illness and death, the absence of positive family life and the decline of a common culture etc.) (Barker 2002: 174).

Furthermore, the deconstruction of essential selfhood has been a central project of postmodern theory which has sought to displace attention from the self-as-entity and to focus on the methods of identity formation (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 102). Yet the ontology of essential selfhood remains axiomatic in demotic understanding of life, not least in self-help books; presumably because "within the originatory matrix of lived experience, a pre-categorical understanding of self and world infused by mytho-poetic interpretation is already operative" (Schrag 1980: 120). As Barker observes:

[The] popular cultural repertoire of the Western world holds that we have a true self, an identity which we possess and which can become known to us. Here, identity is thought to be a universal and timeless core, an 'essence' of the self that is expressed as representations that are recognizable by ourselves and by others; that is identity is an essence signified through signs of tastes, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles (Barker 2004: 94).

Likewise McAdams detects a strong belief in the independence of self from others and a sense that the core of one's being, which is mostly defined in terms of internal attributes such as motives, abilities, talents or 'personalities', does not change much over time; even though it can sometimes be lost, disguised, forgotten or abused. Moreover there is also a common belief that this 'self' can make choices about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour (McAdams 2006: 124; 278) – the instrumentalist assumption upon which all self-help books are predicated.

Certainly, empirical analysis of the self-help genre has revealed that although its readers may define themselves as having a plethora of distinctive personal problems, the fierce critical debate about notions of essential self-hood and socially constructed subjectivity (cf. Gallagher 2000; Metzinger 2004; Zahavi 2008) is *never* one of them! Therefore as a result of its foundational 'certainties', this group of texts appears to be intrinsically paradoxical when considered in critical terms. Although at the deepest level it promulgates an ontology based on 'essential self-hood', its members are epistemologically diverse inasmuch as they propose a wide variety of strategies, some of them conflicting, by which the self can be 'known' and transformed. These range, for example, from scientifically-endorsed procedures such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Wilson and Branch 2005) and the techniques of Positive Psychology (Seligman 2003) to the adoption of magical thinking (Subbotsky 2010) and channelling (De Alberdi 2009). This duality is the focus of Chapter 7, The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book, below.

## 1.9 Conclusion: The Limits of Empiricism

The requirement for a researcher to draw some theoretical conclusions beyond the mere compilation of data in order to establish informational significance is emphasized by Preece:

The rearrangement of what is already known is not in itself the essence of research unless it leads on to the development of patterns or classification systems which, as in evolutionary biology, ... reveal new knowledge about relationships and ... prompt further research and testing (Preece 1994: 6).

In speaking here of 'patterns', 'classification systems', 'relationships' and 'testing' he creates a 'semantic field' (Brinton 2000: 112) which contains a group of words all related to the notion of structure. This lexical cluster strongly suggests that research must have a *framework* in order to produce findings of any significance. There must, at least notionally, be something stable and normative against which information can be contextualised and evaluated. But what should that framework be and on what foundations can it be built? Clearly, it is no longer possible to assume that words or indeed any signs at all are un-problematically referential and will lead to unambiguous

meaning. For example *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* defines 'inside' as the opposite of outside and 'outside' as the opposite of inside - which does not move things on much. Moreover the disintegration of political and religious metanarratives and the emergence of new scientific paradigms have meant that for many people 'truth' has become inescapably relative. As a result, theorists can only struggle to articulate their understanding in limited words because as Saussure notes, the sign always to some extent eludes control by the will, whether of the individual or of society (in Lodge 1988:9). Meanwhile the philosopher-poet T.S. Eliot observes that:

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets* (1968: 7)

Clearly postmodernist critics cannot rely on positivistic, liberal humanistic notions of universal value as the unquestioned basis for their exegesis because as Eagleton observes (2004: 13), postmodern ideology rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. It is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity. In practice, however, it is counter-productive to be over-precious about the existence or otherwise of 'ultimate definitions'; for life is to be lived and theses are to be written. Academic discourse has its rules, and if a proposed piece of research is to get under way at all then its scope must be pragmatically established and its terms 'defined'. After all, counter-intuitive irrational numbers (Wells 1997: xvii) and the lack of an exact value for  $\pi$  (Connor 2010) have not stopped scientific exploration. Thus it is interesting to note that at least one well-respected writer on genre feels *no* need to justify his assumptions at all. The first sentence of Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society* (1975) states, "Everyone's seen a Western", and his



second paragraph continues, "We are all familiar with the Western". However Rick Altman worries about "the constitutive assumptions that genre theorists have neglected to acknowledge in their own work; the habits and positions that have been silently passed on" (Altman 1999: 1).

Therefore this chapter about methodological matters has been placed at the beginning of the thesis to show that some challenging issues for the researcher have been the subject of sustained reflection. Also, to explain how the chapters in this document have been designed to progress systematically from background, contextualising material, through empirical close reading of selected texts, to conclude with theoretically-focused discussions of discourse, genre and subjectivity. The narrative arc of the work is therefore intrinsically deductive inasmuch as it moves from consideration of general matters to focus on theoretical specifics. However, much of the information recorded here has emerged from inductive observation of specific items coupled with abductive reflection. For example, examination of the self-help *corpus* past and present reveals that a remarkable number of its most commercially successful authors are from the USA. This suggests that although the genre is now entrenched in the individualistic discourse of Western society as a whole (see Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, below) and accommodates many variations of topic and register, it retains links with traditional American ideologies of self-sufficiency, non-institutional spirituality and freedom of personal expression, as safeguarded indeed by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Therefore, although this work is not primarily intended as a contribution to American Studies, Chapter 2, Provenance: From the Puritan Legacy to the Culture of Narcissism, below, contextualises the material which follows in subsequent chapters by highlighting certain transatlantic movements and some associated discursive tropes which have become generic features of the self-help book as a Western cultural artefact (cf. Marsh 2010: 9).

## Chapter 2 'Provenance':

### From the Puritan Legacy to the Culture of Narcissism

Arguably there is no greater modern assumption than that it lies within our power to find happiness.

Darrin McMahon, *The Pursuit of Happiness: A History from the Greeks to the Present* (2007:12)

Long ago, before our country [America] became a map of connect the Gap stores, but after the European settlers made the interesting assumption that whatever they laid their hands on was theirs to keep, our defining national spirit was one of potential transformation. The business about taxation without representation and the cessation of religious persecution was all well and good, but the true draw to all this wild countryside was the romance of the remade life.

Sheila Gillooly, *Venus in Spurs: The Secret Female Fear of Commitment* (1996: 28)

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter proposes a number of "diachronic causations" (Taylor 1989: 202) for the emergence of the contemporary self-help book, tracing a network of precipitating events and movements. Firstly, it highlights the American Puritan ethic of individualism, entrepreneurship and self-reliance, noting its relationship with 'the American Dream' and its influence on contemporary self-help literature. Secondly, it considers the emotive appeal of Christian revivalists at several periods, some of whose rhetorical tactics linger in self-help books. Thirdly, it acknowledges the residual influence in self-help books of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and 'new thought', finding some parallels with the popular contemporary subgenre of 'magical thinking' (see also Chapter 5 Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below).

Fourthly, it considers the effects of 1960s and 1970s counter culture, wherein a sense of personal entitlement and a fascination with surface image became of remarkable importance, leading to what Lasch (1979) famously calls a 'culture of narcissism'. Finally, it links the enduring drive towards self-improvement, of which there are clearly many different manifestations, with the archetypal 'quest meme' which Campbell (1949) has called 'the monomyth', a discussion which is revisited in Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, where some of its specific textual manifestations are examined in more detail; and also in Chapter 6, The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre, below. The function of the present chapter is therefore to contextualise the theoretical discussion of genre, discourse and subjectivity which forms the body of this thesis by situating the self-help book in its historical matrix. Thus the arguments presented here are, in some ways, an expansion of ideas touched upon by Dolby (2005) and McGee (2005), both of whom locate the discourse of contemporary self-development in a tradition of American self-invention and narratives of personal salvation.

## 2.2 The American Puritan Legacy

The term 'provenance' in the title of this chapter derives from Latin (*pro* = forth + *venire* = to come) and is employed in art and bibliographic studies to denote the traceable sequence of ownership of objects or artefacts. Used metaphorically it can refer to the origin or source of *anything*, including 'cultural artefacts' such as the self-help book. However it is surrounded with inverted commas in the present text in order to stress that the emergence of the contemporary self-help genre is 'overdetermined': a word coined in 1900 by Freud (2008: 216-7, 234-5) to describe when a single observable phenomenon arises from multiple simultaneous causes and no single precipitating factor can be identified (cf. Althusser 1996: 100). Nevertheless, in reflecting upon the social and historical conditions from which self-help books have emerged to become such a dominant force not just in publishing but in contemporary culture, and in asking what subjective needs they satisfy, certain broad themes emerge.

For example, it is remarkable how many early and contemporary self-help authors are American – though Samuel Smiles who wrote *Self Help* (1859), thereby inadvertently naming a whole genre, was Scottish (McGee 2005). Currently 'canonical' (Macey 2000: 56) American writers include Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Joseph Murphy, John Gray, Richard Carlson, Susan Jeffers, Louise Hay, Barbara de Angelis, M Scott Peck, Phil McGraw, Steven Covey, Anthony Robbins and Melody Beattie. The prevalence of transatlantic authors in the bookshops, revealed as a result of empirical observation during the years of this research, suggests that the self-help genre's characteristic ideology resonates particularly with the 'American Dream'; a notion introduced in 1931 by Adams thus:

The American Dream, that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century, has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class (Adams 2001).

Moreover, Paul Reuben's bibliography of 52 items about the American Dream published between 1980 and the present indicates how strongly this notion continues to resonate in the American psyche (Reuben (n.d.):

<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/append/axs.html#mla>, accessed 17 March 2011). Yet although the phrase was enthusiastically co-opted by Barack Obama in his book *The Audacity of Hope: Reclaiming the American Dream* (2008), the 'dream' ideology has also been rigorously critiqued: for example by Sardar and Wyn Davies (2003; 2004), Leon (2008), and Greider (2009; 2010). Indeed the latter suggests that the notion has actually been responsible for inflated expectations and much subsequent disappointment and depression when, inevitably, limited personal circumstances and external variables have thwarted individual aspirations.

More specifically these critics, along with Gabaccia (2002) and Cullen (2004: 10), distinguish various reified 'dreams': of religious transformation, political freedom, racial equality, upward mobility, home ownership, personal expression etc. Yet beneath every *particular* dream of power, money, emotional or spiritual satisfaction sits the assumption that 'success' and 'happiness' are entitlements which can be achieved through aspiration and effort. And although the 'mythology of entitlement' has been

critiqued by writers such as Weiss (1969) and Wyllie (1966), it is surely no surprise that the self-help book has come to occupy a very central niche in American popular culture; displaying advice on virtually all aspects of life and achieving a huge audience (Starker 1989:2).

Furthermore, McGee observes that the less predictable and controllable life has become, the more individuals have been urged by self-help authors to chart their own courses, to 'master' their destinies, and to 'make themselves over' (McGee 2005: 12). But these are comparatively difficult times and there is also evidence to suggest that personal ambitions constantly adapt to the exigencies of circumstance. For example, a comparison of two reports produced by 'Metlife', which is the largest insurance company in the USA, reveals how Americans have been refocusing their aspirations and accommodating some necessary 'downsizing' in response to the current economic crisis (Metlife.com 2010). Whereas the 2007 survey detected an almost insatiable appetite for material acquisitions, the 2009 one finds people to be more concerned about holding on to what they have already achieved at work, making the most of the material goods they have already acquired, and maintaining good relationships with family and friends.

However this pragmatic reorienting of aspiration seems in no way to have diminished the demand for guidance from the self-help genre which is now, predictably as a textual commodity which must maintain its market, responding to the current ethos of frugality and 'voluntary simplicity' with a variety of publications which claim, for a price of course, to show people how to live better on less (e.g. Andrews and Urbanska 2009; Flower 2009; Farrel 2010; Ingram 2010; Elgin 2010). There is also, of course, *Frugal Living for Dummies* (Taylor-Hough 2003).

Moreover, although commentators increasingly chart the USA's economic decline (Nagorski (2010): <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/03/15/the-troubles.html>, accessed 17 March 2011), the hegemony of American culture is nevertheless constantly broadcast worldwide. Thus Sardar and Wyn Davies (2004: 5) feel able to claim that: "In a sense, we are all citizens of America". So it is not surprising to find the self-help sections of British bookshops packed with works by transatlantic authors. Of course,

personal aspiration is not confined to Americans. But given the dominance of American writers in today's self-help market, much of the background material in this thesis necessarily deals with that nation's culture and its effects. Indeed, a sense of entitlement is enshrined in the very foundational documents of the US. Famously, the *American Declaration of Independence* (1776) asserts the right to pursue happiness, while the *Constitution* of 1787 elevates individualism, self-reliance, liberty and the promise of betterment - beliefs that persist in American life and ideology (Braddy (2009): <http://americandreamcoalition.org/>, accessed 17 March 2011) despite the restrictive realities of economic and bureaucratic control (Lloyd Smith 1994: 295-314). However it must also be acknowledged that these beliefs were not always without *lacunae*: the early ideals did not initially extend to Native Americans, women or slaves (Hall 2004:36).

Starker (1989) argues that the earliest roots of self-help literature in America (and by extension in the English-speaking world) lie in the seventeenth and eighteenth century values of Protestant New England where a person was considered to be directly responsible to God for the state of his or her soul, and where the characteristic 'work ethic', identified by Weber in his famous 1930 work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1991) assumed that each individual had a particular 'calling' which they were expected to follow to the best of their ability. Weber suggests (1991: 79-92) that the Puritan idea of a divinely ordained vocation or 'life-task', a notion which he considers did not exist in antiquity or Catholic theology (Weber 1991: xii), was eventually absorbed into secular life. Thus it became incumbent upon the individual, through conscientious endeavour, to strive for achievement, both spiritually and economically (Weber 1991: 176). As a result according to Anker, post-Reformation spiritual engagement and material acquisition became to some extent linked in the American psyche. Thus:

The ordered product and profit-oriented shape and texture of modern society received a major impetus from the forms of work-world discipline forged by anxious Puritans trying to prove God's favour and salvation by the visible evidence of worldly success" (Anker 1999: vol.1, 141).

Moreover, although Shain (1996) considers the myth of early American individualism to be somewhat overestimated, self-sufficiency must surely have been crucial to the physical survival and mental well-being of people in pioneer societies. For even non-religious American settlers had to make their way in a threatening wilderness with only their own self-reliance and that of their immediate companions to sustain them; an experience which according to Solomon and Higgins produced an enduring no-nonsense and pragmatic sensibility in American ideology: "The early colonists had more to worry about than the ultimate nature of reality. The first settlements were often endangered and immediate practical reality was an unavoidable preoccupation" (Solomon and Higgins 1996: 234).

Thus although 'the American people' clearly has diverse ethnic origins, Albanese (2007:1) nevertheless discerns a respect for individual rights, obligations and mutual support which to some extent has come to characterise the nation in general. Therefore it is argued that contemporary self-help writing, in spite of the current inward-looking 'therapeutic' turn observed with some concern by Pearsall (2005), Salerno (2005), Illouz (2008) and Ehrenreich (2009), is linked by its valorisation of personal aspiration with the longstanding, ingrained desire for social and individual self-determination. Furthermore, that this characteristic national attitude emerged both from the realities of frontier existence and later from the internal social dislocations following the Civil War and the mass immigrations and urbanisation occasioned by industrial expansion in the USA. As people were compelled to search for work where they could, they often became deracinated and had to make the best of their lives in difficult circumstances (Albanese 1999: 262). Once the 'new' country became settled and the physical frontier was closed in 1890, the belief in a pioneering spirit seems to have endured to become re-expressed in the desire for a better life and a better self. Indeed as early as 1893 Turner was writing in his 'Preface' to *The Frontier in American History* that:

[T]he larger part of what has been distinctive and valuable in America's contribution to the history of the human spirit has been due to this nation's peculiar experience in extending its type of frontier into new regions; and in creating peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces which together make up the United States. Directly or indirectly these experiences shaped the life of the Eastern as well as the Western States, and even reacted upon the Old World and influenced the direction of its thought and its progress. This experience has been fundamental in the economic, political and social characteristics of the American people and in their conceptions of their destiny (Turner 2010: front matter, no pagination).

Alongside the fears and insecurities involved in clearing a wilderness, imposing their intentions on the native population and creating a new society, the early American settlers (whether their motivation was religious or materialistic), subsequent frontier families and later migrants seem fervently to have believed they could improve the world spiritually and economically (Miller 1983; Bellah *et al* 1985; Billington 2001) and were willing to take practical steps so to do so, not least through self-education.

But in addition to a generalised social mythology generated by the need to survive, yet un-attributable to any particular author, early American self-help literature was influenced by the views of certain outstanding individuals. Indeed the pithy advice of the most famous of the early writers, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) is still in print. A self-made entrepreneur, polymath and diplomat, without military, religious or aristocratic connections to help him, Franklin became a long-term best-seller with *Poor Richard's Almanac* which was first published in 1732 (2007) and *The Way to Wealth* which was first published in 1758 (1986). Weber (1930) calls him an embodiment of the Protestant ethic because of his respect for 'character virtues' such as industry, temperance, frugality, order and justice. Meanwhile Cawelti (1965) considers his works to be part of the American frontier ethos: pragmatic and utilitarian. A deist rather than a Christian, Franklin recommended certain behaviours of 'self-improvement' not because of their religious or social value, but because they would make the individual more *materially* secure (Cawelti 1965: 13-24). Thus to some extent he anticipated the entrepreneurial ideology of self-help gurus such as Anthony Robbins and Stephen Covey, for whom character and commerce are most certainly not incompatible. Franklin, ever pragmatic, declares that honesty is the best policy because lies bring trouble and complication and that pride is inadvisable because it loses you friends. He has been called a Puritan personality without Puritan motivations (Anker 1999: vol. 1, 143) because he was concerned with wisdom as well as wealth.



Similarly, although Cotton Mather (1663-1728) was a Puritan minister from Boston who published almost four hundred works, he was not tied solely to a theological conception of personal improvement but encouraged the pursuit of wealth. For example *The Christian at His Calling* (1701) and *Essays to Do Good* (1710) both advocate enthusiastic engagement with worldly activity. However, unlike Franklin's more artfully simple advice, Mather's works are not now popular; perhaps because of their historically specific religious bearing. Nevertheless, as populations grew and industrialisation spread in Europe and America during the nineteenth century, Mather's sense that economic success and spiritual development were linked was replicated, for example, in the many 'rags-to comparative riches' novels of Horatio Alger (1832-1899) such as the 'Ragged Dick' stories and the various books in the 'Luck and Pluck' series (Moore 1994: 199) which assure their readers that it is not immoral to become materially secure (Cawelti 1965: 101-124; Weiss 1969). The characteristically American drive to reconcile individual entrepreneurship with social morality which was notable expressed by Franklin and Mather, but which has existed from the time of the early settlers to the present, is the subject of Patricia O'Toole's *Money and Morals in America* (1998).

The tradition of personal striving is at the heart of U.S. education (Spring 2004). Indeed, books used in the American public school system from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, for example the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers*, emphasised the need for individualistic character virtues such as independence, thrift, perseverance and industry because it was considered that these would help a person to succeed in life (Alabanese 1999: 420). Similarly, Napoleon Hill informs his readers in *Think and Grow Rich* which was first published in 1937 (2004: 148) that: "God seems to throw himself on the side of the individual who knows exactly what he wants, if he is determined to get JUST THAT!" (cf. Huber 1971). Anker accordingly notes how even when Puritan spirituality eventually faded, patterns of zealous work behaviour remained; along with faith in the possibility of a better future (Anker 1999: vol. 1, 142). Likewise, the longstanding tradition of self-improvement in the USA to which the Puritan ethic made such a significant contribution is recognised by Lasch (1980: 57-59). Meanwhile, manifestations of 'can-do' ideology in the sphere of auto-didacticism, mostly male (Schrager 1993), are discussed by Cawelti (1965), Huber (1971), Weiss

(1988) and Kett (1994). Clearly the link between spiritual growth and the quest for personal, individualistic material success is not new and has become a lasting trope that is almost omnipresent in the contemporary self-help texts (Gaines 2008), whether or not they originate from American publishers.

Although the self-deterministic 'gospel' became increasingly secular in content, it was often articulated by apologists in what has been described as the 'plain style': a rhetorical technique deliberately adopted by iconoclastic early American Protestant preachers who rejected theological complexity and superfluous textual decoration when addressing their audiences in order to convey their religious message most directly (Boorstin 1988: 11; Miller 1983: 270; Albanese 1999: 416; Brett 2005). But the new narrative of self-development also co-opted some emotive techniques from the populist 'confessional' rhetoric of personal revelation and conversion which came to characterise revivalist, preaching to mass audiences (Caldwell 1983; Sizer 1978; Kibbey 1986). The reformers' religious discourse, which emphasised the Protestant paradigm of sin and salvation, was based on a master narrative of fall, punishment and redemption. That is to say, although life might be bad, salvation was possible through faith, conversion and right action. Preaching began to offer more than just explication of the gospel and confirmation of doctrine; rather it became an emotive call for people to live better. Thus non-conformist ministers, and the itinerant evangelists who lacked the traditional institutional authority to impose their doctrine on their hearers by official means, and whose very impermanence brought a freshness and excitement to their words (Albanese 1999: 153), sought to reinforce their ideas by means of declamatory rhetoric (Haller 1938: 142) which would impress large gatherings, often in the open air (Witham 2008). Star performers emerged, such as the philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) whose passionate preaching style is commemorated in a poem by Robert Lowell (see Appendix G: Poems) and the English Methodist evangelist George Whitfield (1714-70) whose skill could apparently hold large groups spellbound, provoking powerful physical and emotional responses as people groaned and sobbed their way to putative salvation. As Albanese observes:

The preacher who wished to stimulate his congregation towards conversion was required to deal with individual themes. It was the relationship conceived between the sinner and the sinner's God that was uppermost in the sermons – not beliefs about the Christian community, the communion of saints, or the general plan of a creator God for the world (Albanese 1999: 421).

But a similar concentration on individual rather than societal themes is to be found in today's self-help books, which are effectively secular salvation narratives, and it is not difficult to detect traces of preaching tropes. For example, many self-help publications have eye-catching, pithy titles designed to attract initial attention. Their authors often address the reader directly and the text is likely to be packed with exemplary narratives of distress and redemption. For instance, the famous *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series employs a striking cultural allusion on its cover, subsequently offering a stream of inspirational stories "that restore your faith in human nature" (sub-title) as a means of disseminating homespun wisdom in un-taxing yet memorable chunks. Meanwhile some other traditional rhetorical devices are present in the highly-wrought extract below (Jeffers 1996: 94) which uses direct but emphatic language (*lexis*) reinforced by layout and varied graphics (*taxis*) to strengthen its effect (Nash 1992: 8, 25). The passage's most striking 'figure' (Nash 1992: 110) is the repetition of the binary opposition 'saying YES/saying NO' which occurs on several occasions and is emphasised by the use of upper case letters. But there are also several other, less direct antitheses: higher/lower self; giving up/getting up; letting go/letting in. Clearly it is impossible for a written text to replicate fully the sensationalist rhetoric of revivalist preachers. Nevertheless calculated repetitions, graphic variation and some judicious exclamation marks are clearly intended to drive the message home.

**Say YES to your Universe!**

As I describe in *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, saying **YES** to your Universe means letting go of resistance and letting in the possibilities inherent in many of life's situations. Saying **YES** is definitely a tool of our Higher Self! Conversely, saying **NO** is definitely a tool of our Lower Self! In the way I am using it, saying **NO** means being a victim. It means resisting opportunities for growth. Saying **NO** creates tension, exhaustion and struggle. Saying **YES** reduces upset and anxiety and lets you become the creator of enriching new life experiences. *Saying YES doesn't mean giving up.* It means *getting up* and acting on your belief that you can create meaning and purpose to whatever life hands you. It means moving into the realm of action.

- Find the blessing. Find the lesson to be learned.
- Find the strength you never thought you had.
- Find the triumph.
- Saying **YES** is a very powerful tool indeed!

Susan Jeffers (1996)

*End the Struggle and Dance with Life:*

*How to Build Yourself Up When the World Gets You Down.*

London: Hodder and Stoughton

The extract begins with personally-targeted material: the writer speaks directly as 'I' and the reader is addressed as 'you'. The contraction 'don't' suggests a non-threatening, informal relationship between advisor and advisee, the adjective 'our' implies that writer and readers share common concerns, and the very universe acquires a personal dimension: it is 'your universe'. However the passage ends with a number of imperatives which are centred on the page for increased visibility. These simultaneously assert the authority of the writer to be directive, while seeking to move the reader on from reflection into action. It is also interesting to observe that while the benefits of 'saying yes to one's universe' are expressed fairly generally, leaving room for personal preferences, the unpleasant results of 'saying no' are much more specifically described: victimhood, resistance, tension, exhaustion, struggle, upset and anxiety. No one would want to experience these.

There is oblique reference to religion in the word 'blessing' and in the terms 'higher self' and 'higher power'. The latter phrases have become associated with the Twelve-Step recovery movement which has adopted them as a way of talking about life's spiritual dimension without employing the lexicon of any particular religion (Prengel (n.d.): <http://www.proactivechange.com/12steps/higher-power.htm>, accessed 17 March 2011). Thus the self-help writer manages to be spiritual without partisanship – a useful technique if one wants to reach the widest possible market. Most notable of all, there is a pervasive use of 'pioneering' lexis related to change such as 'possibilities', 'tool', 'growth', 'enriching new life experiences', 'getting up and acting on your belief', 'create', 'meaning and purpose', 'moving into the realm of action', 'strength' and 'triumph'. The word 'find' is repeated four times, thus implying that the reader is on a metaphorical 'quest' for a better life; a theme which is revisited in Chapter 6, The Self-Help Genre: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre, below. Finally the passage further exploits typographic variation, using capital letters, italics, bold type, white space and exclamation marks as silent signifiers of declamatory style.

This passage clearly seeks to convey in print something of the persuasive power of the human voice. But Susan Jeffers, like very many other writers of self-help literature, now has a homepage where much can be downloaded (Jeffers (2011a) <http://www.susanjeffers.com/home/index.cfm>, accessed 17 March 2011). There are

currently 4,304 self-help books available from Amazon/Kindle(20 July 2011). But this 're-formatting' of the self-help *corpus* is just a recent instance of how those seeking to persuade others have always been quick to exploit whatever technology would disseminate their message most effectively. For example non-traditional secular ideas about individual agency and a sense of entitlement to personal fulfilment (see also Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, below) began to spread more easily among all classes when improved print machinery and materials made books and journals cheaper during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Middlekauf 2007). This development of mass printing stimulated the production of advice texts about social manners (Eisenstein 1979), which were the ancestors of today's self-help books. Additionally, private reading, not least in free public libraries such as those built by the American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in England as well as the USA (Jones 1997), offered increased opportunities for independent thought. Thus it became possible for anyone so inclined to become an autodidact (Jagodzinski 1999; Feather 2005: 108; Dolby 2008: 19-34). Moreover, as well as much 'improving' literature for the masses which advocated the undertaking of 'good works' and socially active citizenship in didactic essays, sermons, tracts and parables (Moore 16-39), there were also 'confession narratives' which contained revelations about personal feelings and failings (Cawelti 1965: 55-73; Miller 1983; Gill 2005; Lasch (1979: 16-25). Thus to the early Puritan writings described above were added the highly rhetorical tracts of Christian Revivalism and, somewhat later, the eclecticism of Transcendental thinkers. Both ideologies have left their mark on today's self-help literature, as the following sections explain.

### 2.3 The Influence of Christian Revivalism

The concern with personal salvation was first encouraged by the Protestant Reformation with its insistence on 'the priesthood of all believers' who needed no mediation to encounter God (Albanese 1999: 104; McGrath 2000). Thereafter it was reinforced by Puritan confessional ideology and the entrepreneurial spirit of the American colonists and frontier people, subsequently becoming re-energised by various periods of intense religious revival and evangelistic fervour in America: Great

Awakenings (McLoughlin 1978). The first Great Awakening in the early 1700s resulted in the growth of non-conformist denominations such as the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist Churches, all with great oratorical traditions, while the Second Great Awakening at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a period of local mass evangelism by itinerant, fundamentalist preachers (Long 1998). The movement was characterized by lay participation in religious governance and ceremonies, growing inter-denominationalism, evangelism, personal testimony and dramatic conversion experiences. That is, people were increasingly taking it upon themselves to design their own kind of demotic religion.

Some writers consider a Third Great Awakening of missionary activity, for example by the Salvation Army, to have reached its peak in the early 1900s (Anker 1999). Other scholars, for example Fogel (2002), suggest that America also experienced a Fourth Great Awakening during the late 1960s and 1970s which was stimulated by the supposed charisma of Ronald Reagan and an upsurge of Pentecostalism which emphasised experiences of emotion, healing and prophecy. Meanwhile President George W. Bush claimed to see yet another Great Awakening in the revival of religious devotion which coincided with the 'war on terror' (Baker 2006). But whatever their number, the relevance of these 'awakenings' for the present thesis on the discourse of the self-help book is that both the old Calvinist-influenced Protestantism of Puritans and the ideology of later reformers and demotic, sometimes itinerant, evangelists emphasised the importance, indeed necessity, of dramatic personal conversion experiences and extreme emotion as expressions of religious authenticity (Fishwick 1994; Anker 1999, Vol. 1: 153-156). The *locus* of ethical authority thus shifted ever further from established institutions to favour personal judgment, opening the way to increased lay activity, religious experimentation (Anker 1999: Vol.1 149) and eventually, it is argued, to the eclecticism of contemporary self-help books where subjective experience is so often central. Furthermore, the authors of these publications need effective powers of persuasion to capture the attention of their audience – just as earlier preachers did.

It seems that the religious 'awakenings' offered people a more direct way of encountering God and acting to improve their sense of well-being through becoming 'saved'. Evangelists, though often unlearned and itinerant, were passionately convinced of their 'truth' (Anker 1999, vol 1: 155) and deep emotional commitment to conversion was encouraged, indeed expected as a sign of authenticity (Bellah 1985: 233). As Albanese (2007: 5) notes: "The secret of American individualism becomes the secret of the evangelical heart. The direct and personal experience of the revivals in history has indelibly imprinted something that we call the American character".

This prioritisation of personal response by the nineteenth century Christian revivalists paved the way for a similar valorisation of direct personal experience in self-help books, which promised not only spiritual improvement but also worldly success (McGee 2005: 59). For example, *Self Help* (1859) by Samuel Smiles sold over 250,000 copies by the end of the nineteenth century (Houghton 1957: 191) by offering what Hall (2004: 66) describes as a programme for acquiring the masculine identity traits needed to participate effectively in an economically and imperially expanding nation. Its uncompromising first sentence is: "Heaven helps those who help themselves". But other early advice literature dealt with more domestic matters, particularly the conduct of women (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1987; Cameron 1995: 171-176). Moreover, as people increasingly moved from traditional rural communities to find work (Hobsbawm 1999: 57-74), practical wisdom which might previously have been transmitted orally through informal daily contact was recorded for their benefit in publications like the ones listed below.



Mrs. Goodfellow, *Mrs. Goodfellow's Cookery As It Should Be. A New Manual of the Dining Room and Kitchen* ([1865]).

Marion Harland, *Common Sense in the Household; A Manual of Practical Housewifery* (1872).

Cecil B. Hartley, *The Gentlemen's Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness; Being a Complete Guide for a Gentleman's Conduct in All His Relations towards Society . . . From the Best French, English, and American Authorities* ([1873]).

George Winfred Hervey, *The Principles of Courtesy: With Hints and Observations on Manners and Habits* (1856).

George Winfred Hervey, *Rhetoric of Conversation: or, Bridles & Spurs for the Management of the Tongue* (1853).

B.B. Hotchkin, *Manliness. For Young Men and Their Well-Wishers* ([1864]).

Freeman Hunt, *Worth and Wealth: A Collection of Maxims, Morals and Miscellanies for Merchants and Men of Business* (1856).

Library of Congress (2000) *The Nineteenth Century in Print on the Net* (extract)

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/moahtml/mnncspself.html>,

accessed 17 March 2011

Observation shows that the advice in both early and contemporary self-help books is often grounded in demotic shared experience and personal testimony rather than in scholarship. However this is perhaps to be expected in a genre with Puritan nonconformist antecedents which has always been designed for popular consumption in situations where the pragmatic aim has been to live better, not necessarily to know more. For although the sermons of early Puritan ministers seem to have been

theologically rigorous, the *popular* legacy of their culture, and even more so of the evangelistic expansion which followed, was to valorise conversion experiences, confessional accounts and the use of exemplary teaching material. All these genres survive in self-help books. Moreover, remnants of the inward-looking 'self-culture' developed by the mid-nineteenth century Transcendentalists also inhabit the genre.

## 2.4 Traces of Transcendentalism

Alongside Christian revivals, the first half of the nineteenth century also saw a growth of metaphysical, creedless 'religion' which drew upon intuition, ritual and magic to bring about apparently miraculous improvements in the lives of its practitioners (Albanese 2007: 7). Notably active were the American Transcendentalists (Buell 2006: xi-xxvii). Mystical and romantic, they were in revolt against 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism, the restrictions of New England Calvinism and the encroachments of an increasingly mechanised, industrial, sceptical world. Their name, as well as some of their ideas, was derived from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* published in 1781 (2007), which applies the term 'transcendental' to all knowledge which is concerned not with objects but with the mode of *knowing* objects, so far as this is possible, *a priori* (Hart and Leininger 1996: 673). Thus Emerson's famous essays: 'Nature', published in 1836 and 'Self-Reliance' published in 1841 (Emerson 2009) exhort the individual to eschew social conformity, to find their true calling in life, and thereafter to follow their own instincts, intuitions and insights: a message which continues to be found at the heart of many contemporary self-help books.

Ideological offspring of Transcendentalism, such as Spiritualism, Theosophy, Mesmerism and American New Thought, which is sometimes called 'mind cure' (James 1983: 112-123), appeared later in nineteenth century America. All aimed, in different ways, to satisfy psychic and emotional needs which the demanding Christian 'character ethic' (cf. Covey 2004: 18-20), with its emphasis on humility, integrity and industry, did not much recognise. For each system advocated enthusiastic engagement with numinous powers of mind and spirit rather than pragmatic strategies of prudence and

hard work as routes to personal fulfilment and success (Rhodes, 1915; Stillson 1967).

Thus Albanese (2007) calls the time of their emergence the first 'New Age', observing:

All the pieces of American metaphysical history came together in the New Age movement - Transcendentalism, spiritualism, mesmerism and Swedenborgism, Christian Science and New Thought, Theosophy and its ubiquitous spin-offs, and especially metaphysical Asia. Quantum physics provided a horizon of discourse which [allowed people] to engage in mystical-scientific speculation about spiritual healing and psychic surgery. Parapsychology pushed the scientific argot toward the paranormal (Albanese 2007: 505).

For the purpose of this present study of discourse and self-help books then, the ideas associated with the new thinkers and their transcendentalist antecedents (Braden 1963; Williams 2008) are relevant in a number of ways:

1. Although the first American Transcendentalists were particularly active only between the mid-1830s and 1850s, and the movement was mostly confined to New England, their ideas inspired much subsequent unconventional spiritual thinking by lay people. Many, if not most, self-help books today are produced by writers whose claim to authority is entirely experiential. Moreover there is no consensus about what topics the genre may embrace.
2. Transcendentalism precipitated an important epistemological shift because it offered a new route to self-knowledge and spiritual engagement by insisting that the mind could apprehend spiritual truth through direct engagement with a universal 'higher power' without the mediation of external authorities, the provision of scholarly references, or even perhaps the process of rational thought (Bickman (2002): <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/definitionbickman.html>, accessed 23 June 2010). Many of today's self-help books refer to a 'higher power' and the phrase is prominent in the discourse of the 12-Step movement which seeks to help people fight addiction (Jones 2008).
3. Transcendentalism's belief in infinite personal potential and its insistence that the mind alone can alter experience prefigures the message of many self-help publications whose advocacy of mind power (Goldwell and Lynch 2007) attracts

millions of readers (see Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below).

4. Transcendentalists drew their inspiration from diverse sources: for example Platonism and Neoplatonism, Indian and Chinese scriptures, the writings of mystics such as Emanuel Swedenborg, the post-Kantian idealism of Thomas Carlyle and the works of Romantic authors such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Goethe (Myerson *et al* 2010). This eclecticism prefigures the wide variety of material shelved as 'self-help' in mainstream bookshops where materials about Eastern philosophy, UFOs and *esoterica* sometimes sit close to materials on cognitive behavioural therapies, support groups, relationships, self-esteem, job-hunting and 'voluntary simplicity'.

It would seem, from the above, that the intrinsic individualism of the American Transcendental movement has to some extent influenced the contemporary discourse of self-help. However its adherents' belief in the innate goodness of humanity, their tendency to privilege intuition (Albanese 1999: 128), and their reliance on techniques such as autosuggestion, visualisation and thought transference to influence events clearly separate it from both the pragmatic Puritan ethic of the early settlers and the Christian enthusiasm of the Revivalists. Yet its ideology also seems less solipsistic than the narcissistic introspection which a number of commentators find to be a defining characteristic of peri-millennial life.

## 2.5 The Narcissistic Turn

Self-help books, which are all predicated on the assumption that the self and its circumstances can be renovated, may be viewed as material evidence of the Western individualistic, self-reflexive imperative which began to emerge during the Reformation and Renaissance (Watt 1996: 120-121), flourished (remarkably in America) alongside emergent capitalism as an effect of the Enlightenment project (Dewey 1999; Myers 2000: 161-194), was reinforced by Romanticism and transcendentalist thought, and became axiomatic in modernity (Taylor 1989). However liberating many of these developments may have seemed, Hall surmises that as people began to have more personal freedom, the question of what to do with it could actually be very stressful (Hall 2004: 67); an issue elaborated by Lane (2001) and Hecht (2008) and revisited in Chapter 3, *The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual*, below. Likewise North observes, in an early study of what Furedi would later call 'therapy culture' (Furedi 2004), that as the traditional ethical order was progressively undermined by secular relativism, the individual was left in a position of moral and psychic uncertainty and therefore began to look towards unconventional sources of guidance such as psychotherapy (North 1972: 26). Thus its practitioners, whom he calls 'secular priests', began to acquire substantial power to define optimum values and arbitrate about people's behaviour.

Lasch (1979) and Cushman (1996) similarly link the existential anxiety of the modern individual, forced to find meaning and purpose in a world lacking religious certainties, or even the comforts of traditional superstition and magic, with the emergence of a new subject: a 'narcissist' whose inwardly-focused sensibility is 'psycho-therapeutic' rather than religious (Furedi 2004 *passim*). Indeed Lasch famously identifies a pervasive 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch 1980: 52-70) in which people must deal with an 'unanchored subjectivity' (cf. Adams 2007: 25, *passim*), often seeking comfort in secular salvation narratives such as self-help books and in material gratifications which have become the 'objective correlates' of security (Kasser 2002). He argues that ostensible freedom from religion and superstition has, ironically, left a threatening gap in peoples' lives. This he considers to have been filled by the 'creed of self-love', itemizing a number of common personal preoccupations in a list which substantially

mirrors the subject matter of the self-help genre: emotional shallowness, fear of intimacy, hypochondria, a concern with pseudo-self-insight, fear of ageing and death, and an introspective concern with psychic health which leads to an enervating 'therapeutic sensibility' (Lasch 1979: 7-13).

Ziguras (2001) likewise comments on the self-obsessional tendencies promoted by consumer capitalism which he considers to have been reinforced by the 1960s 'counterculture' in which introspection, mysticism and other sources of 'self-knowledge' such as drug-taking were encouraged and commodified (cf. Anker 1999: 149; Braunstein and Doyle 2001: 18, *passim*; Heath and Potter 2006). Moreover, while Bellah (1985: 142-163) acknowledges that modern individualism may coexist alongside a usefully productive work ethic, he notes with some dismay that the interviewees in his study of American social organisation tended to define personality, achievement and the purpose of human life in mostly material terms. This, he considered, effectively left them "suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation" with few spiritual resources (Bellah 1985: 6). Likewise Marin (1975) is concerned about how notions of community, history and social action have become so eroded that people feel they can find meaning only in their private life and inner world. Similarly Popora finds that although nine out of ten Americans claim to believe in God, they also seem to lack a sense of moral, societal purpose and their spiritual world has become markedly private and self-absorbed (Popora 2001).

More specifically, Myers (2000: 165) detects an inward turn as a result of the priority often given by therapeutic and teaching professionals to 'self-expression' and 'self-fulfilment' as indicators of mental health. In particular he notes how emphasis has increasingly been placed on the nurturing of 'self-esteem'; for example in books like *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* by Nathaniel Branden (2001). Indeed there is even a National Association for Self-Esteem (NASE) in America (Foley 2010: 99-102) whose mission is "to fully integrate self-esteem into the fabric of American society so that every individual, no matter what their age or background, experiences personal worth and happiness" (NASE 2010: <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/>, accessed 21 December 2010). However, Furedi is much exercised by what he calls the 'cultural myth' of self-esteem which claims that feelings of low self-worth are not only the cause

of personal unhappiness but of most of the problems facing society (Furedi 2004: 142-161). Indeed he considers that the increasing concern with self-esteem provides "the single most powerful illustration of the impact of therapeutic culture on everyday life" (*ibid*: 153), which he sees as having become emotionalised and anti-intellectual. But he also notes with some approval that there has been a critical backlash (Furedi 2004: 157-159) and that certain psychologists now question whether self-esteem can ever be divorced from hard work and character-building (e.g. Damon 1995; Dawes 1994; Seligman 2007). Moreover even some self-help writers such as Scott Peck (1997: 87-102) and Stephen Covey (1989) insist that personal fulfilment takes effort.

But McGee (2005: 19) observes that while the self-made man of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might aim to achieve success in terms that were largely external and measurable – for example through accumulations of wealth, status and power – late twentieth century self-making involves the pursuit of more elusive and varied goals with no discernible terminus. After all, not everyone one can be the best person in the business. Furthermore McMahon (2007: 273) identifies a remarkable contemporary malaise: "the unhappiness of not being happy". Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, Whelan (2005) argues that the boom in self-help publishing since the 1970s can be linked with feelings of alienation and cultural *anomia* – the inability even to name what is troubling. But in view of the increased opportunities available to many people in the West, it is somewhat ironic that rising expectations may actually generate stress about performance and do not necessarily bring greater happiness in a narcissistic culture (Myers 2000; De Graaf *et al* 2002; Kasser 2003; Hamilton and Denniss 2005; Layard 2005; 29-53; James 1998, 2007, 2008; Hecht 2008). Although Starker (1989: 37, *passim*) locates the roots of today's self-help publications in early devotional guides to achieving spiritual salvation and material success, it is clear that 'advice books' have now become less about character ethics, rather more about personal economics, and very much more about self-renovation in the here and now, when a sense of personal entitlement has become axiomatic.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter initially suggested that the quest for a better existence was a powerful imperative in the self-sufficient, frontier society of the early Americans (Blanding *et al* 1984; Kolodny 1984) whose ethic and Christian rhetoric have left some mark on today's self-help books (Henninger 2008). Secondly it argued that the pioneering meme remained metaphorically present in the activities of the American Transcendentalists who sought to explore the landscape of the psyche during the nineteenth century. It was almost as if once the physical frontier was closed in 1890, and thus the possibility of further Western expansion had ended, people turned the explorative imperative inwards. Certainly the enthusiastic eclecticism of American 'New Thought', which was neither monolithic nor doctrinaire, can be considered to have paved the way for the diversity of self-help subgenres available today. However Gouge (2007) also links internalised frontier ideology with a corrosive contemporary Western sense of entitlement and insistence on the freedom to consume; attitudes nourished by a therapeutic sensibility in which the search for satisfaction of all kinds has become valorised above social participation (Lasch 1979: 7-13). Indeed much literature gives the impression that as result of constantly rising expectations, people are no happier today than they were previously when life was ostensibly much harder: a phenomenon which Brickman and Campbell (1971) call 'the hedonic treadmill' (cf. Hecht 2007: 1-14, 133-145). So it is somewhat ironic that the Puritan advice books "counselled the loss or denial of the self" (Anker 1999, vol. 1: 72) as the most satisfactory mode of life. Yet every self-help book, whatever its ideological flavour, is predicated on the assumption that there exists an 'instrumental' individual with the ability to make choices about how best to live and the entitlement to make those choices. Therefore the 'coming into being' of this comparatively recent ontological phenomenon is the subject of the following chapter.



## Chapter 3

### The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual

The choice is always ours. Then let me choose  
The longest art, the hard Promethean way  
Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan  
That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,  
Kindled or quenched creates  
The noble or ignoble men we are ...

Aldous Huxley *The Cicadas and Other Poems* (1931: 39)

The bounded, masterful self which emerged slowly and unevenly in American history, is a self that has a sense of personal agency that is located interiorly, and a wish to manipulate the world for its own ends.

Philip Cushman  
*Constructing the Self, Constructing America:  
A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (1996: 79)

Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think.

Martin Seligman *Learned Optimism* (1998: 6)

#### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with 'diachronic causations' (Taylor 1989: 202), locating the contemporary self-help genre within a historical narrative of post-Reformation social and economic activity, particularly in America (Samuelson 1997). Now this one further contextualises the more textually-oriented discussions of Chapters 5, 6 and 7, below by reflecting, somewhat more synchronically, on the 'implied readership' of these publications. Firstly, it argues that the self-help genre is predicated on the notional existence of the an-ideological, yet nevertheless historically potent 'instrumental individual'. The existence of this human entity which makes an axiomatic assumption

about the possibility of personal 'agency' can be inferred from the quotations which head this chapter. Agency here means that someone has both the capacity to choose between options and has the ability to do as he or she decides best, whether for good or bad (Honderich 1995 18; cf. McAdams 2006: 244; Korsgaard 2009: 130; Baggin 2011: 167). Every self-help book, whatever its particular subject matter and whether it is stoic or eudemonic in general outlook (that is, whether it advocates discipline and effort or focuses on pleasures and well-being), necessarily depends on its ideal reader having a sense that life can be improved through deliberate choice of action. Secondly, the chapter suggests that the phenomenon of personal autonomy on which the contemporary self-help genre necessarily depends seems to have developed over time. Thirdly, it observes that there are always choices of 'good' to which humans might aspire. Fourthly, it notes that although the postmodern epoch provides unprecedented opportunities for personal choice, it is also a time of many perceived threats and insecurities (Giddens 2002; Bauman 2007). Therefore the reader of the self-help book may be looking for comfort and reassurance as well as a prescription for positive action. Indeed, some publications are quite specific about this: e.g. *The Woman's Comfort Book* (Louden 1992); *Helping Me Help Myself: Ten Self-Help Gurus, and a Year on the Brink of the Comfort Zone* (Lisick 2009) and *101 Morale Boosters for Difficult Times* (Lindenfeld 2010). Finally, this chapter argues that self-help books seem to prosper because they present their readers with opportunities to experience some sense of personal agency through their deliberate engagement with the small narratives of immediate experience in an unstable world.

### 3.2 The Emergence of the Instrumental Individual

In their annotated bibliography of popular self-help books, Fried and Schultis (1995: 137), echoing the assumptions about autonomy and choice made in the quotations which begin this chapter, write optimistically that:

Even though each person is born in a specified existence in a particular society, a particular family, and a particular physical body, that individual self can still determine the type of person she is to become. People are free to some extent to make choices, many of which require courage.

Yet the phenomenon of the instrumental human subject who feels a sense of entitlement to live a satisfactory material and spiritual life in personal terms (however that may be construed), and believes that he or she has the right to take steps to achieve this, is considered by students of modern history (Roberts 2008: 203) to be a comparatively recent emergence (Rosenthal 2006). Moreover, according to Gergen (1991) the preoccupation with the individual is a peculiarly Western phenomenon which seems to have developed as a result of a sustained process during which people came to see the world from a more autonomous standpoint whilst being increasingly recognised as separate psychic entities (Logan 1986). As Cushman (1996:77) observes:

Coincident with the decline of the extended family, the individual self began to be seen as the ultimate locus of salvation: the self was ever evolving, constantly changing, on a never-ending search for self-actualization and 'growth'.

This instrumental personal imperative or autonomy is trans-ideological inasmuch as it supports participation in a variety of different cultural, economic, ethical, conceptual, and social activities and has manifested in diverse ways at certain times. Thus it is taken for granted now in Western societies that people, including women, whose freedom to act as they may please remains restricted in some cultures, should have the right to decide many things about their existence – even though in reality their opportunities for agency may be circumscribed as a result of their immediate economic and social circumstances. As Rosenthal (2006:1) notes, choice has become the 'defining cultural mode' of the contemporary era. Certainly it is the *sine qua non* in the discourse of self-help that someone has the right to take steps to improve their spiritual, emotional, physical or economic lot in life (McKnight-Tronz 2000). Indeed this assumption clearly operates in titles like *You Can Heal Your Life* (Hay 2004b), *You Can Be Thin* (Peer 2008), *You Can If You Think You Can* (Peale 1987) and *You Can be as Young as You Think* (Drake and Middleton 2009).

Yet in his synoptic survey of social and philosophical forces in modern Western society, Charles Taylor (1989) shows how the notion of the autonomous 'self' with an imperative

to seek out what is a 'good' way to live according to their own ethic is neither universal nor particularly ancient. Furthermore, he asserts that there have been various different notions of optimum living with which the increasingly self-determining human subject might choose to engage (Taylor 2007: 16; cf. Grayling 2003) and implies that the forensic obsession with intimate personal relationships, which is the mainstay of today's self-help industry, is peculiar to the present epoch. In making his argument, he traces a significant movement from a religious to a humanistic ethic which took place from the Renaissance onwards, and which he considers to have provided increasing opportunities for self-governance (Taylor 1989; 2007). Similarly Lyon (1999: 41) observes that:

Modernity has bequeathed to us a world split into social segments, each governed by its own rules, implicit and explicit. Authority supposedly shifts from religious to scientific grounds, but in fact the main rule of thumb is instrumental, pragmatic: does it work? Is it efficient? The autonomous self moves to central stage, claiming new liberties that will be enshrined in civil, political and social rights.

Taylor (1989, 2007; cf. Eisenstein 1979b) considers that better opportunities for self-determination have arisen both from the technological advances of modernity, for example in communications, and from increasing literacy, both of which have made it possible for people to access information comparatively independently. Indeed he suggests that these material developments have been more influential on personal agency than philosophical theory or improved scientific methods which have revolutionised epistemology. As Outram (1995: 29) observes in her analysis of the Enlightenment project during the eighteenth century, this was an era where dramatic shifts occurred throughout Europe and America in the production and accessibility of ideas. As the international trade in consumer goods expanded, portable cultural products such as books, newspapers and pamphlets at last became available to more than just members of the elite.

Certainly the gospel of self-help was spread more easily after the invention of factory printing and wood-pulp paper during the mid-nineteenth-century; thereafter receiving a boost with the arrival of thermally-activated binding which revolutionized the production of cheap paperbacks during the second half of the twentieth century (Feather 2005: 172-180). This advance in technology also had the effect of making printed items more

available to female readers who generally had less disposable income than men. Since then electronic technology has made access to information virtually instantaneous. Thus the discourse of self-help in all its variety is constantly channelled through the electronic media: for example on television by famous presenters like Jeremy Kyle (2011: <http://www.itv.com/lifestyle/jeremykyle/.com>, accessed 19 June 2011) Trisha Goddard (2009: <http://www.trishatv.com/>, accessed 19 June 2011) and Oprah Winfrey (2011: <http://www.oprah.com/index.html>, accessed 19 June 2011). There are also thousands of personal blogs which transmit anecdotal advice.

This means that there is more self-development information available than ever before. Thus in an attempt to deal systematically with the discourse of self-help, Butler-Bowdon (2003: 4-6) distinguishes six recurring preoccupations:

1. The Power of Thought: Change your thoughts, change your life
2. Following Your Dream: Achievement and goal-setting
3. Secrets of Happiness: Doing what you love, doing what works
4. The Bigger Picture: Keeping it in perspective
5. Soul and Mystery: Appreciating your depth
6. Making a Difference: Transforming yourself, transforming the world

These headings are broad, yet each item in the list contains either an imperative or the participle of an activity or 'doing' verb. As a result, the expectation that there will be deliberate engagement or personal instrumentality in the process of life-transformation is made quite explicit. Moreover the pragmatic recognition here that there are *different* ways to live satisfactorily is congruent with Taylor's scholarly view that in order to understand what it means to be a human subject at any period, including the present, it is necessary to consider how one might define the meaning of the 'good life' to which one might aspire. This has never been a static ideal and thus he observes:

Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conceptions (s) of what human flourishing is: What constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can't help asking these and related questions in our lives. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by, or between which we haver. At another level, these views are codified, sometimes in philosophical theories, sometimes in moral codes, sometimes in religious practices and devotion. These and the various ill-formulated practices which people around us engage in constitute the resources that our society offers each one of us as we try to lead our lives (Taylor 2007: 16).

There will always be debate about what constitutes the best way to live and what might constitute the 'good' life. But *all* self-help books, whether they are stoic or eudemonic in tenor, share the fundamental assumption that a significant number of people will take the initiative to choose them, read them and perhaps even act upon their advice. If this were not the case, there would be no self-help publishing industry. Thus the genre operates as a flexible tool of personal instrumentality.

### 3.3 Some Choices of 'Good'

In order to explain how 'modern identity' with its notions of instrumental selfhood, assumptions about the possibilities for personal agency and ideals of the 'good life' to which an individual might aspire developed, Taylor (1992) first describes how in the comparatively collectivist societies of classical Greece and Rome the successful 'self' was measured against ideal standards which involved living to the best of one's ability according to the requirements of the *polis* (cf. Detel and Wigg-Wolf 2010: 78-79). This meant conforming primarily to a consensus of extrinsic expectations operating in the city state. Subsequent Roman Catholic thought concurred with the classical preference for self-definition by an external authority: in this case by God whose rules of conduct were transmitted via the priesthood. But according to Taylor, such reductive methods of defining the self became diluted as a result of various developments in Western culture which began to occur during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (cf. Seligman 2007: 20-24).

Firstly, traditional authoritarian paradigms such as long-established religious observances became increasingly questioned by humanist thinkers during the Renaissance, as the empirical dimension of the human experience itself became an

unprecedented focus of attention. Secondly, during the early part of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the vernacular Bible became available in print. This had the effect of further undermining the mediatory role of the clergy in interpreting texts and administering the sacraments. It also, by implication, valorised the agency of the individual in their personal quest for salvation through reading what would now be categorised as a primary ethical source. Thirdly, the scientific explorations and technological developments increasingly undertaken during the Enlightenment project in Europe and America during the latter part of the eighteenth century began to extend people's horizons beyond long-established scholarly orthodoxies and localised superstitions (Hankins 1985; Outram 1995; Grayling 2003: 126-158). Indeed, Hall considers that the famous *Cogito* of Descartes (1596-1650), which is usually translated as 'I think, therefore I am', radically promotes the self-reflective individual as the thinking unit, thereby isolating it from the broad communal processes which had hitherto been the central focus of theories about existence and promoting an attitude of secular rationalism (Hall 2004: 131). Similarly, Taylor (1992: 182) calls Descartes "a founder of modern individualism".

During those times of ideological flux, during which self-determination was becoming increasingly valorised for at least some of the populace, people were ostensibly offered a wider 'choice of goods', both secular and religious to which they might aspire (Grayling 2003; Taylor 2007). Late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism further intensified the individualistic trend by emphasising the power of intuition, imagination and feeling and by celebrating the expression of originality and personal affect (Taylor 1989: 28; Gergen 1991: 6; Travers 1997: 16-20; Grayling 2003: 141). Indeed, according to Taylor this movement has left an enduring socio-psychological legacy:

The fact that we now place such importance on the expressive power means that our contemporary notion of what it is to respect people's integrity includes that of protecting their freedom to express and develop their own opinions, to define their own life conceptions, and to draw up their own life plans (Taylor 1989: 25).

Like Taylor, Hall (2004: 6) notes how the degree to which the individual might assume responsibility for creating and expressing its own identity appeared to increase over

time (cf. Todorov 2002). Classical and scholastic philosophers tended to understand the self as a given which could aspire to 'the good' without much creative reflexivity through ethical conformity, submission to 'authority' and the acceptance of divine grace. However humanistic Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, prefiguring Romantic, modern and postmodern ideas, began to assume that the increasingly self-determining individual could participate in and take some responsibility for its optimum development. This 'self-realisation' would occur through education, diligence and the deliberate cultivation of personal virtues of various kinds. Thus the self would develop its instrumental powers. Indeed, it increasingly seemed as if the 'ideal' character might be defined as much by internal criteria arrived at by people themselves as by civic expectation or institutional dogma and Roe's anthology *Romanticism* (2005) discusses aspects of nineteenth century individualism which have left an enduring mark on contemporary politics and culture. Furthermore, the early twentieth century discourse of introspective and interpretative psychotherapy, with its emphasis on strengthening the psyche, surely accelerated the turn towards self-reflection which is now a staple in the pages of popular psychology books (Cordón 2005).

The early 'heroic' individual, unlike most people in contemporary Western society, was firmly situated within long-standing and localised structure of kinship and household wherein status, roles and expectations were firmly defined whereas issues of a purely personal nature seem not to have been much discussed (Chadwick 1912). Therefore a sense of well-being appears to have resulted from behaving honourably and doing one's duty within the collective imaginary (McMahon 2007). While there was clearly a strong classical ethic, it could hardly be considered 'individualistic' when compared with the emphasis on self-actualisation which is the preoccupation of contemporary Western culture and which pervades self-help books. The practical virtues necessary to well-being in heroic societies such as that depicted by Homer around 700 BCE (Grayling 2003: 17-20) included physical strength, bravery, comradeship and boldness. Naturally these were invaluable at times of war or deprivation. However they became less immediately useful during periods of comparative social and economic stability when there were fewer immediate threats. However it is interesting to note that the word 'virtue' itself derives from the Latin *virtus* (= manliness or strength from *vir* = man).



Nor was there much more freedom in personal ethics during the classical period which followed the heroic one, although the commendable qualities to which one might aspire had rather more to do with the cultivation of a good character. Thus Plato's 'cardinal' virtues, which are listed in Part V of *The Republic* written sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Plato 2007: 130), are as follows:

- Temperance/self-control (*sophrosynē*)
- Wisdom/prudence (*phronēsis*)
- Fortitude/courage (*andreia*)
- Justice (*dikaiosynē*)

As the descriptor 'cardinal' (from Latin *cardo* = hinge) implies, these were considered to be the qualities on which the satisfactory life, and thus a person's sense of well-being, were supposed to 'hinge' or depend. Equally prescriptive, Christianity added three 'theological' virtues to the list: faith, hope and love. But the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries once again began to consider virtue in more immediately pragmatic terms. For example, Benjamin Franklin's secular 'moral virtues' were temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity and humility (Franklin 1982: 75-6). And these are the very values endorsed by Samuel Smiles in *Self-Help* (1859). But more recently Taylor has detected the presence of more liberal, sometimes competing, 'goods' which command respect. These include decency, justice, spirituality, human rights, family life, health, wealth and power (Taylor 1992: 62).

An examination of the self-help bookshelves in today's stores indicates that a significant number of the high-minded aims described above are absent from contemporary publications, most of which focus on circumscribed matters of self-interest. During the second half of the twentieth century until the present, this genre has been almost unfailingly concerned with relationships between individuals at home, at work or in sexual situations and it is highly unusual to find any mention of wider societal obligations. However there seems to be some indication that the situation may be changing. For example *Addiction is a Choice* (Schaler 2002) and *Addiction is a Disorder of Choice* (Heyman 2010) both place more responsibility on the individual to

act in a socially acceptable way, rather than automatically assuming that they are the helpless victims of a disease which exonerates them from any blame (see Chapter 4, Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn, below for a more detailed discussion of addiction).

Nevertheless, the point of including the material on virtue above is to suggest that self-help books can broadly be construed as contemporary 'virtue' texts because they claim to encourage behaviours and attitudes which will strengthen their readers and allow them to 'flourish' in their contingent society. Indeed the notion of *eudemonia* or 'flourishing' has become interesting scholars and is explored, for example, by Peterson and Seligman (2004) in *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* and by Snyder *et al* in *Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths* (2010). Both these publications insist that strength of character remains a valid topic for consideration today and that people can be instrumental in building up their psychic resources, not least by consulting the literature of self-development (cf. Covey 1999; 2004). This is perhaps particularly encouraging at a time when some commentators (e.g. Ecclestone and Hayes 2008) observe with concern what they perceive to be the undermining of self-reliance and the growing infantilisation of adults in Western culture.

For the present however, interesting though the history of ethics is for its own sake as an index of human social concerns, the point of introducing the somewhat neglected traditional virtues mentioned above into this thesis about contemporary self-help books, and particularly in a chapter which argues for the connection between individual instrumentality and these publications, is to suggest that desirable human qualities are not necessarily innate traits. Rather, they are qualities to be cultivated in consonance with what a particular society considers laudable at a particular time and thus the individual putatively has some *choice* about whether or not to make the effort to acquire them. So it is rather ironic to read at a time when there is more easily-available guidance than ever before about how best to proceed - not least from self-help books - that the increased opportunities for 'self-making' or personal *bricolage* which have become possible in the postmodern epoch may actually be making people feel less content (Schwartz 2005; Anderson 2007; Butler-Bowdon 2003: 6; McGee 2005: 16-17;

Salerno 2005). Indeed there is a growing body of literature which suggests that more life-style choice, both material and spiritual, may actually diminish a person's sense of well-being. This may be either because they become paralysed as a result of too much choice or because they soon grow dissatisfied with the decisions they have already made and experience profound restlessness (Ivengar and Lepper 2000; Lane 2001; Easterbrook 2003; Schwarz 2005).

So it is suggested here that one of the *de facto* functions of self-help literature as a whole is to define potential choices for people. Thus as a result of advocating various courses of action while dismissing or ignoring others, the self-help book implicitly offers some "cultural critique" (Dolby 2005: 11) of what is and is not considered to be materially and spiritually desirable in contemporary life. For its member publications constitute part of what Chambers (1986: 216) describes as the un-systematised, popular networks of cultural production and knowledge which people use to obtain information, guidance and some sense of control over their experience (cf. Gilbert 2007: 20-22). The 'wisdom' on offer in these books constitutes both an overt topical and a covert ethical framework by which people can choose to support their activities: the term 'ethic' being used in this chapter in its broad sense of a generalized means by which human conduct may be guided and appraised, rather than in the deontological sense of a set of prescribed rules which govern morality (Bullock and Trombley 2000: 284). Therefore the following section further explores the notion that people are holding ever more determinedly to the 'small narratives' of personal experience in which they can maintain at least the illusion of instrumentality in the face of much quotidian evidence to the contrary - or what critical theory has termed the discrediting of metanarrative (Lyotard 1984).

### 3.4 The Paradox of Too Much Choice

Taylor's thesis, touched upon above, that the 'quest to live well' according to one's contingent social ethic is a powerful human imperative (Taylor 1989; 2007) seems somewhat over-optimistic in the face of the troubling phenomena reported every day in the media which channel a continuous litany of world-wide environmental catastrophe and human failure. Even as this piece is being written, at 20.12pm on 27 May 2011, the *Yahoo* headlines on the Internet include the following news items:

- Greek austerity negotiations fail
- Air France jet 'plunged' suddenly
- Air strikes 'target Yemen tribes'
- Less childhood sleep has fat risk
- HSBC faces investor anger on pay
- Second man dies after gun attack
- Scores missing after US tornado
- Killer cucumbers on sale

But it must be remembered that the 'good' towards which Taylor assumes the human subject will naturally be drawn is not in his view limited to specific issues of traditional theistic and post-Enlightenment teachings on morality: that is about how to act or submit in certain ways on specific occasions. Rather, it constitutes the *underlying* 'meta-ethic' whose assumptions about people's responsibilities, rights and 'virtues' are powerful and pervasive in a particular society during a particular period without their necessarily having been institutionally codified or formally articulated. Demotic values and advice about how to behave or "knowing how to live" (Lyotard 1984: 18) are constantly in 'flux' (Gergen 1991: 7) and are transmitted in daily conversations as well as in the popular press and on television. Thus the collection of common-sense beliefs shared by members of a cultural group when interpreting life in terms of feelings, desires and beliefs, which Murray Thomas (2001: 1-6) calls 'folk psychology', is full of 'narratives' which directly or indirectly valorise certain types of behaviour and stigmatise others (cf. Taylor 2007: 16). Furthermore, this folk ethic is reified in commercially-produced self-help books which are among the resources from which identities are

constructed in today's 'social imaginary': a phrase used by Taylor to describe the elusive horizons of common expectations which give individuals a sense of group solidarity and an awareness of the potential life-choices available to them (Taylor 2004; 2007: 171-176).

Taylor suggests that even people who do not aspire to great public recognition nevertheless hope to live a *telic*, goal-directed life which they consider to have some significance by the time it ends. This might be achieved, for example, through choosing to nurture a family or to undertake some kind of creative work (cf. Boniwell 2008: 44). He memorably calls this ethic of quotidian engagement "the affirmation of ordinary life" (Taylor 1989: 211-304) and considers it to be a defining characteristic of the contemporary epoch. For he observes how people are deeply involved with what immediately concerns them, even though they may feel impotent in the face of global insecurities of which they might have remained happily unaware in previous ages. He further argues that the expressive individualism of modernity which urges people to search for fulfilment and "do their own thing" (Taylor 2007: 300) necessarily involves process of reflexive self-exploration and reflexive self-control. Clearly this may involve consulting advice literature.

Obviously not all human instrumentality is benevolent. Some people may decide to say, like defiant Lucifer in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (line 110), "Evil, be thou my good"; or to declare like Shakespeare's sociopathic King Richard, "I am determined to prove a villain" (*Richard III* Act 1, Scene 1). Yet Taylor (1989) believes that modern subjectivity is characteristically rooted in instinctive "moral intuitions" which underpin a variety of ontologies, theistic or otherwise, observing that these beliefs manifest in the daily activities and reflections of each person. His insistence that in general, humanity instinctively works towards what is considered good implies that "things can only get better", to quote the title of a popular song which was recorded by D:ream in 1993 and subsequently adopted as its theme by the UK Labour Party during the election campaign of 1997. Certainly this view resonates with the overtly optimistic discourse of self-development - which also tends to be an irony-free zone.

However other commentators feel that, somewhat paradoxically, people have tended to become almost paralysed by the unprecedented amount of life-style choice now at least nominally available to many of them as they seek to take advantage of “a whole series of simulacra as mileux of escape, fantasy and distraction”, whilst trying to define their personal identity in a shifting world (Harvey 1991: 302; cf. Illouz 2007; 2008). As Jencks observes:

The Post Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing ... an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity ... [and] pluralism, the 'ism' of our time, is both the great problem and the great opportunity (Jencks 1989: 7).

Indeed it has been suggested that phenomena such as the deconstructive imperative of postmodernity which breeds relativism (Smart 1992; Waugh 1992; Thompson 2004), the rise of consumer capitalism (Bauman 2000) and the recent immense and unpredictable changes in scientific and technical understandings (Lyon 1999: 69-109; cf. Hawking 1988; Greene 2011), have provoked an unprecedented crisis in confidence. The possibility of individual agency seems to have become less plausible as the human subject has increasingly experienced itself as being “displaced and decentred” (Lyon 1999: 110). Indeed much of the postmodern critical project since Lyotard (1984) has been devoted to dismantling ‘legitimizing’ grand narratives such as universalism, progress and individual emancipation which had their roots in the various optimismisms of the Enlightenment and modernity (Thompson 2004: 107-122). Thus Lyotard anticipates problems for the collective psyche when he observes:

To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied upon it. The narrative function is losing its functors [*sic*], its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. ... Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable (Lyotard 1984: xxiv).

Furthermore, Smart (1992: 165), drawing upon the insights of Toynbee (1946) and Toffler (1970), is concerned that while technological developments have dramatically increased the apparent mastery of modern Western man over non-human nature, the spiritual, moral and political capacities of humanity are having problems coping with accelerations of pace and expansions of scale. Similarly, Barry (2009: 83) notes that

the critical discourse of postmodernity, the demotic materialism of late capitalism and the scientific imperative to explore the very concept of individual identity (e.g. Carter 2008) have all discredited the metanarrative which says that there exists some essential human subject which is capable of identifying and progressing towards an ideal state of being, whether its achievement is construed in material or spiritual terms (see also Chapter 7, The Self/Subject Dyad, below). Bauman summarises the situation thus:

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfil them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice (Bauman 1992: xxii).

The authorities above suggest that the propositions at the heart of postmodernism which include the ideas that “all experience is based on interpretation” and “there are no secure foundations for knowledge” (Luntley 1995: 137) have radically altered contemporary ways of thinking. Nevertheless the section below argues that people retain a strong desire to experience localised agency may be in part why they buy a self-help book whose paradigmatic message is *a/ways* that ‘something can be done’. Therefore the next section explores in more detail how the instrumental imperative present in the discourse of self-development has survived the disintegration of earlier metanarratives which previously influenced personal conduct.

### **3.5 Localised Agency Transcends Discredited Metanarrative**

*A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor (2007) discusses how the weakening of traditional cultural assumptions has profoundly disturbed Western individual living at the turn of the millennium, thus provoking an ethical crisis. His highly discursive text (Morgan’s digest of which is gratefully acknowledged: Morgan 2008:

<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13905>, accessed 17 March 2011) has sections headed “The Great Disembedding” (pp146-158), “The Malaises of Modernity” (pp 299-321) and “Unquiet Frontiers of Modernity” (pp711-727), each of which demonstrates the depths of his concern. Indeed the governing idea of this publication is that various

hitherto seemingly entrenched ethics have been replaced by a plurality of new beliefs, and indeed un-beliefs, as people seek for a sense of wholeness in an unprecedentedly unstable epoch. Taylor does not index the term 'metanarrative'. But like Lyotard (1984), who introduced this notion into the lexicon of critical theory, he has closely observed the weakening of long-established tenets and the concomitant sense of unease which has been engendered. Nor is he alone in his anxiety. For example North (1972) similarly observes the decline of earlier certainties, particularly in religious matters. Indeed in the *The Secular Priests* (North 1972; cf. Sykes 1992: 37), he specifically associates the search for a non-affiliated sense of personal orientation with the rise of the therapist during the twentieth century, suggesting that:

The mediaeval world of Christendom and the essentially similar social worlds of traditional societies were distinguished by certitude in moral matters and in individual sense of belonging to a moral order which if not 'natural' was at least divine. After years of disruptions, the traditional order has ended and the individual is left in an enduring position of personal and moral uncertainty. The associates of uncertainty are an instrumental attitude to work and the privatisation of most erstwhile public areas of life, and in this situation, the psychotherapeutic ideology offers a substitute certainty and, with its increasing acceptance by a growing number of individuals, a considerable degree of power passes into the hands of the psychotherapist because the ultimate power is to define reality (North 1972: 26).

More succinctly, Agger (2002:4) detects "an acute anxiety born of a purely surface approach to one's life and things". Meanwhile, Giddens (1991a; 1991b) links an increasing sense of personal insecurity with what Beck (1992) has called the 'risk society': that is, with the unprecedented growth of impersonally-originated yet personally-disturbing issues (cf. Furedi 1997, 2006; Glassner 2010). In particular, he observes how apocalyptic threats unknown to previous generations (such as the arms race, nuclear technology, AIDS, ecological disaster and urban terror) are relentlessly channelled through the media into the collective psyche. Therefore he argues that people have increasingly tended to concentrate their attention on small-scale, privatised 'survival strategies', such as bodily or psychic self-improvement, in response to their constant awareness of these global risks. After all, such immediate activities suggest that it is possible for someone to make a difference, however localised, and thus gain some sense of comfort and control (Giddens 1992: 171). As a result, Giddens considers that "all manner of manuals, guides, therapeutic works and self-help surveys



contribute to modernity's reflexivity", thereby implying that contemporary advice texts themselves constitute a significant epistemic phenomenon (Giddens 1990: 29-35).

But Gergen (1991: 49) speaks of a self becoming 'saturated' by the endless products of communication technology; and it is surely ironic that many people's sense of personal isolation is actually increasing in an age which is unprecedentedly suffused with sources of virtual information. But the 'therapeutic' and inward-looking turn noted above by North and Giddens is surely consonant with Barry's (2009) view that since so many traditional metanarratives have decayed, the best that can be hoped for at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the emergence of a series of personal 'mininarratives' by means of which people can negotiate their lives, particularly through personal relationships, and thus create some 'working definitions' for themselves. Though these may be provisional, contingent, relative and temporary, they at least offer some structuration for the actions of specific groups and individuals at specific times and in specific local circumstances (Geertz 1983). Indeed the description of these mininarratives could convincingly be applied to self-help books where 'story-telling' plays an important part in allowing people to identify their issues, consider some alternatives, reframe their attitudes, and gain some comfort (see Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below which notes how the narrative process functions as part of the self-help book's rhetorical armoury, and Chapter 6, The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre, below for analysis of the heroic monomyth of struggle and survival).

Yet in spite of the genre's undoubted popularity, it must also be acknowledged that some commentators find a negative aspect to self-help texts. For example they suggest that in spite of ostensibly supporting the reader's power to choose within certain parameters, such publications may actually undermine people's confidence (Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005; Pearsall 2005; Salerno 2005; Haeffel 2010) by finding issues of concern in experiences which had hitherto been un-pathologized: such as the process of parenting or the experience of life-changes (see also Chapter 4, Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn, below). For example *The Science of Parenting* (Sunderland 2008) and *Principles of Attachment-Focused Parenting* (Hughes 2009) effectively problematize a universal process. Meanwhile the notion of the 'midlife crisis'

which was only coined in 1965 by Elliott Jacques has generated a subgenre of self-help literature (cf. Sheehy 2006). Moreover although Louise Hay famously asserts that *You Can Heal Your Life* (2004b), disillusion and a sense of failure surely await someone for whom her advice does not work and whose life remains 'unhealed'.

For while self-help books offer strategies for deliberately improving behaviours and attitudes, or acquiring external 'goods', thereby apparently encouraging a sense of agency in their readers, they must inevitably first situate those readers as dependent or suppliant subjects. And although the writer of a self-help book necessarily claims the power to solve readers' problems, the remarkable number of sequels and spin-offs produced by successful authors suggests that these problems very often endure. For example, Susan Jeffers encouraged her readers in 1987 to *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. But clearly she and her publishers expected them to go on buying her work because in 1996 she was exhorting them to *End the Struggle and Dance with Life*. And in 2003 she advocated *Embracing Uncertainty: Achieving Peace of Mind as We Face the Unknown*. Indeed, in consonance with this less appealing dimension to the self-help phenomenon, Foucault himself recognises that a discourse can be simultaneously creative and destructive:

[A]n instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it  
(Foucault 1978: 100).

Here he is referring to how power operates through societal institutions. But he could equally well be talking about how power operates in genres like the self-help book between writer and reader. Thus it is not so surprising to find that there has been some critical response to the self-help genre (e.g. Pearsall 2005; Salerno 2005; Cameron 2007). Moreover even some self-help authors acknowledge their limitations: for example Dawn Mellowship (2008) admits that *You Can Only Achieve What is Possible*.

Nevertheless the self-help market flourishes. Thus it seems ironic that while the turn towards humanistic values and personal instrumentality (i.e. the ability to choose and be accountable for behaviour and beliefs) judged by MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (1989) to be a legacy of Enlightenment epistemology has at one level become a 'given'

in contemporary life, and is characteristically foregrounded in the self-help genre, it has also become rather more difficult for the individual to formulate stable ethical principles for living well. They suggest that this is because so many traditional grand narratives, and the implicit teleology which accompanies them, have been discredited. At a time of unprecedented relativism it is more difficult to discriminate between different cognitive or moral frames of reference, or to justify one course of action over another (Thompson 2004: 91-106). Nevertheless, while Giddens (1991a: 1991b) considers that burgeoning global instabilities have produced a sense of personal meaninglessness in the face of which people feel they can achieve very little, Agger (2002: 6) insists more optimistically that effective postmodern 'knowing' is characteristically grounded in the self because individuals now have the unprecedented benefit of being able to access immediately-available, electronically-channelled information of all kinds. As a result, they are increasingly able to measure their own intuitions and experiences against those of their peers in order to orient themselves and construct their values; thus there is much less pressure to conform to traditional, institutionally-mediated orthodoxies.

So it is perhaps no surprise to find that <sup>the</sup> comforting notion of human instrumentality, in its broadest sense, holds out in the secular 'salvation narratives' of the self-help book. For each publication asserts that at least some personal agency becomes possible through concentrating on the positive transformation of one's own activities and the genre insists that existence can always be improved and happiness pursued through paying respectful attention to the 'little narratives' (Lyotard 1984: 60) of 'lived experience' (Crossley 2000: 40). Hence, perhaps, the ubiquity of lifestyle programmes which purport to renovate homes, gardens, relationships, physiques or clothing; thereby offering viewers the vicarious experience of almost instant transformation (Moseley 2000: 299-314; Heller 2007). As Gergen (1991: 122) observes, our very selves have become "objects of hyper-reality": shaped by proxy through the media.

Localised stories, such as the intensive makeover programmes on TV or the *exempla* used in self-help books to describe both problems and solutions, offer readers a comfortingly circumscribed experience of comprehension, control and closure, even as the media simultaneously channel information about global threats and uncertainties. Whatever their particular unique selling proposition, *all* self-help books are *telic*: they

are produced for a purpose and tend towards a definite end. Thus some publications offer specific strategies for problem-solving or techniques for changing behaviours, attitudes or skills (Fried and Schultis 1995:1). Examples include *Your Assertive Right* (Alberti and Emmons 1986), *Learned Optimism* (Seligman 1998), *Get the Life You Want* (Bandler 2008) and *Messages: The Communication Book* (McKay and Davis 2009). Others focus on how to cope with less tractable issues such as parenting, ageing or depression. Examples include *Practical Parenting Tips* (Lansky 1992), *Ageing Well: A Guide for Successful Seniors* (Fries 1989), *How to Cope with Depression* (Depaulo and Ablow 1995). Still others contain more generally aspirational advice and concentrate on offering encouragement and comfort to their readers. Examples include *Take Time for Your Life* (Richardson 1998), *Simple Abundance* (Ban Breathnach 1995), *End the Struggle and Dance with Life* (Jeffers 1996) and *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* (Carlson 1997).

However Maslow's analysis of how humans tend instinctively to prioritise their needs according to what is most necessary for survival is a reminder of how in difficult real-life situations, pressing material requirements such as food, shelter and safety must ultimately take precedence over transcendent desires for love, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow 1943: 1954). Furthermore, that the opportunity to worry about one's psyche or one's appearance is a quite recent luxury which is limited to those people who do not have to put their daily survival first. It is not the purpose of this thesis to show how the full variety of self-help subgenres, some highly materialist and others more spiritually-focused, maps onto the gradations of Maslow's famous 'hierarchy', though this might provide the basis for some future research. But for the present, it is stressed that although the Western conception of individual agency may have emerged gradually, and the opportunity for self-development is not in practice available to all, the notion of the instrumental individual with a strong sense of personal entitlement became ideologically axiomatic in modernity and endures, even as the old ethical certainties have dissolved in the light of postmodern 'deconstructions'. This is a remarkable ontological situation to which the self-help industry has responded with enthusiasm. For each self-help publication assumes that its readers are entitled to aspire to live better lives and may act as they think appropriate to help themselves to become 'happier'. Thus localised agency survives the disintegration of metanarratives

which previously 'legitimised' concepts of truth, rationality and selfhood (Luntley 1995: 10). As earlier notions about, for example, religions, political movements and the progressive optimisms of the Enlightenment project and modernity have dissolved, people seem to have become ever more deeply absorbed in what Lyotard calls the '*petits récits*' of life (Lyotard 1984: Sim 2005: 261) and what Cobley describes as "'little narratives' of personal pleasures, identity and circumstances" (Cobley 2001b:188).

### 3.6 Conclusion

Indeed self-help books themselves might be described as 'concise narratives of insular happiness' to summarise Dolby's analysis (Dolby 2008: 112-134). Their popularity clearly demonstrates a widespread yearning for 'self-orientation', security and control (Giddens 1991: 33) and as Butler-Bowdon (2003:1) notes, the thread running through the genre is its refusal to accept 'common unhappiness' or 'quiet desperation' as inevitable. However it is surely no surprise that these publications are so often preoccupied with 'feelings' or 'personal capital', having little to say about the mass contingencies of politics, class, poverty, education, ethnicity or death, about which the individual can realistically do little or nothing. Nevertheless, the broader contemporary discourse of 'self-development', of which self-help books themselves are a notable part, can be said to renovate, and indeed domesticate, classical notions of self-respect, Christian redemption, Enlightenment optimism and the promise of 'modernity' that humanity can: "become emancipated from poverty, ignorance, prejudice and the absence of enjoyment" (Lyotard 1988: 302). Moreover, the genre can be thought of as offering a demotic, codified response to the characteristic uncertainties and fragmentations of what post-structural theory calls 'the postmodern condition' (Lyotard 1984; Harvey 1991; Jameson 1992; Waugh 1993: 1-10; Eagleton 1996; Lyon 1999; Malpas 2004; Sim 2005). It is a reaction against the immanent, unstable phenomenal world of anti-foundationalism, multiculturalism, consumerism, mediated experience, fragmented social structures, diffuse authority, globalization (Butler 2002), extensive lifestyle choice, commodification (Jameson 1991), the conflation of high and low cultures, the dissolution of the 'core' self (Luntley 1995), the culture of rising material expectations (De Graaf 2005) and intense self-absorption.

Thus self-help publications may be considered the reified antithesis of the diffuse, deconstructive postmodern position which assumes that there is no such thing as the 'real self' which can be abstracted from history (Luntley 1995: 13), that there are no absolute values, and that personal agency is an illusion. Whether a purchaser in a bookshop selects *How to Make Money* (Dennis 2011) in celebration of the putative opportunities presented by late capitalism or *The Joy of Less* (Jay 2010) in mitigation of the current economic squeeze, the underlying assumption is always the same: that this individual has the right to choose how to act for their best good and to select whatever publication is likely to help them to do so. Thus the notions of the instrumental individual and the contemporary self-help book are inseparable.

This chapter has sought to show how the assumption of personal autonomy is the foundation on which *all* self-help books, of whatever period and however trivial or serious their content, rest. But it also foreshadows the point revisited more fully in Chapters 4 and 5, below, that as a result of its intrinsic essentialism the self-help book is a remarkable discursive phenomenon for the contemporary theorist. This is because so much of the postmodern critical project since Lyotard (1984) has been devoted to undermining 'legitimizing' grand narratives of universalism, progress and individual emancipation which have their roots in the various optimisms of the Enlightenment and modernity (Thompson 2004: 107-122). Yet each self-help book is necessarily predicated on a belief in the humanistic assertion of agency, choice and the possibility of transformation. Furthermore, the genre is playing a significant role in the therapeutic discourse which some commentators find pervasive in contemporary society, and which is discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Discourse in Society: The Therapeutic Turn

The self today is a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future. It is a project carried on amidst a profusion of reflexive resources: therapy and self-help manuals of all kinds, television programmes and magazine articles.

Anthony Giddens *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (1992: 30)

The tendency to interpret not just troublesome but also normal experience through the medium of an emotional script can be seen through the phenomenal expansion of psychological labels and therapeutic terms.

Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (2004: 2)

#### 4.1 Introduction

The present chapter and Chapter 5, Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, below both deal with discursive activity (Bhatia 1993) in relation to the self-help book: the first chapter at a 'macro' and the second chapter at a 'micro' level. This notional division was made because although the popular societal discourse of self-development and the specific discursive events inscribed on the pages of self-help books are interdependent, it facilitates analysis to consider them separately. However, it is stressed that this division is merely a convenient heuristic strategy (Gigerenzer *et al* 1999) for in actuality a 'discursive event', such as a self-help book, is simultaneously:

- a text which can be subjected to critical language analysis
- an instance of discursive practice which is the product of certain processes of production and interpretation
- an instance of social practice which both expresses and helps to constitute institutional circumstances or some dominant hegemony (Fairclough 1992a: 4).

The distinctions and permeability between 'macro' and 'micro' spheres of discourse, as distinguished above are reviewed by Mills (1997: 1-27), discussed by Coupland and Jaworski (2001: 134), and extensively explored by Fairclough (1989a; 1989b; 1995; 2001). As the latter observes: "Discourse is a difficult concept because there are so many overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints" (Fairclough 1992a: 3). Indeed Foucault himself, having devoted so much of his attention to the study of discourse, comments:

Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse,' I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: rating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts of a number of statements (Foucault 1972: 80).

Therefore, in order better to further the discussion of ways in which societal forces have influenced self-help literature and shaped the lives of readers, and *vice versa*, this chapter firstly reviews some scholarly opinion about how the notion of 'discourse' itself may be defined. Secondly, it notes how certain critics have seen a 'therapeutic turn' in contemporary Western discourses. It demonstrates that new causes for personal concern are constantly being identified and named, suggesting that individuals are increasingly seeking guidance and reassurance about all aspects of existence from various professional and non-professional 'authorities' - not least from self-help books. Thirdly, it examines in more detail the process by which new 'therapeutic' discourses crystallise into public awareness, tracing in particular the provenance and expansion of three notions, each of which has its own self-help subgenre. These are 'addiction', 'co-dependency' and 'positive psychology'.

In linking these terms respectively with three types of lexical transformation which this thesis names 'renovation' 'neologism' and 'democratisation', it becomes possible to see more clearly how societal values and discursive expression are interdependent: a process which is often commented on but more rarely anatomised. Finally, as a result of the wide reading of primary self-help texts and secondary commentary, this chapter is able to offer an original 12-part model which shows the steps by which a new discourse can progress from being just a diffuse societal notion to become an entrenched linguistic phenomenon. The pathology of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has a notable subgenre of its own in self-help literature, is used as the



main example of discursive consolidation. However this is considered to be a *generically* applicable model and is therefore offered as a contribution to discourse study in general.

## 4.2 Some Notions of Discourse

This chapter, then, deals with discourse and self-help books at the ideological level: where ideology is broadly defined, according to Eagleton (1991) as denoting certain circulating sets of ideas and social practices. Meanwhile the *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (2006) deliberately links the notions 'ideology' and 'discourse' by suggesting that both offer ready-made ways of thinking, thereby concurring with the views of cultural theorists such as Bhatia (1993: 4), Hall (1997: 44-51) Barker (2004: 54) in treating 'discourse' as the agency that situates human beings as subjects within systems of statements and utterances governed by social and institutional rules and conventions - of whose influence they may often be unaware (Macey 2000: 100). In other words, it considers discourses as crystallisations of social knowledge which precipitate as a result of certain diverse and diffuse signifying practices which create the conditions whereby 'new' human subjects and new subject matters come into being at certain periods of history. Thus Barker, for example, recognizes that self-help books are culturally responsive texts, the remarkable contemporary demand for which he links with growing fiscal insecurity and social fragmentation:

It is no accident that Western culture is witnessing an unprecedented rise in anxiety and depression along with an associated fascination with self-help books. This is attributable not only to capitalism and consumer culture, for there are other actions in play (e.g. the loss of contact with issues of life, illness and death, the absence of positive family life, fragmentation and the decline of a common culture etc.) (Barker 2002: 174).

But there is a further, aspirational and optimistic side to the self-help book which means that it can also be viewed as a discursive manifestation of the individualism and self-absorption which Giddens (1992: 30) refers to as the "self-reflexive project", and which other commentators have identified as being currently axiomatic in Western society (cf. Lasch 1979; Bloom 1988: 82-140 and Furedi 2004; Twenge and Campbell 2010). Therefore self-help publications are interesting to the cultural theorist because, as

narratives of putative personal transformation, they reify and then address the feelings of 'lack', 'desire' and entitlement which people experience in their relationships, health, wealth, work etc.

However, defining what is meant by the term 'discourse in order to facilitate detailed discussion of this notion in relation to the self-help book is difficult because the term is used on different occasions in different ways. In literary theory it sometimes refers to 'how' a text is written rather than its content (Peck and Coyle 1993: 142). But it has a wider significance for critics and philosophers who are concerned with "any means by which human meanings, beliefs and values are communicated and replicated" (Hall 2004: 131). In this sense, it embraces wide stretches of language, images and other non-verbal signifying practices (Jaworski and Coupland 2006; Wodak and Meyer 2009: 2-6 and *passim*; Fairclough 2010). Fairclough, who has spent his career writing about discourse, accepts that there are numerous different and overlapping definitions (Fairclough 1992a: 3), noting that that a range of opinion is usefully reviewed by van Dijk (1985a; 1985b) and McDonell (1986).

Mills (1997) reinforces the point that the term 'discourse' has become common currency in a variety of disciplines such as critical theory, social linguistics and social psychology, but observes that in practice it is often left undefined. She traces how, during the 1960s, the general demotic understanding of 'discourse' as having to do with conversation or speechmaking (cf. *Longman's Dictionary of the English Language*, 1984) began to diverge from the term's increasing theoretical significance, observing that since the various disciplines which have co-opted it use the term 'discourse' in a variety of ways, there is inevitably a great deal of fluidity surrounding it. Thus although Burr defines discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on, that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (Burr 1995: 48), it has become accepted that discourse study now involves more than just close reading of selected texts, or even groups of texts. This is because discourses establish subject relations between people, institutions and hegemonies which exist beyond words on a page (Benwell and Stokoe 2006).

Systems of knowledge and belief, some codified and some not, privilege certain elements of information and relationships through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (Halliday 1978; Fairclough 1992a: 3, 36). In so doing, they simultaneously create both the 'legitimate' channels through which that information and those relationships can be communicated *and* the 'responsive', 'illegitimate' ones by which they can be subverted: for example by para-texts' such as satires and parodies or, in the case of formal institutions, by the establishment of 'alternative' organisations such as social action groups. Indeed some self-help books might themselves be considered 'illegitimate' textual responses as they seek to re-express scholarly ideas about personal psychology for popular consumption. That is not to say that their writers necessarily disagree with 'legitimate' ideas which have institutional accreditation, for example the findings of clinical psychology, but that in distilling and 'democratising' them into common conversation, they must inevitably simplify matters and 'overlay' the authority of the scholarly originators. This process can be seen at work in the 'popular psychology' sections of bookshops (Justman 2005): especially in the *# For Dummies* series and the *Complete Idiot's Guides* whose titles make a virtue out of the simplification process.

The socio-theoretical and the 'linguistic' aspects of discourse are thus *de facto* complementary because it is the *interaction* between societal practice and specific discourse manifestations in the language and signifying practices of specific texts (of all kinds) which creates what Rorty calls "a description of the world" (Rorty 1992: 172). The 'integrative' insights of Foucault are thus important for this thesis because he seeks to identify groups of utterances, beyond individual texts, which seem in some way to be regulated and which seem to have coherence and force to them in common (Mills 1997: 6). He conceptualises discourses as large groups of statements which inhabit rule-governed language terrains defined by "strategic possibilities", observing that:

[W]henever between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (and order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation (Foucault 1972: 37-8).

The 'rules of formation' are the 'system' that enables statements to become intelligible or significant on certain occasions; allowing 'truths' to be told yet also constraining what can be said (Simons 1995: 24). Once recognised, this concept makes it possible to speak with more security about 'uber-discourses' or 'arch-discourses' of, for example, femininity, diversity, economics, human rights etc. which can be conceptualised as 'arenas of discursive activity': each with a characteristic integration of linguistics and praxis. Furthermore it also becomes possible to speak with some confidence about the broadly therapeutic turn in contemporary society and about the 'discourse of self-help' which includes practices of book production, sales and consumption, as well as dialogues between writers, readers and critics.

MacIntyre concurs with Foucault's insight that values, beliefs, concepts, practices, and by implication discourse formations, are socially and historically situated: embedded in their place and time (MacIntyre 1981: vii-ix). Likewise Taylor observes that: "All beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken for granted which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated" (Taylor 2007: 30). Here he is referring indirectly to discourse operating at what might be called a deep 'ontogenic' level rather than at a conscious 'epistemological' one. However discourse is at once constitutive and expressive: both matrix and manifestation. For as Wolfreys notes:

Human subjectivity and identity itself is produced out of various discursive formations as a result of the subject's entry into language already shot through and informed by figurations and encryptions of power, politics, historical, cultural and ideological remainders organised through particular relationships and networks (Wolfreys 2004: 66).

Also relevant to the present study of self-help literature is Foucault's interest in how 'experts', such as doctors, psychiatrists and criminologists, are able to extend and reinforce their personal and professional authority; as much by inventing deviant groups in need of study and treatment as by what they actually say. The 'disciplines' through which they operate (Foucault 1981a; 1981b) subject an individual to certain processes

of normalisation through processes of discursive ordering and restrictions, thereby producing behavioural conformity, while punishing non-conformity:

The judges of normality are everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge: it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements  
(Foucault 1977a: 304-5).

Clearly the writers of self-help books in many cases lack institutionally-sanctioned authority such as that vested in the professionals listed above. However they do set themselves up as arbiters of behaviour to whom the reader voluntarily subjects himself or herself in order, supposedly, to improve their quality of life. In self-help books the 'authority' and power to judge lies not in some 'generic' institutional figure but in the profile and experience of the author, in the marketing strategies of the publisher who ultimately decides on economic grounds what ideas will make it into print, and in the demotic 'critical mass' which is sometimes called 'word of mouth'. Unlike some other 'informative' genres such as student text-books or professional codes of practice which contain 'sanctioned' information and define rules of ethical behaviour, the self-help genre is not overtly constrained by the rules of formal institutions or generic expectations. However self-help books are implicitly 'normative' because they take it upon themselves to define issues of personal concern and offer guidance towards 'ideal' solutions for their readers, thus constituting a rich area of study for the cultural theorist.

### **4.3 The Therapeutic Turn in Contemporary Discourse**

Critics have commented on how the 'constructed self', which they consider to be unconsciously shaped by external discourses, yet which seems in practice to have unprecedentedly wide personal choice about its material and spiritual lifestyle at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has become a significant element of postmodern culture (Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991: 187-221; Gergen 1991; Jameson 1991; Bauman 2007; Elliott 2007). According to this view, identity itself becomes a cultural 'artefact' formed from language and social practices (Barker 2002: 225). Therefore the topics of self-help

books, *etc.* which are clearly in the identity-forming business, may be considered usefully indicative of contemporary social values and aspirations. However it has also been suggested (Pearsall 2005; Salerno 2005; Bergsman 2008; Lilienfeld *et al* 2009) that the inward-looking nature of the genre as a whole has to some extent contributed to what has been called the 'therapeutic turn' in contemporary society, and has thus, ironically, produced a weakening of self-reliance (cf. Wood *et al* 2009). For it has been noticed that as people have become more concerned about personal rights, risks and 'victimhood', the 'self' has increasingly become posited as being fragile, feeble, and in need of guidance (Kaminer 1992; White 1992; Burr 1995: 24; Barker 2002: 86-107; Furedi 2004: 17; 24-43; Hoff Somers and Satel 2005; Salerno 2005; Ecclestone and Hayes 2008; Ehrenreich 2009 and McLaughlin (2009) <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/7199/>, accessed 4 July 2010). As Furedi observes:

Our culture has fostered a climate where the internal world of the individual has become the site where the problems of society are raised and where it is perceived that they need to be resolved ... Since the self is defined through feelings, the state of emotion is often represented as the key determinant of both individual and collective behaviour. Social problems are increasingly recast as individual ones that have no direct connection to the social realm (Furedi 2004: 24-5).

Thus even normal though sometimes difficult life experiences, such as birth or various kinds of loss (Machin 2008), have increasingly become pathologised through acquiring a penumbra of advice texts and 'experts' prepared to discuss them; thereby contributing to the relatively recent discourse which Hoff Sommers and Satel (2005: 1-10) have called 'therapism'. Furedi further observes (Furedi 2004: 40, 74) how therapy culture now suffuses the media, not least in the immense daily output of 'thrash' or 'confessional' TV where intimate self-disclosure is encouraged and 'advice' is offered to members of the public who define themselves as having 'issues'. Even the term 'issue' has now become therapeutically nuanced so that it often now denotes a problem rather than just referring to a neutral matter in need of discussion. Meanwhile 'thrash' is an informal media categorisation which is not yet in dictionaries but is now being used by writers (Furedi 2003:

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/extracts/story/0,6761,1058896,00.html>, accessed 17 March 2011) to describe emotive reality programmes such as the *Jeremy Kyle Show* in the UK (Kyle 2011; <http://www.itv.com/lifestyle/jeremykyle/>, accessed 17 March 2011) or *The*

*Jerry Springer Show* in the US (Springer 2011: <http://television.aol.com/show/jerry-springer/62931/main>, accessed 17 March 2011). But even fifteen years ago, White was observing how popular TV shows hook audience attention with case-histories and confessions which are framed by advertising which invites recognition and identification from viewers. Thus consumer desire and concomitant dissatisfactions are stimulated alongside the pseudo-therapy being offered as palliation for various discomforts (White 1992: 25-51).

Like the TV advice programmes described above, the governing narrative of all self-help books is overtly transformative. Whether their particular topic is love, money, health, work or spirituality, these publications are designed to address their readers' desire to feel better in some way so that they move from an experience of 'lack' to one of 'lack liquidated': to borrow phrases used by Dolby (2005: 4-5; 39-40) and originated by Propp (1968: 53). Accordingly, their authors can be seen to reify much current aspirational ideology into 'objective correlates': a term coined by T.S. Eliot (1951: 144-5) to describe when external objects and affect become linked. MacIntyre, on the same track, speaks of 'eternal goods' which can become conceptualised as someone's property or possession (MacIntyre 1981: 178) and transmuted into identifiable goals. But existential *discomfort* may also acquire its objective correlates, and it is hardly surprising that self-help writers strive to maximise sales by promoting their 'unique selling proposition' or 'USP' (Reeves 1961: 46-48) through identifying new problem areas which require the attention of their 'expertise' and 'authority', and are supposedly amenable to their proposed solutions. Yet these 'neo-classifications' are inevitably contingent upon pre-existing discourse. For as Foucault notes:

[T]he frontiers of a book are never clear cut: beyond the title the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network. ... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands ... it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse (Foucault 1998: 422-3).

In consonance with his view, it is possible to observe much intertextuality within self-help literature. Once a novel area of concern has been reified there are soon many related publications which take advantage of this new opportunity. For example, huge industries of academic research and popular advice have grown up around the

relatively recent concept of 'emotional intelligence' which now has its own self-help subgenre. This term was used without fanfare by Leuner as early as 1966 (Leuner 1966) and then appeared in a scholarly article by Mayer and Salovey (1993). Subsequently it was brought to wider public attention and became commercially important to book publishers when the psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman published his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* in 1995. According to Hoff Sommers and Satel (2005: 3), Goleman has become "a secular apostle of the credo that the continuous monitoring of one's feelings is healthful and liberating". Currently Amazon.co.uk lists over four hundred publications with the phrase 'emotional intelligence' in their title. Furthermore, the extensive bibliography of articles provided by the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations is indicative of how the discourse of emotional intelligence has expanded (2010: [http://www.eiconsortium.org/references/reference\\_general\\_references.htm](http://www.eiconsortium.org/references/reference_general_references.htm), accessed 17 March 2011).

'Emotional intelligence' is a recent example of how new content for self-help books emerges from time to time and is likely to continue to do so as new discursive fields constitute themselves. Whereas early self-help publications stressed the need for hard work, discipline and deferred gratification in order for someone to rise in society (Newton 1994; Carre 1994; Noyes 2007; Mur Effing 2009), much of the subject matter in contemporary publications, particularly with regard to personal experiences, would have been considered unthinkable until fairly recently (Marwick 2003; Hochschild 2003). Yet such material has become increasingly acceptable to publishers as society in general has become more liberal (Appiah 2005) and people have become more casually introspective. Nevertheless *whatever* their particular topic or focus, and whether they claim to offer 'quick-fix' solutions or more profound, long-term guidance (Mur Effing 2009: 133), *all* self-help books transmit certain societal values and 'normativities' through their recommendations. Moreover they inscribe an implicit dialogue between power and need as their readers seek help in achieving their aspirations and their writers claim to be able to provide it. Therefore these books, their commercial footprint, the responses of their readers, and the wider social commentary they generate, for example in the press and on the Web, constitute a remarkable



element in the pervasive postmodern discourse of the 'constructed' self which has been theorised by Goffman (1959), Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992: 174) and Gergen (1991).

However there is a paradox here. Self-help literature and the proliferation of other sources of personal advice available through the media, is obviously a remarkable postmodern phenomenon. Yet inasmuch as individual books are addressed to a supposedly self-determining, though discontented, individual who putatively has the agency to read and respond to their codes (Iser 1976: Eco 1979: 7) and can follow their advice about how to effect material and psychic transformation (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 2), their underlying assumption about *telic* personal autonomy renders them liberal humanist texts (Webster 1996: 83). For although Eagleton (1992: 156-7) at one point dismisses the personal search for meaning such as they inscribe as being characteristic of "old-fashioned modernism" which misguidedly considers the bourgeois humanist subject to be "free, active and self-identical", when he subsequently attempts to reconcile the traditional, holistic views still axiomatic in demotic culture (and celebrated unselfconsciously for example in self-help books and advice shows) with post-structuralist assertions about the contingent nature of selfhood, he is forced to acknowledge that:

The bourgeois humanist subject is not in fact simply part of a clapped-out history we can all agreeably or reluctantly leave behind: if it is an increasingly inappropriate model at certain levels of subject-hood, it remains a potentially relevant one at others ... The subject of late capitalism is neither simply the self-regulating synthetic agent posited by classical humanist ideology, nor merely a decentred network of desire, but a contradictory amalgam of the two (Eagleton 1992: 158).

Clearly, the diffuse ideology of self-concern has become pervasive at the macro level of society and there has been a discernible trend towards the pathologisation of individual experience. But in seeking to discern more clearly how this has come about, it is illuminating to observe how the term 'therapy' itself has undergone a notable renovation, expansion and 'democratisation'; moving out of clinical discourse and becoming assimilated into a culture of self-reflection and self-help which is now in practice as much to do with life-planning and self-actualisation as with the palliation of distress (Giddens 1991; Sykes 1992: 33-52; Furedi 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes 2008). Deriving from the Greek word *therapeúein*, meaning to cure or treat disease, 'therapy' entered the medical lexicon during the nineteenth century and was first used with

reference to interventions in medical or psychiatric disorders. However by 2003 *Collins English Dictionary* had added 'social disorders' to these original two. Now when a person says "I am in therapy", it generally suggests that they are having *psychotherapy*, and not treatment for some physical ill. For example, Amazon.co.uk currently offers 138,473 books on 'therapy', of which thirty-eight of the first fifty are self-help books which deal with psychological matters (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/therapy-Books/s/>, accessed 10 July 2010).

Naturally it is in the economic interest of the contemporary 'therapy industry', of which self-help books are a part, to keep defining new areas of personal concern for writers to write about; thereby expanding the broad discourse of self-development while creating what Giddens has called a "protective cocoon" for the comfort of their ostensibly beleaguered readers (Giddens 1991: 242). Recently emergent popular topics for self-help writers include 'co-dependency' (Rice 1998), 'low self-esteem' (Hewitt 1998) and 'anger management' (Bloxham 2010). But even everyday terms like 'stress', 'anxiety', 'addiction', 'compulsion', 'trauma', 'victim', 'survivor' and 'dependency' have acquired some additional pathological nuance (Furedi 2004: 1) and now appear remarkably often in self-help literature. So what are the origins of this therapeutic turn? While it must be acknowledged that the situation is overdetermined, Keynes and Haidt (2003) identify one distinct historical reason for why both professional psychologists in the twentieth century, and by implication their lay interpreters in self-help books, have for a long time tended to focus more on defining and treating pathology and abnormality than on observing and encouraging healthy functioning: thereby producing a matrix for the therapeutic turn in society described above. The American National Institute of Mental Health was founded in 1949 as a response to the many ex-service men who displayed psychological difficulties after World War 2 (Pickren and Schneider 2004). As a result, psychologists found that they could more easily obtain grants and publishing opportunities by describing their research as being in some way therapeutic: i.e. concerned with the treatment of disease or disability. Thus began a 'science of mental illness' whose expanding discourse involved a nexus of related scholarly and clinical institutions, a vast body of literature and a distinctive lexicon. Many 'new' psychological ills such as 'narcissistic personality disorder', 'dependent personality disorder' and 'adjustment disorder' were recognised, 'authoritatively' defined, and codified in the

powerful *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*, which was published in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association (Wilson 1993) and is regularly updated and expanded (American Psychiatric Association 2010: <http://www.dsm5.org/pages/default.aspx>, accessed 17 March 2011).

Thus the formal discourse of psychopathology has long been associated with influential and economically significant external operators: not just academic institutions and hospitals, but also the pharmaceutical and insurance companies who use the *DSM* as the benchmark and justification for their commercial activities, for example when they are manufacturing drugs for 'new' conditions or offering new types of insurance cover. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that many issues which were previously considered non-medical have now become informed by therapeutic terminology. Undoubtedly this has become more widely used in business situations and has found its way into self-help literature (Halmos 1965; Reiff 1966; North 1972: 29; Sykes 1992: 33-52; McGee 2005; Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005; Salerno 2005: 133-160). Recent writers who observe the influence of economics on the pathologisation of existence include Horwitz and Wakefield (2007), Whitaker (2010) and Watters (2010). Meanwhile the unprecedented proliferation of 'counsellors', both professional and non-professional, is noted by Colgrove *et al* (1991: 96). Furthermore Sykes believes that:

The triumph of the therapeutic mentality reflected the general temper of the American personality, which insisted upon seeing the immemorial questions of human life as problems that required solutions. The therapeutic culture provided both in abundance: the therapists transformed age-old human dilemmas into psychological problems and claimed that they (and they alone) had the treatment... The result was an explosion of inadequacy – or what psychologists themselves would prefer to call 'deficits' – amongst the nonprofessional populace (Sykes 1992: 34).

More recently Furedi reflects upon how so many areas of life have become 'emotionalised', 'medicalised' and 'professionalised', tracing the growth of therapeutic intervention into hitherto un-pathologised areas of human experience such as child-rearing, interpersonal relationships, various kinds of loss and ageing, where traditionally people just got on with things as best they could (Furedi 2004: 8-12, 17-21, 132-3, 98-105). As Wilberg puts it: "The pathologisation of suffering is central to the commercially and medically promoted health paranoia of our culture – a culture which fetishises an idealised concept of 'wellness' or 'well-being'" (Wilberg 2004: 91). More specifically,

Furedi distinguishes a new genre of self-help writing which he calls 'pathography' (Furedi 2004: 68); thereby transferring a term which was already being used in medicine to describe a genre of first person illness narratives (Hunsaker Hawkins 1999) to those highly popular self-help books which focus attention on more general personal distress.

Of course, not all self-help books are 'pathographic' in focus. Indeed many could be described as 'entrepreneurial' inasmuch as they seek to create opportunities for personal progress: for example *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 2009); *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* (Carlson 1997) and *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1998). There are also all the optimistic books on the 'law of attraction' (Amazon.co.uk, 2011c: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Law-Attraction-which-book/lm/RVSD2H4PZSAVW>, accessed 17 March 2011) and those on 'positive psychology' (Amazon.co.uk 2011b: [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Positive-psychology-books-for-students-and-professionals/lm/2Y8GWF3W7EVBF/ref=cm\\_srch\\_res\\_rpli\\_alt\\_1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Positive-psychology-books-for-students-and-professionals/lm/2Y8GWF3W7EVBF/ref=cm_srch_res_rpli_alt_1), accessed 17 March 2011). These publications are predicated on the notion of intrinsic human creativity. However many self-help books certainly co-opt broadly therapeutic or pathographic terms to define and discuss issues: for example in the *# For Dummies* series. Moreover there is also a highly lucrative, sub-genre of what the book-trade calls 'misery memoirs' or 'survivor sagas' (Adams 2006; Barnes 2007) which focus specifically on experiences of victimisation and threats to the self - albeit usually with some triumphant ending. An outstandingly successful author in this field is Dave Pelzer whose autobiography of familial dysfunction has earned him and his publishers millions, but who has been dubbed "the child abuse entrepreneur" by *Slate Magazine* (Plotz 2000: <http://slate.msn.com/id/90532/>, accessed 17 March 2011).

Although the considerable discursive flux around aspects of self-concern, particularly around the 'pathologisation' of everyday experience, has been observed by a number of social commentators, detailed textual analysis is not so common. Therefore the following section examines therapeutic discourse dynamics more closely by concentrating on the recently-emergent notions of 'addiction', 'co-dependency' and

'Positive Psychology'; thereby also distinguishing three mechanisms of discursive transformation: 'renovation', neo-conceptualisation' and 'democratisation'.

#### **4.4 Three Mechanisms of Lexicon Expansion Observable in Self-Help Books: 'Renovation', 'Neologism' and 'Democratisation'**

The gradual formative process whereby changing social conditions and practices crystallise into distinctive discourse phenomena (Foucault 1972: 49) and certain discourse formations then become established paradigms (i.e. ways of interpreting reality) can be metaphorically likened to the physical process of precipitation when atmospheric conditions cause amorphous water-vapour to consolidate into rain or snow (cf. Reynolds 2000: 76-80). But the production of discourse involves more than linguistic consolidation. It also depends upon the selection, organisation, control and distribution of people, objects, concepts and language by the institutions and individuals who have the power to do this (Foucault 1981a: 52). Thus at any period there are unwritten rules of 'acceptability' which constrain what can and cannot be done and talked about, and by whom, in various areas of life, be they scholarly, institutional or demotic (Wolfreys 2004: 65-67). These rules create a 'set of statements' or structural networks particular to specific institutions, characteristic of some cultural epoch, or linked with a particular episteme, that is: "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 49). As Mills observes:

A discursive structure can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context. Thus, we can assume that there is a set of discourses of femininity and masculinity, because, women and men behave within a certain range of parameters when defining themselves as gendered subjects (Mills 2004: 15-16).

Academic disciplines such as medicine, education and law, as well as informal cultural groupings with a shared interest like ecology, Goth culture, or indeed self-development, sustain and distribute the very language and practices which make them possible during certain epochs (Fairclough 1992a; Bhatia 1993) yet impossible during others (cf. Conley *et al* 2005). Well-known examples of relatively 'new' societal discourses include the nineteenth century notion of 'madness' famously theorised by Foucault (2001) and

the 'psychoanalytic' discourse of the early twentieth century (Parker 1997, Reiff 2006: 1-29), which was initiated by Freud and his followers as a type of therapeutic intervention, but which has developed into a school of thought which has influenced many critical theorists (Elliott 1994), novelists such as Iris Murdoch, for example in *A Severed Head* (1969), and writers of popular psychology books. Indeed various items of psychoanalytical jargon (not used here as a pejorative term) have escaped from the confines of the consulting room with the co-option of words such as 'ego', 'inferiority complex', 'projection', 'phobia', 'Freudian slip' etc. into everyday conversation (Frosch 2002; Cordón 2005; Lilienfeld *et al* 2009). Likewise, more lately-defined notions of 'dysfunction' such as 'neediness', 'the twelve-steps', 'co-dependence' and 'post-traumatic stress' have moved from the dialogue of counselling into general discourse (Kaminer 1992; Sykes 1992; Steadman Rice 1998). Now they are unselfconsciously used in 'advice' programmes which are watched by millions, such as those fronted by Oprah Winfrey (Shattuc 1997; Peck 2008; Winfrey 2011a: <http://www.oprah.com/index.html>, accessed 17 March 2011) and Trisha Goddard (Goddard 2009: <http://www.trishatv.com/trishas-advice>, accessed 25 April 2011). But there has also been what might be described as a lexical contra-flow, whereby various *non-clinical* words have become therapeutically nuanced: for example 'victim', 'survivor', 'addict', 'recovery', 'boundary' and 'closure'. Thus there are now many self-help books on 'surviving' what had hitherto been considered unexceptional experiences such as motherhood (Stapleton 2010), infidelity (Subotnik and Harris 2005), and even writing a dissertation (Rudestrom and Newton 2007)!

The discourses mentioned above are clearly overdetermined. Indeed the very episteme or 'world view' (Foucault 1970: 187-188, 190-192; 1980: 197) in which all discourses float is itself constantly subject to transformation (Barker 2004: 60) in response to discursive morphing because: "A discourse is a set of sanctioned statements which have ... a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think" (Mills 1997: 62). Therefore, as Taylor perceives:

[I]t very often happens that what start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society ... Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life (Taylor 2007: 172).

Yet it is possible to identify how discursive transformation may come about in a number of ways: deliberately through institutional decree (Sykes 1992: 6); through cumulative linguistic changes in demotic usage (Miller and Swift 1995); or through a combination of these. The power to regulate what can and cannot be said in certain 'social imaginaries' may be legal, political, economic, academic or 'charismatic': a term coined by Weber (1968) to describe a quality of leadership which appeals to non-rational motives. It may also depend on more diffuse hegemony or 'peer group pressure': a critical social mass which valorises certain ethical or social values and denies others (Ball 2005) at certain times. What is clear is that what is accepted as 'truth' alters subtly as people cease to employ certain words or practices whilst gradually acquiring the habit of using others, thereby eventually internalising new assumptions about their world and what is to be valued in it (Rorty 1992: 173; Kekes 1995). For example, various commentators have observed how self-help literature has increasingly become less about the 'character ethic' which advocates integrity, humility, temperance, courage and hard work (Sykes 1992: 251; Seligman 2003: 125) and more about either the 'personality ethic' which celebrates 'image', positive thinking and communicative skill (Covey 2004a: 18-19) or the 'quandary ethic' which responds to immanent problems and dilemmas, such as employment, health or relationship issues, without necessarily situating these in a broader societal context (Haidt 2006: 164; cf. Johnson 1994).

The social imaginary is inevitably protean and diffuse, so that the set of self understandings, horizons of expectation and background practices in which individuals operate are often implicitly understood rather than explicitly articulated (Taylor 2004). Therefore it can be informative to trace how a certain lexicon within a discourse may expand or contract because focus on the *microcosm* of language can provide some material evidence of *macrocosmic* discursive change and also show something of the *mechanisms* which drive it. For example, established terms like 'addiction' may acquire additional nuance, quite new ones like 'co-dependency' may be coined to describe a

hitherto undefined condition, and institutionally-originated ones like 'positive psychology' may become co-opted into everyday conversation. Each of these terms has a large amount of self-help literature associated with it, thus providing a useful body of evidence for the analysis below which proposes that it is possible to see three linguistic mechanisms of discursive transformation in action: 'renovation', 'neologism' and 'democratisation'.

### ***Renovation: 'Addiction'***

Attitudes to 'addiction' have changed profoundly in the last hundred years, thereby producing an explosion of responsive academic and clinical publications, educational and clinical institutions, informal support groups and many self-help books. This process is discussed by Hoff Sommers and Satel in their chapter 'Sin to Syndrome' (2005: 77-109). Whereas the Temperance Movement, which was powerful in Britain and the USA particularly during the nineteenth century, attempted to deal with the physical and social problems caused through alcohol addiction by advocating self-control and complete abstinence (Blocker *et al* 2003; Berridge 2005), the word 'temperance', with its 'virtuous' overtones of self-denial and moderation, is rarely heard today. Instead there is a much broader discourse of 'substance abuse' into which alcoholism has been subsumed. Moreover, though addiction was for a long time considered to be a personal moral failing, it is now viewed as a generic disease whose re-categorisation as 'pathology' rather than bad behaviour has generated a thriving treatment industry (Conrad 2007; ; Peele 1999; Furedi 2004: 124; Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 99-109; Salerno 2005: 154). There are many academic and clinical courses in 'addiction studies' (cf. Addiction Studies Forum (n.d.):

[http://www.addictionstudies.ca/wd\\_about.php](http://www.addictionstudies.ca/wd_about.php), accessed 17 March 2011) and scholarly journals such as *Addiction Research and Theory* (1993-) have become well-established. There are also famous, celebrity-patronised treatment centres such as The Priory (Priory Group (n.d.): <http://www.priorygroup.com/>, accessed 17 March 2011) and the Hazelden Treatment Centre (n.d.): <http://www.hazelden.org/>, accessed 17 March 2011). Meanwhile, the self-help books of famous addiction 'gurus' like Pia Melody (2002) and Melody Beattie (1989, 2009) sell millions and a search of Amazon.co.uk



reveals that there are many 'addiction memoirs' (cf. HCI Books (2010): <http://www.hcibooks.com/c-6addiction-recovery.aspx>, accessed 25 April 2011).

But the 'disease model' of addiction described above, and its associated 'recovery ethic', (Steadman Rice 1998: 159-178; Lemanski 2001) have now become applied more widely to unhealthy relationships with people, food, technology and work (Giddens 1992: 66) and there is a flourishing 'recovery' subgenre of self-help books. For once it was recognised that addiction involved more than chemical dependency because it produced compulsive *behaviour*, the addiction metaphor could be transferred to other 'involuntary' activities which were not specifically substance-related (Seligman 2007: 198-222). A new class of social problem thus became 'recognised' because, in Foucauldian terms (1981a), the invention of the 'addict' created a new network of institutional and demotic 'power and knowledge' whose underlying assumptions, rules and expectations were transferable. Within this discourse, the addict/subject was constituted as 'victim': a designation with implications of diminished responsibility and the potential for healing; rather than as 'miscreant': a designation with implications of choice and agency, but also of failure (Seligman 2007: 204-207). Since Alcoholics Anonymous began in 1935 (Kurtz 2008), the world-wide 'Twelve-Step Movement' which is based on AA's disease/recovery model has engendered many similarly-structured lay and professional interventions into dysfunctional behaviours (Sykes 1992: 135-6; O'Hallaran 2001). Current groups include 'Narcotics Anonymous', 'Overeaters Anonymous', 'Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous' (SLAA), 'Molesters Anonymous', 'Co-dependents Anonymous' (CoDA) and 'Messies Anonymous' [sic] (Rice 1998: 51). Indeed there is even a 'Recoveries Anonymous' for those who: "Despite their best efforts have yet to find the recoveries they're looking for" (Recoveries Anonymous (n.d.) <http://www.r-a.org/>, accessed 17 March 2011)!

This 'recovery movement' has surely contributed to the pervasive therapeutic ethos in society where self-help books of all kinds now flourish, particularly through its emphasis on the pernicious effect of troubling childhood experiences on the adult psyche which can result in enduring feelings of shame and low self-esteem (Kaminer 1992; Sykes 1992: 135-149; Salerno 2005: 133-160). For example, the notion of 'co-dependency' (Steadman Rice 1998), which Beattie (1989) and Norwood (2004) describe as

behaviour involving extreme dependency by one person on another who is suffering from an addiction to such an extent that the 'codependent' becomes 'addicted' to helping and controlling that person, has generated much media coverage and publishing revenue. Indeed its lexicon, which includes such terms as 'dysfunction', 'recovery', 'survival', 'scapegoat', 'denial', 'enabler', 'toxic behaviour', 'the inner child' and 'the wounded child', is now routinely used by professionals and non-professionals alike (Gemin 1997a; 1997b; Seligman 2007: 239-243) and occurs in numerous self-help books (Helgoe 2008). Thus Furedi observes:

Increasingly, the survivalist outlook projects every conceivable experience as a 'trial of life' that raises issues of survival. Consequently, coping with relatively banal, unexceptional episodes is now represented as an act of survival. There are over a thousand different self-help books in print with the word 'surviving' contained in their title (Furedi 2004: 129).

However there is also an interesting 'counter-discourse' which seeks to rebut Twelve-Step 'victim/survivor' ideology (Peele 1999). For example the discussion group '12-Step-Free', in a small act of lexical rebellion, opposes what it calls 'steppism' and aims to debunk what it considers to be the superstitious and unscientific beliefs of Twelve-Step ideology (Twelve Step Free Zone (2010):

<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/12-step-free/>, accessed 17 March 2011). Yet this is an example of how a counter-discourse can actually help an original discourse maintain its identity through the operation of *différance* (Derrida 1981: 8-9). This is because the process of opposition is necessarily inter-textual and must inevitably draw further attention to that of which it disapproves. Clearly the change in what is understood by 'addiction' is interesting as an index of cultural shift. But it is particularly illuminating for someone concerned with the mechanisms of discursive change because it is an example of how a traditional word can become 'renovated', thereby achieving new significance.

### **Neologism: 'Co-Dependence'**

The growth in significance of the term 'addiction' and the expansion of the ideology associated with it is example of how an old term can become revitalised. But a different kind of discursive expansion can be seen to operate in regard to the term 'co-dependence'. This notion is part of the broad discourse of substance addiction where it

denotes the tendency for someone associated with a person who has primary addiction problems to assume an obsessive 'caretaking' role to such an extent that their own well-being becomes compromised. However co-dependency has also generated a self-help sub-genre of its own, of which the following works are famous examples: Norwood (1985); Beattie (1990); Mellody (2002) and Casey (2008). Furthermore Co-Dependents Anonymous (2011: <http://www.coda-uk.org/>, accessed 17 March 2011) uses the twelve-step format to encourage people who identify themselves as being 'co-dependent' to form healthy relationships.

Rather than being a renovation of an old idea, 'co-dependency' is a neologism which was first recorded in 1982 (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2011) <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/codependent>, accessed 17 March 2011). *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1999) defines it as "the condition of seeking to fulfil one's own emotional needs by caring for or controlling a dependent". By contrast, the *New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1999), in a remarkably trenchant entry, considers it to be "an aspect of addiction ... a vague and imprecise term which usually means anything its user wants it to mean [and] can be useful in persuading insurance companies to medicalize a personal or social problem." Meanwhile Rice's cultural study of co-dependency, *A Disease of One's Own*, treats it as a social discourse: i.e. not something one has, but something in which one believes (Rice 1998: 2, 10). He notes that neither the category of 'co-dependent' nor the organisation Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) existed before the mid-1980s.

Today 'co-dependency' has become widely recognised as a problem of compulsive unhealthy engagement with things and people, and its distinctive culture is critiqued by Kaminer (1992: 9-28). Just like substance abuse, co-dependency has generated a huge treatment industry (Treatment Solutions Network 2011: <http://www.treatmentsolutionsnetwork.com/codependency-treatment.html>, accessed 17 March 2011) and there is a growing *corpus* of related academic work, examples of which can be found in the *CORK Bibliography* (2010). Moreover there are currently 2,372 co-dependency titles listed on Amazon.co.uk (8 June 2010) and the term has entered the *WHO Lexicon of Alcohol and Drug Terms* (World Health Organization 2011: [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/terminology/who\\_lexicon/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/terminology/who_lexicon/en/) accessed 17

March 2011). This formal codification means that the notion of co-dependency has become entrenched in both professional and demotic discourse. Thus terms which were for some time particularly associated with the 'pathology' of the condition are now used with little awareness of this nuance in everyday speech: for example 'issue', 'recovery', 'closure', 'inner-child', 'enabler', dysfunction', 'denial', 'victim', 'projection', 'transference', 'damaged', 'toxic', 'controlling', 'needy' etc. (Salerno 2006: 134-160). 'Co-dependence' may always have existed as a practice of one person supporting another in unhealthy behaviours to the detriment of their own well-being. But the term itself and the literature which it has generated are comparatively new.

### ***Democratisation: 'Positive Psychology'***

The diffuse yet related discourses of addiction and co-dependency described above have both generated vast amounts of scholarly publications and advice literature. However the school of thought now called 'Positive Psychology', which is also the subject of much scholarship and many self-help books, was originally associated with one person in particular: the fortuitously-named Martin Seligman. A former president of the American Psychological Association (Haidt 2006: 167), Seligman compared the insights of many previous 'eudemonic' thinkers, both ancient and modern, and found significant congruence in their ideas about how best to 'flourish' (Seligman 2003: 11). In response he began to promulgate Positive Psychology (Seligman and Csiksentmihályi 2000: 5-14) which, having rapidly become an institutionally-recognised 'sub-discipline' of formal psychology, very soon acquired the precise language, citations, exclusions and rules required of a respectable academic discourse (Linley *et al* 2006; Fløttum 2007). Therefore in light of the above, the phrase 'positive psychology' might initially be considered to be a kind of neologism because it does, after all, offer a new paradigm for thinking about human experience. However, the emergence of positive psychology is also a useful example of how an institutional discourse may become *democratised* because it is comparatively easy to trace its movement from academic and clinical practice into self-help books (University of Pennsylvania (2007):

[www.positivepsychology.org](http://www.positivepsychology.org), accessed 17 March 2011; Robbins 2008: 96-112).

Seligman's aims are similar to those of Abraham Maslow who said that psychology ought to become less negative in approach (Maslow 1965: 27). Both men emphasise

the need to view people as 'co-operants' rather than victims of their life story, stressing the importance of instrumentality: personal will, individual responsibility, hope, creativity, mindfulness, perseverance, wisdom and courage (Diener *et al* 1999; Diener 2000; Hoff Somers and Satel 2005: 56-64). Thus practising positive psychologists focus on the study and affirmation of:

- Positive emotion and whatever enables people to flourish
- Positive individual traits and abilities, such as intelligence and athleticism
- Positive societal institutions such as democracy, strong families and the principle of free enquiry (Keynes and Haidt 2003: xii).

Seligman also realised that although clinical psychologists had the enormous *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* to help them detect mental ills and abnormalities (a publication which is systematically critiqued by Cooper (2010)), there was little professional language with which to discuss *healthy* well-being. Therefore he and a colleague developed the *Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson and Seligman 2004) which identifies twenty-four abstract virtues of ancient provenance describing the 'strengths of character' which enable people to 'flourish' (Haidt 2006: 167-9). These are as follows: creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective (wisdom), bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, love, kindness, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality. In deliberately initiating a new discourse, Peterson and Seligman stress that they disavow the disease model in relation to character and are adamant that:

Human strengths are not secondary, derivative, illusory, epiphenomenal, parasitic upon the negative, or otherwise suspect ... We believe that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition, and that strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life (Peterson and Seligman 2004: 4).

Remarkably for the cultural theorist, the school of Positive Psychology can be said to be effecting something of a paradigm change, even within scholarship itself (Hazleden 2003). For it is a rare example of an academically-supported return to the liberal humanist notion, much undermined by postmodern theory (MacQuillan 2001; Culler

2008), of the 'essential' individual who is capable of substantial agency (McKay and Fanning 2000). Such essentialism was famously discredited by Derrida's (1982: 1-28) view that every linguistic term or signifier acquires meaning only as a result of its connection to a network of other linguistic terms or signifiers from which it differs in some way. Thus he contested the notion of undivided subjectivity (Derrida 1973: 66-8) and this view influenced many subsequent theorists (e.g. Snyder and Lopez 2005). However self-help books and their readers have always taken the humanistic valorisation of unique individuality for granted and do not seek to problematize its very existence. Indeed they have more immediate issues to deal with as the list of subgenres in Appendix C, below demonstrates

The new academic discourse of Positive Psychology quickly migrated from textbooks and journals onto the self-help shelves. This was firstly through the works of Seligman himself, who refashioned his scholarly material into publications aimed at a popular audience. For example, he produced *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (1998), *What You Can Change, And What You Can't ...* (2007) and *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realise Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (2002). But other literature soon followed and there is now an *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (2009) which comprises articles by 42 practitioners. The production of this type of reference book tends to indicate that an originally circumscribed discourse is migrating into other arenas, both academic and demotic, where people may need to seek some clarification. Meanwhile Amazon.co.uk listed 4,080 books under 'positive psychology', most of which are aimed at the general reader, on 27 July 2010. Therefore the 'new' paradigm of positive psychology offers a clear example of how an academic version of a discourse and a demotic version of it can flourish symbiotically, with the former acting as the matrix for the latter. It therefore demonstrates the mechanism of discursive democratisation in action.

The observation and naming of the three discursive mechanisms of lexical change introduced above was a welcome but unexpected result of the preparatory reading for the present chapter. But additionally it revealed a more sustained sequence of activity in the emergence of a new discourse. This original model is therefore outlined in the

following section which uses Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the subject of much self-help literature, as its main example.

#### 4.5 A Generic Model of Discourse Emergence

As a result of reading many primary and secondary texts during this research, it became possible to see how *any* discourse might tentatively emerge and gradually become 'crystallised' until it finally became linguistically entrenched. Therefore this section presents a 12-part model of discourse emergence which identifies certain crucial stages in the process. The proposed model is based in part on Fairclough's ideas (1992) about how various established discourses may combine under certain social conditions to produce a new discourse: for example that which now surrounds HIV/AIDS. But the model below also offers exemplary material about the language and praxis related to the following issues: 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (Young 1995; Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 141-76), 'co-dependency' (Rice 1998) and 'Positive Psychology' (Seligman 2002). It is emphasised, however, that although this illustrative material comes from a number of therapeutic discourses, the sequential structure being proposed is considered to be a *generally* applicable model which constitutes a heuristic framework for the systematic discussion of discourse-formation in diachronic terms. However it is also acknowledged that while twelve steps are distinguished below, in practice the process of emergence is actually one of flow and overlap, *bricolage* and consolidation. So it should not be supposed that *every* discourse can be *fully* mapped onto the sequence offered here. Nevertheless it seems likely that every discourse will have some of these elements – and in this order.

There is now a clinically recognised and measurable pathological condition called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which has generated a huge body of academic and lay discussion, as well as stimulating various therapeutic and palliative interventions (Foa *et al* 1989). Indeed there is even a self-help book entitled *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for Dummies* (Goulston 2007) and the description of this publication provided by Amazon UK (which was transcribed in July 2008 but is no longer available online April 2011) is as follows:

[This book is] a plain-English resource for people suffering from the after-effects of a traumatic experience. An estimated five per cent of Americans - over 13 million people - suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at any given time, and approximately eight percent will develop it at some time in their lives. Written for PTSD sufferers and their loved ones, this practical guide gives people the lowdown on symptoms, details today's various treatment options, offers practical coping strategies for day-to-day life, and even shows how to help children with PTSD. For the 12 to 20 percent of returning combat veterans who suffer from PTSD, the book offers real-world strategies for dealing with flashbacks, nightmares, and disruptive thoughts. Cope with flashbacks, nightmares, and disruptive thoughts. Help your heart accept what your mind already knows - and overcome PTSD. A traumatic event can turn your world upside down - but just because you're still afraid doesn't mean you're still in danger. There is a path out of PTSD, and this reassuring guide presents the latest on effective treatments that help to combat fear, stop stress in its tracks, and bring joy back to life. Identify PTSD symptoms and get a diagnosis. Choose the ideal therapist for you. Weigh the pros and cons of medications. Maximize your healing. Help a partner, child, or other loved one triumph over PTSD (Amazon.co.uk <http://www.amazon.co.uk/>, accessed 3 July 2008).

This extract juxtaposes number of elements: a brief description of the topic, references to both battle trauma and quotidian stress, a mention of the therapy industry, an appeal to the popular market, an affirmation of personal responsibility, a journey metaphor, some unreferenced statistics and a lot of imperatives. The effect might be thought to trivialise a serious issue in response to the imperatives of a pragmatic genre: the commercial advertising summary. But PTSD is just a relatively recent and convenient name for long-recognised kind of maladaptive behaviour involuntarily adopted in response to physically and mentally distressing circumstances (Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 141-76). Moreover it is possible to trace how the 'new' discourse of PTSD has gone through a number of formative stages (Young 2004; Wessely and Jones 2005) to become entrenched in demotic discourse.

Although it has long been observed that some people, though not all, experience disabling and long-lasting reactions to catastrophic events such as war or environmental disasters and this phenomenon has sometimes been called 'battle fatigue' or 'shell shock', the term PTSD was first specifically applied to the suffering of those Vietnam veterans who became mentally ill and needed help readjusting to society at the end of that war in 1975. The condition was recognised by the American Psychiatric Association in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMD-III)* (1980) and the term eventually became co-opted by care



agencies for use with various other groups of people who had endured an ordeal of some kind which left them with lingering reactive symptoms:

Soon the idea took hold that most people, not just veterans, who encountered stressful situations were likely to be damaged by the experience. Other axioms of 'therapism' began to emerge, for example the assumptions that most victims of traumatic experience would need professional help to cope and that they were passive recipients of tragedy; helpless to control their reactions to disaster and heartbreak (Hoff Somers and Satel 2005: 144-5).

But even at the beginning of the sixties there was some recognition of how psychological categories of distress and the theories that they accrued were culturally situated and ontologically expressive, so that, for example, symptoms which might have been considered evidence of demoniacal possession and treated by exorcism during the Middle Ages became regarded signs of mental illness to be treated by a psychiatrist (Frank 1961: 7-8). More specifically, Hoff Sommers' and Satel's account of how PTSD became a widely used term associated with a cluster of psycho-therapeutic practices, a body of scholarly literature, and a growing compensation culture, suggested the following generally applicable 12-part sequence for discourse formation.

1. **Phenomenological Matrix:** universal human experiences, such as physical and mental discomfort or the desire to live a better life, find cultural expression according to time and place.
2. **Identification:** a type of experience becomes increasingly recognised in a particular society and talked about as a discrete phenomenon but in varied terminology at various times. For example battle-induced distress has been called nerves, irritable heart, shell-shock, battle fatigue, combat exhaustion, PTSD etc. (Young 2004: 129-30; Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 146). It is mentioned in different genres such as war poetry, memoirs, medical records, legal records and anecdote.
3. **'Granulation':** this word is coined here to describe how the terminology and practice associated with certain activities becomes stabilised into various expressions which are privileged: for example in certain legal, medical or social situations etc. A fairly recent example of a lexicon in the process of granular formation is 'geek-speak', sometimes called 'nerdic' (Elliot 2008). This discourse is highly dynamic: terms coalesce, co-exist and slide around. But it has an

undoubted constituency and presence on the Web (Geekazoid and Friends 2010: <http://www.geekazoid.com/geekspeak/>, accessed 17 March 2011).

4. **Definition:** dictionaries eventually record usage and provide enduring definitions which are then cited in essays and journalism, thereby becoming consolidated in people's minds.
5. **Expansion:** the emergent discourse begins to borrow concepts and metaphors from pre-existent discourses. For example alcoholism and other physical addictions, long considered moral failings, have been re-conceptualised in terms of disease (Thorburn 2005; Seligman 2007: 204-7). Likewise the discourse of self-help has acquired a notably therapeutic, inward-looking turn. Having previously been largely focused on character and what might be considered appropriate social conduct (Cawelti 1965) it has become as much about personal affect as 'efficiency' (Salerno 2006) in response to the new secular ethos which is described by Lasch (1979) and Rieff (1966).

Expressions cross from one discourse to another, perhaps initially as metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), eventually becoming 'naturalised' so that they cease to be considered remarkable. For example the term 'stress' moved from physics into psychology via biology (Siebert 1996: 100; Selye 1979: 10).

Likewise the term 'survivor' has acquired particular resonance and loading in self-help books, often connoting sexual trauma, but now also being applied to all kinds of abuse, eating disorders, house-buying, redundancy etc. (Siebert 2008). Meanwhile 'co-dependent' is now widely applied to anyone in an unhealthy relationship (Irvine 1999) or with an addiction-like disease (Rice 1998: 19-45).

6. **Absorption:** the new expressions and practices become inscribed, without qualification, into established lexicons and non-specialist texts which may be official or demotic. Thus MIND, the leading mental health charity in the UK, advises that personal trauma, violent crime, sexual or physical assault, road traffic accidents or difficulties during childbirth can all produce PTSD (Mind 2011: <http://www.mind.org.uk/About+Mind/>, accessed 17 March 2011). The assumption is that the term PTSD is recognised and understood by a wide, non-specialist audience. Associated practices, such as certain attitudes or therapeutic interventions become normalised and taken for granted. For example there has been a dramatic increase in the number of professional trauma counsellors (Rice 1998: 27; Hilpern 2000).
7. **Ratification:** an emerging 'granulation' achieves formal institutional sanction. For example once PTSD was included in the *DSMD-III* (1980), it could 'legitimately' become the subject of political attention, academia, the law, the media and commercial firms offering treatment and insurance (Cooper 2010). Similarly emergent 'pathologies' include Adjustment Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder and Narcissistic Disorder (Mihares and Khalsa 2005).
8. **Theorisation:** an academic response and a body of scholarly literature is produced, becoming self-generating as debate gets underway. The new school of Positive Psychology is a remarkable instance of this discursive 'bootstrapping' (International Positive Psychology Association 2009: <http://www.ippanetwork.org/>, accessed 25 April 2011). Also the expansion of PTSD literature and courses (Institute of Counselling 2011: <http://www.collegeofcounselling.com/counselling-courses/certificate-courses/certificate-in-trauma-counselling/>, accessed 17 March 2011). Seminal books and articles soon acquire a *penumbra* of both positive and negative critical response – all of which serve to consolidate the new discourse.
9. **Co-option:** the practices, lexis and assumptions of the emergent discursive field are borrowed by established discourses. For example the notion of PTSD is

now treated axiomatically in therapy, the law, medicine, the press etc., thus becoming ever more objectified but also conceptually diluted. Furthermore it is now possible to study for a certificate in the management of PTSD by distance learning (STT Courses (n.d.): <http://www.homestudy.org.uk/colleges/stt/>, accessed 17 March 2011). Likewise counselling skills and their associated lexis, which were once the prerogative of psychologists, are now often automatically included in the training of nurses, teachers, social workers and managers.

10. **Commodification:** various related 'peri-genres' emerge such as textbooks, handbooks, guides, journals, training courses etc. These cater for both the popular and professional markets. There are also related 'products': for example palliative drug therapy and the huge 'grief-counselling' industry (Furedi 2004: 11) in the case of PTSD, and treatment centres for co-dependence and other addictions.
11. **Scepticism:** critiques, parodies etc. serve to reinforce the characteristics of that about which they comment. These can be termed 'para-genres'.
12. **Entrenchment:** there is eventually a recognised, nameable discourse whose accepted terminology has become well-known and will be retained by the dictionaries *in perpetuum*.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to situate the self-help book in the wider therapeutic discourse of society. But as a result of reflecting on various primary and secondary sources, it also became possible to discern how certain mechanisms and stages or 'consolidations' would come into play during the emergence (Corning 2002) of *any* nominalised discourse. That is, to see how the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts as structures and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple linguistic and societal interactions. In conclusion therefore, it is suggested that a discourse may be compared with what scientists call a 'complex system' (Gribbin 2009): a notion which is increasingly being investigated by disciplines such as biology and business which are interested in how large numbers of relatively simple entities "organise themselves, without the benefit of any central controller, into a collective whole that creates patterns,

uses information and, in some cases, evolves and learns" (Mitchell 2009: 4). Complex systems include ant colonies, climate conditions, traffic jams, a developing embryo and the interaction of human groups (Sawyer 2005). Characteristically they have fuzzy boundaries, are open and dynamic, operate through non-linear relationships and create feedback loops. This sounds similar to the discourse phenomenon which is fluid and responsive, yet may 'granulate' to become to some extent definable within certain situations. For example, the pervasive 'therapism' which various critics have noted as being characteristic of the present epoch is made up of many related discourses, each focusing, either positively or negatively, on the subjective well-being of the individual. Moreover the many subgenres of the self-help book demonstrate that this genre is a site where many such discourses are active. Therefore the next chapter, *Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade*, looks in more detail at certain characteristic signifying practices to be found in these publications.

## Chapter 5

### Discourse on the Page:

### Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade

Outside the use of therapeutic drugs, language remains the primary means by which we seek to make alterations in our emotional identification.

Chris Barker, *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates* (2002: 102)

Metaphor lifts up truths about the structure of existence that could not be seen through descriptive language, with literal definitions and discursive logic, alone.

Olav Bryant Smith, *Myths of the Self: Narrative Identity and Postmodern Metaphysics* (2004: 173)

#### 5.1 Introduction

Self-help books work by identifying and articulating common problems of everyday life, much simplified, before offering solutions in an attractive, accessible, affordable form. As "bearers of traditions" (Dolby 2005: ix) which often recast old stories and ideas in contemporary ways, they renovate and re-channel folk wisdom, popular psychology and social values (Murray Thomas 2001; Haslam 2003) and may thus be seen as contemporary, highly commercial manifestations of the narrative impulse in 'self'-creation which has been theorized by Sarbin (1986), Davies and Harré (1990), Adams (2007), Linde (1993), Harré (1998), Holstein and Gubrium (1999), Jones (2003), Day Sclater (2003) and Bauman (2004) among others. The *telic* trajectory and drive for subjective coherence which these critics observe is clearly detectable in self-help books whose subject matter seeks to distinguish individual problems and then master them, using what Dolby describes as 'the problem-solution form' (Dolby 2005: 39-40, 69-70). As a folklorist, she considers self-help books to be expressive of cultural values in the same way as other 'intertexts' such as ballads, fairy tales and legends are, noting that

the stories which pervade them are neither entirely original nor entirely formulaic (cf. Beardslee 2001). Rather, the books co-opt the frameworks of traditional narratives to explore current concerns (Dolby 2005: 12, 114). Beneath their surface differences, all self-help books promise transformation. And the dynamic of transformation, whether real or fictional, is necessarily a narrative with a beginning, middle and end (Culler 1997: 85).

However, given the social constructedness of subjective discourse discussed in the previous chapter there might seem to be some irony when self-help books claim to have the power to solve problems of an essentially private nature. Yet they would seem to be facilitating at a personal level the 'project of the self' described by Taylor (1989) as a modern legacy of the Enlightenment project; a phenomenon which is now heavily theorized, for example by Goffmann (1990), Giddens (1991, 1992), Adams (2004), Hermans and Hermans-Kanopka (2010: 82-200), Dweck (2002), Elliott (2007), Burkitt (2008) and Jackson (2010). However, the 'terrain' of culturally acceptable signifying practice (Hall *et al* 1996:153), in which desirable social values are objectified, constantly acquires new features, so that various products (such as fashion and therapies) are produced in response to the changing episteme (Starker 1989). Indeed the transformation of one's identity into something 'better' has become an overt process whereby peri-millennial consumers in a capitalist system are invited to find their 'true selves' through active reinvention (Simonds 1996) using commercially-generated resources. Thus engagement with highly personal issues now very often happens in the realm of public discourse and commodification: not least in the self-help book.

'Identity' has increasingly become understood as: "a public phenomenon, a performance or construction that is interpreted by other people" (Benwell and Stockoe 2006: 3-4). However Giddens observes the paradox of how a normative imperative about what values are socially desirable may co-exist with apparently unprecedented individual choice: "The mass media routinely present modes of life to which, it is implied, everyone should aspire; the lifestyles of the affluent are, in one form or another, made open to view and portrayed as worthy of emulation" (Giddens 1991: 187-221). Frow likewise observes how genres emerge or morph to meet societal demand (cf. Frow 2006: 137; Strinati 1995: 77; Booth 2005) and this responsiveness is

surely true of contemporary self-help books which are mass-produced vectors of objectified societal values. The 'appropriate conditions necessary for the genre's continuing survival and regeneration involve both the 'culture of fear' in which people seek for reassurance (Furedi 2006) *and* a constant supply of fashionable life-styles for which people can yearn (Dolby 2005: 101-4; Salerno 2005: 7-16; Adams 2009: 8). Clearly the market value of existential angst is unlikely to diminish and people will always have their aspirations (Dolby 2005: 102). Indeed one of the most popular self-help books of all times advises readers to *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* (Jeffers 1987). As Strinati notes:

Genres are produced according to the criteria of profitability and marketability, and provide what audiences are familiar with, although not in ways that are completely predictable. The profitable market for genres is met by a product which balances standardisation and surprise (Strinati 1995: 77).

It was therefore predictable that a new sub-genre of self-help would emerge in response to the recent credit crunch, and that the 'thrift book', such as those produced by Galvez (2006), Philips (2007), Knight (2009), Blakenhorn (2009), Wilkinson and Gillieron (2009) etc. would sell well for opportunistic publishers. The current batch of 'frugality manuals' is a notable example of how a culturally-responsive subgenre emerges within the 'supra-genre' 'self-help', thereby demonstrating the validity of Cranny-Francis's (1990) views about how generic conventions and the commodities of mass culture are constantly shaped by sociological, historical and ideological forces (cf. MacDonald 1957; Swales 1990). Likewise Cawelti (1976) could be describing the protean nature of the self-help book when he writes of how: "[The] process through which formulas develop, change and give way to other formulas is a kind of cultural evolution with survival through audience selection" (Cawelti 1976: 20). There is always going to be some new dimension of personal concern to be exploited for economic gain. But it is surely somewhat paradoxical that this should currently be 'thrift' because the implicit assumption publishers are making is that people will always have enough money to buy self-help books about how to economise (see the following link for a list of popular examples: (Cadwell (2010): <http://frugalforlife.blogspot.com/p/quick-frugal-book-and-movie-reviews.html>, accessed 17 March 2011).



As an ideologically diverse yet essentially pragmatic genre intended to facilitate personal transformation and also make money for its producers, the self-help book depends for much of its effect on overt linguistic strategies which readers can easily recognise and respond to. Therefore in order to identify some of the genre's typical characteristics, this chapter proceeds as Foucault recommends (1972: 27). Firstly, it describes various discursive events and surface rhetorical tropes often encountered in self-help books (such as eye-catching titles, allusions, metaphors and numbering systems). Secondly, it considers some deeper organising principles which govern the genre as a whole (such as the persuasive imperative and the transformative 'monomyth'). The ideological extremes which the genre accommodates are also considered. Therefore, since it focuses on the self-help book as a textual artefact rather than as a cultural phenomenon, this chapter complements the previous one which situated the self-help genre within wider societal therapeutic discourse. This approach also means that it contains more descriptive material than the chapters surrounding it. But in offering an empirically-based case-study of textual practice in the self-help genre and providing a 'synchronic analysis' (Wodak 2009:46) of some representative publications in order more clearly to illustrate 'discourse in action', the aim here is once again to contextualise the theoretically-informed discussion of genre, discourse and subjectivity which comprises the final chapters of this thesis.

However it must be stressed that the distinction made in this chapter and the previous one between 'discourse in society' and 'discourse on the page' is a purely heuristic strategy (Gigerenzer *et al* 1999: 28) which has been adopted in order to facilitate systematic discussion (cf. Hall 1997: 44-47; Fairclough 1992a: 3-4, 2001: 1-11; Macey 2004: 100). It is not intended to be a definitive separation, nor could it be. For it is necessary to comprehend the parameters of both manifestations of discourse when one considers, on the one hand, the normative character of self-help texts in their response to societal expectations and, on the other, the typical rhetorical strategies which they adopt as persuasive and pragmatic texts addressed to an individual reader.

What follows then is:

- an acknowledgement of the 'persuasive imperative' to which authors of self-help books must respond as they seek to make people buy their books and 'buy into' their ideas
- a discussion of how publications attract attention with various superficial discursive strategies including the use of eye-catching titles, allusion, embedded genres and metaphor
- an outline of the mono-mythic transformation structure which helps people, not least the readers of self-help books, to organise their personal experience
- a case study of two famous yet very different self-help books, *Self Help* by Samuel Smiles (1859) and *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006). This demonstrates the ideological extremes '(Apollonian' and 'Dionysian') which the genre is able to accommodate

## 5.2 The Persuasive Imperative

Self-help books deal with a variety of subject matters including business issues, stress, relationships, sexuality, spirituality, self-esteem, addictions, ageing etc. (Fried and Schultis 1995; Butler Bowdon 2003; 2004; 2005). Empirical evidence for this diversity can be seen in Appendix C: Self-Help Subgenres, below. However in spite of their superficial differences, as highly intentional, 'performative texts' (Searle 1969) which seek to transform attitudes and behaviour through using words, *all* self-help books claim that their readers' lives will be improved as a result of engagement with them (Dolby 2005: 47). Indeed their common form is the problem/solution model (Dolby 2005: 39-40). While some publications offer specific, targeted information and employ reason and argument to achieve their effects (e.g. Dyer 1976; Seligman 2007), many others rely more heavily on anecdote, revelation, testimony and self-conscious rhetorical strategies to motivate their readers.

Indeed, examination of the 15 'star' self-help texts listed in Appendix A, below, as well as others cited *passim*, has shown that writers often use the following techniques:

- the identification, naming and characterisation of issues, sometimes by means of metaphor and allusion
- the insertion of instructive narrative
- the provision of affirmations and slogans for readers to repeat in order to 'reframe' and stabilize their experience
- the use of textual patterns such as lists, numbering systems etc. to capture attention and structure information for ease of assimilation
- the provision of occasions for reader/text-interaction through quizzes worksheets, checklists etc.
- the foregrounding of authorial credentials, which may be academic, professional or experiential (e.g. someone who has undergone a similar crisis to the targeted reader)

The rhetorical, persuasive tropes in self-help books are important because these publications can do nothing *directly* about people's surrounding physical or economic circumstances. As Smiles himself recognizes, they can only attempt to encourage individuals to change their mind-set and behaviours through their choice of words and style of presentation. Ultimately: "Our own active effort is the essential thing; and no facilities, no book, no teachers, no amount of lessons learnt by rote will enable us to dispense with it" (Smiles 1859: 210). Therefore much effort typically goes into encouraging the readers of self-help books to reassess their *attitudes* – a process which can clearly be seen, for example, in the very many popular publications about how to improve one's self-esteem or achieve better personal relationships. (Colman 2009: 16). Further evidence for the way in which writers seek to stimulate affect in the reader (i.e. to appeal to their perceptions, feelings and motivations) can be found in 'dynamic' titles like *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, *Awaken the Giant Within*, *Women Who Love Too Much*, *Learned Optimism*, *Creative Visualization* and *You Can if You Think You Can*. Even those publications which focus on material prosperity or getting a better job, like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey 1989) and *Self-Help Steps to Success* (Campbell 2009), can only exhort

their readers to change *themselves* - on the understanding that certain actions such as thinking optimistically, setting targets, identifying personal strengths and weaknesses and becoming better organized will be likely to improve someone's material circumstances.

The question of what kinds of stimuli may motivate people to change their attitudes, and hence their behaviour, has long interested academics, particularly educationalists who must persuade people to want to learn (cf. Gerd and Wanke 2002; Dweck 2002; Oskamp and Schultz 2005; Suedfeld 2007). The general consensus, which is expressed with varying degrees of complexity, seems to be that people's attitudes and behaviour may in certain circumstances be influenced either by intrinsic desires and goals of their own making or by external forces such as rewards and punishments. However, since self-help books are valuable commodities in a highly competitive market (Gunnell 2004; Puttick 2005) and their textual practice is thus necessarily affected by their need to motivate potential readers to buy them in the first place, it was felt that a more commercially-focused approach to persuading people might appropriately be considered to offer some heuristic guidance during the present critique. For example Sant (2008: 31, 102) describes a concise 'persuasive paradigm' with which to 'sell' all kinds of commercial services. This is based on the following three processes:

- the identification of needs and desired outcomes;
- the suggestion of solutions;
- the provision of evidence as to why such proposed solutions should be adopted.

Given that the above model maps neatly onto the generic structure of the 'archetypal' self-help book (which is discussed in further detail in Chapter 6, The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre, below) it is unsurprising that although Dolby does not specifically reference Sant, her identification of a seven-step progression often found in the genre proves to be an elaboration of his ideas about what makes a persuasive sequence.

She notes (Dolby 2005: 75) that self-help books usually contain the following:

- Identification of a given problem
- Explanation of how this problem is the result of faulty thinking
- An account of how this faulty thinking has come about and why it persists
- Vehicles for alternative patterns of thinking (stories, slogans, checklists, affirmations, diagrams etc.)
- Explanation of how these will help the reader to behave differently
- Suggested changes in practice to remove dysfunctional thinking and inculcate new behaviour, such as exercises and affirmations
- A reminder that the message of any self-help book is only realised when the reader applies it

Clearly each self-help book must entice potential buyers to pick it up before it can offer them advice. This is typically done in two ways: firstly by identifying 'their' problem on its cover; secondly by indicating how this might be solved or at least palliated. To this end a number of publications have striking titles: for example *Eat That Frog: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time* (Tracy 2002a) or *F\*\*k It: The Ultimate Spiritual Way* (Parkin 2008). Indeed the latter publication seems to be part of a trend to utilize hitherto taboo words in order to attract attention; other examples being *Why Men Marry Bitches* (Argov 2002) and *Life's too F\*\*\*king Short* (Street-Porter 2008). Such initial 'eye-catchers' are usually followed by more prosaic sub-titles which clarify the author's subject matter and intentions. However other publications use a more direct approach in the hope of attracting readers. For example all the books beginning with 'How to ...' or 'Coping with ...' and titles such as *Change Your Life in 7 Days* (McKenna 2004), *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* (Jeffers 1987) and *It's Called a Breakup Because its Broken* (Behrendt and Rutuola-Behrendt 2006) are bluntly unambiguous. Moreover the '# For Dummies' series (2011: <http://www.dummies.com/>, accessed 25 April 2011), the *Chicken Soup* franchise (Canfield and Hansen 2011: <http://www.chickensoup.com/>, accessed 17 March 2011 ) and the 'Complete Idiot's Guide' series (Complete Idiots Guides (2011) <http://www.idiotsguides.com/> accessed 25 April 2011) have generated world-wide

publishing empires as a result of claiming to offer direct, uncomplicated advice to hyperbolically-challenged readers.

Some books are briskly didactic in tone. For example in *The Rules of Wealth* Templar (2006) exhorts his readers, in a series of very short chapters, to decide on their definition of prosperity, set their objectives and understand that money begets money. Indeed, so successful has his notion of the 'rule book' been that so far he has also applied the template to parenting, management, work and love. Likewise in *All the Rules*, Fein and Schneider offer what they claim to be "time-tested secrets for capturing the heart of Mister Right". Similarly, publications like *Don't Call That Man* (Findling 2000), *End the Struggle and Dance with Life* (Jeffers 1996) and the 'Don't Sweat ...' series by the late Richard Carlson anchor their advice to a series of imperatives. The style of such texts tends to be comparatively concise and economic. Specific desirable outcomes are identified for the reader and 'negotiated reading' (Hall 1980) is not invited. But in contrast, allusive titles such as *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (Peck 1978), *Awaken the Giant Within* (Robbins 1991), *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman 1995/6) and *The Power of Now* (Tolle 2005), signal that their writers have employed a broader discursive style and that the reader will be expected to engage more deeply with what is on offer. Such texts assume that people will be able to recognize and integrate their 'message' as a result of some sustained reading and contemplation. Also, that they are not looking for a 'quick fix'.

Another group of self-help texts is unashamedly materialistic: for example *Make Money, Be Happy* (McConnell 2004) and many of the 'success classics' listed by Butler-Bowdon (2004). Indeed 'prosperity literature' is a long-standing tradition (Wyllie 1954) and early examples include *The Way to Wealth* by Benjamin Franklin (1758) and *The Book of Wealth: In Which It Is Proved from the Bible that it is the Duty of Every Man to Become Rich*, which was written by Thomas P Hunt in 1836 (Baida 1988). But there is also another tradition of spiritually-informed self-help, such as the fifty volumes of ancient and modern wisdom catalogued by Butler Bowdon (2005). This ideological distinction is helpfully explored by Mur Effing in 'The Origin and Development of Self-

*Help Literature in the United States: The Concept of Success and Happiness, An Overview* (2009).

But whatever their particular angle self-help writers often include a cultural allusion in their titles - presumably assuming that this will act as a kind of 'evocative shorthand' for potential readers (Delahunty *et al* 2005: v). Thus the phenomenally successful *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series refers to the traditional belief in Jewish culture that chicken soup is a healing food which can palliate both physical and emotional distress (Roden 1997: 76; *Medterms Dictionary* (n .d.) <http://www.medterms.com>, accessed 25 April 2011). Remarkably, the chicken soup allusion has been appended to the souls of diverse social groups including gardeners, mothers, teenagers, adoptees, Latinos, military wives, nurses, prisoners, chocolate lovers and veterans, thus earning many millions of dollars for its originators Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen. Naturally there is *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul* (Canfield and Hansen 2002) and there is also a growing subgenre for the Christian soul. However the series' publishers have so far rejected the idea of 'Chicken Soup for the Muslim Soul' in spite of repeated requests to produce such a volume (Khatib 2005: 50).

Another particularly striking and highly lucrative example of allusion on the cover of a self-help book can be seen in Spencer Johnson's famously successful book *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life* (1998). This publication employs a sustained metaphor to compare employees who feel insecure and helpless in the face of life's mutability with mice trapped in an experiment who must ostensibly live at the mercy of their captors' whims, yet who can choose to respond creatively to change. Johnson's imagery suggests an analogy between the early twentieth-century behaviorist studies which confined rats within mazes (Carr 1913: 259-275) and the situation of an individual in a difficult situation who apparently lacks agency. This association is also present in the term 'rat race' which was first recorded in 1939 (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2011): <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rat+race>, accessed 17 March 2011). However Johnson's message, expressed in just 94 pages set in large type, is that although change is inescapable in life, it may be negotiated in such a way that it produces positive outcomes. The fact that the text proper does not begin until page twelve, and that there

are also 15 full-page drawings of cheese, means that there are just 67 pages of “simple parable that reveals profound truths about change” (blurb). This has not, however, stopped this publication becoming a “number one bestseller and instant classic” (book cover) and the slender homily has also been repackaged into *Who Moved My Cheese for Kids* (Johnson 2003).

Johnson has written many other books, for example in *The One Minute Manager*® series. But his rodent-inspired parable has brought him particular success, staying on the best-seller lists for years and earning him a fortune (Jones (2008): [http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2002-12-26-cheese-usat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/media/2002-12-26-cheese-usat_x.htm), accessed 17 March 2011). It has even been bought in bulk by companies for staff training purposes (Maryles and Donahue 2001) and the reaction of its devoted readers is exemplified by Robert Davis, President of Chevron Chemical who writes in the preliminary material to the 1998 edition: “I gave copies to my boss, my subordinates, other refinery managers, and even my wife, our close friends and our clergy. It has that type of appeal and it’s that good”. The recipients’ response is not recorded. However the satirical volume *Nobody Moved Your Cheese!* (Shafer 2003) suggests that not all reaction has been as favourable as the puffs on Johnson’s book jacket would imply.

Perhaps the most famous and lucrative use of allusion in the contemporary self-help canon is to be found in the title of *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus* (Gray 2002). John Gray’s binary opposition assumes that gender is the core of identity and thereafter relies on the reader to recognize a complex, stratified allusion to co-existent ancient and modern ‘mythologies’ (cf. Barthes 1957) which is sustained throughout this book and subsequent works as follows. The red planet Mars is associated with the Roman god of war, and hence with traditional assertive masculine values. Meanwhile the bright planet Venus is associated with the goddess of love, and hence with traditional notions of receptive femininity. These two synchronic levels of connotation are assimilated into the synthetic ‘mythology’ of Gray’s *Mars and Venus*, which has achieved a remarkable cultural presence of its own and is frequently mentioned in popular discourse as the list of references at the address below attests: *Wikipedia* (n.d.: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men\\_Are\\_from\\_Mars,\\_Women\\_Are\\_from\\_Venus#References\\_in\\_popular\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men_Are_from_Mars,_Women_Are_from_Venus#References_in_popular_culture), accessed 17 March 2011). Thus Gray’s book is considered



required reading for the female 'singleton' in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding 1997) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Fielding 2000). But it has also provoked parodies like *Men are from Earth, Women are from Earth. Deal with It* (Soh 2005) and comedian Neil Mularky's show at the Soho Theatre (2002) which was called *Men are from Mars, Neil is from Surrey*. This piece featured a fictional life-coach called Vaughan Spencer, author of the bestselling book: '*Don't be Needy, Be Succeedy*' (Anon (n.d). <http://www.facebook.com/succeedy>, accessed 25 April 2011). There is now an actual book by this title (Spencer 2008) whose cover proclaims that Vaughan Spencer is to life coaching what Alan Partridge is to broadcasting. The reference here is to comedian Steve Coogan's hapless fictional chat show host.

But as well as the original 'Mars and Venus' books by Gray, there is now a huge related industry which employs the metaphor and which comprises media transmissions, a relationship coaching franchise, and even a selection of diet products - including a milkshake advertised at <http://home.marsvenus.com/> (Gray 2010). Of course, there have been numerous less famous self-help books about supposedly gendered styles of communication (e.g. Tannen 1991; Moir and Moir 2001; Pease and Pease 2001). Likewise the brutally direct *If You Want Closure in Your Relationship, Start with Your Legs* (Boom and Big 2008) purports to deal with similar personal issues to those covered in *Mars and Venus*. But it is Gray's strikingly simplistic 'planetary' opposition which has resonated so remarkably with the public and generated a whole catalogue of commercial products plus a penumbra of critical response. Indeed the insidious power of the metaphor is obliquely recognized by Cameron even as she critiques it in *The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?* (Cameron 2007). It is also implicitly acknowledged in the feminist response to Gray's assumptions entitled *The Rebuttal from Uranus* which employs a planetary pun to emphasise its irritation with his ideas (Hamson 1997: <http://susanhamson.wordpress.com/2010/02/24/of-the-fear-of-flying-and-gadflies/>, accessed 17 March 2011).

The affective power of metaphor and allusion, such those present in the examples above, interests psychologists as well as discourse theorists and the writers of self-help books. This is because all are concerned with how people manage to make sense of a

world which is objectively chaotic (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1981; Gibbs 2008; Semino 2008; Wilson and Lindy [in press, 2012]). However the allusive technique for attracting buyers' attention was exploited in business long before Barthes famously theorized the social process of connotation in *Mythologies* (1957). Indeed it appears that the latter's observations were to some extent anticipated as early as 1891 by Wendell who believed that the 'force' of a written message lay less in what was directly stated and more in what was "implied, suggested and connoted" (Wendell 2009). However, Barthes' critically important insight was to see that at the connotative level the surface manifestations of 'myths' come and go as social usage is added to an existing bank of denotative material, and that these then operate powerfully in combination at an ideological level (Barthes 1957: 109, 117).

Yet although self-help books frequently make use of allusion and figurative language, either in their titles or as 'governing metaphors' which shape the text as a whole, they tend to eschew figurative decoration for its own sake for they are pragmatic, not literary artifacts. Thus they are mostly written in a plain, direct style; frequently employing first person address ('I', 'you' and 'we') to simulate dialogue and intimacy with the reader. In this respect they are similar to many advertisements which:

[C]ommonly attempt to address the potential consumer as an individual, thus invoking their identity, and use a variety of linguistic means to simulate a special intimacy. Synthetic personalization is closely linked to Baudrillard's (1998) term 'simulated intimacy: both refer to a paradoxical form of consumerism and its conflicting impulses to be both 'mass' in its appeal and 'intimate' in its engagement with the consumer. It is precisely this synthesis between the mass and the individual, the commercial and the intimate, facilitated by discourses of synthetic personalization, that plays particularly into the configuration of 'commodified identities' ... (Benwell and Stockoe 2006: 180).

Also contributing to the 'personalised' effect of many self-help books are the explicit and implicit targets which may be set for the reader to meet; a pragmatic technique in consonance with scholarly evidence which indicates that setting goals promotes positive personal development and a sense of well-being because people are thereby persuaded into specific positive action (Klinger 1977; Little 1989; Emmons *et al* 1998; Emmons 2003). Likewise Baltes and Freund (2003: 259) observe how "goals reduce the complexity of any given situation as they guide attention and behaviour". Lists of aims and objectives are thus now a staple technique of business trainers (Mager 1997) and manifest as part of the 'target culture' in health, education and policing because

they systematise the process of behavioural control (Houldsworth and Jirasinghe 2006).

However informational complexity is also somewhat reduced by the use of number: a technique which can be seen in self-help titles such as *The 3 Keys to Empowerment* (Blanchard 1999), *The 4-Dimensional Manager* (Straw 2002), *The 21 Success Secrets of Self-Made Millionaires* (Tracy 2001), *The 100 Absolutely Unbreakable Laws of Business Success* (Tracy 2002b), *301 Ways to Have Fun at Work* (Hemsath and Yerkes 1992), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey 1989), *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success* (Chopra 1994), *30 Days to Find Your Perfect Mate* (Spezzano 1994), *60 Tips for Self-Esteem* (Field 1997) etc. The implication here is that many of life's challenges can be more effectively faced if they are first enumerated and then sequentially addressed. Therefore it would be interesting to do a survey of which numbers occur most in self-help books and to see if there are any links with folk numerology. However space does not permit that at present.

The fact that self-help books use a variety of discursive strategies, such as the examples touched upon above, in order to persuade their readers and reinforce their message is consonant with Gardner's observation that essentially the same semantic meaning can be conveyed by using different forms of transmission: for example words, numbers, renditions, lists, graphs etc. which resonate with different aspects of human intelligence : linguistic, mathematical, musical, spatial/kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential etc. (Gardner 1993). Other persuasive tropes commonly found in self-help books include meta-commentary (see Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below) and the insertion of 'embedded genres' such as the following:

- Narrative (anecdote, parable, exemplum, biography)
- Essays
- Quotations
- Testimonials
- Lists
- Web Links
- Biographical information (about authors and readers)
- Meditations
- Further reading
- Puzzles/Puffs' from other writers
- Sales Statistics
- Slogans
- Checklists
- Cartoons
- Worksheets
- Quizzes
- Affirmations
- Questionnaires
- Rhetorical Questions

Also important in capturing reader attention and boosting a publication's credibility are various kinds of authorial claims to have their advice regarded with respect, which often appear on book jackets (see Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below). Various theorists have noted how a discursive formation, whether scholarly or demotic in character, is inevitably influenced by those supposedly 'in the know' who have the power to define what can and cannot be said on certain occasions (Bourdieu 1991; Fairclough 2001). This discursive phenomenon is demonstrably present in the 'therapeutic' world because academics, professional therapists, and indeed the writers of self-help books, all overtly assume the authority to nominalise problems and give advice to others, whether or not they are formally qualified to do

so. Indeed, the source of their 'power' can vary: sometimes it is institutionally validated through academic qualifications or publications, but sometimes it is dependent on less verifiable 'evidence'. For example, the material on the book-covers of the fifteen self-help texts listed in Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts, below shows that their writers seek to maximize their credibility by making reference to one or more of the following:

- Scholarship: they have scholarly qualifications or publications
- Professional qualifications and expertise
- Personal experience: they have 'survived' certain distressing experiences and seek to pass on the lessons they have learnt
- Reputation: they have media endorsements
- Economics: they have already made money from what they do, for example by writing other bestsellers

Foucault (1972: 50-51) says that individual subjects, for example doctors, are empowered to make 'truth claims' because of their training, institutional location, for example in a hospital, and mode of discourse, for example through established genres such as textbooks, treatises and case-studies (Howarth 2001: 4). So it is not surprising to find, in consonance with this observation, that many writers of self-help books foreground qualifications such as MD or PHD on their book covers - even though their academic work may never actually be referred to in the text itself (cf. Anthony Robbins and John Gray). Honourable exceptions are those self-help writers who seek to popularize a body of research work already circulating in the scholarly domain: for example Dyer (1976), Tannen (1991), Csikszentmihályi (1990) and Seligman (2007). But as Dolby observes, works of genuine scholarship rarely appear to feel the need to announce their author's academic qualifications on the front cover because it is automatically assumed that the author has an advanced degree and a body of peer-reviewed work behind him or her (Dolby 2005: 8). Of course publishers of self-help books will claim only to publish 'authoritative' material. But at times it seems as if authorial credibility is mostly predicated on an individual already having sold a lot of books. As Cherry (2009b) observes, good sales figures create a sense of publishing achievement. Indeed a high volume of sales effectively becomes a recursive mechanism justifying the book's continued existence in the shops. Thus it is a rare self-help book which does not display some claim about previous authorial successes, magnificent sales statistics or admiring 'puffs' from

successful colleagues on its cover. Such endorsements might be fruitfully examined as a small genre of their own, though space does not permit here. But important as such superficial tactics are in attracting, and hopefully keeping, readers, there are deeper, archetypal forces at work in the self-help genre which contribute to its potency.

### 5.3 Narrative and Reinvention in the Self-Help Book

Culler believes that narrative is an omnipresent element of human experience (Culler 1997: 84). Although his work deals mostly with fiction, in which stories give pleasure by revealing a new twist to familiar situations, stimulating and then satisfying the reader's desire to discover secrets, find the 'truth' and 'know what happens', he also implies that narrative teaches about the world in two ways: firstly by a process of structuration and secondly through offering people the chance to see things from different perspectives, a point with which Dolby (2005: 134) concurs in her discussion of self-help books. Furthermore, narratives 'police' behaviour and attitudes inasmuch as they lay down socially acceptable patterns of desire, thereby acting as vectors of ideology (Culler 1997: 92). Giddens (1991: 243) and Hardy (1968: 5) similarly believe that narrative is a primary way of establishing personal identity; a view with which Beardslee (2001: xii-xvii, 170) concurs. Meanwhile Brooks notes that: "The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature: myth and folktale appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work" (Brooks 1984: 3-4). Certainly big business is keen to address the human craving for narrative in film and TV (Goldman 1996; McKee 1999; Vogler 2007) and there are many virtual activities such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (King and Borland 2003) and 'avatar' sites such as *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc (n.d.) <http://secondlife.com>, accessed 17 March 2011) which offer possibilities for 'personal reinvention'. Herman *et al* (2005: 345) say that narrative functions as:

- a way of thinking about the world and organizing human experience through constructing models of reality
- a vector of cultural values and traditions, thereby defining cultural identity
- a means of coming to terms with passing time and capturing experience

- a vehicle for dominant ideologies
- a repository of practical knowledge
- a source of education and entertainment

Thus Herman *et al* (2005: 349) view narrative as a powerful 'cognitive instrument' which supports and enhances intelligence, as do Herman (2003) and Fludernick (1993). Schank and Abelson (1995) discuss it as a fundamental mode of thought, Vygotsky (1978) considers it a key constituent in a child's development of social cognition, and Bruner (1986; 1992: 52; 2003) suggests how stories help both children and adults to learn. Similar ideas are to be found in MacIntyre (1981: 201), Culler (1997: 92) and Ryan (2007). Thus the very common use of narrative as a transformative agent in self-help books is consonant with research which identifies story as powerful, self-reflexive way of way of organizing immediate personal experience. Indeed narrative is potent at two levels in this genre. Firstly there are the exemplary 'challenge and success' stories which are very often embedded in the text surrounded by commentary and advice (Peterson 2000). These stories are intended both to define problems and to encourage readers to change their behaviour as a result of seeing how others have suffered yet succeeded. Secondly there is the underlying monomyth of desire, search and personal triumph upon which *all* self-help books are predicated. This is an implicit a-personal narrative which offers hope, whatever the particular subject matter.

Yet since self-help books are pragmatic texts and not primarily story-books they have little use for detailed characterization, relying mostly on well-known stereotypes and instantiation: the discontented employee, the abandoned lover, the dysfunctional family etc. The individuals mentioned in a text are mostly unambiguously 'for' or 'against' 'the good' values which the book seeks to impart (cf. Frye 1957: 195) and tend to have usefully neutral first names which convey little about ethnicity or class, thereby appealing to the widest audience. Description and 'sub-plots' would obviously be a distraction from the transformative task at hand. Yet in spite of its characteristic 'flatness' in this respect (Forster 2005: 73-81), the self-help genre is interesting to the theorist because close analysis reveals it to be a structurally complex phenomenon in which superficial objective correlates coexist with deeper subjective forces. The reader may want a new lover or a new job. But in engaging with a self-help book they place themselves in the subject position of the potential 'hero' who seeks transformation. And they may also occupy the subject

position of the 'villain' whose psychological shadow attributes are what is causing the 'hero' distress. This is, after all, an intrinsically self-reflective genre and the 'villains' in a self-help book are as likely to be abstractions like depression, addiction or chronic diffidence as 'real' persons like a faithless spouse or a difficult boss.

Given the transformative power of narrative described above, it is unsurprising to find it being used as an element of clinical practice (White and Epston 1990; Freedman and Combs 1996; Pardeck 1998:1; Ferro 2004: 38; Wallerstein 2005; Payne 2006; White 2007). This situation is of interest to the present research because patients undergoing 'narrative therapy' are specifically asked to explore the 'stories' that have shaped their lives, identifying dominant and alternative plots and seeing how the links made between events may be seen to impact past, present and future actions. However rather than just focusing on problems 'inside' the person, as traditional psychotherapies tend to do, this is very much a 'solution-based' approach which seeks to empower people by encouraging them to build on their strengths. They effectively 're-write' their stories and take appropriate action. This, then, is similar to the *telic* approach of most self-help books which tend to be solution-oriented rather than purely reflective. However, unlike these publications, narrative therapists have the opportunity to enter into a dialogue about the impact of socio-political issues on their clients: for example about the potentially 'subjugating meta-narratives' which can affect people's experiences such as capitalism, psychiatry/psychology, patriarchy, hetero-normativity, and Eurocentricity. These issues are largely absent in the mainstream self-help book.

A documented example of narrative as transformative agent in action is the '6-Part Story Method (6PSM)' which is based on Propp's structural model which is analysed in detail in Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre*, below (Lahad 1992; Dent-Brown (n.d.): <http://www.icspc.org/?CategoryID=162&ArticleID=113>, accessed 17 March 2011). During treatment the patient is asked to create a fictional story related to their circumstances according to a prescribed sequence which then forms the basis of discussion with the therapist. Specifically they are encouraged to objectify themselves and then describe:

1. the main character in his or her setting
2. the task facing the main character



3. things that hinder the main character
4. things that help
5. the main action/turning point of story
6. the aftermath/what follows the main action.

A similar sequence to this one can be traced in many self-help books and it is perhaps in recognition of its efficacy that 'bibliotherapy' is increasingly being suggested for people with mental health problems (Morrison 2008). Though of course reading a book is cheaper than individual counselling. Suitable patients are offered annotated lists of self-help books (Pardeck 1998) or are sometimes encouraged to make stories with a therapist and other patients (Maidman Joshua 2000; Morrison 2008), thereby tapping into the power of the universal heroic monomyth which offers them the possibility of becoming the hero in their own life story (see Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre*). It would seem that the narratives in self-help books may do more than just provide illustrations of problems and possible solutions because at a deeper level they articulate the principle of transformation.

#### **5.4 The Self-Help Book as Monomyth and Romance**

Inasmuch as they articulate an aspirational narrative of progress from discomfort to satisfaction, self-help books can be read as a manifestation of 'the hero's journey' or 'monomyth'. This structural phenomenon is found in many narratives across all times and cultures and was famously explored by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and later by Pearson (1991) and Vogler (2007). It seems that every self-help book, whatever its topic - and I have been unable to find any exceptions - contains an underlying narrative of transformation which is expressed in terms of a search for personal satisfaction, albeit of various kinds: emotional, fiscal, spiritual etc. Self-help books are thus at once quotidian and mythic. Quotidian because they are a commodity designed to deal with everyday problems; mythic because they are predicated on an archetype of transformation. Characteristically they simplify the complexities of life, eliminating most contingent detail so that their message will appeal to a wide number of potential readers and fit into a limited number of pages.

Campbell borrowed the term 'monomyth' from *Finnegan's Wake* (2000: 581) in order to stress that the notion of the transformative journey (which may be real or imagined) is psychically *universal* (cf. Vogler 2007: xxvii). Its sequence is as follows:

- there is a call to adventure for the 'hero' which he (or she) may accept or decline
- there is a series of trials at which the hero may fail or succeed
- a goal (or boon) is achieved
- the hero returns (or may not) to ordinary life
- whatever the hero has gained is used to improve the world

Thus the mytheme of the hero's journey typically involves a transition from despair to hope, darkness to illumination, victim-hood to victory, or 'lack to lack liquidated' (Dolby 2005: 4-5, 39-40). This sequential model is sufficiently powerful to be used in many advertisements, fairy tales, pantomimes and Hollywood blockbusters (Vogler 2007). Similarly, Lawson (2005) considers it to be a significant developmental metaphor in the counselling process which necessarily requires the client/subject to surrender his or her old way of meaning-making and adopt a new way of seeing the world (cf. Pearson 1986). Certainly the transformational sequence of the monomyth is the *sine qua non* of self-help books, which are typically bought when a hero/reader wishes to change his or her life for the better and decides to 'venture out' from established ways of thinking and behaviour using the text as a stimulus and 'mentor'. This situation is congruent with Vogler's advice to would-be screenwriters that the energy of the Mentor archetype in the monomyth may be invested in a book or other artifact which guides their fictional hero in his or her quest just as effectively as a sentient being might (Vogler 2007: 47). Famously this happens in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by the late Douglas Adams (1999).

The sequence of the 'heroic journey' observed by Campbell is also notably recognised and theorised by Frye in his seminal work on narrative archetypes: *Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye 2001: 1445-1457) which was first published in 1957. However Frye's terminology in regard to this particular deep narrative structure is somewhat different from Campbell's because he associates what the latter calls the 'monomyth' with what *he* terms the *mythos* of 'romance'. Here Frye is using the term 'romance' in a technical sense to refer to an archetypal, supra-generic mode whose essential element is adventure and which he describes as a "naturally a sequential

and processional form" (Frye 1957: 186). Indeed he considers the romance mode to be "the structural core of all fiction" and "man's vision of his life as a quest" (Frye 1976: 15), observing how within the generic space of 'romance' society projects its ideals onto heroes and heroines and its fears onto villains - who thus become embodiments of conflicting ethics. Certainly the struggle between a protagonist/hero and an antagonist/villain would seem to be a 'narrative universal' and is clearly the basis of much literature and film (Hogan 2003; Herman *et al* 2005: 384-385). Moreover, since the notional protagonist of romance moves through experiences of metaphorical life, death and resurrection in the quest for material satisfaction, self-respect, or both, it can be argued that the self-help book is intrinsically an expression of Frye's romance mode because its very *raison d'être* is the putative transformation for the better of the individual reading it.

In order for the promise of transformation to be made, the self-help author must suggest a number of strategies by which change may happen. As has been noted, some publications are structured around a series of specific goals, often signalled by lists, numbers and bullet points, while others are more discursively organized, perhaps with the intention of encouraging episodes of creative introspection in the reader. But whatever the style adopted by its writer, the implicit promise of each self-help book is that the hero/reader will make some desired *progress* as a result of engaging with the publication. This transformative dynamic is often expressed through the use of a metaphor which signals, either explicitly or implicitly that a transition from one state of being to another is indeed a possibility, as the titles listed below demonstrate. In this respect the writers of self-help books are exploiting a long-established discursive technique for defining issues and conveying meaning through the use of metaphor. Lyddon *et al* (2001), for example, review research into the therapeutic use of metaphor in clinical practice and note that counselors use metaphor to do the following:

- Build relationships with clients by establishing some shared concepts
- Access and symbolize client emotion
- Uncover and challenge tacit client assumptions
- Deal with client resistance
- Introduce new frames of reference

Discussion of how certain imagery may allow individuals therapeutically to encounter new ideas within reassuringly familiar frameworks also appears in Gordon (1978), Martin *et al* (1992), Barker (1995; 1996), Sharp (2002) and Guiffrida *et al* (2007). Indeed Robbins overtly acknowledges the power of metaphor to change lives by specifically indexing those he uses during his self-help bestseller *Awaken the Giant Within* (Robbins 1992: 531-2). Common archetypal metaphors encountered in both film scripts and self-help books involve healing and repair, getting out and getting on, energy, winning, search, movement, control, dancing, discovery, awakening, freedom and flow. Moreover each metaphor also carries an implicit antithesis within it as is shown in the indicative list of famous self-help titles below.

Book Title and Author	Generic 'Change' Metaphor and its Antithesis
<i>The Road Less Travelled</i> (Scott Peck) <i>Man's Search for Meaning</i> (Viktor Frankl) <i>Finding Your Own North Star</i> (Martha Beck) <i>The Purpose-Driven Life</i> (Rick Warren)	Exploration/Limited Horizons
<i>Don't Sweat the Small Stuff</i> (Richard Carlson) <i>The Language of Letting Go</i> (Pia Mellody) <i>End the Struggle and Dance with Life</i> (Susan Jeffers)	Acceptance/ Struggle
<i>How to Win Friends and Influence People</i> (Dale Carnegie); <i>The Power of Now</i> (Eckhart Tolle); <i>Awaken the Giant Within</i> (Anthony Robbins)	Power/Weakness
<i>Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway</i> (Susan Jeffers) <i>The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People</i> (Stephen Covey); <i>Life Strategies: Doing What Works</i> (Phil. McGraw)	Agency/Passivity
<i>Chicken Soup for the Soul</i> (Jack Canfield and Mark Hansen); <i>You Can Heal Your Life</i> (Louise Hay)	Healing/Pathology
<i>What You Can Change ... and What You Can't</i> (Martin Seligman); <i>Change Your Life in Seven Days</i> (Paul McKenna)	Transformation/Rigidity
<i>Real Magic: Creating Miracles in Everyday Life</i> (Wayne Dyer); <i>Creative Visualisation</i> (Shakti Gawain)	Creativity/Sterility
<i>10 Steps to a New You</i> (Leslie Kenton) <i>The Journey</i> (Brandon Bays)	The Journey

The script-doctor Vogler advises his students that “the mythological approach to story boils down to using metaphors or comparisons to get across your feelings about life” (Vogler 2007: 84). Furthermore he observes that the hero’s story is always a journey from one kind of physical or emotional state to another, even if the path leads only into his own mind or into the realm of relationships (*ibid* 2007:7). As they undertake their ‘quest’ (derived from the Latin *quaerer* = to seek or ask) the characters of romance, and indeed the ‘heroic’ readers of self-help books, move from a position of equilibrium and undergo a process of struggle to a point of virtual ‘death’ - thereafter, it is to be hoped, experiencing some deliverance which will effect a transformation in their future circumstances. Indeed triumph is implicit in self-help titles such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* and *End the Struggle and Dance with Life*, as well as in all those publications with titles about how to ‘beat’ or how to ‘overcome’ various problems. In this respect, self-help books are similar to the generic fairy tale described by Bettelheim (1989) in which the hero is at first forced to depend on friendly helpers, but by the end has mastered all trials and remained true to himself or, in successfully undergoing them, has discovered his true nature. However the personal journey can take extremely different forms and the self-help genre is flexible enough to accommodate some remarkably different ethics, as the detailed comparison of two famous self-help books below demonstrates.

### 5.5 Ideological Extremes: *Self Help* and *The Secret*

*Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles (1859) and *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne (2006) could hardly be more different in both format and ethics. Yet both promise to show their readers a route to personal transformation and both have sold millions of copies as a result. While the former publication advocates self-control, discipline and social concern using dense slabs of unadorned prose, the latter deals largely with wish-fulfillment and ‘surrender to the power of the universe’, employing fragmented ‘sound-bites’ which originate from a number of “featured co-authors” whose material has been edited by Byrne (2006: xiii) into a small, highly-wrought volume. Although both books are listed under ‘self-help’ by Amazon.uk.com they can be said respectively to articulate ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Dionysian’ attitudes to life: a distinction theorised in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2003) which was published by Nietzsche in

1872. He begins by contrasting the ethics associated with two classical gods who are both linked with processes of creativity and transformation. Apollo, the Greek god of light, healing and the arts is associated with order, discipline and rationality. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, theatre and fertility, is associated with ecstasy, instinct and the apprehension of the numinous.

Although there do not seem to be any references to this ethical opposition within self-help literature, it can certainly be argued that some publications are primarily 'Apollonian' and some primarily 'Dionysian' in their guiding beliefs and ideals. For example, books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 1936) or *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* (Covey 1989) expect their readers actually to practise what is being preached and not just to think positive thoughts about it. They may thus be considered Apollonian in spirit. Likewise *Emotional Intelligence* by Goleman (1996) demands sustained concentration in order to read 339 pages of small print. It offers no quick fixes. Furthermore, although many popular neuro-linguistic publications present their advice in easily-assimilable chunks of text, all stress that desired change comes about only as the result of a consistent 're-framing' of the self through diligent repetition of various exercises (cf. Robbins 1992, Ready 2004 and Knight 2009). Meanwhile 'cross-over' texts by academics like Seligman (2002; 2007) and Wiseman (2004; 2009) season their advice for the lay reader with scholarly citations and are in no way simplistic.

In contrast, those texts which promulgate the 'law of attraction' and 'magical thought' (e.g. Goldwell and Lynch 2007) and those which advocate surrender and acceptance as a coping mechanism (e.g. Jeffers 1996; Parkin 2008) may be considered Dionysian in character because they consistently valorize feeling, sensation, immediacy and transpersonal bliss. Moreover some of the spiritually-oriented texts catalogued by Butler-Bowdon (2005) seem to advocate the kind of mystical, pre-Enlightenment, 'a-rational' thinking which is described by Thomas (1973), Cunningham (1999) and Rapson (2007). This comparison is not meant to imply that one of these approaches to personal 'transformation' is necessarily better or more effective than the other, but rather to demonstrate how diverse ethical values operate simultaneously within the self-help genre. The Apollonian and Dionysian distinction can be seen more clearly when two famous self-help books, *Self-Help* and *The Secret*, are compared detail. Ironically *both* publications have provoked strong critical reaction from those who consider them to be simplistic. For

example, *Self-Help* was dismissed in the novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* as being “suitable for perusal by persons suffering from almost complete obliteration of the mental faculties” (Tressell 2004: 492). This may be because the socialist Tressell, writing in 1914, took exception to observations such as the following which appears to disregard the often pernicious effects of economic disadvantage:

So far from poverty being a misfortune, it may, by vigorous self-help, be converted even into a blessing; rousing a man to that struggle which the world in which, though some may purchase ease by degradation, the right-minded and true-hearted find strength, confidence and triumph (Smiles 1968: 22).

Meanwhile, whereas Smiles assumes that people must succeed as a result of working hard, *The Secret* assures each reader that maintaining a positive attitude is all that is required and that the ‘Universe’ will inevitably co-operate to deliver their desires:

It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, the law of attraction is forming your entire life experience, and this all-powerful law is doing that through your thoughts. You are the one who calls the law of attraction into action, and you do it through your thoughts (Byrne 2006: 5).

Presumably as a result of this assurance, *The Secret* currently has 19 million copies in print (Adler (2010): <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/20/book-review-rhonda-byrne-s-the-power.html>, accessed 17 March 2011). Yet the psychologist Oliver James describes the book as a toxic stew of psychobabble which relies heavily on quick-fix, simplistic methods gathered from extant self-help manuals and re-presented for a credulous audience (James 2007). Meanwhile social commentator Ehrenreich includes an acerbic critique in her book *Smile or Die: How the Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (Ehrenreich 2010: 45-73). Both *Self Help* and *The Secret* are remarkably famous self-help texts, yet in rhetoric and content they could not be more different, as the analysis below shows.

### ***Self Help (1859)***

*Self Help* was published in 1859 by Samuel Smiles, a Scottish doctor, newspaper editor and business man of radical sympathies who based his book on a series of lectures which he gave to young working men at a Leeds evening school during 1845 (Briggs 1968). His book is situated within a national context of industrial expansion, technical invention, increasing colonial influence and fervent radical



politics (Smiles 1968: 261-275). But although Smiles' approach is unapologetically didactic, *Self Help* is neither rule-laden nor full of imperatives. Rather, it advocates the cultivation of certain stoic virtues and good habits as the way for its readers to achieve material prosperity, self-respect and the ability to help others less fortunate than themselves. Throughout the book, Smiles illustrates his ideas with numerous real-life stories about worthy men - and a very few devoted wives and sisters (Smiles 1968: 26, 268). There is, of course, some irony here, given that so many contemporary self-help books seem to be aimed at women.

Smiles continually emphasizes the importance of cultivating personal qualities such as integrity, courage, honesty, loyalty and responsibility, insisting that energy, cheerfulness, prudence, diligence, restraint, economy, thrift, temperance, patience and determination are essential for a productive life. Although he is addressing the material aspirations of an emergent middle class, he employs a lexicon of duty which expresses high ideals similar to the ethics of mediaeval chivalry (Jacques 2010: 5). Writing before the insights of psychoanalysis which emerged in the 1890s (Mitchell and Black 1996: 1-22), Smiles is not sympathetic to introspection, but advocates mass education, industry and perseverance, giving little credit to luck and suggesting that energy and effort will achieve more than genius for the individual. Thus he writes:

Accident does very little towards the production of any great result in life. Though sometimes what is called 'a happy hit' may be made by a bold venture, the common highway of steady industry and application is the only safe road to travel (Smiles 1968: 83).

However, although Smiles was a pragmatic materialist whose ideas were based on his own experience and his observation of successful men in the worlds of technology and the arts, he does not overestimate *financial* success. Rather, even repeated failure is viewed as a stimulus and opportunity for a person to work harder and, at the very least, to achieve self-respect (Smiles 1968: 24). Smiles' solid prose style now seems old-fashioned and even troublesome to read, even though the 'character ethic' which he champions survives to some extent as an ideal in more recent publications like *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People* (Covey 1989: 18-23) and *The Road Less Travelled* (Peck 1978). Indeed Peck's first sentence is "Life is difficult" and he goes on to insist that only discipline solves problems and gives existence meaning. However although *Self-Help* may have inadvertently named a commercial generic category, this publication is certainly no template for today's

self-help books, either in terms of content or presentation. It is outward rather than inward looking and far more concerned with someone's contribution to society than with that individual's entitlement to personal 'happiness'. Furthermore there are no headings and sub-headings, information 'chunking', (Miller 1956; Gobet *et al* 2001), bullet points, numbers, charts, graphs, cartoons, checklists, quizzes, or any of the other interactive elements recommended by Jean Marie Stine who is the editor of many successful self-help books including *Women Who Love Too Much* (Stine 1997). Nor does Smiles employ the short chapters, repetitions, summaries and 'white space technique' advocated by Chandler and Kay in their satirical, yet observant, publication: *How an Idiot Writes a Self-Help Book* (2004).

In contrast to much contemporary self-help discourse which is artfully presented for ease of assimilation, Smiles' substantial chapters contain dense slabs of prose packed into extended paragraphs made from long sentences, wherein lie numerous clauses. Smiles articulates a 'discourse of diligence' which involve duty, work, training, effort, self-control, perseverance, knowledge, wisdom, industry, thrift, action, economy, progress, self-denial, sobriety, application, discipline, character, energy, practice, discipline and "manly self-reliance" (Smiles 1968: 25). The pervasive presence of this semantic field, which is based on an ethic of conscientious personal agency, serves to create some discursive cohesion in spite of the very many separate improving narratives which constitute the body of Smiles' text.

Moreover all his illustrative material is taken from the lives of *real* people with documented achievements. This is very different from many contemporary self-help books which, though they may purport to contain biographical material, actually describe the activities of expedient stereotypes (the unhappy employee, the dissatisfied partner etc.), who tend to have usefully unremarkable first names. Furthermore, while the accumulation of exemplary narratives is certainly an important part of Smiles' technique, his improving stories are presented with very little authorial comment and therefore his readers must concentrate and be prepared to draw their own conclusions. Indeed he may perhaps even have approved of the optimistic pragmatism advocated in *Screw It, Let's Do It: Lessons in Life* by Richard Branson (2006) which, in spite of its crudely imperious title, shares some of his respect for hard work and enthusiasm. But he is likely to have been puzzled by the currently prominent sub-genre devoted to the 'law of attraction' which

suggests that *anything*, both material and emotional, can be attained just by thinking the right thoughts (Trine 1910: 5). This view may have reached its apotheosis in *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne.

### ***The Secret (2006)***

In direct contrast to *Self-Help*'s focus on tangible, documented and socially-useful achievements which it suggests an individual would do well to try and emulate, *The Secret* asserts the universal instrumentality of abstractions such as thoughts and feelings in achieving personal ambitions. This message is conveyed via a numinous discourse of desire filled with words such as 'attraction', 'belief', 'imagination', 'love', 'power', 'emotion', 'visualization', 'abundance', 'wisdom', 'legend' and 'manifestation'. Moreover, although constant reference is made to the aspirations of the individual, traditional notions of effort, practice and stoicism are not apparently considered necessary to achieve these; nor is there any sense of personal social obligation. Instead readers are advised that:

Whenever you receive anything, remember that you attracted it to you by the law of attraction, and by being on the frequency and in harmony with the Universal Supply. The Universal Intelligence which pervades everything moved people, circumstances and events to give that thing to you, because that is the law (Byrne 2006: 163).

The co-option of 'law' into this discourse of aspiration is striking because the term generally denotes either a systematic set of rules which are valorized by defined institutions or a scientific principle which can be confirmed by inductive reasoning. Neither is the case here. Yet the repeated use of the term 'law' throughout the book lends a spurious respectability to the ideology of *The Secret*. However the 'law of attraction' is not a new idea because it was first promulgated by proponents of American New Thought towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dresser 2010; Stillson 1967). Indeed Byrne herself acknowledges the influence of earlier writers in the field such as Robert Collier (2007) and Wallace D. Wattles (2007). The latter's text has recently been reissued in a cover remarkably like that of the *The Secret*. This is presumably so that its publishers can make the most of the connection and attract buyers Amazon.co.uk (2011d): [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Science-Getting-Rich-Attracting-Financial/dp/1594772096/ref=pd\\_sim\\_b\\_4](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Science-Getting-Rich-Attracting-Financial/dp/1594772096/ref=pd_sim_b_4), accessed 17 March 2011).

*The Secret* has been summarized as: "A repackaged hybrid of the messages that motivational writers have been selling for years, presented with a stroke of marketing genius" (Wheatley 2007). It was also named by *The Times* (14 November 2009) as the second worst book of the decade after *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. But it is currently the most prominent of many 'thought power' books listed at Amazon.co.uk. Earlier ones include *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill (1937) and *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale (1953). More recent publications in the sub-genre include *The Law of Attraction: How to Make It Work for You* (Hicks and Hicks 2007) and *The Cosmic Ordering Service* (Mohr 2006). The latter's cover promises that all wishes can be fulfilled: "Just by placing an order with the universe". Meanwhile *Have Anything You Really, Really Want: A Christian Testimony* (Muller 2000) describes how positive thinking has manifested a 'new life' and a Rolls Royce for its devout author.

*The Secret* asserts with some characteristic circularity that: "When you are feeling good feelings, it is communication back from the Universe saying 'You are thinking good thoughts'" (Byrne 2006: 33). And it constantly addresses the reader directly, for example:

You will notice throughout the book that in certain places I have capitalized the word "You". The reason I did this is because I want you, the reader, to feel and know that I created this book for you. I am speaking to you personally when I say You (Byrne 2006: xii).

Yet although such meta-commentary may be considered patronising by some, the book has sold millions of copies as a result of insisting that by constantly imagining perfection: "You can think your way to your perfect state of health, the perfect body the perfect weight, and eternal youth" (Byrne 2006: 131). Thus it assures its readers that:

The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are blocking money from coming to them with their thoughts. ... It is not that money is being kept from you by the Universe, because all the money you require exists right now in the invisible (Byrne 2006: 99).

Indeed it seems that one can even attract first place in the queue at Disneyland if that is one's heart's desire: "Imagine discovering – at the age of ten – that the power to move worlds lies within you!" (Byrne 2006: 88-9).

In contrast to *Self-Help*, which has gone through various editions set in basic, unadorned type and with a series of unmemorable covers, *The Secret* is a highly-wrought physical product whose idiosyncratic 'trade dress' (*West's Encyclopedia of American Law* (n.d.): <http://www.answers.com/topic/trade-dress>, accessed 17 March 2011) is recognizable from a distance and has clearly been designed for maximum semiotic effect: presumably in order visually to reinforce the idea that Byrne's is a precious, arcane message worth paying £12 for (August 2010). *The Secret's* small size is perhaps intended to suggest 'wisdom distilled into precious essence'. Its parchment-like - though, on closer inspection, somewhat shiny - wrapper appears from a distance to be a palimpsest of ancient writings and diagrams and is embossed with the image of a red seal similar to those found on important old legal documents. However the seal does not appear to be sealing anything and may therefore be considered a 'simulacrum' inasmuch as it produces only the effect of a resemblance to a putative 'original model' (Wolfreys 2004: 226-231). Furthermore, the use of 'white ink' for the 'handwritten' title may make it stand out effectively from the 'antique' beige background. But white ink is surely a graphical oxymoron and the effect is egregious. The antique aesthetic continues inside with sepia-tinged pages whose effect is somewhat mitigated by a super-smooth finish. Meanwhile the necessary tools of commercial stock control: bar-code, URL and ISBN, sit incongruously amidst the pseudo-archaism of the back cover.

The internal graphics of *The Secret* are a messy combination of 'handwritten script', Roman typeface, italics, upper case letters of various sizes, bullet points, indentations and tiny coloured pictures, reminiscent of the type of embellishments sometimes found in mediaeval MS but without their attention to detail: simulacra again. Various unreferenced quotations are scattered throughout the text, each concluding with apparent autographs from their originators. However, close examination shows all of these 'signatures' to be 'written' in an identical hand. The pervasive use of short, sometimes indented paragraphs intensifies the chaotic visual effect. Likewise, the numerous 'chunks' of de-contextualised 'information-bites', presented without citations to help anyone who might want to track down a quotation, make sustained reading difficult.

In fairness, *The Secret's* textual fragmentation may be the result of translating sound-bites from the original DVD directly to the page (Byrne 2010:

<http://www.thesecret.tv/> accessed 17 March 2011); this was a TV film before it became a book. But the publication contains a disconcerting series of unsupported statements and anecdotal 'proofs', none of which are linked by those conventional linguistic 'signposts' which create discursive cohesion such as 'firstly', 'secondly', 'furthermore', 'in contrast', 'similarly', etc. Moreover its initial claims are unfulfilled. For although page ix distinguishes Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson and Einstein as people who have owed their success to their understanding of 'the secret', and the back cover adds Galileo and Carnegie (Andrew or Dale?) to this list, none of these figures then appears in the publication itself. So the reader never learns what it is that these great figures actually apprehended that was so important. Instead, the pages of *The Secret* are filled with what appear to be the opinions of Byrne's 24 'co-authors' (p. xiii) whose short biographies, mostly enumerating their commercial achievements as motivational speakers on success and abundance, conclude the book. *The Secret* finally distills its message thus:

- You get to fill the blackboard of your life with whatever you want
- The only thing you need to do is to feel good now
- We are in the midst of a glorious era. As we let go of limiting thoughts, we will experience humanity's true magnificence, in every area of creation (Byrne 2006: 184):

Strikingly opposed to the pragmatic discourse of endeavour which Smiles articulates in *Self Help*, the so-called 'law of attraction', which seems to have its roots in nineteenth century American New Thought (Albanese 2007: 177-256) and of which *The Secret* is currently the apotheosis, generated 3,560,000 hits in Google when used as a search term in December 2010. Moreover, such has been the global success of the *The Secret* (2006) that *Scientific American* (Shermer 2007) has actually felt it necessary to refute Byrne's claim that science endorses the idea that "the outside world is ... just the result of thoughts" (Byrne 2006: 110), and hence all its problems result from 'bad thinking'. Byrne's new volume *The Power* (2010) says much the same things as *The Secret*.

## 5.6 Conclusion

*The Secret* and *Self-Help* are extreme examples of the self-help genre's ability to accommodate both Apollonian and Dionysian ethics. The former is certainly more artfully 'packaged' in terms of how its content is divided into segments, and its cover is awash with signifiers as described above. But the latter employs its own characteristic rhetorical style to reinforce its message that hard work gets results. Thus, in spite of their ideological differences, both publications employ certain 'tricks of the trade' to convey their message. Indeed very many self-help books seem to want to maximize their impact through their internal rhetoric, style of textual presentation and the materiality of their covers. Of course, some are more successful than others in doing so and this may perhaps depend as much on the publisher's budget as on the author's wishes.

Yet in spite of some wide differences of topic and presentation within the genre, it is possible to argue that *all* self-help books are intrinsically 'normative'. This is because each one describes how things 'ought to be' according to the beliefs of its writer, even though the ethics of optimum living are as subject to fashion as any other cultural phenomenon (May 1996: 174). Thus the well-established subgenre about how to grow rich currently sits alongside more recent ones about how to be content with what one has (Emmons 2007). Every very self-help book is effectively saying to its readers, "Save time, see things my way, take my advice and you will end up as the hero of your life-narrative". Something of this triumphant imperative can be seen in titles such as *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *Think and Grow Rich*, *Born to Win*, *Games People Play*, *End the Struggle*, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, *Learned Optimism* etc. Each of these examples contains an implicit binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' values: positive thought/depression, poverty/prosperity, winning/losing, optimism/pessimism, fear/bravery etc. Therefore each publication might be said to be 'interpellating' its readers into its own particular discourse of optimum living which valorises certain assumptions and imposes certain 'positive' values, while excluding other options (cf. Althusser 1971).

Indeed O'Neill (1996: 8) could be describing the dynamic of the whole genre when she observes how ethical standards in general "command, oblige, recommend and guide" people, because this is undoubtedly what self-help books set out to do.

Smiles' 'discourse of diligence' may contrast strikingly with Byrne's 'discourse of desire'. Yet both advocate 'ideal' behaviours for their readers to adopt and neither publication discusses issues of failure and mediocrity. Thus in conclusion to this chapter it is suggested that the surface 'tricks of the trade' employed by writers and the typical narrative arc detectable in *all* self-help texts combine to affect, or indeed *effect*, the subjectivity of the reader who, whatever the particular challenges in his or her personal life, is by definition seeking guidance, transformation and 'closure' (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). But who in practice, as Dolby's title indicates (2005) is also very likely to go out and buy another self-help book.

The following chapter now moves beyond consideration of tropes and strategies which may appear in individual texts to consider in more panoramic terms how the self-help genre as a whole operates simultaneously as a successful commercial product, a secular salvation narrative, and a remarkable theoretical phenomenon.



## Chapter 6

### The Self-Help Book:

### Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre

Geologists normally group volcanoes into four main kinds: cinder cones, composite volcanoes, shield volcanoes and lava domes.

Robert Tilling  
*US Geological Survey: Volcanoes (USGS) (1999)*

Polonius:

[These are] ...the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*: Act II, Scene 2 (1601)

Traditional definitions of genre focused on textual regularities. In traditional literary studies the genres—sonnet, tragedy, ode, etc. - were defined by conventions of form and content ... Current genre studies (which incidentally tend to concentrate on non-literary texts) probe further; without abandoning earlier conceptions of genres as 'types' or 'kinds' of discourse, characterized by similarities in content and form, recent analyses focus on tying these linguistic and substantive similarities to regularities in human spheres of activity. In other words, the new term 'genre' has been able to connect recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use.

Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway,  
*Genre and the New Rhetoric (1994: 1)*

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter argues that although the term 'self-help book' embraces many topics and the genre is commercially protean inasmuch as it constantly responds to market forces, critical analysis in the light of some issues of genre theory and selected structuralist insights shows that, whatever the superficial variables or tricks of the trade imposed by the market imperative, a self-help publication always fundamentally operates as a salvation narrative in which the reader is 'hero'. Furthermore the self-help book is considered to be a unique, 'actantial' genre because the text itself plays a role in the putative 'redemption' of that reader.

The preparatory work for this chapter was inspired by Todorov's observation that a notional genre, such as the self-help book in this case, can be described from two different perspectives: that of abstract analysis and that of empirical observation (Todorov 1990: 17). Therefore the necessary reading of primary sources and secondary commentary was constantly supplemented by visits to bookshops in order to observe emergent trends and enduring classics in the self-help business. For as Frye observes, a writer does not produce a text "*ex nihilo*" (Frye 1957: 97); there will always some 'inter-discursive' influence. Indeed, as the previous two chapters on discourse have demonstrated, self-help publications are nothing if not responsive to social change and reader demand. Thus the comments below derive both from pragmatic interrogation of contemporary self-help materials currently in circulation and critical hermeneutics.

As a result of this combined approach, it became possible to categorise the self-help book in three generic ways. Firstly, empirical observation shows that it is a *protean*, commercially-constructed genre which must constantly respond to the perceived needs of its readers and the demands of the market. Secondly, critical analysis of this genre's underlying structure reveals that it is a theoretically *stable* genre which is a contemporary manifestation of the universal 'hero's journey' from 'death to rebirth'. Thirdly, that it is a uniquely 'actantial' genre because each member publication *participates* as 'helper' in the narrative of personal transformation which it articulates for the reader. The notion of 'actant' employed here originated with the French linguist Lucien Tesnière (1969: 102) who coined the term to denote "beings or things that participate in processes in any form and in any way whatsoever, be it only a walk-on part and in the most passive way". However

the term has become particularly associated with Greimas (1966; 1970) who suggests that 'actants' should be considered as elements or units in a narrative which operate on the level of function rather than surface content. He is not concerned here with names, personal characteristics or even particular motives in a story. Rather, he asserts that all participants in a narrative, whether they are human or not, can be reduced to just six actantial pairs: subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent. His rationalisation of Propp's more complex typology of general narrative roles or "spheres of action" (Propp 1968: 78-83) into these three dyads is helpful for the present study because it throws the *telic* function which is common to all self-help books into relief. That is, it makes it possible to see more clearly how a text can be said to act as 'helper' and 'guide' to a reader who can be said to inhabit the roles of 'victim', 'seeker' 'sought for person' and ultimately, one hopes, 'hero' in their struggle against adverse circumstances and in their 'quest' for a better life.

Clearly there are other 'helping' genres such as cookery books, health and fitness guides and do-it-yourself manuals which seek to improve the lives of their readers. Indeed as Stine observes, all such publications provide specific guidance with helpful examples and illustrations (Stine 1997: 10). However 'how to' books tend to be concerned with issues of superficial, everyday effectiveness, unlike self-help books which typically seek to renovate the psychic landscape of their readers and achieve profound, long-term improvements in their fundamental well-being. Of course there is no 'analytic space' in self-help books like that shared between a real patient and counsellor and no actual dialogue between helper and helped. Nor is the therapeutic dynamic of transference and counter-transference (Grant and Crawley 2002) possible. Nevertheless, although the notional mentor/mentee relationship is a fundamental structure in *all* advice publications, self-help books may be considered a special case by the narratologist. This is because while cookery books or home maintenance manuals offer guidance to perplexed readers, they are not in the business of transforming those people into 'heroes' through offering them the chance to participate in their own narrative of personal redemption. In contrast, the self-help book may be viewed as a secular salvation text which possesses an 'autonomous level of meaning' wherein deep patterns and 'mythemes' of transformation (Herman *et al* 2005: 335) are necessarily active - however banal the superficial subject matter of individual publications may be.

In order to support the proposals made above and stabilise the discussion which follows, this chapter firstly compares how some influential theorists have dealt with defining the slippery notion of 'genre' as a critical concept, noting the interdependence of generic form and contingent ideology as well as the effects of intention and audience expectations. Secondly, as a result of examining the pragmatic strategies adopted by booksellers and publishers in order to market self-help books, for example by grouping them in respect of their subject matter, author profile, physical format and brand identity, this chapter examines how the self-help book operates as a protean 'working genre' in the commercial world. The nominalisations 'author', 'livery' and 'template' genres are introduced here in order to facilitate discussion of this phenomenon. Additionally, this section also describes the generic 'symbiosis' by which certain commercially successful self-help books sometimes nourish peripheral products (often in different media) which emerge around them as publishers seek to maximize their market footprint, by creating a brand. Indeed popular publications can sometimes become a 'franchise' which may include sequels, DVDs, workshops, TV shows and even food (see Appendix A: Case Study Texts, below). However since 'franchise' is so broad a concept, the terms 'peri-genre' and 'para-genre' are coined in Section 4, below in order to describe more precisely in generic terms the localized efflorescence of dependent texts which certain successful 'core' publications, such as *Men are from Mars*, *Women are from Venus* (Gray 2002), can be seen to produce.

Secondly this chapter further acknowledges the pioneering structural work of Vladimir Propp and Algirdas Greimas with gratitude because their complementary narratological insights make it possible to see more clearly the deep structural forces at work in the self-help genre. Indeed their views have a significant bearing on the original assertions which end the chapter and which are summarised here. Firstly, in spite of many variations of topic and register between actual publications on sale in the shops, the self-help book is always paradigmatically a retelling of the 'hero's journey'. The term 'paradigm' is used here to mean a model or pattern rather than a particular theoretical framework, as is the case in science (Kuhn 1962), or the vertical 'axis of selection', as is the case in linguistics (Saussure 1966). Secondly the self-help book constitutes a unique theoretical genre because structural analysis shows how each text participates as an 'actant' in the narrative of potential personal transformation which claims to offer its reader.

## 6.2 Genre in Theory: Some Critical Issues

The notion of 'genre' itself required some initial attention because it is less easy to define than might at first be thought. For example, the two quotations which begin this chapter, the first a confident assertion by the US Government about four distinct varieties of volcano, and the second Polonius's hysterical stream of theatrical hybrids from the second act of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, demonstrate polarized responses to the challenge of classification potentially available to anyone concerned with distinguishing 'kinds' (Todorov 1988: 159) or 'genres'; not least someone who wishes to critique a *corpus* of material like self-help texts. However the third quotation indicates how genre *scholarship* has increasingly looked beyond purely literary or taxonomic concerns to consider the effect of cultural activity on groups of phenomena. As Todorov observes, there must necessarily be "a continual coming and going between the description of facts and the abstraction of theory" (Todorov 1973: 26) when the notion of genre is being considered.

Nevertheless, from a distance the term 'genre' initially seems unproblematic, and the amount of academic discussion which it has generated surprising. Perhaps this is because it is succinctly described in reference books, where it is often treated as a literary phenomenon. Thus according to Collins (1992: 254) genre is simply "a literary type or class"; while according to Crystal (1997: 73) "genres of literature are established categories of composition, characterized by distinctive language and subject matter". However Fosskett (1973), Eaglestone (2000: 52) and Montgomery (2000: 200) warn that any 'genre' when analysed critically will be found to be 'hybrid' or 'impure' because it can be always defined in a variety of overlapping ways: for example by means of formal arrangement, topic or theme, mode of address, attitude towards subject matter, anticipated response, form, function, language etc. To this list Hawthorne (2000: 141) adds the dyad of reader expectation and response. It would seem, therefore that genres are always conventions and not absolutes. Nor can 'genre' be considered a purely literary term anymore because now *any* 'kind' or 'category' of cultural product or practice which shares some identifiable similarity of form or function may be so designated (Pope 1998: 199).

Perhaps because of its very 'fluidity', considerable attention has been given to 'genre' as a theoretical notion. Cobley (2001a), for example, notes the structural and taxonomic focus of much early critical work, tracing how genre scholarship has

progressed from the enumerative to the interpretative, moving beyond the formalist, classificatory preoccupations of Propp (1968), through the semiotic, structuralist expansions of Lévi-Strauss (1967; 1973), into the discursively-based reflections of poststructural critics such as Foucault and Derrida which are helpfully discussed by Smith (2001: 182-200). Similarly Duff (2000), Frow (2005) and Herman (2007: 110-114) provide a useful overview of developments in genre theory. But while preparing for this thesis, the insights of certain individual scholars proved to be particularly germane to the task in hand. Thus the work of Propp on fairy tales (1968: 4-5; 1971), Campbell (1949) on the 'monomyth', Frye (1957) and Lévi-Strauss (1958; 1963) on myths, Tudor (1970), Buscombe (1970), Wright (1975), Cawelti (1976) and Neale (2000) on film, Palmer (1978; 1991) on thrillers and 'potboilers' and Cobley (2000) on the American thriller is gratefully acknowledged for providing much contextual food for thought. These scholars marry reflections about the nature of genre in general to an analysis of how their chosen group of identifiable texts operates; a process which the present thesis has sought to emulate with regard to the self-help book.

Some critics are concerned with audiences and social change, e.g. Altman (1989), Cobley (2000) and Makinen (2001). Similarly, pioneering film theorists such as Ryal (1970) Buscombe (1970) and Tudor (1970) seem to have encouraged later genre scholars such as Wright (1975), Cawelti (1976) and Palmer (1978) respectively to examine Westerns, mysteries and melodrama, and thrillers in terms of their ideological significance as well as their textual patterns. For example, Wright construes the Western as being an embodiment of the struggle between nature and culture in early American society. Meanwhile Palmer argues that the organizing principle of the thriller carries meaning inasmuch as it inscribes capitalist social relations in the nineteenth century when the genre emerged.

These scholars demonstrate that:

[U]nderstanding the role of genre involves not just working out how texts are classified and defined, but grasping how the distinctions on which systems of classification are based fit into larger, aesthetic and social frameworks governing how texts are created, used and evaluated" (Montgomery 2000: 200).

Meanwhile Bennett (1987) offers a somewhat different and illuminating theoretical perspective on genre, through focusing on readers and text reception. His insight is to suggest that various discursive factors operate to create a 'reading formation' which he defines as:

A set of discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways (Bennett 1985: 7).

According to this view, a text may 'mean' something particular to a reader at different ages or on certain social occasions yet not on others (cf. interpretations of the fairy tale 'Rapunzel' in Bettelheim 1976: 16-17). Jauss (1982) similarly believes that readers approach texts with a 'horizon of expectations' which will have been pre-conditioned by social and commercial imperatives such as fashion or advertising or, additionally in the case of the self-help book, by some pressing personal need for information or comfort. Culler (1975: 136; 1997: 73) likewise highlights 'reader expectation' and 'reader response'. Meanwhile Cobley (2001a: 232) also observes that a genre is transient and 'does not do the same thing' at every reading (Cobley 2000: 2), thereby highlighting issues of context and use which inevitably 'frame' the themes and forms of any textual instance (cf. Frow 2005: 9). A current example of 'genre transference' in action can be seen in how Frank Sinatra's signature tune 'My Way' (lyrics by Paul Anka) and the cheery crucifixion song 'Always Look on the Bright Side' from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, directed by Terry Jones in 1979, have become favourite funeral anthems. This apotheosis is surely not what their originators intended (*Daily Telegraph*, 9 January 2009: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/4352276/Monty-Python-classic-tops-list-of-best-funeral-songs.html>, accessed 6 July 2011). It would seem, therefore, that genres must always be 'works in progress': historically provisional, empirically diverse and at the mercy of demotic taste.

Therefore, given the variety of opinions about the nature of genre, it is worth quoting at some length from Tudor because he summarises both the problems and the possibilities which face the genre theorist:

I think almost all writers [on Westerns] using the term genre are caught in a very genuine dilemma. They are defining a 'Western' on the basis of analysing a body of films which cannot possibly constitute 'Westerns' until after analysis. ... To take a genre such as 'Western', analyse it, and list its principle characteristics, is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films which are 'Westerns'. But they can only be isolated on the basis of 'principle characteristics' which we can only discover from the films themselves after they have been isolated. That is, we are caught in a circle which first requires us to isolate our films, for which purposes we must have a criterion, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films. This 'empiricist dilemma' has, I think, two solutions. One is to classify according to a *priori* chosen criteria depending on the critic's purpose ... The second is to lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a 'Western', and then go on to analyse it in detail. The latter is clearly the root of most uses of genre (Tudor 1970: 35).

Tudor notes that if there is a consensus about what is meant by a genre such as a Western, then "the crucial factors which distinguish [the] genre are not simply that the films themselves possess certain characteristics, but they are also in some way dependent on characteristics of our particular culture" (Tudor 1970: 38). Similarly, Todorov observes :

A society chooses and codifies the acts that correspond most closely to its ideology; that is why the existence of certain genres in one society, their absence in another, is revelatory of that ideology ... It is not a coincidence that the epic is possible in one period, the novel in another, with the individual hero of the novel opposed to the collective hero of the epic: each of these choices depends upon the ideological framework within which it operates (Todorov 1990: 19).

Surely, therefore, it is no coincidence that all kinds of self-help books have become so popular with readers, and lucrative for the publishing industry, at time when, according to Furedi and other commentators, the 'survivalist' outlook projects every conceivable experience as a potential life-challenge, so that coping with relatively banal, unexceptional episodes becomes experienced as a significant trial (Sykes 1992: 11-24; Furedi 2004: 129; Salerno 2005; Pearsall 2005).

The brief survey of critical issues offered above shows how the term 'genre' is a complex one for the theorist. It can be used to refer to a type, class or kind of 'text' which may be literary or non-literary', there must be more than one text in order to have a group which can be classified, and these two or more texts must have something in common. However the question of what that commonality might be is open to debate. While some authorities use *intrinsic* criteria such as literary and linguistic practices to delineate a genre, others use *extrinsic* criteria such as sociological, ideological and historical shaping forces, or even commercial standardization (cf. Adorno 2001). Therefore Kress and Knapp (1992) think that the



term 'genre' has been renovated in recognition of how social and cultural forces shape textual form in contemporary media (cf. Rosmarin 1985; Berger 1997; Chamberlain and Thompson 1997; Edgerton and Rose 2005). Clearly the self-help book itself is highly responsive to the needs of its readers who are both situated within and contributing to society's ideological and historical processes at any given moment. Indeed 'responsivity' is the genre's *raison d'être*. Therefore the work of the critics cited above is gratefully acknowledged for providing considerable food for thought about how external forces beyond the control of an author may shape the genre in which he or she has chosen to work; a topic which the next section explores in more detail.

### 6.3 Genre in Praxis: The Self-Help Book as Commodity

Any attempt at classification involves putting 'like' things together and separating other things, but there are simple classification schemes and complex ones with many layers and subdivisions (Scamell 2001: 73-75; Frow 2005: 29-45). The broad subject grouping of self-help material in the bays of bookshops is an example of the first, simple, type of classification because it is an uncomplicated, pragmatic strategy designed to encourage sales by collocating materials likely to appeal to readers seeking personal advice on certain subjects. In this respect it is similar to the 'literary' warrant described by Dabney (2007) which introduces an empirical, 'common-sense' element into the process of knowledge organisation. However in practice this tactic can create strange 'self-help' neighbours such as *Why Men Marry Bitches* (Argov 2006), *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman 1995), *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1998), *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1985) and *Life's Too Fxxxing Short* (Street-Porter 2008), all of which are currently in the same bay at Waterstones bookshop in Canterbury (January 2011). Clearly, although the fundamental intention of every self-help book is always to help the reader, there are many different topics, approaches and formats (see Appendix C: Self-Help Subgenres, below). However, for practicality's sake books are often shelved in very broad subject clusters, so that publications dealing with stress, relationships, motivation, wealth, women's issues, spirituality etc. will often sit together in spite of wide variations in register and presentation (Gauntlett 2002).

But the present study of self-help books proposes some other ways of grouping texts which have shared characteristics beyond their subject matter: for example into 'author genres', 'livery genres', 'template genres' and 'brands'. Furthermore, the broader efflorescence of symbiotic material which successful publications sometimes develop around themselves is also classified and then discussed using the terms 'para-genre' and 'peri-genre'. As far as I have been able to discover, these phrases have been employed critically for the first time here - and thus constitute additions to the lexicon of genre study. The term 'author genre' was coined during the empirical research for this thesis in order to denote those publications which booksellers sometimes collocate as a promotional strategy under the names of their writers, rather than dispersing them across their shelves according to topic. However background reading revealed that Foucault had already commented on what he calls 'author function' in 'What is an Author?' (1969) noting its classificatory significance and observing that, "the author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture" (in Rabinow 1991: 107-120). That is, the name of the author serves to distinguish certain groups of publications, thereby providing them with a particular status (for example as scholarly or popular works) and indicating that they should be read with a certain 'appropriate' attitude. However Foucault also insists that the traditional idea of an individual producing a publication in isolation to which his or her name is un-problematically appended is misleading because all such texts are influenced by the conditions of their production, circulation, classification and consumption (Rabinow 1986: 101-120; cf. Bourdieu 1992: 37-89).

Yet be that as it may, the 'author genre' as described at the beginning of this paragraph is a pragmatic construct which is used daily in thousands of retail outlets in order to group publications in a way likely to attract purchasers. For example the famous author and TV hypnotist Paul McKenna has dealt with how to sleep better, acquire confidence, lose weight, stop smoking and become rich. Therefore in order to exploit the commercial effect of 'critical mass', retailers sometimes present his books on a dedicated display stand to maximize visual impact, thus effectively constituting this author as a 'brand'. Similarly, the many works of the late Richard Carlson are sometimes grouped together, as are the books of Susan Jeffers. As Healey puts it:

A brand is a promise of satisfaction. It is a sign, a metaphor operating as an unwritten contract between a manufacturer and a consumer, a seller and a buyer, a performer and an audience, an environment and those who inhabit it, an event and those who experience it (Healey 2008: 6).

But as well as 'author genres', there are 'livery genres' to be found in bookstores. This term is coined here to denote those groups of publications which, though written by different people, have covers which have been graphically homogenised by the publisher so that the 'brand' will be recognizable from a distance as a result of its distinctive shape, typography or colour. The Penguin paperbacks which first appeared in 1935 were an early example of this marketing phenomenon because their covers were colour-coded: orange for fiction, blue for biography and green for crime (Baines 2005; Pearson (2011):

<http://www.pearson.com/index.cfm?pageid=140> , accessed 17 March 2011). But more recently, the '# *For Dummies*' series has used its bold yellow and 'black-board' trade dress (Dinwoodie and Janis 2010) to attract the eye. This strategy is particularly effective when there is a dedicated '*Dummies*' display stand such as the one observed in Waterstones bookshops during October 2010. Similarly the publishers of *The Secret* and *The Power* (Byrne 2006; 2010) exploit some memorable visual tropes, such as the compact size of each volume, in order to establish this 'brand' in the minds of potential buyers. The strategic 'packaging' of *The Secret* is analysed in Chapter 5: Discourse on the Page: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, above.

But as well as being a 'livery genre' because of its distinctive external features, the # *For Dummies* series is also an example of a 'template' genre. This is because whatever an aspiring author's topic may be, his or her original manuscript is rigorously edited into a standard *internal* format so that every page conforms to the house style. This means that it is chopped into many short paragraphs and decorated with subheadings, icons and various type-faces. Each volume in this series is thus reconfigured to look just like the memorably alliterative *DOS for Dummies* (1991) which was the computer manual which started it all. While some may consider this fragmented textual presentation to be a good example of systematic 'information chunking', as advocated by Gobet *et al* (2001), others may experience it as a messy distraction which inhibits sustained reading. Nevertheless, it is clearly popular because although the original *DOS For Dummies* had a run of just 5,000 copies, there are now over 1,300 titles in the *For Dummies* series. These

include ones about 'Happiness', 'Divorce', 'Post-Traumatic Stress', 'Frugality' and 'Ferrets' (*For Dummies* (2011) <http://www.dummies.com/>, accessed 16 March 2011). Other examples of 'template' publishing can be seen in the *Complete Idiot's Guides* and the *Teach Yourself* books. Likewise, although *The Rough Guide to Happiness* (Baylis 2009) and the *Rough Guide to Sex* (McConnachie 2010) are breaking new topical ground for a well-established publisher which originally specialized in advising people about exotic travel (*Rough Guides* (2011): <http://www.roughguides.co.uk/> accessed 15 May 2009), their covers are consistent and their contents are organised in a way which is congruent with other publications in the catalogue. The implication is, perhaps, that while everyone may not have the resources to explore the physical world, many will be able to find around £10 to investigate their very personal landscape.

'Author', 'livery' and 'template' genres are highly-wrought commercial constructs. However, equally interesting to a student of genre in general, and of self-help books in particular because this is an area in which they notably flourish, are the 'symbiotic' materials which sometimes emerge *around* successful 'core' publications. While not subgenres in the sense of operating as subcategories within a supra-category, where the prefix 'sub' indicates a hierarchical 'tree' relationship between items, these materials are nevertheless dependent on an original source. Therefore the terms 'peri-genre' and 'para-genre' have been coined here as ways of more accurately describing the kind of relationship between various publications which might be visualised as having 'rhizomic' characteristics inasmuch as they sit in no predictable hierarchy and there are multiple potential points of contact between them. This is rather like a plant structure which sends out roots and shoots from horizontal nodes: for example irises and orchids. While Deleuze and Guatari (1980) theorise the rhizome concept in detail, inductive empirical observation reveals examples of how this type of structure operates, both institutionally and informally, in the publishing market-place: notably with regard to self-help literature as described below.

**'Peri-genres'** are always positive responses, designed to maximize the economic return from an original publication by extending or reformatting original textual material. Thus a best-selling item may generate related products designed to target various consumer groups and produce as much income as possible from an idea. These products may include sequels, CDs, DVDs, websites, computer software, syndicated newspaper columns, radio shows, workbooks, calendars, 'tarot cards', stationery, posters, coasters, T-shirts, key rings, mugs etc. *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* is a particularly good example of a highly successful core text which has generated very many commercial spin-offs (Gray 2010a: <http://home.marsvenus.com/>, accessed 17 March 2011).

**'Para-genres'**, though still dependent upon and nourished by a generic host such as a successful self-help book, constitute a more broadly-focused, sometimes imitative but often critical, response which is not necessarily dependent on investment by a commercial organisation for its existence. Para-genres include scholarly critiques of primary sources and non-scholarly responses: e.g. in newspapers, advertisements, parodies, fan-sites, bibliographies and blogs. All emerge alongside a 'generative' text or corpus in order to comment on its discursive characteristics, and sometimes also to simulate them. Slash fiction, which is written by fans and focuses on romantic or erotic relationships between fictional characters of the same sex (e.g. Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*) is a para-generic response which flourishes vigorously on the *World Wide Web* (Sutherland (2006): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3650072/Slashing-through-the-undercult.html>, accessed 26 April 2011). Meanwhile, para-generic material relating to the self-help book includes the various critical works cited in this thesis, e.g. by Dolby (2005), McGee (2005) and Pearsall (2005), parodies like *Nobody Moved Your Cheese!* (Shafer 2003) and the sceptical texts listed in Appendix F: Sceptical Texts, below.

As yet, *Google* (searched 25 April 2011) reveals very few occurrences of the term 'peri-genre'. These are mostly to do with the record industry and their meaning is not obvious to someone outside that world. Likewise there are just six references to 'para-genre' on the *World Wide Web*. Again the meaning of the phrase, even in context, seems unclear. But these two terms are co-opted into the discourse of genre study in this thesis so as to distinguish more efficiently between the different kinds of relationships which may occur between a seminal text and the various materials which appear 'symbiotically' in response and depend on it for continued nourishment. It is stressed, however, that the terms 'peri-genre' and 'para-genre' introduced above do not mean the same as 'paratext': a term coined by Genette (1997) who uses it to refer to "those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*) that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles [sic], notes, epilogues and afterwords" (Macksey 1997: xviii). Generic symbiosis, in contrast, manifests as various types of *extra*-textual efflorescence, and the two aspects of this phenomenon have been lexically distinguished here for the first time through the use of relational affixes: *peri* = around and *para* = alongside. A well-established example of this lexical structure already exists in the term 'subgenre'

Textual symbiosis in all media extends the discursive reach of 'ur-texts': a German-derived term which was first employed in musicology to denote an original manuscript or first published edition of a composition and is co-opted here to denote a 'generative' text of any kind. Clearly a symbiotic textual response requires the identification of characteristic discursive features in the original so that these may be re-expressed or critiqued. Therefore it is considered that the textual 'efflorescence' which a genre or individual publication may 'host', to continue the biological metaphor, contributes an additional, oblique source of information about that original genre or publication because its effectiveness depends upon the distillation and re-expression of the primary 'message'. For example a parody must capture something of the spirit of the original as well as imitate its formal devices if it is to be truly effective and not be just burlesque or pastiche (cf. Culler 1975: 152; Gross 2010: i-xix; see also Appendix F: Sceptical Texts). A good example of this principle in action is *How an Idiot Writes a Self-Help Book* (Chandler and Kay 2004) which manages to be both *mimesis* and critique.

The empirically-derived material above indicates firstly how publishers may produce various related products in order to maximize their profits; and secondly how other interested parties may seek to realise their informal, yet nevertheless significant, responses to certain texts through less direct channels. As far as I can tell, no one else has made these observations about the self-help book and other successful popular texts as sites of generative activity, nor specifically categorised and named the symbiotic products which may typically emerge around them as 'peri-genres' and 'para-genres'. This material is therefore considered to be a new contribution to genre studies. Furthermore, critical analysis revealed two other interesting aspects peculiar to the self-help book when it is critiqued as a theoretical genre: it operates as both a redemptive paradigm and an 'actantial' genre.

#### 6.4 The Self-Help Book as Redemptive Paradigm

The pioneering formalist work of Vladimir Propp (1968) and the critique and rationale of his system produced by Algirdas Greimas (1966), which are usefully compared by Rimmon-Kenan (2002), have proved particularly helpful to the present study because they offer stable theoretical models and a lexicon for discussing issues of role and structure in narrative which can be applied to the self-help book as a theoretical genre. Propp established the norms of structural narratology and text semiotics by isolating minimal units of story and specifying the principles by which these might be combined. He thus emphasised the distinction between the constant (structural) and variable (topical) elements of a text. When he applied his method to a group of one hundred Russian folktales, which had already been designated as a genre by Aarne (1910), he found that *all* the items in his chosen *corpus* were constructed from a fixed repertoire of seven character roles, which he called 'spheres of action'. Furthermore, he discovered that the tales to a greater or lesser extent always involved an invariant sequence of thirty-one 'story events' (Pateman 1991) which he called 'functions' (Propp 1968: 79-83). The 'spheres of action' described in Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* appear at first sight to correspond to the *dramatis personae* in a fiction and are as follows: villain, donor, helper, the princess (sought for person) and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. However Propp stresses that the phrase 'sphere of action' should be understood as "an act of a character defined from the point of view of its

significance for the course of the action" (Propp 1968: 20-21). That is, he insists that what a character *does* in a narrative is more significant than their personal identity.

As Woollacott explains:

The story [typically] begins with either an injury to a victim or the lack of some important object and ends with retribution for the injury or the acquisition of the thing lacked. The hero is sent for on the occasion of the injury or the discover of the lack and two key events follow: He [firstly] meets a donor (a toad, a hag, a bearded old man, etc.) who after 'testing' him, supplies him with a magical agent which enables him to pass victoriously through his ordeal. He [secondly] meets the villain in decisive combat or he finds himself with a series of task or labours which, with the help of his agent, he is ultimately able to solve properly (Woollacott 1982: 95).

Propp's model makes it clear that a named character may be involved in more than one sphere of action during a narrative, as the following literary example demonstrates. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos (1782) the protagonist Valmont spends most of the time villainously plotting to seduce the virtuous Madame de Tourvel to win a bet with his ex-lover the Marquise de Merteuil. However in the final scene he first warns the latter's current lover that she has betrayed him and then sacrifices himself in their subsequent duel, thereby bestowing the gift of information on his opponent, saving his life and entering the sphere of action belonging to a tragic hero.

Propp's insights make it possible to look beneath the surface of stories to see their common dynamics. Indeed the last group of events in his list of thirty-one 'functions' (Propp 1968: 61-64) is particularly interesting with regard to the self-help book because it maps with remarkable congruence onto the typical structure of items in the genre as follows:

- 25 A difficult task is proposed to the hero
- 26 The task is resolved
- 27 The hero is recognized
- 28 The false hero is given a new appearance
- 29 The false hero or villain is exposed
- 30 The villain is punished
- 31 The hero is married and ascends the throne

If the 'false hero' and 'hero' are construed as being unwanted aspects of the self, the 'marriage' as being any desired personal goal (spiritual or material), and the 'difficult task' as involving the reader in the elimination of an unwanted habit, a



decision to change their circumstances, or the adoption of more positive attitudes, then these particular seven functions or happenings are reminiscent of the archetypal events to be found in many self-help books wherein the 'implied reader' (Iser 1976) or textual addressee is also implicitly the hero of the story who eventually triumphs over adversity. Indeed some titles foreground 'heroic' role of the reader: for example *End the Struggle and Dance with Life* (Jeffers 1996).

Furthermore, titles such as *You Can't Afford the Luxury of a Negative Thought* (McWilliams 1997) indicate that the struggle may sometimes take place within the reader's psyche. Like a fairy tale, the self-help book operates in a synthetic microcosm which mostly has little to say about real political, social or ethnic issues in spite of its constant use of illustrative case studies apparently drawn from 'real life'. The focus of the text is always confined to the personal ethic. Yet each self-help book deals paradigmatically with the universal dynamics of human struggles, loyalties, alliances, reversals and triumphs. Thus the ideas introduced in Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* make it easier to distinguish the deep structural characteristics which all self-help books share beneath those surface variables of topic and approach which are unique to each publication.

However, equally useful as a heuristic tool in the investigation of the self-help book's paradigmatic qualities is Greimas's rationalization of Propp's pioneering structural insights into three sets of binary oppositions (Greimas 1966; 1987). Greimas considers that Propp's 'morphology' is too closely based on empirical observation (Culler 1975: 212) to be truly systematic. And certainly his is a much simpler, more generically-applicable model of narrative structure. However there is also some irony here because so much of Greimas's other work is, to say the least, opaque. For example his 'semiotic square', which seeks to move beyond the semiosis of binary opposition in an attempt to conceptualise the operation and relationships between *simultaneous layers* of discourse, is presented in a series of daunting 'equations' and drawings. Nevertheless Greimas's binary 'actantial' model, which resulted from his taking Propp to task for failing to consider how elements in a narrative actually *relate* to each other in non-sequential ways, is illuminating.

Firstly, he identifies six trans-historical and trans-cultural categories of fictional role common to all stories. These he calls ‘actants’ rather than ‘spheres of action’. Secondly, he observes how his actants manifest as a series of oppositions in the archetypal narrative structure (Greimas 1966) and proposes a two-dimensional model (see below):

Subject	Object
Sender	Receiver
Helper	Opponent

In asserting that there is a universal narrative dynamic between these three sets of binary oppositions which operates beyond the contingent details of individual texts, Greimas creates a relational structure which seems applicable to many contemporary sites of signification such as advertisements, plays, novels, films, cookery books and, of course, self-help literature. According to his theory, individuals in both fiction and life manifest the characteristics of the above ‘actants’ on various occasions. The ‘subject’ is the one who seeks, and could be either an individual or an institution. The object is that which is sought for and might, for example, be a desired item, a person, an abstract quality, an audience, a market, or an experience. The hero may at different times be a subject who seeks, a receiver who finds and thus triumphs, or even a person who is ‘sought for’: as is the case in the many self-help books which speak of ‘finding yourself’ (e.g. Vanzant 1999 and Weatherspoon 2008). The sender launches the subject on a quest or dispatches an object to a receiver; the helper assists in an action; and the opponent blocks it. For example a person takes (sends) themselves to a bookshop in the hope of finding a helper on the shelves whose guidance will allow them to triumph over adverse circumstances, unhelpful attitudes or bad habits.

Additionally, Greimas proposes a second model which is useful to the present analysis of genre because it seeks to rationalise the phenomenon of textual coherence (Greimas 1983) by suggesting that there are three levels of simultaneous relational activity in a narrative. Indeed this idea was also the inspiration for discussion of stratified subject-activity in the self-help book which concludes

Chapter 7, The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book, below. Greimas's tripartite structure of narrative is as follows:

- 1 The ['actantial'] level of semantic deep structure and its basic oppositions and combinations
- 2 The level of surface structures, of agents and actions
- 3 The level of discursive structures such as time, space, characters and imagery

In terms of their narrative characteristics, self-help books clearly operate superficially at level two where people do positive and negative things which result in associated consequences to themselves, their companions and their environment. They fall in and out of love, they lose jobs, they become addicted etc. This is the level of contingent, embedded stories, both fictional and supposedly real, which are designed by authors and editors to deal with defined problems and address the putative needs of the implied reader, hopefully to good commercial effect. However the self-help genre, unlike popular narrative fiction, has little use for detailed matters of space, time, character and imagery: those things which Greimas consigns to level three of his model (Herman *et al* 2005: 524). And most significantly for this thesis, at the deep structural level (i.e. at level 1) the self-help text can be seen to operate as a notional 'actant' or active participant in the paradigmatic narrative of redemptive transformation which it articulates. It is always an agent for good and functions as a wise mentor who motivates the hero, sends him or her on a journey to find a better life, teaches him or her along the way to accept and overcome challenges and finally, it is to be hoped, conveys gifts of skill and insight.

Each self-help book thus offers, *au fond*, a quotidian articulation of the archetypal quest or 'monomyth' described by Campbell (2004) – see Chapters 2 and 5, above. This is because its reader, whatever the superficial topic with which he or she is choosing to engage, *de facto* adopts the a-personal subjectivity of the 'seeker' who is looking for a 'treasure: i.e. a better life. Thus at its deepest level, each publication can be construed as a contingent articulation of the quest 'meme' (Dawkins 1976; Blackmore 2002): the term meme here denoting an element of culture passed on over time through *mimesis* and teachings such as personal anecdote and folk narratives (Dolby 2005: 72-3). The universal quest pattern of human loss, struggle

and ultimate redemption is first recorded in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which was created over three thousand years ago (Foley 2010: 70). But is also present in much contemporary fiction, many films (Jewett and Shelton Lawrence 1977), and in virtual games ([http://www.freeonlinegames.com/tag/Quest\\_Games](http://www.freeonlinegames.com/tag/Quest_Games), accessed 23 July 2011). It can clearly be discerned in some westerns (Wright 1975; Simpson 2006) and in 'space operas' such as the *Star Trek* franchise (1966-) whose characters have a mission to 'boldly go' about teaching various aliens the American way while exploring 'space: the final frontier' (Goulding 1985; Richards 1999). Meanwhile it has been effectively satirized in the film *Galaxy Quest* directed by Dean Parisot in 1999. Indeed the 'quest' dynamics of personal discovery, pilgrimage and frontier are even embedded in the circumscribed domestic narratives of the American transcendentalist Louisa M. Alcott. For example, her most famous book *Little Women* (1868) refers often to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) as its four young protagonists journey towards maturity during the American Civil War (1861-1865). Similarly, the quest meme is domesticated by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her *Little House on the Prairie* series which was published between the years 1932-43 and tells the story of pioneering life and aspirations in the American Midwest (Kosur 2007).

At their heart, the many present-day self-help books which speak directly about 'searching' for fulfilment can be construed as a metaphorical manifestation of this longstanding urge for new experience which is characteristic of, but by no means confined to, the American Dream. Campbell summarizes the universal quest narrative thus in his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (Campbell 1956: 30).

Furthermore the following best-selling titles all imply that a quest will be necessary to find contentment: *Man's Search for Meaning* (Frankl 1946); *Finding Your Own North Star* (Beck 2001); *The Road Less Travelled* (Peck 1978); *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (Hillman 1996); *All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek* (Marinaccio 1994). The mono-mythic trajectory of the self-help book is also similar to the paradigmatic 'character arc' traced by script consultant Christopher Vogler (2007: 205) when he observes how the 'hero' of so many films:

- Begins with limited awareness of a problem
- Experiences increased awareness
- Feels some reluctance to change
- Overcomes that reluctance
- Commits to change
- Experiments with the possibilities of change
- Attempts significant change
- Reflects on the consequences
- Masters the problem and gains the reward

Vogler's sequence is also similar to the narrative arc of a fairy tale which states an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly, simplifying all situations, eliminating unnecessary details and offering clearly drawn protagonists who are "typical rather than unique" (Bettelheim 1970: 8). For as Herman *et al* (2005: 156) observe, the fairy tale typically combines the correction of a misdeed or lack with a demonstration of its characters' exemplary destiny according to a moral system clearly divided into good and evil; thus providing a fantasy microcosm which serves as a self-sufficient system of ethical reference. Furthermore, Ellis Davidson (2003: 99) notes how, in many fairy tales various characters offer to help the hero or heroine, while others seek to destroy them. Indeed, the intervention of a helper is essential to the plot because "this is what usually ensures that the final outcome is a happy one" (*ibid*).

This optimistic quest sequence, which can be followed by male and female alike, is the basis of many successful, goal-oriented stories such as pantomimes, advertisements, Hollywood blockbusters (Jewett and Shelton Lawrence 1977: 13; Salla 2001: 2) and reality game-shows on TV which challenge people to 'succeed' at various tasks (Hill 2004: 31-37). But more germane to the present study, the 'paradigmatic journey' which the reader of a self-help book vicariously undertakes typically involves moving from despair to hope, darkness to illumination, and victimhood to victory through the process of facing and conquering various intrinsic or extrinsic life challenges with the guidance of the chosen publication. Therefore, although the analytical formulae of Propp, Greimas and Vogler outlined above have their differences, each one can usefully be applied to self-help books which distil complex situations and human interactions into simple narratives, employing representative character types with remarkably common first names which are

presumably chosen in order to maximize audience appeal. These are highly formulaic publications (Dolby 2005: 2-5) designed to satisfy predictable expectations in readers who are not seeking literary entertainment and are certainly not looking for an opportunity to practise their critical skills on complex examples of 'defamiliarisation' (Shklovskii 1917). They just want concise, accessible and effective guidance. Therefore the self-help book is characteristically a 'closed' text (Belsey 1980: 70; Eco 1989) which always contains the promise of a 'happy ending'. Indeed even thanatological publications like Michael Conrad's *How to Die Well* (2005) and Jamie Oliver's beautifully illustrated *Get Dead* (2006) are comfortingly, though perhaps disconcertingly, upbeat. Clearly successful self-help books give people what they think they want – otherwise the genre would not be such big business. But beneath the surface advice lies a deeper ethical level at which the monomyth of transformation is enacted in a dialogue between the book and the reader and it is this 'actantial' dynamic which makes the self-help book a unique theoretical genre, as the following section explains.

### 6.5 The Self-Help Book as a Unique 'Actantial' Genre

It is not difficult to observe empirically that every self-help book, whatever its overt topic is intended to move its reader from a situation of some difficulty to one of triumph: from 'lack' to "lack liquidated" (Propp 1968: 53; Dundes 1965: 208; Dolby 2005: 4). It may thus be construed as a 'heroic' text which dramatizes an individual's search for a better existence; a process which may be reified in terms of relationships, spiritual satisfaction, financial success etc. However the text and reader of a self-help book have an unusual relationship because the reader/'self' has deliberately chosen to participate in the narrative of personal transformation being unfolded as a result of his or her buying the publication and working through it. Moreover he or she may occupy various a-personal subject positions in the narrative and may be construed, sometimes even simultaneously, as being:

- the victim of distressing circumstances, physical or mental
- the villain whose bad habits, actions or attitudes cause distress and sabotage progress
- the donor who helps himself by buying an advice text for guidance

- the sought for person who desires to achieve his or her true potential
- the hero whose life is transformed for the better through his or her efforts.

Clearly during any 'quest' there will be oppositional 'actants' in play, as well as a goal to be reached: 'actant' being the theoretical term for characters which fill archetypal roles such as 'hero' and 'villain' (Herman 2007: 13). Indeed the reader's struggle towards redemption and renovation is implicit in self-help titles such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Carnegie 1936), *End the Struggle and Dance with Life* (Jeffers 1996), *The Power of Positive Thinking* (Peale 1990) and the *Life Strategies* series by Philip McGraw. It can also be seen in the thousands of texts about *overcoming* or *beating* depression, anxiety, anger, sexual problems, etc. However the 'actants' in self-help publications prove to have unusual qualities. This is firstly because the 'villains' in the pages of these books are as likely to be abstractions like depression, low self-esteem or a broken heart as a cheating lover, a bullying boss or a bad landlord; and secondly because the 'hero' is *always* ultimately the reader who fights adversity by reading the book, while the 'helper' is *always* implicitly the book itself. This means that the self-help book can be categorised as a unique '*actantial*' genre. Other 'helping' genres exist; but this one deliberately seeks to build a 'personal' relationship with its readers.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This research set out to apply some critical notions of genre to the contemporary self-help book and discovered three areas of particular interest as a result. Following Propp's example when dealing with folk tales (1968: 3-19), it initially assumed the existence of self-help books as a given class in order for work to begin. Thereafter the opinions of various critical authorities suggested some ways that the self-help genre might more theoretically be defined by using intrinsic criteria such as content, form and style of writing (Dolby 2005: 39; Santrock 1994) as well as external criteria such as reader expectation or commercial footprint (Salerno 2005: 7-9). The propensity of the genre to nourish symbiotically related materials was also discussed. But consideration of the self-help book at the deeper semiotic level of actantial involvements as opposed to surface narration (Greimas 1977: 23) revealed that while its overt subject matter (personal problems and their solutions) is

not remarkable, its engagement with the reader most certainly is. Firstly, the self-help book is always predicated on the binary opposition of discomfort and relief. Secondly, the text itself participates as an actant in the therapeutic process because it functions as a guide (mentor) seeking to help a sufferer (seeker) who desires relief (the sought for goal) and who hopes, through taking the initiative to read a 'transformational text', to progress from being a 'victim-actant' to being a 'hero-actant'. Thirdly, the reader's own dysfunctional attitudes may be classed as antagonists to be vanquished just as much as his or her adverse external circumstances may be. For example the 'villains' may include depression, co-dependency, loss, anger issues, overeating, grief etc. Obviously there are many content variables operating in self-help books and the genre is constantly influenced by changes in social conditions and perceived consumer needs. But critical analysis has shown that the ultimate intention is always for the *locus* of power to shift so that the 'heroic' reader may eventually be able to recognise and own their own strength. This dynamic is therefore considered to be a generic characteristic of the self-help book.

However at the same time as the way in which self-help books operate simultaneously as both personal and impersonal texts was being recognised, a second duality in the genre began to reveal itself. Therefore the final chapter in this thesis turns its attention from the realised genre to its notional readership in order to discuss in more detail the dyadic relationship between the personal 'self', which participates in everyday discourse, and the impersonal 'subject', which is the focus of so much critical attention. For both phenomena are to be found in the dynamic of the self-help genre.



## Chapter 7

### The Self/Subject Dyad in the Self-Help Book

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

W. E. Henley (1849-1903) 'Invictus'

Polonius

Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,  
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;  
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,  
And they in France of the best rank and station  
Are most select and generous, chief in that.  
Neither a borrower, nor a lender be;  
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,  
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry,  
This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)  
*Hamlet* Act 1, scene iii, 58

## 7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed how the self-help book operates simultaneously as a protean commercial genre while existing notionally as a stable, and indeed unique, theoretical one. Now this final chapter continues the structuralist approach to this group of publications, turning its attention to distinguishing how the readership is involved with the genre at a number of levels. Specifically, it considers how the related notions of 'selfhood' and 'subjectivity' operate simultaneously within a self-help text: the first overtly in its address to someone with defined personal issues; and the second covertly in the a-personal, paradigmatic relationships which operate between reader, writer and ideology. Finally, it offers an original, tripartite model of stratified subject-activity within the *corpus*.

Dolby (2005: 66) speaks of the 'simple self' which is an archetype of American individualist culture (see also Chapter 2, 'Provenance': From the Puritan Legacy to the Culture of Narcissism; and Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, above). Similarly, Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 3-4) see identity as a stable, yet self-fashioning personal project (cf. Goffman 1959). The assumption is that although people may present themselves differently in different contexts, beneath that *persona* lies an intrinsic, pre-discursive 'self'. Indeed the notion of 'self-ownership' is implicit in terms like 'identity card', 'identity fraud' and 'identity theft' (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 17). However these two writers also note how *postmodern* accounts treat identity as being fluid, fragmenting and, crucially, constituted in discourse. Thus it is re-located from private realms of cognition and experience to the social arena; the implication being that there is no essential 'self' but only a discursively-constructed 'subject'. Meanwhile self-help books persist in considering identity to be an unproblematised issue of agency and self-determination.

In consonance with these different views, and most helpfully for the present project, Mautner (2000: 157) argues that the traditional notion of selfhood and the more recent notion of the constructed subject are best viewed as a 'dyad' rather than an opposition. In so doing he co-opts a biological term which denotes two units manifesting as one. (An example of a physical dyad is parent/child while an example of a conceptual dyad is positivity/negativity.) This is presumably because critical scrutiny in the light of post-structural theory inevitably encounters 'self' and

'subject' as a symbiotic pair of notions, even as it seeks to distinguish between them in order to 'bracket off', to adopt a phenomenological phrase (Husserl 1962: 96-101), areas for discussion. Indeed the present work employs this heuristic division as a means of contrasting the superficial, un-problematized presentation of traditional, substantive 'self-hood' which is axiomatic in self-help books, and is clearly proclaimed in the quotations from popular texts which head this chapter, with the underlying a-personal subjective activity which covertly inhabits the genre (cf. Malpas and Wake 2006). However, 'self' and 'subject' are clearly slippery terms which may be used in a variety of ways. Indeed the notional boundary between what each may signify is in practice highly permeable and they are sometimes employed synonymously. Therefore the following discussion begins with a stabilising review of terminology.

## 7.2 'Self' and 'Subject': Some Shifting Conceptions

Although the distinction between the words 'self' and 'subject' might seem reasonably clear from formal definitions such as those in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (1989, vol. XIV: 905-907 and vol. XVII: 28), there has also been much discussion about what the two terms may denote within various disciplines (Mansfield 2000). Certainly the attempt to distinguish between them theoretically is germane to a thesis which seeks to examine 'selfhood' and 'subjectivity' as they are manifest in the discourse of self-help books. For it is argued here that both these notions are simultaneously active in the genre: the former overtly in the self-reflexive material which forms the written text of these publications; and the latter covertly in their pervasive ideology suggesting the possibility of personal transformation, and in the deeper structural relationships which exist unspoken between writer, reader and text.

'Self', which is derived from Germanic roots (*self*, *seolf*, *sylf* = one's own person, same) carries within it notions of wholeness and of something which remains consistent. It is thus analogous with the Latin '*ipse*'. According to the OED (1989: vol. XIV: 907) the word may mean:

What one is at a particular time or in a particular aspect or relation; one's nature, character or (sometimes) physical constitution or appearance considered as different at different times, e.g. 'one's former self'; [also] an assemblage of characteristics and dispositions which may be considered as constituting one of various conflicting personalities within a human being, e.g. 'one's better self'; [also] that which a person is really and intrinsically *he* [sic] (in contradistinction to what is adventitious); the ego (often identified with the soul or mind or opposed to the body); a permanent subject of successive and varying states of consciousness.

Latinate synonyms for 'self' such as 'individual' and 'identity' likewise suggest a connection with wholeness, continuity and consistency. Indeed the term 'individual', first coined in 1605 from the Latin *in* = not + *dividuus* = divisible, asserts that a person is a whole entity which cannot be fragmented and continue to exist. Similarly the word 'identity', which emerged around 1570 and is derived from the Latin *idem* = the same, connotes 'wholeness'; which is a word of Germanic origin related to the terms 'health', 'hale', 'holy' and holistic. Likewise the Latin word *integer*, from which the English word 'integrity' was coined around 1450, can be translated to mean 'whole', 'in perfect condition' and, metaphorically, 'virtuous'. The *OED* lists hundreds of English compounds which use the element 'self-' (*OED* 1989 vol. XIV: 913-933), which shows just how prevalent and powerful this reflexive concept is in demotic discourse.

Meanwhile 'subject' is a Latinate term which came into English later than 'self' at the end of the thirteenth century when Norman French and scholastic Latin replaced much of the Germanic lexicon in the discourse of institutional activities of court and church (Knowles 1997: 46-50; Leith 1997: 61-85). It has been causing interpretative difficulties almost ever since because, as Raymond Williams explains (1976: 308-312), it has historically been used in several different and even opposite ways. Derived through Old French from the Latin *subjectus* (literally something 'thrown beneath'), it first denoted a person under the dominion of a lord or sovereign or some other ruling power; then the material or substance from which something could be made; then a thing having real independent existence; a thing about which judgments could be made; a substance or matter worked upon; and ultimately a topic in a discourse. But in poststructuralist theory the term has become applied to the socially-situated human being in a way which is at once conceptually distinctive to the theorist yet is in *praxis* phenomenologically diffuse because it may signify somewhat different things in the arenas of philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology etc. As Rice and Waugh observe:

The notion of the 'subject' has proved crucial to the post structuralist enterprise; the concept can be traced in most varieties of post-structuralism and acts a focal point for the critique of humanist ideology. Post-structuralism uses the term 'subject' rather than 'self' or 'individual' in an attempt to avoid the presupposition that the human being is in some way 'given' and fully formed prior to its entrance into the symbolic order of language or discourse. The term plays ambiguously between, on the one hand, *subject* as in the opposition subject/object, or subject as in grammar; and on the other hand, *subject* as in subject of the state, or subject of the law - that is, *subject* is both central and at the same time decentred (Rice and Waugh 1992: 119).

Although the term 'self' may have arrived first in English and is used pervasively in ordinary speech without qualification, these critics make it clear that the notion of the 'subject' has come to dominate postmodern scholarship (Sarup 1988). This is because it expands the discursive arena beyond the quotidian, personal sphere of consciousness to enable objective discussion of the mind as the 'site' in which ideas lodge, to which all mental representations or operations can be attributed, and on which 'constructive' societal powers impinge. Indeed it would seem that the discourses available for the use of an individual at the 'subject' level must shape his or her 'personal identity' inasmuch as they articulate what is and is not acceptable behaviour in that person's surrounding culture, thereby providing an 'interpretative repertoire' for understanding experience (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1988). Thus Lacan argues that although the subject is personally experienced as an essential and individuated 'self', it is not 'pre-given'. Rather, it is constructed developmentally as a child moves from the imaginary, undifferentiated order of diffuse sensory awareness into the symbolic order of language which necessarily constrains what can be thought and said; thus moulding that individual into a socially acceptable subject, which must operate within a pre-determined ethical context (Lacan 1968; Fink 1996). But the notional boundary between 'self' and 'subject' can prove highly permeable on the page (Green and LeBihan 1996: 139-181) as the following quotation illustrates:

What is meant by the term 'subjectivity'? Finding a satisfactory definition of the human self, as it is positioned in the world and as it experiences itself and its world, has been one of the most pressing philosophical problems; predictably, there is no obvious route that we can offer through the maze of theories that wrestle with the question of 'Who am I?' We can only offer highly selective version of the way this question has been considered in relation to literature (Green and Le Bihan 1996: 140).

Moreover Smith notes how the terms 'self' and 'subject' may sometimes overlap:

Over the last ten or twenty years, [discourses of the human sciences] have adopted this term, the 'subject', to do multifarious theoretical jobs. In some instances the subject will appear to be synonymous with the 'individual', the 'personal'. In others – for example, in psychoanalytical discourse – it will take on a more specialised meaning and refer to the unconsciously structured illusion of plenitude which we usually call 'the self'. Or elsewhere, the 'subject' might be understood as the specifically subjected object of social and historical forces and determinations (Smith 1988: xxvii).

Indeed Atkins (2005) uses both terms without qualification in the title of a substantial anthology which aims to trace the emergence of 'self' and 'subjectivity' in European and Anglo-American philosophy: *Self and Subjectivity*. Furthermore she suggests that the term 'self' should be understood as "a colloquial umbrella term that encompasses a range of concepts that relate to self-reflective activity: for example 'consciousness', 'ego', 'soul', 'subject', 'person' or moral agent" (Atkins 2005: 1). Thus her definition of these terms is not entirely stable because 'self' and 'subject' appear to be treated as virtual synonyms, alongside the other items listed. But since her book aims to present a variety of critical positions, she may simply be anticipating the diverse usage of her chosen contributors.

What is certainly clear is that philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and other disciplines offer shifting heuristic models of self-hood and subjectivity. Although the mediated 'subject' rather than the essential 'self' is undoubtedly privileged in critical theory, the former term appears less often in other academic fields such as sociology, psychology and philosophy. For example the much-cited ethicist Charles Taylor, who has loomed large in this thesis and who, in *Sources of the Self* (1989), *de facto* writes about the history of the socially-constructed subject in contrast to a 'given' self, uses 'subject' very rarely and does not index it. In contrast, there is no entry for 'self' in the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* (2000), though there is one for 'subject'. Meanwhile Furedi uses 'self' not 'subject' in *Therapy Culture* (2004), indexing the former term forty-four times and 'subject' not at all. Furthermore, the 'subject' also seems to be absent from the discourse of folk psychology (Hutto 2008): the demotic informal narrative employed to rationalize experience, to which self-help books are a comparatively recent addition. Here the notion of the essential self remains undisturbed; a situation which is consonant with the 'ontology of the everyday' described by Heidegger wherein the

'I' or 'self' must be understood as a unity which defines the horizons of 'being' (which he calls *Dasein*):

The 'I' seems to 'hold together' the totality of the structural whole. In the 'ontology' of this entity, the 'I' and the 'Self' have been conceived from the earliest times as the supporting ground (as substance or subject) (Heidegger 1962: 365).

While people may consider themselves to have all sorts of emotional, spiritual and bodily problems when they read self-help books, anxiety about the metaphysical status of selfhood is not going to be one of them. Even Foucault himself, so much of whose work comprises a plea to understand the power of socially constructed subjectivity, sometimes appears to conflate the notions of 'self' and 'subject' in his attempt to outline a philosophy of consciousness which takes into account firstly the formative mechanisms of structure and systems of meaning, secondly the 'subject as matter under consideration', and thirdly 'subject as semiologically-constructed identity' (Foucault 1993b: 203). Thus when explaining his intention to move beyond earlier materialist theories of ideology predicated on the possibility of objective knowledge, he writes:

I have tried to get out from the philosophy of the subject through a genealogy of this subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led up to the modern concept of the self. This has not always been an easy task, since most historians prefer a history of social processes, and most philosophers prefer a subject without history (Foucault 1993: 213).

But in spite of the challenges of definition briefly indicated above, the notion of the 'subject' as an a-personal construct of ideological forces, in contrast to the 'self' as an unique manifestation of biology and experience, is valuable in a critique like this one because it is a reminder that the way we describe and judge ourselves, far from being wholly personal and private, is based on how we observe and are observed by those outside us; whose opinion is itself derived from a vast tranche of linguistic and cultural assumptions (O'Grady 2007). According to this view, when people choose a self-help book from the thousands on sale in order to palliate their contingent and personal circumstances, arguably they unconsciously define themselves according to the categories available in the bookshop. In attempting to transform themselves in this scenario, they must subject themselves to the established, circumscribed discourse of the self-help writers and the hegemonic power of the publishers, a process which the next section explores in more detail.

### 7.3 The Interdependence of 'Self' and 'Subject' in the Self-Help Book

Whereas the previous section sought to establish some heuristic *distinction* between 'self' and 'subject' so that the terms might henceforth be used with more security, the present section discusses the *interdependence* of these notions within the self-help book. For in spite of critical suggestions to the contrary, popular ethical discourse, of which the self-help book can be said to be an informal element because it offers suggestions about how best to live (cf. Sieger 2005), continues to insist that there are always opportunities for individual agency (Midgley 1991; Altieri 1994; Singer 1997; Grayling 2003) and that no one need be a victim of circumstance. Indeed the vast, *felicitous* literature devoted to 'success' of various kinds, some of which is catalogued by Butler-Bowdon (2003; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008) and Yarian (2004b) is necessarily predicated on the assumption that individuals can take personal responsibility for themselves and make changes for the better. Even Burkeman's sceptical columns in the *Guardian* newspaper, now collected into one volume under the title *Help! How to Become Slightly Happier and Get a Bit More Done* (2011), acknowledge the widespread craving for personal improvement.

Thus, somewhat paradoxically, inasmuch as they deal with renovated or re-constructed selves, self-help books might be considered exemplary postmodern texts. As a '*bricolage*' of traditional wisdom, 'scientific' findings and modern optimism, the genre offers its readers symptomatic palliation of physical and psychic 'dis-ease' through suggesting possibilities for personal transformation, both material and spiritual, through the medium of language (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 2). Yet the avowed objectives of self-help books are inevitably culturally constrained. As Taylor (1989), MacIntyre (1984), Giddens (1990; 1991; 1992) and Schrag (1988; 1997; 2003) point out in various ways, the intrinsic or extrinsic 'good' which someone may be seeking, for example through reading a self-help book, is ultimately a social formation which changes in different epochs. Thus even though self-help books are preoccupied with encouraging their readers to find an essential, 'authentic' and effective self (e.g. Ban Breathnach 2007; Anderson 2007; Van Valin 2008), those readers will necessarily be shaped by external variables over which they lack much control; not least because of possible limitations in their own linguistic and social resources and the inevitable commercial manoeuvres of the publishing industry.



So it is somewhat ironic that at the same time as the post-structuralist critique of the essential self and traditional *telic* grand narratives (Lyotard 1984) has greatly undermined the notion of goal-directed, self-determined personal agency (Lee 2004) in the theoretical domain, apparent opportunities to exercise personal choice have never been more available and celebrated in popular culture; not least in self-help books. Even Foucault himself, whose insights about the relation between discourse and power challenge individualist rationalism with important consequences for the understanding of postmodern identity as a construct at the mercy of powerful institutional forces (Foucault 1979), admits that people *can* sometimes 'help' themselves:

Analysing the experience of sexuality, I became more and more aware that there is [*sic*] in all societies ... techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct ... so as to transform themselves, modify themselves and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on. Let's call this type of techniques [*sic*] a techniques or technology of the self (Foucault 1988: 18).

According to the above view, the self-help book may be considered a 'techniques' of self-creation. Necessarily essentialist, it has no problem in assuming the existence of a self-reflexive individual who is able to "take an instrumental stance to [his or her] given properties, desires, inclinations, tendencies, habits of thought and feeling, so that they can be worked on, doing away with some and strengthening others" (Taylor 1989: 159; see also Chapter 3, *The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual*, above). These publications are unapologetic about the possibility of agency and personal transformation; both processes which entail cognition about and action toward a desired end (Lee 2004). The genre can therefore be described as '*telic*' because each member publication has a transformative goal, even though it may well be topically distinct from its neighbours on the bookshelf.

But prominent though they have become in contemporary culture, self-help books are just a fairly recent, reified expression of the demotic ethic of personal choice and individual responsibility which is clearly present in the two well-known quotations at the head of this chapter which have been included because they famously express unselfconscious, axiomatic essentialism. 'Invictus' ('The Unconquerable') is a poem by William Ernest Henley which was published in 1888 (see Appendix G: Poems, below). An uncompromising assertion of individual choice and agency, it was taught by Nelson Mandela to other prisoners in Robben Island Penitentiary during his

twenty-seven years there (Hallengren: 2001) and presumably was a source of comfort to those whose immediate physical surroundings rendered them apparently powerless. The piece contains much-quoted assertions such as “my head is bloody but unbowed” and “I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul”. These lines are still sometimes used by people, albeit perhaps ironically, to suggest that in spite of life’s difficulties they retain some choice about how they will behave in order to maintain their self- respect. Indeed the poem is alluded to in the title of the film *Invictus* (2009: director Clint Eastwood) about Mandela’s encouragement to the South African team before and during the 1995 Rugby World Cup. Ripperata and Delrons express similar sentiments about the possibility of personal agency in their 1962 hit song ‘Captain of Your Ship’ (see Appendix G: Poems, below). And thousands of self-help books implicitly concur.

But the quotation from *Hamlet* is the more interesting one for the critical theorist because it contains a paradox. The two sets of oppositions at its heart (true/false; night/day) appear to reinforce the traditional notion that there are clear and fixed boundaries to identity which people cross at their peril if their integrity, in the sense here of honour, is to be maintained. However this passage is more complex than it first appears because Polonius’s advice to his departing son Laertes offers two perspectives on the notion of identity. It combines metaphysical thinking about the core nature of the substantive self, to which one may or may not ‘be true’, with pragmatic awareness that personal style, for example in choice of dress, affects how one is perceived and therefore categorized by others (cf. Goffman 1959). The older man thus simultaneously endorses traditional essentialism while anticipating postmodern notions of the self as the contingent and mediated construct described thus by Culler:

What is this 'I' that I am – person, agent, actor, self – and what makes it what it is? Two basic questions underlie modern thinking on this topic: first, is the self something given or something made and, second, should it be conceived in individual or social terms? These two oppositions generate four basic strands of modern thought. The first, opting for the given and the individual, treats the self, the 'I', as something inner and unique, something that is prior to the acts it performs, an inner core which is variously expressed (or not expressed) in word and deed. The second, combining the given and the social, emphasizes that the self is determined by its origins and social attributes: you are male or female, white or black, British or American, and so on, and these are primary facts, givens of the subject or self. The third, combining the individual and the made, emphasizes the changing nature of a self, which becomes what is through its particular acts. Finally, the combination of the social and the made stresses that I become what I am through the various subject positions I occupy, as a boss than a worker, rich rather than poor (Culler 1997: 110).

Like Culler, and indeed Shakespeare, Slater observes how in a post-traditional society someone's position in the status order is no longer fixed but is to a great extent represented through the material goods to which they have access (Slater 1998: 30). Meanwhile Featherstone (2007) describes how powerfully signs and images traverse the media to create ever-changing objects of personal desire. Thus advertising has become as much about stimulating aspirations which crave satisfaction as providing accurate information about products (Williamson 1978; cf. Ries and Trout 2001: 5). Acquisition in most forms demands a certain amount of wealth and therefore it is no surprise that self-help shelves are full of books about how to make more money: for example *The Millionaire Mind* (Stanley 2002), *Rich Dad ...Poor Dad* (Kyosaki 2011) and *I Can Make You Rich* (McKenna 2007b).

Additionally, there are now unprecedented sources of 'advice' available from ranks of commentators whose job is to push what is new in the arts, leisure, media and fashion towards potential consumers through lifestyle magazines, 'makeover' programmes (Heller 2007), talk shows and other popular texts (Bell and Hollows 2005). The media are saturated with 'heritage', cookery, diet, décor and gardening programmes which, while not strictly self-help material as defined in this thesis, all suggest that various kinds of life transformation can be quickly achieved as a result of adopting certain simple financial, cosmetic, architectural or dietary strategies. But more significantly for the present work, there has been a remarkable growth of both qualified and unqualified therapists and educationalists (Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005: 1-10) offering very personal advice and interventions from various perspectives (cf. Seligman 2007: 16-29; Makari 2008; Gillan 2007: 1-25; Orlans and Van Scoyoc 2008: 1-19; Ong and Van Dulman 2006; Snyder and Lopez 2006). And when counsellors write self-help books they help to 'reify' a discursive space in

which people can not only describe and construct their self-reflective experience but also identify their aspirations more clearly; even though in practice personal choice is always limited by personal circumstances.

Theorists like Ashley (1997) and Slater (1998) have a particular interest in examining how personal and group identity grows from a cultural matrix and emerges through the interaction of natural and manufactured desires; in particular the consumption of mass-produced objects and images. Likewise Lury (1996: 81) reflects on how commodities may move beyond their primary function to take on a cultural and symbolic meaning which individuals and groups use to in an attempt to distinguish themselves from others, whilst simultaneously subjecting themselves to the vagaries of current fashion. Amongst such commodities might be included self-help books themselves which are certainly objects of desire according to their ever-expanding sales statistics. Their subgenres are as subject to stylistic modification as other commercial products and they are by definition in the identity-forming business (PR Web (2011):

<http://www.prwebdirect.com/releases/2006/9/prweb440011.php>,  
accessed 17 March 2011).

Thus particularly germane to the present study of genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help genre is the way that the book trade stimulates the emergence of distinct reading constituencies. For example the symbiotic 'co-dependent' and 'survivor' communities have acquired their 'own' subgenres (Kaminer 1990; Rapping 1996) in both real bookshops and the virtual world. In this way a 'dedicated' discursive space (Sheridan 1980: 106) has been created where the preoccupations associated with these relatively recent categories can be articulated (Salerno 2005), thereby offering new 'subject positions' for people to inhabit and a concomitant 'script' for them to articulate. For example the discourse of co-dependency, as articulated by Melody Beattie (1989) among others, . . . utilises a distinctive lexicon in which the terms such as 'recovery', 'shame', 'boundary', 'surrender' and 'empowerment' take on specific therapeutic significance.

Lacan (1997) famously notes that humans unconsciously acquire a pre-existent 'library of scripts' by which to live as they enter into the symbolic order of language during childhood. But when people buy self-help books they are *deliberately* choosing to 'reconfigure' themselves in a certain way through language. Indeed the

idea of the mutable human 'script' which can be modified for the better is specifically exploited by a number of self-help authors. These include Berne (1964) writing on transactional analysis and thus dealing with unconsciously-adopted subject positions in *Games People Play*; Harris (1969) in *I'm OK – You're OK*; Ash and Gerard (2006) in *Rewrite Your Life: How to Turn Your Negative Thoughts into Positive Scripts and Change Your Life*; and Harling (2008) in *Rewriting Your Emotional Script*. Similarly the Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) industry is predicated on encouraging people to pay attention to their habits of communication and 'reframe' their perceptions using new language and communicative structures (O'Connor and McDermott 1996). This is also the technique advocated in Paul McKenna's series of best-sellers: *Change Your Life in Seven Days* (2004); *Instant Confidence* (2006b); *I Can Make You Thin* (2007a); *I Can Make You Rich* (2007b), *I Can Make You Happy* (2011) etc.

As McKenna's titles indicate, reader and advice-giver are, superficially at least, clearly distinguished entities who know their place, even though they are unlikely to term this their 'subject position'. One is the suppliant and one is the 'supplier' - that is the point of buying a self-help book. Likewise, all self-help books share a simple trajectory. They are overtly designed to solve problems for their readers - not to increase their stress by offering various interpretative options or literary complexity. Indeed the psychologist and social commentator McAdams (2006: 124-6) distils the generic message into five themes:

1. The inner self is good, true and innocent
2. The outer world cannot be trusted
3. Redemption lies in the actualization of the self
4. In order to be redeemed you must follow a step by step plan
5. If you follow the plan and stay true to yourself, you can have almost anything

What could be more straightforward? However postmodern criticism points out that the seemingly axiomatic language of personal choice, free will and self-determination is actually historically and culturally contingent (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987: 105; see also Chapter 3, *The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual*, above). Thus Gergen (1991) notes how critical attention has moved away from discussing the self as a unique entity shaped by inherent traits and conscious effort towards discussing how a 'self' may be theorised as a construct which

emerges, to some extent unconsciously, as a result of material circumstances and ideology.

Even more germane to the present study of the discourse and subjectivity in self-help genre is Gergen's observation that cultural life in the twentieth century was dominated by two contrasting discourses of assertive self-hood: the first a continuation of the nineteenth-century Romanticist view which valorizes the personal expression of passion, soul, creativity, and intuition; and the second the modernist position which privileges reason, science, progress and conscious intentions (Gergen 1991: 6; cf. Slater 1998: 9). Likewise Sim (2005: 312) considers the latter discourse to have created the 'entrepreneurial subject' whose development and self-realization has come to be regarded as a central objective (if not the central objective) of twentieth century Western culture. However Gergen argues that these two established 'vocabularies' of individualistic expression are generally falling into disuse now because people have become 'saturated' with various technologies of communication which offer an unprecedented range of life-style choices (cf. Schwartz 2005) in what Foley (2010: 31-48) identifies as a 'culture of entitlement'. As a result, individuals exist in a continuous state of potential construction and re-construction which demands no ideological allegiance or long-term commitment from them. Indeed Fromm (1942) suggests that 'anonymous authority' exerts a cultural pressure which is all the more powerful for being invisible, source-less, and thus difficult to detect and resist (cf. Foley 2010: 10). Likewise, Gergen's point (1991) is that even as postmodernity celebrates the processes of chaos, variety and change, it subverts romantic visions of the self as a self-governing instrumental spirit and undermines the modernist project of universal rational progress to which someone might dedicate themselves (cf. Taylor 1989: 456- 491; Sim 2005: 290, 312; McClay 2006: 179-80).

Yet although the notion of a 'knowable internal core' is no longer tenable for the postmodern theorist, even Foucault recognises that ordinary people continue to cling to old assumptions, not least when they are seeking guidance:

"In the Californian cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what our true self is (Foucault 1984: 362). Certainly the burgeoning sales figures for

self-help books indicate that essential, instrumental and congruent selfhood is just what purchasers long to read about "on the journey to bring meaning and fulfilment in this busy, sometimes chaotic life that each of us has chosen" (Wilson Schaef 2000: ix). Indeed famous titles such as *The Road Less Travelled* (Peck 1978) and *Awaken the Giant Within* (Robbins 1992) imply that both the 'ontosphere' (a term here co-opted for the first time into critical theory from the discourses of artificial intelligence (AI) and semantic web design [Maedche and Staab 2001; Bosca *et al* 2005] which use it to denote the site at which sets of concepts and their interrelations operate axiomatically and multi-dimensionally in a specific domain) of the 'romantic individualist' who persistently follows his or her own path, and the 'ontosphere' of the 'entrepreneurial' modern agent who can bring about radical improvement for himself or herself, both continue to flourish within their covers. Thus Peck (1978: 14) insists that meeting and solving problems with confidence in the possibilities of one's own resilient and flexible agency is what gives life meaning and declares that "We know the world only through our relationship to it. Therefore to know the world, we must not only examine it but we must simultaneously examine the examiner" (1978: 53). Furthermore he asserts that, "The feeling of being valuable ... is essential to mental health and is a cornerstone of self-discipline" (1978: 23). Similarly Robbins advises readers that, "Any time you sincerely want to make a change, the first thing you must do is to raise your standards" (1992: 24). Thereafter he assures them that, "It's our decisions, not the conditions of our lives that determine our destiny" (1992: 33). However it must also be acknowledged that in spite of their championing of essential self-hood, neither Peck nor Robbins underestimate the challenges to identity which must be negotiated as changes in circumstances arise and death approaches (Peck 1978: 66-81; Robbins 420-433).

Yet while the self-help genre proposes optimistic strategies for the conscious development of self-esteem (e.g. Fennell 2009; Branch and Wilson 2009) and the acquisition of desired external 'goods' (e.g. Templar 2006), thereby apparently encouraging a sense of agency in its readers, critical analysis of the genre indicates that it must also inevitably situate them as dependent subjects who initially define themselves as lacking and may even have this belief *reinforced* by their choice of publication. After all, why buy a book called *Your Erroneous Zones* (Dyer 1976)

unless you perceive yourself, or significant others, to be in error? As Foucault declares:

There are two meanings to the word subject: subject to someone else's control and dependence, and tied to his [sic] own identity by a conscience and self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to (Foucault 1982: 212).

For in spite of someone's intention to improve his or her life through reading a helpful book, the publishing industry might also be said to be *undermining* that person's confidence in their own resilience through its necessary insistence on problematising issues with which they can identify: a process explored in *SHAM (Self-Help and Actualization Movement): How the Gurus of the Self-Help Movement Make Us Helpless* (Salerno 2005: 1-19 and *passim*), *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture is Eroding Self-Reliance* (Hoff Sommers and Satel 2005) and *The Last Self-Help Book You'll Ever Need* (Pearsall 2005: 9-72). On the surface self-help books purport to offer hope to those who are prepared to define themselves in some way as lacking: codependent, depressed, unconfident, poor, socially inept etc. Yet while Louise Hay (2004b) assures her readers that *You Can Heal Your Life* (particularly through the repetition of positive affirmations about one's value), potential disillusion and a sense of failure await people for whom the advice does not work (cf. Salerno 2005: 7). Indeed a deconstructive reading of Hay's seemingly optimistic opening paragraph indicates that it will be the reader's fault if things do not turn out well:

What we think about ourselves becomes the truth for us. I believe that everyone ... is responsible for everything in our lives, the best and the worst ... the thoughts we think and the words we speak create our experiences. The Universe totally supports us in every thought we choose to think and believe (Hay 2004b: 1).

Hay's book deals with physical ailments as well as mental discomfort and has been an enduring bestseller. So clearly her hopeful message resonates with many. Yet De Botton suggests that Western bookshops and authors may unintentionally sadden people by offering them autobiographies of self-made heroes and manuals of transformation which promise the rapid attainment of vast wealth and great happiness to the 'not-yet made' (De Botton 2004: 57) who may never actually get to where they long to be. His point is that even ostensibly upbeat publications can make their readers feel like failures if they do not eventually achieve the kinds of success which they have been promised.



Moreover, although it has been demonstrated that the therapeutic value of having some personal choice is more than anecdotal (Langer and Rodain 1975), it also seems there are limits to what people can *really* do to change their lives; a situation which is acknowledged by at least some self-help writers (e.g. Seligman 2007; Mellowship 2008). Even though someone may take the initiative to read a self-help book whose writer confidently claims the power to *solve* certain problems, the remarkable number of sequels and spin-offs produced by 'successful' authors suggests that these problems tend to persist and that the reader continues to be subject to anxieties. Presumably the book industry is very happy with this situation. For example in 1987 Susan Jeffers encouraged her readers to *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* (new edition scheduled for 2011). Having introduced her premise on page 16, which is that all you have to do to conquer fear is to develop more trust in your ability to handle whatever comes your way, she reiterates this assurance in various forms until page 219. For example, Chapter 2 advises readers to 'Let go of holding on'; Chapter 5 encourages them to 'Drop the heavy baggage'; and Chapter 18 tells them to 'Trust the Grand Design' (18). But clearly Jeffers and her publishers expected readers to go on buying her message because in 1996 she was exhorting them to *End the Struggle and Dance with Life*. In this book she explains that:

I wrote *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* to help you feel more powerful in the face of your fears. Clearly, handling our fears is an essential part of the tapestry of a life well-lived. *End the Struggle and Dance With Life* was written to help you with an equally important part of this great tapestry – easing the strain of everyday living and bringing into your life more enjoyment, appreciation and peace (Jeffers 1996: 3)

Yet it seems that there was still more embroidery to be done because in 2003 Jeffers produced *Embracing Uncertainty: Achieving Peace of Mind as We Face the Unknown*. In this publication she reminds her readers on page 6 that life is uncertain, assuring them on page 8 that it is a relief to surrender to what is uncontrollable. Therefore, she continues, one should seek to make the best of how things are (*passim*). Jeffers' *oeuvre* and the many other sequels which populate the self-help *corpus* indicate that readers and publishers do not mind repetition. Indeed reading advice may perhaps become a substitute for doing something more challenging. As Salerno (2005:4) somewhat irritably observes, aspiration is not the same as achievement. Nevertheless engagement with self-help literature clearly satisfies readers in significant ways - whether or not they are encouraged to take definitive action as a result or merely use the texts as palliatives.

Thus in critical terms, while from one perspective self-help books can be read as late-modern, humanist products predicated on optimistic notions of 'self-improvement' and progress (Mautner 2000: 256), from another the genre may be construed as a defensive reaction to fearfully identified postmodern assaults on traditional and hitherto un-problematized ideas about identity and agency, such as are discussed by Lasch (1979; 1985), Holstein and Gubrium (1999) and Gubrium and Holstein (2000). In the second case self-help books can be said to function as comforters as much as mentors. Yet in spite of their benign declared intentions, *all* self-help books, to a greater or lesser extent, implicitly construct their subject/reader as a "beleaguered" entity (Lasch 1985: 16) which is somehow less than it could be: at best a project to be completed and at worst a problem to be solved. Moreover not one of them can alter the fact that the processes of birth, ageing and death play out through immanent experiences of a physical, emotional and spiritual nature which individuals must ultimately endure without textual mediation. Nevertheless the truly remarkable popularity of self-help books means they are worth critical attention as a significant discursive phenomenon which has emerged in response to both quotidian discomforts and existential anxiety; thereby creating an ostensibly comforting space in which readers can temporarily situate themselves as proactive selves in search of contingent solutions, and thus become subjects in search of transformation. This necessary proximity of 'self' and 'subject' within their pages makes them a remarkable phenomenon for the critical theorist. Furthermore, it is one which can be subjected to systematic structural analysis, as the following section demonstrates.

#### **7.4 Three Strata of 'Subject Activity' in Self-Help Books**

This chapter has so far contrasted the notion of traditional, holistic identity, which is considered to be axiomatic in 'real life' and which manifests 'unselfconsciously' in the pages of self-help books, with the way in which, by their insistence on language as the source of meaningful experience, post-structuralist critics have moved the psychological centre of gravity of the individual from immediate personal experience into the social realm of a-personally constructed subjectivity (Burr 1995: 40). Yet this interesting critical debate is mostly couched in broad terms with little illustrative material. Therefore, the final section of this chapter seeks to contribute to this

conversation by showing more specifically how multi-layered 'subject activity' is present in self-help books beneath the superficial stories of life-challenged but ultimately triumphant 'real people' which constitute the surface of these texts. In order to explain more clearly how the self-help 'subject' is simultaneously engaged with the genre at three levels, the following synchronic model has been co-opted from stratigraphy. This sub-discipline of both geo-science (Toghill 2002: 15) and archaeology (Jeske and Douglas 2003) involves the study of the layered sequence of sedimentary rocks (*strata*).

Three Strata of Subject Activity in Self-Help Books	
<p><i>Super-stratum</i></p> <p>(Contingent Level)</p>	<p>The superficial, self-conscious level of ostensible personal choice and consumption relating to health, wealth, relationships, work, status, spiritual comfort etc. These aspirational discourses may often be gender-inflected (many self-help books are aimed at women) and are much influenced by the media, advertising and fashion to which readers willingly subject themselves. Self-help books vary widely in subject matter and approach at this contingent, epistemological level where the assumption is that it is possible to 'know' about things and choose to take appropriate action.</p>
<p><i>Inter-stratum</i></p> <p>('Actantial' Level)</p>	<p>The deeper, 'actantial' level at which archetypal, a-personal subject positions such as 'dispatcher' 'hero', 'donor', 'seeker', 'sought for person', 'helper' etc. (cf. Propp 1968 79-80) operate. These "fundamental roles at the level of narrative deep structure" (Prince 1987: 1) are necessarily present in the dynamic of every self-help book. Their presence may be explicitly addressed in the text (often in titles) or may be intuited implicitly as sub-text. The reader may occupy a number of these positions simultaneously. The level is not gender-inflected: women can be the 'heroes', 'helpers' and 'villains' of self-help books.</p>
<p><i>Sub-stratum</i></p> <p>(Ontological Level)</p>	<p>The ontological foundation of underlying Western liberal-humanist ideology which informs contemporary self-help books. There are axiomatic assumptions here about individualism, entitlement, instrumentality and what it means to be human. Not gender-inflected.</p>

### ***Super-stratum***

It is the function of self-help books to describe and classify people's problems and to offer goals and solutions. They are not concerned with discussing an abstract self/subject which can be opined by the powers of disengaged reason. Rather, they deal with what Taylor famously calls 'the affirmation of ordinary life'. That is, with "those aspects of life concerned with production and reproduction [such as] labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family" (Taylor 1989: 211). In his view, although satisfaction will always be a subjective personal experience (cf. Keynes and Haidt 2003) inasmuch as different people may feel differently about the same situation, it is most likely to be experienced, or indeed be perceived as lacking, when individuals engage in the specifics of life, such as defined activities, or when they aspire towards gaining certain possessions or accomplishments. Similarly, although the fundamental movement from 'lack to lack liquidated' is a constant dynamic in advice literature (Dolby 2005: 4-5; 39-40), there are numerous topical variables. This breadth of concern can be seen, for example, in the Contents pages of *500 of the Most Important Stress-Busting Tips You'll Ever Need* (Olivier 2002) which promise advice on 'home', 'work and money', 'health', 'emotions' and 'relationships' (cf. Fried and Schultis 1995; Reis and Gable 2003; Lyubomirsky 2007: 13; Hecht 2007: vii-viii; see also Appendix C, Some Self-Help Subgenres, below). However Taylor (1989), MacIntyre (1984), Giddens (1991; 1992) and Schrag (1988; 1997; 2003) remind us that the various intrinsic or extrinsic 'goods' which someone may yearn for tend to be contingent formations linked to a particular time and social situation. Therefore the publishers of self-help books are unlikely ever to run out of new subject matter. For example, some people now hope to 'recover' from 'co-dependency' (an unhealthy preoccupation with the care of others) and the advice market provides many publications to help them do so. But the term 'codependent' only emerged into therapeutic discourse during the 1980s (Mellody 2002: Appendix). Likewise, an examination of publications listed by Amazon<sup>6</sup>.uk suggests that the discourse of 'anger management' only began to be of fashionable concern during the 1990s.

Such 'superficial' matters occupy the '*super-stratum*' of the self-help book which offers advice about how to cope with daily living rather than archetypal dilemmas. Yet observation suggests that even ostensibly materialistic texts such as *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill 1937) or *The Official Guide to Success* (Hopkins 1982) reflect to

some extent on personal ethics, implying that external 'goods' are most likely to manifest once someone achieves a successful internal economy of self-esteem and respect for others through participating in the narrative of transformation which is the 'hypotext' of all self-help books. This 'actantial' level of engagement below the quotidian is described below as the *inter-stratum*.

### ***Inter-stratum***

The 'actantial' level of subject activity in the self-help book, which is here described as the *inter-stratum*, corresponds to the 'meta-personal' roles and interactions identified by Herman (1995) as units in the universal 'grammar' of narrative (see also Chapter 6, *The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial' Genre*, above). Beneath the contingent surface preoccupations of the genre lie archetypal figures and relationships. As well as the presence of individual 'subject actants' such as 'dispatcher', 'hero', 'donor' etc., it is also possible to detect a number of 'binary oppositions' or dyads in operation: for example victim/victor; helper/helped; seeker/sought. Readers and writers occupy a variety of these a-personal subject positions, sometimes even simultaneously. For example, it seems obvious that the writer of a self-help book is a 'helper'. But so, in a way, is the reader - even if they only manage to help themselves as far as the bookshop. Moreover the reader helps the writer to earn a living and thus occupies the powerful subject position of patron or 'donor' - even as he or she is defining themselves as a 'victim' in need of advice. Indeed the reader will always remain the 'sought for person' in the eyes of a publisher whose imperative is to sell as many books as possible. Readers notionally 'dispatch' themselves on a journey towards feeling better. But the writer is a more obvious 'dispatcher' inasmuch as he or she proposes certain goals within the text, sometimes setting explicit tasks and targets for the reader to attempt. The 'villain' may be considered either an internal force: comprising for example the reader's feelings and attitudes; or an external one: comprising the reader's distressing circumstances and relationships. These dynamics are to be seen in the passage below where Behrendt and Tuccillo (2005: 182) assure their readership that:

There's a million and one things you can do after a breakup; what you do in that time – yoga, affirmation tapes, murder – is your business. But basically you're going to have to feel the pain, and you're going to have to go through it, and then you're going to have to get over it. All we can try to do in this book is help you do it differently.

*He's Just Not That Into You* hardly deals with profound suffering. Nevertheless, embedded in the lines above are several universal actants: both abstract and concrete. Pain is clearly a 'villain' but may also be construed as a 'dispatcher' inasmuch as it goads the reader into action. Meanwhile the reader starts as a 'victim' but learns to 'go through it' and 'get over it', ultimately becoming a 'hero'. Moreover the text is overtly constituted as a 'helper'. The 'transformed individual' is the 'sought for person' and the whole drive of this publication, and indeed *any* self-help book, is to move the reader from being a 'victim' to being a 'victor'. Likewise, Dyer (1992: 7) exhorts his readers to accept that they have a "heroic mission" to find a purpose in life. But below this 'actantial' level of powerful yet a-personal activity in the self-help book sits the largely unarticulated humanistic *ethos* on which all advice literature is predicated. This ontological assumption that people are entitled to experience the most satisfactory life available to them is the *sub-stratum* of the self-help genre.

### ***Sub-stratum***

At the deepest level, beneath their varied surface topics and even beneath the monomythic narrative of transformation described in the section above, *all* self-help books share an ontology of instrumental individualism (see also Chapter 3, The Self-Help Book and the Instrumental Individual, above). That is, each one is predicated on the essentialist ideology that it is possible for someone to take steps to transform their life for the better - however that process may be enacted. Self-help books necessarily assume that there exists a unique, authentic entity at the centre of personal experience which can be encouraged towards 'optimum living' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 99) even though there are many versions of 'happiness' and the 'satisfactory life' has been differently construed in classical philosophy, Christian teaching, Renaissance humanism, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, nineteenth-century secularism, post-Freudian psychology and postmodern thought (Taylor 1989, 1992, 2007; MacIntyre 2002; Singer 1997; Grayling 2004; Foley

2010). All these commentators acknowledge the emergent Western respect for the personal experience of the individual, as do Foley (2010: 31-48) and Twenge and Campbell (2010). Therefore it is no surprise to find that beneath the superficial preoccupations of self-help literature (*super-stratum*) and beneath the archetypal monomyth of a-personal subject-activity which inhabits the *inter-stratum* of each self-help book as described above, lies the same ontology which takes it for granted that each person is a unified, coherent and rational entity worthy of experiencing the best that life can offer. Of course, by definition 'ontologies' deal with the essence of things and thus operate in terms of axiomatic assumptions rather than specific articulations so that it is rare to find direct statements about them. Nevertheless, it is possible to find ontological traces in some self-help texts. For example Colgrove *et al* (1976: 64) in *How to Survive the Loss of a Love* exhort their readers thus: "Use any body of knowledge you find comforting, inspiring or uplifting – explore it, lean on it, grow from it, enjoy it". Even though this publication is clearly limited in its immediate concerns, the assumption made here that the individual has a right to flourish is surely part of the essentialist discourse of liberal humanism which has for so long informed modern Western thought (Burr 1995: 117; Rose 1989). Similarly, titles like *How to Get What You Want* (Gray 1999) and *Get the Life You Want* (Bandler 2008) are unequivocal in their assertion of someone's right to transform their existence according to their own wishes. Furthermore, the essentialist ontology is active in the following lines from *Meditations for Living in Balance*:

[Human beings are] spiritual, emotional, and feeling creatures who need much more than chaotic rushing and materialism ... We need to grow. We need to be as fully alive as we can be ... We need to be productive. We need to be loving. We need to be connected. We need to participate in our lives in a way that is full and meaningful (Wilson Schaef 2000: ix).

The use of the pronoun 'we' in the above quotation indicates that ontology of entitled self-hood is not narcissistic in the sense of being oblivious to the existence of others. But as the three-layer stratigraphic model above shows, it is the implicit foundation on which the both the universal monomyth of transformation (*inter-stratum*) and the topical diversity of the self-help genre (*super-stratum*) rest.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has made a significant contribution to the critical conversation about self and subjectivity as a result of considering the relationship between the self-help genre and its readership in structuralist terms. Having first defined the terms 'self' and 'subject' conventionally and then acknowledged the well-established theoretical distinction which is made between them whereby the first term denotes an essential entity whereas the second relates to a discursively-constructed phenomenon, it has shown, by means of an analysis which draws abductively on both theory and empirical evidence, how these two notions co-exist as a *dyad* within the pages of the self-help book. The 'self' inhabits the surface text of individual publications whose content addresses the various quotidian needs of the readership. Meanwhile the 'subject' participates in the underlying monomyth of transformation which these texts all embody at the deeper level. Furthermore, as a result of adopting a stratigraphic model, it has been possible to discuss in some detail how the 'self' and 'subject' which cohabit in self-help books relate not just to each other but also to the underlying essentialist ontology on which the genre as a whole is necessarily predicated. To the best of my knowledge this the first time that the 'self' and the 'subject' have been constituted as a dyad and also the first time that such 'stratigraphic' analysis has been applied to the self-help genre. Therefore the content of this chapter is offered as a contribution to knowledge.



## 8 Conclusion

This project began with the assumption that a critical investigation using selected structuralist and post-structuralist theory into 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' in relation to the contemporary self-help book would reveal points of interest about this group of texts. Not only did each of the initial research questions reveal a number of hitherto completely unconsidered aspects of the project and functioning of the self-help book, concisely revisited under the headings below, but they also contributed to a more general and critical and methodological conversation, as explained thereafter.

### 1 What is the cultural matrix of the contemporary self-help book?

The cultural matrix of the contemporary self-help book is richly over-determined and incorporates elements from a variety of discourses. A remarkable number of these publications, past and present, have originated from the USA and various commentators have linked the genre in broad terms with an internalisation of the early American pioneering spirit which characteristically assumed that life could be transformed for the better by taking action in a new society where self-sufficiency was essential. Therefore, although it is stressed that this research has not sought to make a contribution to American Studies, the transatlantic connection has been acknowledged (especially in Chapter 2). Likewise the archetypal 'quest' meme which is associated with the aspirations of the American Dream was shown to be intrinsic to the paradigmatic dynamic of the self-help genre (Chapter 2 and Chapter 5). However there have been other powerful influences on self-help books: notably Protestant Reformation ideology, the Puritan work ethic, American Revivalism, and the Transcendentalist movement. These cultural phenomena, along with the 'person-centred' ideologies of Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment optimism, Romantic individualism, the promises of progressive modernity and the New Age engagement with capitalism, as has been seen, can all be said to have contributed to the *ethos* of self-reflection which now dominates contemporary Western society and finds expression in self-help books. All, in various ways, assert the primacy of personal experience above the constraints of institutional orthodoxy; a view which is the *sine qua non* of self-help literature past and present.

As has been argued, European habits of reading improving texts during the Reformation migrated to Protestant New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries where it became incumbent on the pioneering individual to strive for achievement both spiritually and materially: an entrepreneurial combination which endures in today's self-help books. This master narrative of personal redemption was subsequently reinforced by various, mostly American, religious 'revivals', traces of whose emotive rhetoric lingers in the pages of some contemporary self-help publications as the extract from *End the Struggle and Dance with Life* (Jeffers 1996) in Chapter 2 demonstrates. But alongside these Christian revivals, the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of metaphysical, creedless 'religion' such as American Transcendentalism. Its practitioners drew upon intuition, ritual, and magic in order to explore the landscape of the *psyche* and the movement influenced the development of the self-help book for four reasons: unconventional spiritual thinking was encouraged; it proclaimed that self-knowledge could occur as a result of direct engagement with a universal power without the mediation of external authorities; there was a belief in infinite personal potential; and its highly varied sources of inspiration included Eastern as well as Western philosophy, thus prefiguring the eclecticism of contemporary self-help literature.

In considering these diachronic causations, it has been shown how the *locus* of ethical authority inexorably shifted from established institutions to favour personal judgement, opening the way for increased lay activity, religious experimentation and eventually, it has been argued, to the emergence of the contemporary self-help book where subjective personal experiences are the *sine qua non*. This rich background suggests that the existing, often commonplace, knowledge about the cultural matrix of the self-help book is rather limited.

But, in addition, as research into the genre's historical and cultural matrix proceeded it became clear that a synchronic assumption about individual instrumentality necessarily exists beneath all the various diachronic movements described above. Furthermore, it has been argued that this trans-ideological ethic is intrinsic to advice literature which assumes, whatever its particular topic or register, that personal agency exists and that there are strategies which someone can adopt to live a satisfactory life, however that ideal might be construed at any given time. Clearly, this notion of the trans-ideological 'instrumental individual' has not previously been overtly linked with self-help literature to any significant extent - perhaps because the

concept is less easy to define and describe than the historical events or schools of thought mentioned above. One original contribution to knowledge of this thesis, then, consists in the formulation of the metaphysical matrix of the self-help genre in conjunction with the notion of personal agency as it has been constituted at various times. The assumption that the autonomous, self-reflexive and 'questing' subject exists is, after all, the foundation on which *all* self-help books rest, whatever their period and however trivial or serious their particular content may be. It has been argued that this assumption, in itself, is worth interrogating.

The instrumental personal ethic identified above has ancient roots in Western ideology and there have been both 'stoic' and 'eudemonic' ideas about what kind of behaviour makes for a satisfactory life. Moreover the degree to which the individual might assume responsibility for creating and expressing his or her identity appears to have increased over time (Chapter 3). Nevertheless, in spite of the unprecedented choice of both spiritual and material 'goods' to which one might now aspire and the currently entrenched Western culture of personal entitlement, it seems that this 'freedom' has not made people happier. Ironically the contention exists that that having extensive life-style choices and opportunities for self-reflexivity may actually cause anxiety. Moreover the global economic uncertainties and the relativism of postmodern life in which traditional values have become discredited have also reportedly produced a deep sense of insecurity. Therefore this thesis has suggested that contemporary readers of self-help literature may be looking as much for comfort as for advice. This seems to be borne out by the very recently emergent subgenre of the self-help book which offers both practical suggestions for frugal living and the implicit promise that it is possible to 'live better on less'. Moreover the many self-help publications which cover similar ground to each other and the remarkable series of sequels which successful publications generate has fuelled the implicit suggestion in this thesis that readers do not necessarily expect their problems to be 'solved' but find some satisfaction in revisiting the same topic.

However, whilst recognising the self-help genre's overt good intentions to intervene positively in people's lives through its characteristic discourse of personal 'empowerment', this research has also shown how the reader is inevitably situated as an a-personal subject who is somehow 'lacking': at best a project to be worked upon and at worst a problem to be fixed. Nevertheless the enduring popularity of

self-help literature surely demonstrates how determinedly people strive to retain some sense of localised agency and assert their right to self-determination in shifting, postmodern circumstances. This thesis has argued that the 'small narratives' of personal experience and the traditional 'grand narratives' on which ethical assumptions have traditionally been grounded, but which have been somewhat devalued by critical theory, continue to flourish in contemporary demotic discourse, notably in self-help books. Moreover its deconstruction here is, perhaps, not just a significant contribution to the better understanding of the cultural matrix of this genre but a contribution to the understanding of the popular conception of the fate of the narrative of the self in postmodernism.

## **2 To what extent is this genre part of the 'therapeutic turn' which some commentators detect in contemporary society?**

A number of commentators have noted the pervasive presence of a comparatively recent 'therapeutic' discourse in contemporary society which transforms hitherto unremarkable human experiences into problems which require 'treatment'. Having acknowledged such observations (Chapter 4), this thesis showed in more detail how self-help literature is a significant participant in this process, not least because its publishers have a vested interest in 'pathologising' normal life events in order to extend their market. Thus the commercial imperative helps to create a therapeutically-nuanced lexicon which has come to permeate general conversation as new issues of personal concern are defined and talked about in the media. Comparatively recent topics include 'self-esteem', 'anger management', 'emotional intelligence', 'recovery' and 'codependence', all of which now have substantial self-help literature associated with them. Likewise the phrase 'post-traumatic stress disorder', which originally referred specifically to the pernicious psychological effects of combat, has been shown to have undergone a process of lexical 'democratisation' so that it is now uninhibitedly applied to the after-effects of other difficult, though not life-threatening, situations and has acquired a self-help subgenre of its own. As a result of gathering such specific linguistic evidence, this research has been able to show more clearly how the reflexive self-help genre operates as both a responsive and a generative participant in demotic therapeutic discourse. It is responsive because it seeks to palliate personal discomfort by

addressing whatever issues are currently of concern to its readership. But it is also generative because its producers seek to expand their market by identifying new issues of concern, thereby alerting people to 'problems' of which they might perhaps have otherwise remained happily unaware,

A second way in which the self-help genre has become part of pervasive therapeutic discourse is through its dominant presence in bookshops and the frequency with which it is discussed in the media. This thesis has argued, for example, that successful authors, such as John Gray who wrote *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), Susan Jeffers who wrote *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway* (1987) and Paul McKenna who has over the years promised to make his readers happy, thin, rich and stress-free, effectively become 'brands' in the public's perception as they are strenuously promoted by their publishers through intensive advertising, including special displays in shops and media appearances by the authors. Indeed the work of successful writers may generate a notional 'franchise' which comprises 'symbiotic' materials such as sequels, CDs, workbooks, workshops etc., all of which serve further to spread the discourse of self-help throughout popular culture.

The many textual examples from primary sources presented throughout the thesis have been compiled over a number of years and thus undoubtedly make an original contribution to the understanding of how self-help literature operates as part of contemporary demotic 'therapeutic' discourse. But in addition, as a result of reflecting on how the notion of self-help has impacted on demotic culture, it became clear that contemporary 'therapeutic discourse', and by extension *other* discourses, can be justifiably compared with the non-linear sets of relationships which scientists call 'complex systems': for example when discussing neurological networks, economic activity and climate. This is because a nameable discourse such as medicine, law, or indeed self-development, is a protean phenomenon made up of a multitude of lexical elements and human praxis which organise themselves without the benefit of a central controller into a collective whole which, although it has fuzzy boundaries, nevertheless contains identifiable patterns of characteristic thought and activity (Chapter 4). To the best of my knowledge this particular comparison is a new juxtaposition of ideas and the notion of discursive 'complexity' is likely to provide a fruitful basis for future research.

### 3 What kind of discursive strategies are characteristically used to promote personal transformation in the reader?

Self-help books set out to change people's experience for the better by articulating common problems of everyday life, much simplified, and then proffering advice in attractive, accessible and affordable ways. All are predicated on the problem/solution model as described in Chapter 5. Since these artfully-produced products depend on linguistic strategies to hook and hold their readers' attention, it was not difficult to identify some recurring tropes such as eye-catching titles, striking metaphors, comforting affirmations, embedded exemplary narrative, the use of number, cultural allusions and direct address to the reader (see Appendix B: Some Characteristic Signifying Practices Found in Self-Help Books). Moreover many publications were found to rely very heavily on personal testimony in order to engage and motivate people and all carried promotional 'puffs' on their covers (see Appendix A: 15 Case Study Texts).

However two covert but nevertheless significant dynamics were found to operate beneath these superficial signifying practices, both of which surely contribute to the genre's putative effect. Firstly, since self-help publications can do nothing directly to solve people's problems but can only motivate individuals into useful action, much effort goes into *persuading* people to change their attitudes. Indeed the following sequence seems to be universally present in self-help books, albeit with more or less elaboration. Problems and desired outcomes are identified, for example on the book cover and introductory chapters. Then solutions and suggestions for action are offered and 'evidence' about why the advice should be accepted is provided. This evidence is sometimes factual but very often consists of anecdotal stories about other people with usefully unspecific names who have dealt successfully with the same situation. While some texts are briskly didactic and direct, others are more sympathetic and discursive. But the 'persuasive imperative' is a constant.

Secondly, it has been demonstrated that self-help books are both quotidian and mythic: the former because their purpose is to deal with everyday problems; the latter because they are fundamentally predicated on an archetype of transformation. This means that whatever their variations of topic or register, each book can be said to re-articulate the ancient 'mono-mythic' story in which a 'victim' struggles

heroically with circumstances until he or she triumphs. Yet although the *mytheme* of the hero's journey is an intrinsic metaphor in this literature and thus constitutes a significant discursive element, the personal 'quest' can take extremely different forms and people may desire very different things: health, wealth, emotional satisfaction, better employment etc.

Thus close reading of *Self-Help* (Smiles 1859) and *The Secret* (Byrne 2006) has provided extensive evidence of how the self-help genre is able to accommodate both Apollonian and Dionysian ethics. The former articulates a traditional 'discourse of endeavour' and is packed with stories about self-made men. The latter is an advocate of 'magical thinking' which insists that the universe will grant your wishes if only you are specific enough about them and believe that you really deserve to have your dreams realised. *The Secret* is the more artfully 'packaged' of the two publications and is awash with textual tropes and typographic signifiers as Chapter 5 describes. But *Self Help*, though unremarkable in its physical presentation of material, employs its own characteristically direct rhetoric to reinforce, by means of an unrelenting series of worthy examples, its message that hard work gets results. Thus these ideologically polarised publications both employ certain 'tricks of the trade' and it was entertaining to compare their strategies in detail. But more significantly, the analysis consisted of an empirical engagement with primary texts which resulted in an original contribution to knowledge about the self-help book and the overt and covert discursive strategies which are characteristically used to promote transformation in the reader.

#### **4        How is the self-help book a theoretically distinctive genre as well as being a commercially successful one?**

The issue of the self-help book as a generic phenomenon (Chapter 6) has been shown to be complex. Clearly the self-help book is a prominent commodity which responds to changing societal circumstances and reader needs in order to make money. Indeed for the last decade it has increasingly dominated the book trade and successful publications often generate a remarkable number of spin-offs for which this thesis has coined the terms 'peri-genres' and 'para-genres'. However this analysis, which drew particularly on the insights of Propp (1928), Frye (1957), Lévi Strauss (1958), Greimas (1966) and Vogler (2007), revealed that the self-help book

can also be categorised as two kinds of theoretically-defined genre. Firstly, it operates as a manifestation of the 'hero's journey': a mytheme in which the protagonist overcomes difficulties and triumphs in the end. Secondly it is a uniquely 'actantial' genre because the text itself is a participant in the secular salvation narrative which it offers its readers, inasmuch as it can be said to play a number of significant roles such as 'helper', 'dispatcher' and 'sought for object'.

Of course, as has been acknowledged, other 'helpful' publications, such as makeover manuals, exist. But they do not typically set out to transform the reader's psyche through offering a 'heroic' narrative of redemption. While the overt subject matter of self-help literature (personal problems and their solutions) is not remarkable, that literature's engagement with the reader most certainly is because the text functions as a guide (mentor) seeking to help a sufferer (seeker) who desires relief (the sought for goal) and who hopes, through taking the initiative to read a 'transformational text', to progress from being a 'victim-actant' to being a 'hero-actant'. Moreover, the reader's own dysfunctional attitudes may be classed as antagonists to be vanquished just as much as his or her adverse external circumstances may be. For example the 'villains' may include depression, co-dependency, loss, anger issues, overeating, grief etc. Whatever the content variables between different self-help books, the ultimate intention is always for the *locus* of power to shift so that the 'heroic' reader/subject may eventually be able to recognise and own their own strength. This dynamic is therefore considered to be a generic characteristic of the self-help book. To the best of my knowledge, the sustained structuralist critique of the self-help book presented in this thesis is the first of its kind and this is the first use of 'actantial' as an adjective.

## **5        How do demotic assumptions about essential selfhood and the critical notion of constructed subjectivity coexist within the genre?**

Much scholarly attention has been given to distinguishing the notions of 'selfhood' and 'subjectivity'. Yet, while the readers of self-help books putatively consider themselves to have problems, the issue of their socially-constructed subjectivity is not going to be perceived as one of them. However the self-help book is clearly a site at which the reader submits himself or herself to the 'power' of the writer and thus the notions of 'self' and 'subject' can be said to 'coexist' within the genre. The



biological notion of the 'dyad', co-opted as a structuring metaphor to describe their interdependence, demonstrates, as the song says, that you can't have one without the other. The point illustrated throughout this thesis (but particularly <sup>in</sup> Chapter 7) is that although self-help books are bought by individuals with personal needs and are full of supposedly real-life examples, the *underlying* dynamic is always to do with impersonal subject positions as the reader strives to change from being a 'victim' to a 'hero' as a result of altering their behaviour or attitudes. It is in this way that the relationship is therefore 'dyadic', a biological notion used here for the purposes of critical theory as an illustrative metaphor.

For the critical theorist who is familiar with the self-help discourse, perhaps the most unexpected finding which emerged from the research was that not just one but three levels of 'subject activity' can be distinguished in the self-help book. They are the level of ostensibly personal choice and conscious engagement with the text (*super-stratum*); the level of interaction between 'actantial' roles such as 'hero' 'villain', 'helper' etc. (*inter-stratum*); and the ontological level of humanist ideology (the 'ontosphere') in which the existence of the essential individual is considered to be axiomatic (*sub-stratum*). This new stratigraphic approach was essential for the critical analysis but required terms borrowed from geology. What it has helped to show is how the quotidian notion of 'self-hood' and the critical notion of the a-personal, social constructed subject really do co-exist in self-help literature. Potentially, this tri-partite vertical model may be usefully applied to other genres, for example psychiatric assessments, job evaluations, or any other document in which an individual's behaviour is formally discussed within a cultural context where there are covert values.

## **6 To what extent may the self-help book be considered a typical postmodern phenomenon?**

The question of how much the self-help book may be considered a typical postmodern phenomenon has been referred to on various occasions throughout the thesis (Introduction, Chapters 4 and 5). Certainly the self-help book is a remarkable discursive phenomenon for the contemporary theorist because of its intrinsic essentialism. So much of the postmodern critical project has been devoted to undermining 'legitimizing' grand narratives of universalism, progress and individual

emancipation which have their roots in the various optimisms of the Enlightenment and modernity. Yet each self-help book is necessarily predicated on a belief in precisely the Enlightenment humanistic assertion of agency, choice and the possibility of therapeutic transformation. Thus the genre can be thought of as offering a demotic, codified response to the characteristic uncertainties and fragmentations of what post-structuralist theory calls 'the postmodern condition'. Indeed self-help publications may be considered the reified antithesis of deconstructive critiques which assume that there is no such thing as the 'real self' which can be abstracted from history, that there are no absolute values, and that personal agency is an illusion.

More specifically, the analysis has illustrated how the contemporary self-help book displays both 'modern' and 'postmodern' characteristics. It can be viewed as a typical postmodern artefact for the following reasons. Its content is highly eclectic. It assumes that identity can always be refashioned and it implicitly celebrates the process of *bricolage*. It foregrounds personal desire. It encourages self-reflexivity. It is subject to fashion. Its current prominence seems to be a response to the decline of traditional ethical metanarratives such as those of religion and family values as people look for alternative sources of guidance. It focuses on 'local', personal issues rather than wider problems. It is acutely sensitive to market forces.

However, while self-help literature has generated an entertaining body of satirical response, as the examples in Appendix F: Sceptical Texts demonstrate, and although pastiche is a characteristic postmodern form, the books themselves tend to be irony-free zones. Moreover, the following textual characteristics are certainly not postmodern ones. Self-help books are 'closed' texts which are usually very highly organised and not designed for 'oppositional' reading. There is little acknowledgement of relativism, or of cultural diversity. The genre is intrinsically *teleological* and rests on an underlying metanarrative of indomitable personal agency and self-determination. Although its surface attention is on contingent issues like work or family relationships, its fundamental concern is with universal narratives of love, anger and suffering.

Self-help books might therefore be described as 'concise narratives of insular happiness' and their popularity clearly demonstrates a widespread yearning – or, at the very least, a perception of a widespread yearning - for 'self-orientation', security

and control as their writers stubbornly refuse to accept the inevitability of unhappiness. However, as has been demonstrated, the genre has very little to say about politics, class, poverty, education and ethnicity, key issues impinging on personal existence that most people can do little to alter. Yet as a result of its optimistic belief in the instrumental individual, in the possibility of their making life choices for themselves, and in their potential for personal transformation, the self-help book is a paradoxical cultural phenomenon for the postmodern theorist who proclaims the redundancy of traditional metanarratives and the dissolution of the core identity into contingent subjectivity. It is, however, a significant element in demotic discourse which perpetuates the liberal-humanist creed of the essential, *telic* self whose stable core has always been the focus of traditional ethical advice. The recognition of this paradox is, perhaps, a key result of this thesis; it lays down a challenge to theorists of the subject 'after' postmodernism and is one contribution to scholarly understanding.

## **7 The future and some final thoughts**

As the points above indicate, the primary investigation into genre, discourse and subjectivity in the self-help book have suggested new strategies for the analysis of other texts and situations, thus making an unanticipated yet nevertheless significant contribution to critical discourse as a whole. But in addition, the detailed critique of methodology which was undertaken at the beginning of the research and is recorded in the first two chapters not only serves as a substantive rationale for the abductive approach adopted during the research but also addresses in detail some fundamental, though ultimately intractable, issues which are often passed over by scholars: the 'empiricist dilemma', the 'hermeneutic circle' and the processes of separation and 'hospitality' associated with the categorisation and sequencing of information. Moreover the effectiveness of the flexible case study as a way of exploring textual phenomena was also discussed at this early stage. This method is associated with social studies, but in its search for 'typical' phenomena is ideally suited for investigating a particular genre such as the self-help book.

This piece of research has now concluded but a number of possibilities for future research, in addition to those indicated in passing (above), suggest themselves, as follows:

- What rhetorical tropes and lexical shifts are occurring in the emergent discourse of 'frugality'?
- To what extent can the self-help book be linked with folk narrative?
- To what extent do the aspirations of the readers of advice literature map onto Maslow's hierarchy of needs?
- How is the government going to implement a 'happiness' policy and what discursive strategies will it use?
- How do selected pathologies from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (e.g. autism) map onto the twelve-step sequence of discourse emergence proposed in this thesis?
- Which numbers re-occur in self-help books and folk literature? Why?
- How do the book-jackets of long-established, much re-issued, publications signal changes in their surrounding culture?
- How do the *super-stratum*, *inter-stratum* and *super-stratum* of subject activity map on to other genres: for example educational statements of special need or psychiatric evaluations?

This research project has reaffirmed that the terms 'genre', 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' are highly protean and there is an ever-increasing mass of primary material in this area of popular culture. Yet, it has also shown the durability of these terms in approaching and deconstructing a genre that, while it is demonstrably paradigmatic of postmodern culture, has been so infrequently investigated. In studying the self-help book, the opportunity to contribute incrementally to the understanding of contemporary 'therapeutic' culture has been developed, along with an explication of the discourse of self-transformation, proposals for original ways of looking at genre, discourse and subjectivity in relation to the self-help book, new terms and approaches for critical theory and research methodology, and the suggestion of further avenues and means for future research.

JC September 2011

# Transformational Texts: Genre, Discourse and Subjectivity in the Self-Help Book

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Jean Collingsworth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of London Metropolitan  
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## **Appendices and Bibliography**

September 2011

## Appendix A 15 Case Study Texts

The information about fifteen 'star' self-help books provided here has been included to provide additional supporting evidence for points made during the thesis, particularly those relating to the genre's expressive characteristics. As well as publication details for each text, and some extracts to indicate the style of writing, 'metacommentary' from book-jackets has also been included.

Metacommentary is a 'quaternary' source of informal critical information which has been described thus:

The most visible use of metacommentary occurs on the front and back covers of self-help books, and also inside on the first few pages of front matter as well. Here we find quotes praising the current or past books of the jacketed book's author, along with an identification of the author of each quote via the title of one or more of his or her own self-help books. It is assumed that the potential buyer of the book will recognize some or all of the names ... It is an important means of promoting the book as well as of authenticating the author as a writer known and appreciated by other successful self-help book authors (Dolby 2005: 51; 52-55).

Naturally, the examples included here are indeed laudatory. But the publisher's 'puff' is surely a genre in its own right and is therefore considered to be an example of generic symbiosis (see Chapter 6 The Self-Help Book: Protean Commodity, Redemptive Paradigm, 'Actantial Genre', above).

**Book 1: Rhonda Byrne (2006) *The Secret*. New York: Simon and Schuster**

Blurb: *The Secret* contains wisdom from modern-day teachers – men and women who have used it to achieve health, wealth and happiness (front cover).

You hold in your hands a Great Secret ...it has been passed down through the ages, highly coveted, hidden, lost, stolen, and bought for vast sums of money. This centuries-old Secret has been understood by some of the most prominent people in history: Plato, Galileo, Beethoven, Edison, Carnegie, Einstein ... As you learn the Secret, you will come to know how you can have, be, or do anything you want. You will come to know who you truly are. You will come to know the true magnificence that awaits you in life (back cover).

Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/No	No	No	2006
<p>Extracts: In the moment you ask, and believe and know you already have [what you want] in the unseen, the entire Universe shifts to bring it into the seen... If your thoughts contain noticing you do not have it yet, you will continue to attract not having it yet. You must believe that you have it already ... You must emit the feeling frequency of having received it, to bring those pictures back as your life (p.49). Think about the inventors and their inventions: The Wright Brothers and the plane. George Eastman and film. Thomas Edison and the light bulb ... The only way anything has ever been invented or created is because one person saw a picture in his mind. He saw it clearly, and by holding that picture of the end result in his mind, all the forces of the Universe brought his invention into the world, <i>through</i> him. These men knew The Secret. These were men who had utter faith in the invisible, and who knew the power within them to leverage the Universe and bring the invention into the visible ... (p.82). The earth turns on its orbit for You. The oceans ebb and flow for You ... None of it can exist, without You. No matter who you thought you were, now you know the Truth of Who You Really Are. You are the master of the Universe. You are the perfection of Life. And now you know The Secret (p.183).</p>				
Commendations: No				
<p><u>Ideology</u>: Anyone can have anything if they think positively enough about it and have faith.  Visualisation is power. Your life experience is the result of your thoughts: you reap what you sow.</p>				
Rhetorical characteristics: See Chapter 5: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade, above				
Graphics: See Chapter 5: Tricks of the Self-Help Writer's Trade., above				
<p>Spin-offs and responses: Film and TV versions <a href="http://www.thesecret.tv">www.thesecret.tv</a> Byrne, Rhonda (2007) <i>The Secret Gratitude Book</i>. Simon and Schuster; Byrne, Rhonda (2008) <i>The Secret Daily Teachings</i>. Simon and Schuster; Byrne, Rhonda (2010) <i>The Power</i>. Simon and Schuster.</p> <p>Shermer, Michael (20 May 2007) 'The (Other) Secret: The inverse square law trumps the law of attraction'. [Internet] Available from: <a href="http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-other-secret&amp;page=2">http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-other-secret&amp;page=2</a>, accessed 1 December 2010.</p>				

**Book 2: Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (1993) *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories that Restore Your Faith in Human Nature*. London: Vermillion**

<p>Blurb: Chicken Soup for the Soul is publishing phenomenon ... The stories collected by the authors include examples of the best qualities we share as human beings: compassion, grace, forgiveness, generosity and faith. In passing on these stories they share a collected wisdom on love, parenting, teaching, heroism, death and the overcoming of obstacles.</p>				
<p>Acknowledgements Yes</p>	<p>Contents/Index Yes/No</p>	<p>Refs./Footnotes List of contributors</p>	<p>Bibliography List of permissions</p>	<p>First Published 1993</p>
<p>Extracts: We know everything we need to know to end the needless emotional suffering that many people currently experience. High self-esteem and personal effectiveness are available to anyone willing to take the time to pursue them (p. xiii). Many of the stories and poems you have read in this book were submitted by readers like you. We are planning to publish five or six Chicken Soup for the Soul books every year ... Stories must be up to 1,200 words and must uplift or inspire (p. 289).</p>				
<p>Commendations: Over 7 million copies sold (front cover). Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, New York Times bestselling authors, are professional speakers who have dedicated their lives to enhancing the personal and professional development of others. CSS inspires the reader and helps us remember the important things in life: love, connection and gratitude, Barbara De Angelis [best-selling author and relationship expert] (back cover)</p>				
<p>Ideology: The assurance that homespun folk wisdom is the answer to most things is imparted by a series of short inspirational and motivational stories sent in by people.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: This is a franchise series in which material collected from many sources is edited for length and sorted into topical volumes, each containing 101 short tales. These are mostly first personal narratives, all of which have an uplifting ending. They are presented without commentary and sometimes preceded by short quotations, e.g. by Abraham Lincoln and Mother Teresa. No citations are given.</p>				
<p>Graphics: Traditional. A few cartoons. A few lists. The main title on the covers of this series tends to use a distinctive font which suggests handwriting - and thus a 'personal' message. This is an example of a livery genre designed to be recognised from a distance. However individual volumes do not internally conform to a strict graphical template, unlike the # For Dummies series.</p>				
<p>Spin-offs: There are now more than 200 titles in the series. Under the brand name Chicken Soup for the Soul® the CSS licensing programme controls syndicated newspaper columns and a weekly TV programme. (<a href="http://www.chickensoup.com/cs.asp?cid=titles">http://www.chickensoup.com/cs.asp?cid=titles</a> accessed 2 February 2010). Associated merchandise includes pet food, The Chicken Soup for the Soul Bible, 'scrollers', toys, stationery, calendars, sleepwear and socks. See <a href="http://www.chickensoup.com/">http://www.chickensoup.com/</a>.</p>				



**Book 3: Richard Carlson, PhD (1998) *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff, and It's all Small Stuff: Simple Ways to Keep the Little Things from Overtaking Your Life.* London: Hodder and Stoughton.**

<p>Blurb: In 136 short essays, Richard Carlson teaches us, in his gentle and encouraging style, simple strategies for living a more fulfilled and peaceful life. ... Do something nice for someone else ... Surrender to the fact that life isn't fair ... Listen to your feelings ... Remember that when you die, your 'in' box won't be empty (back cover)</p>				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/No	No	Yes	1997
<p>Extracts: I've yet to meet an absolute perfectionist whose life was filled with inner peace (p.9) ... In over a dozen years as a stress consultant, one of the most pervasive and destructive mental tendencies I've seen is that of focusing on what we <i>want</i> instead of what we <i>have</i> (p.161). The more patient you are, the more accepting you will be of what is, rather than insisting that life be exactly as you would like it to be (p. 37). Surrender to the fact that life isn't fair (p. 47). Imagine yourself at your own funeral (p, 59). Choose your battles wisely (p.77). Choose being kind over being right (p.95). Realise the power of your own thoughts. Give up on the idea that more is better (p. 229).</p>				
<p>Commendations: One of the fastest selling books of all time (front cover)</p>				
<p>Ideology: Appreciate what you have and thus become more relaxed, peaceful and loving. Learn to live in the present moment and allow yourself to be bored sometimes. Be kind to others. The message of this book is superficially based on common sense but also grounded in the strategies of cognitive therapy which asserts that feelings are the product of thoughts and thus 'reframing' a situation can actually change things. This is not the same as the more simplistic 'law of attraction' which suggests that simply wishing hard enough will make something come to pass: cf. <i>The Secret</i>. Carlson was a trained psychotherapist.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: 100 short meditations, many with a heading which includes an imperative: make peace with imperfection ... develop your compassion ... don't interrupt others ... etc. No lengthy arguments or anecdotes. The layout encourages periodic consultation rather than sustained reading. Direct address to the reader: 'we', 'you' 'I'.</p>				
<p>Graphics: Conventional. No lists, tables, checklists etc.</p>				
<p>Spin-offs and responses: Don't Sweat the Small Stuff in Love ... with the Family ... at Work ... for Women ... for Men ... for Teens ... for Graduates ... etc. etc. Carlson, Richard (2003) <i>What About the Big Stuff? Finding Strength and Moving Forward When the Stakes are High</i>. New York: Hyperion. Note: Richard Carlson died 2006 .<a href="http://dontsweat.com/">http://dontsweat.com/</a></p>				

**Book 4: Dale Carnegie (1988) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.****London: Vermillion**

Blurb: In exuberant, conversational style, internationally best-selling author, Dale Carnegie offers practical advice and techniques for how to get out of a mental rut and make life more rewarding.				
Acknowledgements No	Contents/Index Yes/No	Refs./Footnotes No/No	Bibliography Embedded titles	First Published 1937
<p>Extracts: The rules we have set down here are not merely theories of guesswork. They work like magic. Incredible as it sounds, I have seen the application of these principles literally revolutionize the lives of many people (p.18). The employment manager of a large New York department store told me she would rather hire a sales clerk who hadn't finished grade school, if he or she had a pleasant smile, than to hire a doctor of philosophy with a sombre face (p.84). This is an action book (p. 21).</p>				
<p>Commendations: The international pioneer of personal skills development. Over 16 million copies sold (front cover).</p>				
<p>Ideology: Overtly utilitarian – good manners can be put to good use. The book is less cynical and manipulative than its title suggests. The message is that empathy is an important skill and it is always helpful to understand how others see the world. However Carnegie is against empty flattery and advocates the expression of honest, sincere appreciation. There is some recognition of cultural diversity (p.146). The ability to communicate ideas clearly and with enthusiasm is considered an essential element of leadership. Carnegie does not use the term 'emotional intelligence' but there are ideological similarities with the book of that title (Goleman 1996). People skills can be learned.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: Discursive, conversational style. No tables, diagrams etc. Use of number: 8 things this book will help you achieve; 9 suggestions to get the most out of this book; 6 ways to make people like you. Repeated use of "How to ...". First person address. Use of imperatives: Do this ....: talk about your own mistakes first; let the other person save face etc. Pervasive use of encouraging anecdote, some personal and some ostensibly about real people such as national leaders and business men (e.g. pp55, 105, 147). Extracts from letters. Dialogues. Chapters end with a one-line 'principle, e.g. "Become genuinely interested in other people (p.82) Comparatively little comment from the author.</p>				
Graphics: Conventional				
Spin-offs and responses: Dale Carnegie, <i>How to Stop Worrying and Start Living</i> (1944)				

**Book 5: Stephen R. Covey (1990) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Simon and Schuster.**

<p>Blurb: A holistic, integrated, principle-centred approach for solving personal and professional problems ... Covey reveals a step-by-step pathway for living with fairness, integrity, honest, and human dignity – principles that give us the security to adapt to change and the wisdom and power to take advantage of the opportunities that change creates (back cover).</p>				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/Yes	No/No	No	1989
<p>Extracts: I'm not suggesting that elements of the Personality Ethic – personality growth, communication skill training, and education in the field of influence strategies and positive thinking – are not beneficial, in fact sometimes essential for success. But they are secondary, not primary traits ... If I try to use human influence strategies and tactics of how to get other people to do what I want ... while my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity and insincerity, then, in the long run I cannot be successful (p. 21). It's not what happens to us but our response to it that hurts us (p. 73).</p>				
<p>Commendations: 37 are listed at the front of the book. These come from other inspirational writers, CEOs, the director of NASA and a US ambassador. "This book has the gift of being simple without being simplistic", says M. Scott Peck, author of <i>The Road Less Travelled</i>; "I am reading it with profit", declares Norman Vincent Peale, author of <i>The Power of Positive Thinking</i>; "Buy this book But most importantly use it", advises Anthony Robbins, author of <i>Unlimited Power</i> (back cover). Translated into 32 languages (Butler-Bowdon 2003: 97).</p>				
<p>Ideology: Covey's book contrasts the 'Character Ethic' with the 'Personality Ethic' (p.18-44). What people <i>are</i> communicates more about them than what they say or do. Effectiveness in life, and in business, comes from being clear about your principles, values and vision.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: Mention of the author's research into US 'success literature' since 1776 done in preparation for a doctoral dissertation (p. 18). No specific references to what he found. Seven pieces of advice are offered for those seeking to further their personal development: 1) be proactive not reactive; 2) define your dreams and goals; 3) prioritise and use time carefully; 4) think win/win, i.e. look for solutions; 5) seek to understand others; 6) synergise: be prepared to lead and co-operate; 7) take care of your body, mind and spirit. The text is mostly discursive and full of personal and family references: 'We are all in this together'. There are regular passages of direct speech, as well as Covey's reported advice to people: 'I said that ...'. Chapters begin with attributed epigraphs but there are no detailed citations should one wish to follow these up. The lexicon foregrounds growth, change, leadership, balance, peace, family, relationships, 'scripting', win/win situations .</p>				
<p>Graphics: Conventional typography. A few diagrams, forms, tables, headings and lists.</p>				
<p>Spin-offs: <i>The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness</i> (2006)Covey Leadership Centre, Seven Habits Seminars, CDs, workbooks <a href="https://www.stephencovey.com/">https://www.stephencovey.com/</a></p>				

**Book 6: Dr. Wayne W. Dyer (2009) *Your Erroneous Zones*:*****Escape Negative Thinking and Take Control of Your Life.* London: Piatkus**

<p><b>Blurb:</b></p> <p>If you are plagued by guilt and worry and find yourself falling unwittingly into the same old self-destructive patterns, then you have 'erroneous zones' – whole facets of your approach to life that act as barriers to your success and happiness. ... If you believe you have no control over our feelings and reactions Dyer reveals how you can take charge of yourself and manage how much you let difficult situations affect you. ... Dyer points the way to self-reliance (back cover).</p>				
Acknowledgements No	Contents/Index Yes/Yes	Refs./Footnotes No	Bibliography No	First Published 1976
<p><b>Extracts:</b></p> <p>Being healthy is a natural state, and the means for achieving it are within the grasp of each one of us. I believe that a judicious mixture of hard work, clear thinking, humor and self-confidence are the ingredients of effective living. I do not believe in fancy formulas, or historical excursions into the past ... [or] that someone else is responsible for your happiness (p.2).</p> <p>You can never please everyone. In fact if you please fifty percent of the people you are doing quite well... Armed with the knowledge, you can begin to look at disapproval in a new light. When someone disapproves of something you say, instead of being hurt, or instantly shifting your opinion to gain praise, you can remind yourself that you've just run into one of those folks in the fifty percent who don't agree with you (p.67). Anger can be eliminated (p. 231).</p>				
<p><b>Commendations:</b> The record-breaking No1 bestseller about you and your personality (front cover). 'An inspiring book on self-esteem' <i>New Woman</i></p>				
<p><b>Ideology:</b></p> <p>People can make choices about their emotions. Do not dwell on past or future experiences: live in the present moment.</p>				
<p><b>Rhetorical characteristics:</b> Eye-catching title. From a distance it can look like 'Your Erogenous Zones'. Mostly discursive, with direct address to the reader. Asks the reader 25 questions and refers them to certain chapters according to the answers (p. 5). Uses lists, both to pinpoint challenges and offer concise advice. Sections of dialogue. Lists of imperatives.</p>				
<p><b>Graphics:</b> Conventional. Some checklists with bullet points. <b>Lexicon:</b> syllogism, premise, logic, choice,</p>				
<p><b>Spin-offs:</b></p>				

**Book 7: John Gray (2002) *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.****London: Thorsons.**

Blurb: A modern classic, this phenomenal book has helped men and women realise how different they really are and how to communicate their needs.				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/No	No/No	No	1992
<p>Extracts: As you read this book you may wonder how anyone succeeds in having a successful relationship without it (p.6) ... [It is] not just a theoretical analysis of psychological differences but also a practical manual for how to succeed in creating loving relationships ... The truth of these principles is self-evident and can be validated by your own experience as well as by common sense (p.6). ... 101 ways to score points with women are listed [p.231]. ... Women, however, will learn to redirect their energies into ways that score big with men by giving men what they want (p.15; 256) ... Martians value power, competency, efficiency and achievement ... Even their dress is designed to reflect their skills and competence. Police officers, soldiers, businessmen, scientists ... all wear uniforms or at least hats to reflect their competence and power. ... They are interested in the news, weather and sports and couldn't care less about romance novels and self-help books (p.20) ....Venusians value love, communication, beauty and relationships ... They do not wear uniforms like the Martians (to reveal their competence). On the contrary, they enjoy wearing a different outfit every day, ... (p.23).</p>				
Commendations: The most famous relationship book ever published (back cover).				
<p>Ideology: Predicated on the binary opposition of sexual difference but with no theoretical underpinning, in spite of Gray's PhD. Universalising. No acknowledgement that gender roles may be culturally conditioned. Men are focused problem-solvers; unsolicited advice from women is never welcome. Women need to be cherished; men need to be needed. No mention of gay relationships.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: Pervasive use of sustained metaphor: the 'myth of Mars and Venus' (pp 11-18 and passim); women are like waves (pp 141-165); men are like rubber bands (pp 116-140); men need periodically to enter their caves (pp 37-52). [A previous book by Gray was called <i>Men, Women and Relationships: Making Peace with the Opposite Sex</i>. It was not a publishing sensation, indicating the power of metaphor in a title.] Many illustrative anecdotes which use neutral-sounding names like Susan and Jim (p.4), Tom and Mary (p.26) presumable to maximise the audience. Discursively written.</p>				
Graphics: Conventional typography . Not much white space.				
<p>Spin-offs and responses: <i>Mars and Venus Together for Ever</i>; <i>On a Date</i>; <i>Starting Over</i>; <i>In the Bedroom</i>; <i>In Collision</i>, etc. Franchises <a href="http://www.marsvenuscoaching.com/">http://www.marsvenuscoaching.com/</a>; Wellness retreats, CDs, DVDs <a href="http://www.marsvenus.com/xcart/home.php">http://www.marsvenus.com/xcart/home.php</a> Deborah Cameron (2007) <i>The Myth of Mars and Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?</i> SOH (2005) <i>Men are from Earth, Women are from Earth: Deal With It</i>.</p>				

**Book 8: Susan Jeffers (1987) *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*.**  
**London: Vermillion.**

Blurb: This inspiring modern classic has helped thousands turn their anger into love – and their indecision into action (back cover).				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/No	No	Yes	1987
<p>Extracts:</p> <p>Facing fear is less frightening than living with the underlying fear that comes from a feeling of helplessness (p.30). While teaching a fear class in New York ... I instructed my students to stay away from the news entirely. They were surprised at the positive difference it made in their lives. Instead of talking with friends about how miserable the world situation was, they began sharing the positive ideas learned from self-help books, and their conversations became more animated and exciting (p.82). Whether you presently believe it or not, your life is already abundant. You simply haven't noticed it. Before you can accept abundance in your life, you have to notice it (p.184).</p>				
Commendations: "Comforting, practical, upbeat" (front cover: <i>Today</i> )				
<p>Ideology: The presence of fear is a positive thing because it shows people are aware of life's challenges and can therefore take steps to meet them. Though there are clearly specific fears, the over-arching one is that we will not be able to handle things. Fear is not a psychological problem but an educational one. Say "Yes" to your universe. Jeffers does not insist that people can control everything, but rather that it is vital to take responsibility for your life. If you don't like the way things are, do something about it. Reframe "It's terrible" into "It's a learning experience". Positive thinking takes practice: use tapes and affirmations to encourage mindfulness. Do not be impatient; do not fear mistakes. Accept that there are no 'right' answers in life. The author has a PhD in psychology but her advice is grounded in praxis.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: Straightforward prose. Much personal anecdote and reference to the putative experiences of others with usefully neutral names: Mary, Joan, Alice, David, Sheila. Direct address to the reader. Listing of objectives (p. 7). Use of oppositions (e.g. p.210). Some use of illustrative quotations (e.g. p. 186) but these lack citations. Use of imperatives throughout. Advocates some characteristic tools: affirmations, saying yes to your universe, positive thinking taking responsibility, choosing love etc. References to the 'Higher Self'</p>				
<p>Graphics: Use of capitalisation and italics for emphasis. Headings and lists (e.g. pp 13-17) recur, but they are not particularly emphatic. Some numbering of items. Some diagrams (e.g. Comfort Zone, p. 44; Life Grids pp 135-149). The presentation is fairly unsophisticated. Some attempt at graphical reinforcement of ideas but no overall system.</p>				
Spin-offs and responses: Many books and CDs at <a href="http://www.susanieffers.com/home/books.cfm">http://www.susanieffers.com/home/books.cfm</a>				

**Book 9: Robin Norwood (2004) *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change*. London: Arrow Books.**

Blurb: If being in love means being in pain, this book was written for you ... Many women find themselves repeated drawn into unhappy and destructive relationships with men. They then struggle to make these doomed relationships work. This bestselling book takes a hard look at how powerfully addictive these unhealthy relationships are – but also gives a very specific programme for recovery from the <i>disease</i> of loving too much.				
Acknowledgements Yes	Contents/Index Yes/Yes	Refs./Footnotes No/No	Bibliography No	First Published 1985
Extracts: We will explore why, once we know a relationship is not meeting our needs, we nevertheless have such difficulty ending it (p.1). I first recognised the phenomenon of "loving too much" as a specific syndrome of thoughts, feelings and behaviours after several years of counselling alcohol and drug abusers (p.2). Many women make the mistake of looking for a man with whom to develop a relationship without first developing a relationship with themselves: they run from an to man, looking for what is missing within ... What we manifest in our lies is a reflection of what is deep inside us: out beliefs about our own worth, our right to happiness, what we deserve in life. When those beliefs change, so does our life (p.146).				
Commendations: "A life-changing book for women". Erica Jong [ <i>Fear of Flying</i> ]				
Ideology: Popularises the notion of 'co-dependency', a term originating in the family-systems approach to the treatment of drug and alcohol addictions. Therapist Robin Norwood describes loving too much as a pattern of thoughts and behaviour which some women develop as a response to problems from childhood, finding themselves repeatedly drawn into unhappy and destructive relationships with men.				
Rhetorical characteristics: Much reliance on illustrative 'true' stories about named women: either first person or reported. Chapters are headed by quotations. But without citations it is impossible to track these down. Direct address to the reader: the use of 'I' and 'we'. Issues are identified and listed (pp 10-26), as are the characteristics of a woman 'in recovery' (p.242). Chapter 10: 'The Road to Recovery' presents a series of imperatives for the would-be survivor: go for help; make recovery your priority; find a peer support group; develop your spirituality; stop managing and controlling others; don't get hooked into games; face your problems and shortcomings; do some self-development; become 'selfish'; share what you have experienced and learned.Lexicon: addiction, abuse, denial, control and recovery				
Graphics: Conventional. Diagram (p190) comparing the processes of recovery from alcohol and love addictions adapted from Glatt M.M. <i>British Journal of Addiction</i> 54, no 2.				
Spin-offs and Responses: <i>Letters from Women Who Love Too Much</i> (1987); <i>Daily Meditations for Women Who Love Too Much</i> (2000). Nolen-Hoeksma, Susan (2004) <i>Women Who Think Too Much</i> ; Walters, Marianne (1990) 'The Co-dependent Cinderella Who Loves Too Much ... Fights Back'. <i>Family Therapy Networker</i> , July/August: 53-57.				

**Book 10: Anthony Robbins (1991) *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny*. New York: Fireside.**

<p>Blurb:</p> <p>The nation's [US] leader in the science of peak performance shows you his most effective strategies for mastering your emotions, your body, your relationships, your finances and your life. The acknowledged expert in the psychology of change, A.R. provides a step-by-step program teaching the fundamental lessons of self-mastery that will enable you to discover your true purpose, take control of your life and harness the forces that shape your destiny (back cover). Over 1 million copies sold (front cover).</p>				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/Yes	No	No	1991
<p>Extracts:</p> <p>Remember that you have unlimited power within you (p.19). There's nothing you can't accomplish if: 1) you clearly decide what it is that you're absolutely committed to achieving; 2) you are willing to take massive action; 3) you notice what's working and what's not; 4) you continue to change your approach until you achieve what you want using whatever life gives you (p.44).</p>				
<p>Commendations:"Required reading for anyone committed to increasing the quality of their life", Dr. Barbara Angelis, author of #1 bestsellers <i>How to Make Love All the Time</i> and <i>Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know</i>.</p> <p>"Tony Robbins is one of the great influencers of his generation", Stephen R. Covey, author of the New York Times Bestseller <i>The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People</i>. "Yet another profound and powerful tool in the Robbins arsenal of self-awareness, It has been an enormous source of strength and insight for me both personally and professionally", Peter Guber, CEO Sony Pictures (back cover).</p>				
<p><u>Ideology</u>: Robbins has refined and marketed the tenets of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) to a mass audience. You can reinvent yourself and achieve your goals by noticing what things you link to pain and pleasure, raising your standards, ditching negative beliefs, making a committed decision to change and taking appropriate action.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics:</p> <p>Epigraphs but no citations. Mention of celebrities: the Clintons. Mandela, Gorbachev, Thatcher, Mother Theresa, Donald Trump. Chapter 9 deals with the vocabulary of ultimate success (pp 200-226). "The words you consistently select will shape your destiny" (p.211).Lexicon: challenge, power, potential, breakthrough moment, transformation</p>				
<p><u>Graphics</u>: Conventional typeface. Some tables, lists, headings, cartoons and forms to complete.</p>				
<p><u>Spin-offs</u>:</p> <p><a href="http://www.tonyrobbins.com/Home/Home.aspx">http://www.tonyrobbins.com/Home/Home.aspx</a><a href="http://anthonyrobbinsfoundation.org/">http://anthonyrobbinsfoundation.org/</a></p>				
<p>Robbins is billed as being an entrepreneur, author and peak performance strategist.</p>				



**Book 11: M. Scott Peck (1990) *The Road Less Travelled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. London: Arrow.**

Blurb: Confronting and solving problems is a painful process which most of us attempt to avoid. ... Dr M. Scott Peck, a practising psychiatrist, suggests ways in which facing our difficulties – and suffering through the changes – can enable us to reach a higher level of self-understanding. He discusses the nature of living relationships how to recognise true compatibility; how to distinguish dependency from love; how to become one's own person and how to be a more sensitive parent.				
Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/No	No/Some	No	1978
Extracts: Life is difficult. ... Most do not fully see this truth ... Instead they moan ... about their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life <i>should</i> be easy. ... I know about this moaning because I have done my share. ... Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? ... Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems (p.1).				
Commendations: "Number 1 International Best Seller" (front cover). [It did not make the New York Times list until 1983 after which it remained there so long that it entered the <i>Guinness Book of Records</i> .]  "Magnificent ... This is not just a book but a spontaneous act of generosity written by an author who leans towards the reader for the purpose of sharing something larger than himself" (back cover: <i>Washington Post</i> ).				
Ideology: Much less overtly optimistic than many self-help books. There are no quick fixes but once we know the worst we are free to see beyond it. A mixture of personal ethics, science and religion. The answer to our problems is discipline, love, morality and grace. Change is slow. While some people can manage to transform their lives, others refuse to change. Discipline and self-control are necessary. Love is a decision. It is possible to experience 'grace'. Peck is a medical doctor and conventionally trained psychotherapist.				
Rhetorical characteristics:  Discursive style. Use of anecdote about personal experiences and Peck's professional practice. Some dialogues. The book is divided into four sections: Discipline, Love, Growth and Religion, Grace.				
Graphics: Conventional				
Spin-offs and responses:  <a href="http://www.mscottpeck.com/index.html">http://www.mscottpeck.com/index.html</a> Peck, F. Scott (1993) <i>Further Along the Road Less Travelled</i> . London: Simon and Schuster.				

**Book 12: Martin Seligman (2007) *What You Can Change ... And What You Can't: The Complete Guide to Successful Self-Improvement*.  
Boston: Nicholas Brealey**

**Blurb:** In the climate of self-improvement which has reigned for the last 20 years, misinformation about treatments for everything from alcohol abuse to sexual dysfunction has flourished ... Grounding his conclusions in the most authoritative scientific studies, Seligman pinpoints the techniques and therapies that work best for each condition, explains why they work, and discusses how you can use them to change your life. Inside you'll discover the four natural healing factors for recovering from alcoholism; the vital distinction between overeating and being overweight; the four therapies that work for depression; the pros and cons of anger. Martin E.P. Seligman, PhD., a leading figure in the positive psychology movement, Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and a former president of the American Psychological Association, is the author of the bestselling *Authentic Happiness* and *Learned Optimism* (back cover).

Acknowledgements	Contents/Index	Refs./Footnotes	Bibliography	First Published
Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/ Yes	No	1993

**Extracts:** If you or someone you are close to has symptoms of a mental disorder you will be able to find here candid and tough-minded recommendations for what specific psychotherapy or what medications are likely to help and the degree to which they are likely to help. But these will not be curative. Many of the symptoms will recur, even if they are so ameliorated. An old fashioned virtue must be coupled to these interventions. It is called courage: the courage to understand your psychological problems and manage them so as to function well in spite of them (p. xiv). Young Americans right now are in an epidemic of depression [and they]are easy pickings for anything which makes them feel better – even temporarily. The recovery movement capitalises on this epidemic . When it works, it raises self-esteem and lowers guilt, but at the expense of our blaming others for our troubles ... [Therapy] requires a heightened sense of responsibility for our problems and a commitment to hard work (p241).

**Commendations:** Extremely well-written ... Throughout, Seligman uses outcome studies to identify what works in making change. *Library Journal* [no date] (back cover). An extraordinary blend of real scholarship, an experimental scientist's best judgement, and down-to-earth self-help advice. George E. Vaillant, Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School (back cover).

**Ideology:** Examines the psychology of individual change from the point of view of a scientifically qualified practitioner (Seligman is Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania). There is much disinformation about the possibilities of self-improvement. This leads to unrealistic expectations of what can actually be achieved with therapy and medication. It is possible to compare the effectiveness of relaxation, meditation, psychoanalysis and cognitive therapy in the treatment of anxiety, depression and anger. Seligman advocates a focus on fitness and health, and argues that childhood trauma does not necessarily shape adult life. It is not necessary to see one's self as a victim.

**Rhetorical characteristics:** A mixture of discursive prose with direct address to the reader: 'I', 'you', 'we'. Short case studies, questionnaires, lists, tables, statistics, diagrams, imperatives. Reference to published research. .

**Graphics:** Conventional typeface

**Spin-offs and Responses:** <http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/bio.htm>

**Book 13: Samuel Smiles (1968) *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement*  
*Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men*. London: Sphere.**

<p>Blurb:</p> <p>SELF HELP was first published in 1859, as were Charles Darwin's THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES and John Stuart Mill's ESSAY ON LIBERTY. It sold 25,000 copies in its first year and 250,000 by the end of the century. By 1958 it had been reprinted 71 times, besides appearing in at least 12 foreign editions. ... As Asa Briggs wrote in his introduction to the centenary edition, "there are few books in history which have reflected the spirit of their age more faithfully and successfully than Samuel Smiles' SELF HELP" (back cover).</p>				
Acknowledgements No	Contents/Index No/Yes	Refs./Footnotes No/No	Bibliography No	First Published 1859
<p>Extracts: The most important results in daily life are to be obtained, not through the exercise of extraordinary powers such as genius and intellect, but through the energetic use of simple means and ordinary qualities, with which nearly all human individuals have been endowed (p. 8). Accident does very little towards the production of any great result in life. Though sometimes what is called a 'happy hit' may be made by a bold venture, the common highway of steady industry and application is the only safe road to travel (p. 83).</p>				
<p>Commendations: Not on this edition.</p>				
<p>Ideology: Any man can improve his life by persistence, patience and hard work. It offers a catalogue of virtues and vices. Smiles does not advocate success for its own sake but as a way to make life better for others as well as one's self. His sympathies lie very much with working class heroes. He asserts that failure can be a good discipline and spur to greater endeavour. This book is almost entirely about men; the few women mentioned are willing ancillaries.</p> <p>Smiles exhorts his readers to be persons of integrity, principle, generosity and common sense who are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the good of others: that is, to be gentlemen.</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics:</p> <p>This publication is written entirely in large slabs of discursive prose, with little in the way of headings and no lists or diagrams to ameliorate its density. It constantly utilises a wide range of illustrative narratives about successful men in all walks of life and employs a characteristic 'lexicon of endeavour': see Chapter 5 for more discussion of this. See Chapter 5: Tricks of the Self-help Writer's Trade, above.</p>				
<p>Graphics: Conventional</p>				
<p>Spin-offs and Responses:</p> <p>Other descendants of the 19<sup>th</sup> century secular success writers, of whom Smiles is the most famous, include Lyons, A. E. (1924) <i>The Self-Starter</i></p> <p>Carnegie, Dale (1936) <i>How to Win Friends and Influence People</i>. Popplestone, C. E. (1936) <i>Every Man A Winner</i>; Peale, Norman Vincent (1955) <i>The Power of Positive Thinking</i></p>				

**Book 14: Norman Vincent Peale (1953) *The Power of Positive Thinking: A Practical Guide to Mastering the Problems of Everyday Living*.**  
**Kingswood: Cedar**

<p>Blurb: In this book Dr. Peale proves by actual experiences that an attitude of mind can change lives, win success and overcome obstacles; and shows, clearly and practically, how this astonishing result can be achieved by using faith and optimism as guides to a more positive way of life ... Let Dr Peale give you: 10 simple, workable rules for developing confidence; 3 proven secrets for keeping up your vigour; 13 actual examples of how prayer power helped in need; 4 words that lead to success; 5 actual techniques used by successful men to overcome defeat; an 8-point spiritual healing formula; a 10 point guide to popularity (back cover).</p>				
Acknowledgements No	Contents/Index Yes/No	Refs./Footnotes No/No	Bibliography No	First Published 1952
<p>Extracts:Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy. ... It is appalling to realise the number of pathetic people who are hampered and made miserable by the malady popularly called the inferiority complex (p.1). For many years I have been accumulating a series of incidents, the validity of which I accept and which bear out the conviction that we live in a dynamic universe where life, not death, is the basic principle ... Euripides, one of the greatest thinkers of antiquity, was convinced that the next life should be one of infinitely greater magnitude. Socrates shared the same concept. One of the most comforting statements ever made was his remark: "No evil can befall a good man in this life or in the next" (p. 274-5). [This sounds like something from <i>The Secret</i>.]</p>				
<p>Commendations: Not on this edition (1953). But the front cover of a 1990 edition calls it "the international bestseller by the father of positive thinking".</p>				
<p>Ideology:Peale was a mainstream Protestant minister who became attracted to American New Thought (see also Chapter 2, above). He looked for practical rather than theological solutions to people's financial, marital and business problems. Advises readers to count their blessings, to visualise success, to replace negative thoughts with positive ones and not to be awestruck by other people. Also to find a counsellor, practise daily positive affirmations, develop a healthy respect and trust in God. Peale advocates repeating 10 times each day a quotation from Romans viii: 31: "If God be for us, who can be against us" (pp, 17-19).</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics: Pervasive reference to verses to the Bible and prayer. Illustrative stories about people. Some of these are identifiable, but most are un-sourced.Direct address to the reader: 'I', 'you', 'we'. Use of numbered lists of aspirations and imperatives to undertake positive action</p>				
<p>Graphics: Conventional typography</p>				
<p>Spin-offs and Responses: Peale's radio programme 'The Art of Living' began in 1935 and ran for 54 years. <i>Guideposts</i> magazine: a non-denominational forum for the dissemination of inspirational stories.</p>				

**Book 15: Eckhart Tolle (2005) *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. London: Hodder and Stoughton**

Blurb: <i>The Power of Now</i> is the bible du jour – a must-read for anyone looking for a modern take on spirituality ...				
Acknowledgements Yes	Contents/Index Yes/No	Refs./Footnotes No/No	Bibliography Yes	First Published 1998
<p>Extracts:</p> <p>You are here to enable the divine purpose of the universe to unfold. That's how important you are! (preliminary text). The pain that you create now is always some form of non-acceptance, some form of unconscious resistance to what is (p.27).</p> <p>To be identified with your mind is to be trapped in time: the compulsion to live almost exclusively through memory and anticipation. This creates an endless preoccupation with past and future and an unwillingness to honour and acknowledge the present moment and allow it to be. The compulsion arises because the past gives you an identity and the future holds the promise of salvation, of fulfilment in whatever form. Both are illusions (p.40).</p> <p>Forgiveness is to offer no resistance to life – to allow life to live through you (p. 100).</p>				
<p>Commendations:</p> <p>"One of the clearest and most accessible texts on becoming more present that we have seen" Kindred Spirit</p> <p>"<i>The Power of Now</i> can transform your thinking. The result? More joy, right now" Oprah Winfrey</p>				
<p>Ideology:</p> <p>Holistic. Mystical. Surrender to life in the present moment. Let go of mental and emotional resistance to what is; inner resistance cuts you off from other people, from yourself and from your surroundings (p. 111). Nobody chooses dysfunction, conflict and pain. Be compassionate and forgive. Every form is destined to dissolve and ultimately nothing 'out here' matters that much (p 115).</p>				
<p>Rhetorical characteristics:</p> <p>Discursive prose.</p> <p>Detailed sub-headings in each chapter. Some question/answer sections.</p> <p>Direct address to the reader.</p> <p>Lexicon: transformation, the un-manifest, the Now, surrender, peace, enlightenment, 'the inner body'</p>				
Graphics: Conventional.				
Spin-offs: <a href="http://www.eckharttolle.com/home/">http://www.eckharttolle.com/home/</a>				

## Appendix B Some Characteristic Signifying Practices Found in Self-Help Books

Structures	Lexicon
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two-part titles</li> <li>• Slogans</li> <li>• Checklists</li> <li>• Open-ended questions</li> <li>• Questionnaires</li> <li>• Writing projects</li> <li>• Workbooks</li> <li>• Affirmations</li> <li>• Bullet points</li> <li>• Recommendations to the reader</li> <li>• Testimonials from readers and 'authorities'</li> <li>• Further reading (comparatively rare)</li> <li>• Biographical information (authors and contributors)</li> <li>• Meditations</li> <li>• Imperatives</li> <li>• Assertions</li> <li>• Narratives: 'real life'</li> <li>• Narratives 'allegorical'</li> <li>• Direct address to the reader</li> <li>• Use of modals (should, could, can etc.)</li> <li>• Sales statistics</li> <li>• Numbers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self</li> <li>• Survivor</li> <li>• Toxic</li> <li>• Abuse</li> <li>• Co-dependent</li> <li>• Trauma</li> <li>• Victim</li> <li>• Recovery</li> <li>• Panic attack</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Phobia</li> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Issues</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> <li>• Negativity</li> <li>• Closure</li> <li>• Inner child</li> <li>• Higher power</li> <li>• 'Give yourself permission ...'</li> <li>• Affirmation</li> <li>• Validation</li> <li>• Journey</li> <li>• Challenge</li> <li>• 'Getting in touch with ...'</li> <li>• First names</li> </ul>

Appendix C Some Self-Help Subgenres

The following well-established subgenres of the self-help book were extracted from the contents pages of Santrock *et al* (1994) *The Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Books*. To them might be added more recent categories such as ‘gratitude’ texts and those about ‘emotional intelligence’, ‘positive psychology’, the ‘law of attraction’ and ‘frugality’. Other recent sub-genres include ‘survivor sagas’ or ‘misery memoirs’ which have been classified as “Tragic Life Stories” in W H Smith, “Painful Lives” in Waterstones Bookshops, and “Real Lives” in Borders (‘Sales of Woe’ 2007).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Abuse</li><li>• Addiction and recovery</li><li>• Adult development</li><li>• Ageing</li><li>• Anger</li><li>• Anxiety</li><li>• Assertiveness</li><li>• Career development</li><li>• Codependency and recovery</li><li>• Communication</li><li>• Death and grief</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Diet and exercise</li><li>• Divorce</li><li>• Dreams</li><li>• Proseperity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Families</li><li>• Inner child</li><li>• Loneliness and single life</li><li>• Love, intimacy and marriage</li><li>• Men’s issues</li><li>• NLP</li><li>• Positive thinking</li><li>• Women’s issues</li><li>• Stress and relaxation</li><li>• Self-esteem</li><li>• Self-fulfillment</li><li>• Motivation</li><li>• Sexuality</li><li>• Stress</li><li>• Parenting</li><li>• Relationships</li></ul>
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## Appendix D Issues of Classification Reified in the Supermarket

Distinguishing a 'genre', whether notionally for the purpose of discussion or physically in a library or shop, is not straightforward. Fundamental decisions always have to be made about what things might usefully go together on certain occasions and the inevitable issues of separation and 'hospitality' necessarily undermine all attempts at comprehensive generic classification (Hopkins 1973). Thus classification schemes are always in some sense contingent constructs. But it is to be expected that there will be some logic behind the choices being made and that groupings of texts or artifacts will be based on more than just "our own expectations or individual perceptions" (Montgomery 2000: 199). This is why Foucault's intriguingly subversive classification scheme, apparently derived from the work of the Argentine critic and short story writer Jorge Luis Borges who was himself a librarian, is so very thought-provoking. The mind seeks to rationalize the sequence of apparently irrational categories being presented as in some way generically defensible (see Appendix E: Foucault's Classification Scheme, below).

Reviewing the challenges facing narratologists who wish to discuss textual genre, Roland Barthes (1977) suggests that two different approaches are possible. If the inductive method is used, then as many examples of text as possible are analysed and their similarities are noted; if the deductive method is adopted, a hypothetical model or theory is established against which various texts are tested in order to be appropriately collocated.

As Todorov puts it:

Genres are entities which can be described from two different viewpoints, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalised, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties" (Todorov 1990: 17).

Moreover the semiotician Greimas (1966; 1970) asserts that signs or objects in themselves lack meaning outside the discourse in which they are encountered, and that it is how various cultures have named, grouped and used them which confers significance. Therefore language does more than simply label; it divides the world into abstract categories which themselves (as part of the texture of discourse) accrue ideological significance. Thus classification is itself a kind of signifying



practice (Rafferty 2001). This phenomenon becomes easier to recognize if one imagines a visit to a supermarket where the issues of what should go where are reified every day according to various imperatives.

For example a common hierarchical sequence is to be found at Tesco, Sainsburys, Asda, Waitrose and Morrison's supermarkets in the UK. The practice in these stores is to have flowers, fruit and vegetables near the entrance, followed by fresh meat, fish and dairy products, various tinned and packaged consumables, non-alcoholic beverages, household goods and cleaning materials, frozen foods and alcohol. Moreover there are usually temptingly displayed sweets to pacify fractious children by the checkout. New sub-genres constantly emerge within broad product categories. Meat is always divided into various kinds of animal and 'cuts'; but there are also sections offering 'ready meals' (Kinsey 1998), organic produce, 'free froms' which cater for people with various food intolerances, and 'best buys' for those needing to budget. Furthermore the store's hierarchical sequence is often disrupted by prominent displays of loss leaders or seasonal specials.

The vegetable section is particularly rich in 'sub-genres': salad stuff; root vegetables (potatoes, swedes, parsnips, carrots etc.); legumes (peas, beans); alliums (onions, garlic, chives and leeks etc.); brassicas (cabbage, broccoli, sprouts etc.); herbs and so on. But there are also root salad vegetables (beetroot, radishes, celeriac etc.); salad items which grow above ground (lettuce, celery); and salad items carried on a vine (beans, tomatoes and cucumbers). Then there are also dried herbs, frozen peas and tinned carrots etc. Clearly items will be shelved in separate areas according to how they have been processed and packaged. Here 'form' takes precedence over 'content'.

It would, of course, be possible to classify non-animal foodstuffs differently. Selection by colour would collocate red peppers, strawberries, tomatoes, beetroots, radishes, red cabbages, red potatoes, red lentils and 'black' grapes. A green area would have limes, courgettes, peas, beans, cucumbers, green cabbages, green peppers, green lentils and 'white' grapes, while a brown section would have 'white' potatoes, parsnips, swedes, mushrooms and kiwi fruit. But it would also be possible to group items by shape: ovoid egg-plants, radishes and

potatoes; long cucumbers and celery; round(ish) cabbages, sprouts, tomatoes, apples etc. Moreover the common merchandising practice of distinguishing organic from non-organically sourced products produces a 'double sequence' in which apparently identical lettuces sit in separate locations because on this occasion provenance takes priority over appearance or utility. Issues of terminology also arise: an 'egg-plant' might sell better as an 'aubergine' but who in Britain would buy a rutabaga (swede). And when does a 'pumpkin' become a 'squash'? There are also problems of elision: for example how does a new potato mature into an old one?

Theoretical classification schemes are different in character from empirically-derived ones because they are communicative events which do not have to respond quickly to real situations. For example, Linnaeus's taxonomy *Systema Natura* (1735) divides the natural world into three 'kingdoms': animal, vegetable and mineral, which are further divided into classes, orders, families, genera and species. However his systematic treatment of vegetables would be little use in a supermarket for he employs his 'Sexual System', grouping plants according to the number of their stamens. Nevertheless he is a great innovator inasmuch as he at least works with observable phenomena. In contrast, earlier taxonomic schemes had been rather more subjective; thus animals might be classified according to whether they were wild or domesticated, terrestrial or aquatic, large or small, or even whether they were thought handsome or not (Bryson 2004: 434). But even the most logical and internally consistent classification schemes create issues of separation, hospitality and hierarchy. Since there are always going to be many ways of grouping things together (e.g. by subject, substance, form, intention, provenance, use, cost etc.) the questions of which group should take precedence in a scheme and the concomitant sequence of subordination are always going to be debatable.

Given the generic complexity lurking in the aisles of all supermarkets, it is clear that *anyone* concerned with grouping things together, be they texts or tomatoes, needs to have some justification for the choices they make. It is not possible to create categories without separating items from other items with which they share qualities (either intrinsic or extrinsic). So it must be decided what characteristics will be considered primary, secondary, tertiary etc. in the classification hierarchy. Aware of

these issues, writers on various genres: for example fairy tales (Propp 1968), myths (Lévi Strauss 1963; 1973), film (Tudor 1970; Wright 1975; Neale 2000), thrillers and potboilers (Palmer 1978; 1991) and detective stories (Cobley 2000; 2001), set out their methodological stall very carefully, justifying the criteria by which they have selected their corpus for study and the theoretical approaches which that study has involved.

Fortunately, the self-help book is more easily observed than some other genres because it is such a strongly promoted commercial presence. Nevertheless, the material above has been included to show that the necessary issues of classification which underlie genre studies have not been disregarded.

## Appendix E Foucault's 'Classification'

Foucault's preface to *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*<sup>a</sup><sub>1</sub> which was first published in 1966 begins:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old definitions between the Same and the Other (Foucault 1989: xvi).

In *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins* Jorge Luis Borges describes "a certain Chinese encyclopedia", the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, in which it is written that animals are divided into:

- those that belong to the Emperor
- embalmed ones
- those that are trained
- suckling pigs
- mermaids
- fabulous ones
- stray dogs
- those included in the present classification
- those that tremble as if they were mad
- innumerable ones
- those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush
- others
- those that have just broken a flower vase
- those that from a long way off look like flies

Borges was a professional librarian (Williamson 2004). But the seemingly absurd classification scheme which he joyfully presents here questions the very nature of the process with which he must have engaged every day.

As well as thousands of institutional and commercial classification schemes which are formally codified and physically enacted, there is also the unconscious selectivity which each person must develop in order to survive. At its most primitive, this is the division into 'good things' and 'bad things'. But who has the power to classify in wider society and why?

## Appendix F Sceptical Texts

The self-help genre which offers advice about personal conduct has inspired a number of parodists to imitate some of its characteristic tropes as they “mock a discourse which purports to be authoritative” (Dentith 2000: 20). Theirs is an entertaining form of scepticism about this successful commercial phenomenon. Yet the titles below also help to inform the discussion of self-help discourse at the heart of this thesis because parody not only distils the content and style of its source material but also offers some oblique comment on the putative attitudes of the original audience. A parody of a self-help book may thus function as both *mimesis* and critique. Popular techniques for the parodist include over-emphasis, retaining a particular style while changing the subject to comic effect, oxymoron and the incongruous reproduction of characteristic vocabulary, clichés and conventions. Although space does not permit this here, it would be interesting to see how far the tropes of classical rhetoric (Lanham 1992) endure in the pages of the contemporary self-help book

Bines, J. and Greenberg, G. (1999)

*Self-Helpless: The Greatest Self-Help Books You'll Never Read.*

Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.

A collection of short parodies including 'Ventriloquism for Dummies'.

Buckley, Christopher and Tierney, John (with Brother Tye) (1998)

*God is My Broker:*

*A Monk Tycoon Reveals the 7<sup>1/2</sup> Laws of Spiritual and Financial Growth.*

London: Nicholas Brealey.

A group of monks become wealthy by chance - or perhaps through miracles. They hire marketing people and public relations consultants while beginning to read books by Deepak Chopra and other self-help gurus. Chandler, David S. and Kay,

Elliot (2004) *How an Idiot Writes a Self-Help Book.*

New York: iUniverse. Both *mimesis* and critique. Much white space and repetition.

Held, B.S. (2001) *Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching: A 5-Step Guide to Creative Complaining.* New York, St. Martin's Griffin. Written by a professor of psychology who is irritated by the cult of positive thinking.

Marinaccio, Dave (1994) *All I really Need to Know I Learned from Watching Star Trek*. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks. The premise is that "every situation you will face in life has already been faced by the crew of the Starship Enterprise" (p.9).

Salmansohn, K. ( 2001)

*How to be Happy, Dammit: A Cynic's Guide to Spiritual Awareness*.

Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts. The oxymoronic approach

Salmanson, K. (2003) *How to Change Your Entire Life by Doing Absolutely Nothing*.

New York: Simon and Schuster. Offers a paradoxical 'life principle'

Shafer, Ross (2003) *Nobody Moved Your Cheese!*

*How to Ignore the "Experts" and Trust Your Gut*. Victoria, BC: Trafford.

An exasperated response to *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1998).

Soh, G. (2005) *Men Are From Earth, Women Are From Earth: Deal With It*.

London: Little Books.

Practical *bathos* in response to the mega-selling *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray 1992).

Spencer, L. Vaughan [aka Neil Mularkey] (2008)

*Don't be Needy be Succeedy: A to Zee of Motivitality*©. London: Profile.

A dictionary-style book which parodies the language of the corporate self-improvement industry. Based on Mularkey's show which won the award for Best Satire of 2002 at the Edinburgh Fringe.

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