

SELF AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN *NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND* AND *CONFESSIONS OF ZENO*¹

Idilva Maria Pires Germano²

Ana Carolina Teixeira Bastos

Allan Ratts de Sousa

Universidade Federal do Ceará, Fortaleza-CE, Brasil

ABSTRACT. The question "who am I?" evokes both the problem of the self (self-conscious) and the autobiography (self writing). The notion of a self-conscious I and the autobiographical genre are interconnected social constructions, marked by historical and cultural changes of the Western modernity and object of philosophical, scientific and literary reflection. This paper discusses problems in both Dostoevsky's (1864/2009) *Notes from the underground*, and Italo Svevo's (1923/2003) *Confessions of Zeno*. In These works we can observe modern dilemmas regarding the understanding of the self and the self writing by their authors' handling of the content and texts form. Two themes, the truth of self as disease and the impossibility of autobiography were examined comparatively with the support of trans-disciplinary theoretical frames which contribute to the revision of the concept of self and the autobiographical genre. In both novels, the same analysis shows the challenge of Cartesian, individualistic and rationalist underpinnings of the self and the autobiography made by the critical debate of the modern subject, by figuring these realities as the social, relational and dialogical artifacts rather than individual, finished, private, static or coherent entities realities. Both underline the I precarious condition that emerges only in the relationship with and in reaction to others. Each novel, in its own way, disrupt the belief in the I founding conceptions and the autobiography, while raising questions that are now special object of theorization of a narrative-dialogical Psychology.

Keywords: Self; autobiography; dialogism.

SELF E AUTOBIOGRAFIA EM *MEMÓRIAS DO SUBSOLO* E A *CONSCIÊNCIA DE ZENO*

RESUMO. A pergunta "Quem sou eu?" remete tanto à problemática do *self* (a consciência de si) quanto à da autobiografia (a escrita de si). A noção de um eu que tem consciência de si mesmo e o gênero autobiográfico são construções sociais interligadas, marcadas por transformações históricas e culturais da Modernidade Ocidental e objeto de tematização filosófica, científica e literária. Este trabalho discute ambas as problemáticas em *Memórias do subsolo*, de Dostoiévski (1864/2009), e *A consciência de Zeno*, de Italo Svevo (1923/2003). Nessas obras podem-se acompanhar os dilemas modernos do entendimento do *self* e da escrita de si, mediante o tratamento dado por seus autores tanto à matéria quanto à forma textual. Dois eixos temáticos, a verdade de si como doença e a impossibilidade da autobiografia foram analisados comparativamente, com amparo em molduras teóricas transdisciplinares que contribuem para a revisão do conceito de *self* e do gênero autobiográfico. Nas obras analisadas observa-se o mesmo desafio às bases cartesianas, individualistas e racionalistas do *self* e da autobiografia operado pela crítica do sujeito moderno, com a figuração dessas realidades como artefatos sociais relacionais e dialógicos, ao invés de realidades individuais acabadas, privadas, estáticas ou dotadas de coesão. Ambas sublinham a condição precária do eu que ganha forma apenas na relação com e reação aos outros. Cada uma, a seu modo, desconstrói a crença em concepções fundantes do eu e da autobiografia, levantando questões que hoje são objeto privilegiado de teorização de uma psicologia de linhagem narrativo-dialógica.

Palavras-chave: *Self*, autobiografia; dialogismo.

¹ *Support:* FNDE - Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação; Programa de Educação Tutorial PET- SESU; Departamento de Psicologia da Universidade Federal do Ceará.

² *Correspondence address:* Rua Monsenhor Catão, 948, ap. 302, Meireles - CEP 60.175-000 - Fortaleza-CE, Brasil. *E-mail:* idilvapg@gmail.com.

SELF Y AUTOBIOGRAFÍA EN MEMORIAS DEL SUBSUELO Y LA CONSCIENCIA DE ZENO

RESUMEN. La pregunta "¿quién soy yo?" se refiere tanto al problema del *self* (auto-conciencia) como de la autobiografía (la escritura de sí mismo). La noción de un yo que es consciente de sí y el género autobiográfico son construcciones sociales interconectadas, marcadas por transformaciones históricas y culturales de la modernidad Occidental y objeto de tematización filosófica, científica y literaria. Este artículo discute los dos problemas en *Memorias del subsuelo*, de Dostoiévski (1864/2009), y *La consciencia de Zeno*, de Italo Svevo (1923/2003). En estas obras se pueden acompañar los dilemas modernos de la comprensión del *self* y de la escritura de sí, a través del tratamiento que sus autores dan tanto al contenido como a la forma textual. Dos temas, la verdad de sí como enfermedad y la imposibilidad de la autobiografía, se analizaron comparativamente con amparo de marcos teóricos transdisciplinarios que contribuyen a la revisión del concepto de *self* y del género autobiográfico. En las obras analizadas, se observa el mismo desafío a las bases cartesianas, individualistas y racionalistas del *self* y de la autobiografía operado por la crítica del sujeto moderno, con la figuración de estas realidades como artefactos sociales relacionales y dialógicos, en lugar de realidades individuales acabadas, privadas, estáticas o dotadas de cohesión. Ambas destacan la condición precaria del yo que se concreta sólo en la relación con y reacción a los demás. Cada una, a su manera, deconstruye la creencia en las concepciones fundamentales del yo y de la autobiografía, planteando cuestiones que actualmente son objeto privilegiado de teorización de una psicología de linaje narrativo-dialógico.

Palabras-clave: *Self*; autobiografía; dialogismo.

This work comes from a shared interest of the authors, who are members of a Brazilian undergraduate tutorial program called *Programa de Educação Tutorial -PET Psicologia (Tutorial Education Program In Psychology)*, in the relationship between psychology and literature. The interest comes to fruition in activities that allow the students and the tutor to read and discuss novels, short stories and essays which are considered important readings for the psychologists' academic education. Indeed, the study of this relationship reveals historical problems on subjectivity that cross scientific and aesthetic boundaries, being present in both theories of the psyche as in fictional stories.

One such problem is that concerning the self or self-consciousness that has received great attention in modern psychosocial studies since the early twentieth century, in the pioneering works of William James, Charles Cooley and George Herbert Mead. These authors paved the way for the social self formulation, breaking with the transcendental and abstract concept of the self born of the Enlightenment (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Another problem, which is linked to the self problem is the autobiography, a confessional form of the I presentation, that emerges in the eighteenth century and states itself in the eight hundreds, spreading the practice of writing in the first person until today (Galle & Olmos, 2009). The autobiographical genre is only

possible with the expansion of the modern notion of the individual; moreover, it participates in the setting of the modern psychological subject, as urging people to understand themselves as unique beings, endowed, each one, of an inner, intimate and private space.

The modern biographical and autobiographical model, from enlightened roots, produced the narrative of development, disseminating the notion of life as a continuous learning in which the human being learns lessons until he achieves his full development. This sort of narrative is associated with the German notion of *Bildung* and gained literary form in the *Bildungsroman* whose most famous work is *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre* (1796), by Goethe. As Delory-Momberger (2009) claims, the human life is here represented as "a process of the self formation, through the experiences of living in his temporal trajectory, realizing his own strengths and dispositions as they confront the limits and the possibilities of his environment" (p.101). The textual structure is an account of the development stages of the hero, from youth to maturity, through the significant moments of learning, until he "reaches a sufficient understanding of himself and his place in the world, to live in harmony with himself and with the society, which is his."(p. 101).

The question "who am I?", therefore, refers to both problems of the self and the

autobiography. The notion of an I that is conscious about himself and that can and should write about himself are interrelated social constructions, marked by historical and cultural transformation of Western modernity and the object of philosophical, scientific and literary thematization. These interrelated issues interest to psychologists who historically have occupied an important position in the modern *expertise* of the psyche, participating of the self construction and regulation, "... promoting the self-inspection and the self-consciousness, shaping desires, seeking to maximize the intellectual abilities" (Rose, 1988, p. 34). Currently, the study of the self gains new momentum when discussing the impact of economic, technological and cultural transformations of the post-industrial capitalism in the subjective experience, at a time that multiplies both the interaction forms and the modes of identification.

This paper discusses, on a comparative basis, the themes of self-consciousness and autobiography in *Notes from the underground* by Dostoevsky (1864/2009), and *Confessions of Zeno* by Italo Svevo (1923/2003). The aim of this discussion is to compare the treatment given to these issues in the two works, focusing how they challenge the self-consciousness promised by the confessional genre and how they construct the I space as multiple and fragmented. In their confessions, their protagonists unveil the paradoxical and ironic dimension of the self-knowledge task. They are strange and pathetic heroes who find themselves entangled in the traps of saying who they are. Heroes who reflect, with varying degrees of clarity, about their contradictions and dilemmas, ranging between positioning themselves as healthy or sick, inside or outside the standards of normality in their current environments. In this sense, the protagonists' confessional work itself, that leads them to mull over, to articulate and to give meaning to their doubtful memories and feelings, is the object of irony and mockery.

Notes from the underground is one of the novels that precede the great novels of Dostoevsky. It was written from January to May 1864, and represents the period of his literary production after his release from the penalty of forced labor in Siberia imposed by the czarist regime. Upon leaving prison, the writer finds the Russian intellectual

environment marked by deterministic ideologies to which the novel seeks to answer. The 1860s is also marked by nihilism, anarchism and political unrest in Russia, which become a source of concern and literary material for the writer (Frank, 2002). According to Bakhtin (1929/1997), the text launches the polyphonic novel genre, a novel form marked by the compositional principle of polyphony: different narratives that speak differently of the same topic, i.e. "narratives that intersect and complement each other" as in the musical counterpoint (Brait & Machado, 2011, p. 27).

In a simplified way, the novel refers to the confessions of a man in his forties, a resident of St. Petersburg, an impoverished former government employee in the czarist Russia, who speaks of himself to anonymous gentlemen. Dialoguing with these imaginary characters, the underground man reveals his bitterness and guilt, but in a contradictory way, saying and going back in his sayings about the knowledge which builds on himself and the others. This attitude makes up the very fabric of the novel. As Schnaiderman (2009) says about the Bakhtin thesis: he showed that "all the novel was structured on a confession that builds itself on the expectation of the other's word" (p. 8).

Confessions of Zeno, book of the Italian writer, who was born in Trieste, Italo Svevo (pseudonym of Ettore Schmitz) is published in 1923, and it is considered a modernist masterpiece. Svevo (1861-1928), the son of a Jewish father of Hungarian origin and an Italian mother, began to write this novel in 1919, after the First World War, in a Trieste which becomes an Italian province, after being Austrian possession. Around this time, he met Freud's work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and he came to translate part of it into Italian. He also met the writer James Joyce who was his English teacher and helped him to obtain, finally, the recognition of the international literary criticism. His career is marked by the dual Italian and German background (he studied in Germany in his childhood) and for his life as a businessman life and a man of letters, interested in art and philosophy (Barroso, 2010).

The novel is about Zeno's adventures and misadventures, a middle-aged bourgeois from Trieste, trying to kick the habit of smoking. He undergoes psychoanalysis sessions and, at

the request of the analyst, to the task of writing his memories and feelings. Zeno is a hypochondriac without special qualities or talents and represents a privileged social class. The account of his memories comically subverts the claim of self-transparency of the confessional tradition. His deceptive narration makes the reader laugh facing the huge gap between what Zeno thinks of himself and what all the others think of him.

There are several common points in the two texts. One is the centrality of the disease or malaise theme, the awareness - between painful and cynical - that the protagonists deviate from socially acceptable standards of physical and mental health. Here, the polar themes disease/health and normality/abnormality emerge in these fictional texts as core meanings or metaphors, signaling that self-consciousness involves tensions and discomfort, since they are made up among social voices and diverging interpretations irreducible to absolute certainty. The self-consciousness is compared to a disease in Dostoevsky, among other points, in the sense that the imperative to define oneself coherently and according to the prevailing morality is a troubled and contradictory effort that leads to unpredictable actions, sometimes reprehensible and sources of remorse. In Svevo, it seems that the disease can also refer metaphorically to the "inability to be upright", issue noted by Ramos (2001, p. 194), about his inability to be a romantic hero, i.e. "to have character and composure" (p. 194), to represent the morals and good manners and to sacrifice himself on behalf of the others".

In *Notes from the underground*, the bitter narrator confesses his faults and pains, describing himself as a "sick man, a bad man" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 15), who probably suffers from "liver disease" (p. 15). His feeling and voice are angry, even more devastated because of his acute awareness of his own anxieties and his radical difference in relation to the "direct people and men of action" (p. 18), hence his complaint that "excessive consciousness is a disease – a genuine, absolute disease" (p. 18).

In *The Confessions of Zeno* (1923/2003), the theme is also central: the memorialist exhibits all the time his concern about being healthy and achieving a well-being, maturity and serenity state, expected from people of his

age and his social position. As Hollington (1989) stated, health for the protagonist is a "criterion, order, coherence" (p. 354) question, attributes that are persistently pursued and frustrated.

The second point of approach of the two works is its articulation of the issues self and autobiography. Indeed, Dostoevsky and Svevo, in their works, weave elaborate narratives that explore the self-knowledge problematic, the multiple nature of subjectivity and the impossibility of the autobiography. Both texts aesthetically elaborate the complex psychosocial phenomena and processes explored in psychology, social sciences and philosophy: the narrative and dialogical construction of the I, the memory work, the criteria of personal truth and authenticity and the autobiographical illusions.

Some questions of this study guided the comparative analysis of the works: To what extent do *Notes from the underground* and *Confessions of Zeno* deconstruct entrenched beliefs and expectations about the stability and uniqueness of the self as well as the knowledge and the writing of oneself? How is problem of confessions' truthfulness/falseness explored? How is the disease metaphor figured in both works? How do the novels literarily formulate the rejection of certainties regarding the autonomous, self-centered and transparent subject of modern metaphysics? We understand that the two fictional texts analyzed reflect, in particular, the multiple and fragmented character of the I and therefore the inability of people in reaching a reliable knowledge about themselves.

For analysis, we selected two themes that emerged from the initial reading of the works: the truth of oneself as a disease and the impossibility of the autobiography. The first axis involves the pathological meanings associated with the protagonists' self-knowledge. In their inner probing, the protagonists present themselves as sick men, but they oscillate ambivalently on their belief in the reality of their diseases. The second axis gathers the meanings of disbelief on the task of narrating their own stories: Zeno and the underground man distrust of their own narration, putting in suspicion their own confessions and, in the case of Zeno, the very possibility of his cure.

To discuss these issues, we seek support in transdisciplinary theoretical frames, such as the Bahktinian inspired theory of the dialogical self (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992; Hermans, 2001, 2002) and a contemporary discussion about the deconstruction of the autobiographical space (Arfuch, 2010; Duque-Estrada, 2009). A recent and promising theoretical perspective in psychology inaugurated by Hermans and his colleagues, starts from Bakhtin's work on Dostoevsky's poetic to propose the concept of dialogical self. The formulation of the dialogical self is inspired by the tradition of William James (the I/me distinction), of Bakhtin (the polyphonic novel) and in the positioning concept (Davies & Harré, 1990/2007), offering a more spatial concept of the psyche as a multiplicity of I-positions in the mind scenario. We believe that this formulation allows us to understand the I contradictions that inhabit the individual - and which are well illustrated in the writings of Dostoevsky and Svevo which were selected here.

Against the Cartesian *cogito* which formulates the I as a centralized single instance, the dialogical self assumes that there are several I positions that might be occupied by the same person. Hermans (2001) conceptualized the self in terms of a "dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions." (p. 248). In real or imagined conversations, the I fluctuates among positions according to the circumstances and has the imaginatively capacity "to endow each position with a voice so that the dialogical relations among positions can be established. Here, the voices function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement." (p. 248).

The texts analysis was also carried out on a critical discussion of the autobiographical genre, which highlights the misconceptions of understanding the autobiography as the story that an author makes of his own life with the intention of telling the truth. Escaping from the narrow limits of this kind of concept, we tried to show how the texts here analyzed contribute to dissolve the pretense of an autobiography based on the assumption of a self-contained subject able to tell his own and true story (Arfuch, 2010; Duque-Estrada, 2009).

Exploring the consciousness and the writing of oneself, the selected texts build them as relational and dialogical phenomena, rather than finished, private, static and individual realities endowed with cohesion. Instead, they highlight the I precarious condition that takes shape only in the relationship with and in reaction to others. We argue that Dostoyevsky's and Svevo's works, which were analyzed here, each in its own way, disturb the belief in the founding conceptions of the I and autobiography, raising questions about the self that is nowadays a privileged object of theorizing in a narrative-dialogical perspective of psychology.

MY ILLNESS, MY TRUTH: SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND MALAISE IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE UNDERGROUND MAN AND ZENO

One theme that stands out when comparing the novels is the polarity between normality/abnormality, between what the underground man and Zeno believe to be either a normal and healthy behavior or a pathological behavior, therefore source of discomfort. In the protagonists' self-reflection, who are engaged in their self-examination and narration, the disease, the neurosis and the addiction occupy a central place, leading them to recognize themselves, in a more or less direct way, either guilty or innocent, as *outsiders*, strange people who do not act according to the civility and health expectations or standards which are dominant in their social environment. They are beings who judge themselves, somehow, outside the rules, who have some psychic and moral disorder and cannot live their lives in a relaxed way like (they think that) people ordinarily do. The very definition of what they want, their goals and objectives are crossed by strangeness, uncertainty and sense of failure.

The construction of the protagonists' illness and discomfort however gets different nuances in each novel. In *Notes from the underground*, the protagonist oscillates in claiming and denying his weakness and the mistakes he makes, stressing especially how a massive self-awareness as his own constitutes a real disease: "I swear to you gentlemen, that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness." (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009,

p.18). The acute self-consciousness separates him from the "direct people and men of action" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 29), those without dilemmas, who are secure of their truths and know how to behave in society. It is the very self-reflection of the underground narrator - a process that occurs in a dialogic way - that triggers off the awareness of insoluble contradictions, which are experienced as suffering. The discomfort, therefore, is associated with the difficulty in positioning himself among conflicting and eloquent voices fighting in the space of conscience. In this view, people who define themselves positively (that is, not conscious of the contradictions and paradoxes of desire, of interests, of values) and accept the monological truths about the world and themselves, are healthier and suffer less.

In *Confessions of Zeno*, the disease/healing theme and its relationship with the protagonist's self are central. The addition to smoking and also the attempt to get rid of it are reupdated in each situation that requires the initiative, the ability and the decision of the narrator in the personal (e.g, his love life) or professional field (in the business administration). In this sense, Zeno's promises of his last cigarette, registered accurately in his notes, but never actually accomplished, anticipate his desired victory over the addiction and its benefits: the world of healthy choices, serenity, sobriety and fulfillment that can come to the narrator in the various areas of his life. As Zeno says, such a promise is the "hope of an imminent future of strength and health" (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 14).

Indeed, Zeno is convinced of his own illness - "Disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction" (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 15). Throughout the narrative, we can follow the chain of symptoms displayed in significant moments of his life, leading him to successive treatments toward health and happiness. The ideal health is embodied in his own wife, someone who "can reach everything within the law and the order" (p. 139) or "renounces everything" (p. 140).

In *Notes from the Underground*, the link disease-truth is explored in a dialogic manner, always in response to the socially available narratives that position the narrator in a contradictory way. These involve hegemonic discourses associated with the pole of health

and normality - reason, science, common sense, beauty, prosperity, morality - that are, at the same time, refused and appropriated by the narrator when talking about himself. The narrator refutes the imperative of rationality and of common sense, claiming both the creative dimension of humanity and its love for destruction and chaos that leads human beings to desire and to seek, paradoxically, the reprehensible and the suffering. The rejection, however, is ambivalent and confessed as a lie. The dialogue with these contradictory truths, presented in a perspective of self-dialogue dramatizes how other people and speeches occupy positions in the narrator's multivocal self, positioning himself uncertainly:

Last of all, gentlemen: It is best to do nothing! The best thing is conscious inertia! So long live underground! Although I have said that I am green with envy of the normal man, I wouldn't like to be him in the circumstances in which I see him (even though I shall not cease to envy him, all the same.) No, no, the underground is better, in any case. There one can at least ... Ach! The fact is I am lying even now! I'm lying, because I know, as sure as two and two make four, that it isn't the underground that is better, but something different, entirely different, which I am eager for, but which I shall never find. (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, pp. 50-51).

The I of the narrator oscillates between disparate narratives that run parallel, without closing. The purpose of reading is to destroy the expectation of a consistent view of the narrator's self: the reader follows the faltering arguments unable to build a cohesive and comprehensive image of the speaker, nor accept his self-description as sick, deviant and sufferer.

Zeno and the underground man face their diseases by using a tool that they seem to discredit themselves: the free and sincere writing of their memoirs and confessions. The confession by the register of their recollections is, in principle, the path to healing, and a privileged strategy of self-knowledge and purgation, but soon becomes the object of derision and disbelief.

In *Notes*, the questioner, when responding imaginatively to the masters, suggests that "it

is possible that the annotations bring him relief" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 54). With that, he anticipates the confession of a sin evoking the catharsis that the narration can produce. He comes to acknowledge a painful truth about himself that becomes accessible only in self-narration. Purging involves an otherness game, which is, "experiencing oneself as another and the another as yourself" (Kearney, 2012, p.419). But at the end of the novel, when his cruelty to Liza is revealed, alongside his tension between wickedness and repentance, anger and compassion and his ambivalent judgment upon his own person, the paradoxical narrator questions the process and the outcome (unpleasant) of his self-writing, closer to "a correctional punishment" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p.147): "... all this is somehow a very evil memory. I have many evil memories now, but ... hadn't I better end my "Notes" here?" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 145). In fact, this reticent issue and the final argument about the relationship between the books and the "living life" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p.142) present the limits of the autobiography that yielding more questions than answers, always ends up as an unfinished project.

In *Confessions of Zeno*, in the reflection of the malaise theme, the psychoanalysis itself is a privileged object, whose theorization is constantly challenged in a paradoxical and ironic way. One of the paradoxes is Zeno's relationship with psychoanalysis, where he looks for help to understand the origin of his disease and the meaning of his symptoms, but which he also mocks, disbelieving its validity and effectiveness. Zeno, in fact, reads a psychoanalysis compendium and keeps his purpose of writing his recollections of the past following the guidance of his analyst. But the belief in Freudian framework and the therapeutic process is always subject to doubt, betraying Zeno's autobiographical intention and the confidence in the self-portrait that may result from such untrustworthy narrator.

At the end, Zeno attributes the cure of his illness not to the psychoanalysis, but to chance, disorder, finally to life itself in its unpredictability. The war, his old age, the unexpected success in business restore him to health, not the psychoanalysis sessions. For Zeno, now convinced of his health (for him, it was a persuasion case, not a treatment issue),

"life does resemble sickness a bit, as it proceeds by crises and lyses and has daily improvements and setbacks. Unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal. It does not tolerate therapies" (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 582). The articulation confessions-healing - the heuristic and therapeutic aspect of talking about himself - is increasingly called into suspicion in the two works.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IMPOSSIBILITIES: SELF-KNOWLEDGE REFIGURATIONS IN NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND AND CONFESSIONS OF ZENO

By confessional forms, *Notes from the Underground* and *Confessions of Zeno* explore the boundaries or even the impossibility of the autobiography, refiguring literarily the disbelief in modern founding conceptions of self-knowledge and self-writing. In fact, the autobiographical tradition that dates back to *The Confessions*, by Rousseau, is shaken in Dostoevsky's and Svevo's modernist novels. According to Duque-Estrada (2009), Dostoevsky, in *Notes from the Underground*, performs the proto-deconstruction of a set of beliefs that spanned the centuries in the lineage of autobiographical writing since the *Confessions*, by St. Augustine. This set of beliefs covers:

the assumption that each individual is unique and self identical, the belief in a "humanity" that simultaneously unites and differentiates the individuals, the presumption of an externality between the *I* and the language, which is understood solely as the means of expression and transmission of meaning of pre-linguistic experiences and, ultimately, the character of exemplarity of experiences that claim to have universal validity. (Duque-Estrada, 2009, p. 61).

The break with the foundations of the traditional autobiography in *Notes* is accompanied by a displacement in the ways of understanding the truth / lie and fiction/reality relationship. An alleged referent of the *I* of the underground man then becomes fleeting and unstable, failing in the promise of a trustworthy personal self-portrait. Distancing himself from both the scientific rationality advocated by the Enlightenment (symbolized by the refusal of the order, of the system and

of the assured "*two plus two equals four*") and doubting the sincerity and the sensitivity chased by Rousseau, the text of Dostoevsky suggests that the I investigation just leads to an "empty form" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 53); the autobiography is more a product of a way of telling (the style) than an instrument of self representation. Thus, the novel anticipates the reflection on the autonomous subject emptiness, who can know himself and to make himself known. That will be occupied, in the contemporary theory of the subject, by discursive strategies (Arfuch, 2010). The deconstructed and decentered self can only be approached in its close relationship with the discursive orders and practices that produce the individuality and the selfhood.

In the wake of the contemporary reflection, resulting from the linguistic, discursive and narrative turns, the formulations about the self tend to gain an increasingly dialogical, discursive and performative accent falling on the social and relational factors rather than on the individual factors that shape the personality. In this sense, Dostoevsky's text builds a vision of the I which will be explored in theoretical perspectives that understand the self in a "thin individual and thick social relational" viewpoint (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 5) and which are oriented by a relativist epistemology, unbelieving definitive grounds or criteria of truth and knowledge. Those approaches emphasize either the ways in which people make use of culturally and socially available narrative resources to articulate a sense of themselves, either the game of positioning and voices dialogically produced, or even the practical circumstances and conversational exchanges which dilute the self in situated and contingent constructions. In line with such formulations, in *Notes* the dialogic nature of the hero's inner probing reveals his indeterminacy (which is the indeterminacy of the past told) and the tensions between oneself continuity and the discontinuity. With this, the novel unbalances the self-writing that aspires to a finished portrait of the character and his story.

The disturbing effects, inaugurated in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel and also present in Svevo's comic paradox, are present in the content and the form of these fictions, helping to destroy the certainties that the narrators - and their readers - may have about

these subjects. The response of the autobiographers to the question "who am I?" is answered in a contradictory, dialogic and multivocal form without the relief of a sure and certain response.

In what way do *Notes from the underground* and *Confessions of Zeno* address the problem of the protagonists' divided self-consciousness? Bakhtin (1929/1997) explains how Dostoevsky opens the "entirely dialogic polyphonic novel" (p. 46) and a new way of building the characters. Instead of composing the character as determined, endowed with typical social traits and goals (traits that would allow to answer the question "who is he?"), he is composed as a "specific point of view about the world and about himself, as a rational and evaluative position of the man in relation to himself and to the surrounding reality." (Bakhtin, 1929/1997, p. 46). About the hero, almost everything we know about him is presented by himself in his inner dialogue and in his anticipations of the other word. In these new poetics, self-consciousness becomes the dominant artistic principle of the character building, no more a trace which determines and concludes the character, as in the representation of the traditional realistic novel, in which the author has a united, stable and solid image - i.e., monological - of their characters. In this sense, Dostoevsky's artistic vision emphasizes the incompleteness and the insolubility of the character, whose full image keeps inconclusive by the author: the character is who presents himself in his polemic with his anonymous gentlemen.

Bakhtin's perspective on the polyphonic genre in Dostoevsky and his dialogism problematic surpass, as it is known, the field of literary studies, significantly influencing the psychosocial and cultural perspectives about the I and self-consciousness. As previously mentioned, Dostoevsky's poetics as formulated by Bakhtin inspired the development of the theory of the dialogical self, by Hermans (2001, 2002), which comprises the consciousness of oneself as a dynamic movement of the I-positions. In this theory, the existential reality is understood as relational and dialogic: the possibility of knowledge of things and of oneself is always a result of the communicational and negotiated relationship between an I and another. The self-knowledge implies the action to position

oneself in relation to the voices (present and absent) and not the notion of a singular and central self.

As in the polyphonic novel by the Russian writer, the human psyche is composed by various authors or perspectives into play, each one with a distinct voice, but telling different stories about some personal experiences. The notion of voice approaches the notion of character; the psyche is a complex dialogue among these characters and their stories. In the case of *Notes*, we followed the conflicting ways in which the underground man is presented, as he imagines what his interlocutors think of him and what they might say: for example, his claim to be or not to be bad and his recognition of "these contradictory elements swarmed inside me" (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 16). This fluctuation between subjective positions in disagreement allows the *Notes'* narrator to discredit the words he had used earlier to describe himself, weakening the confidence in the honest autobiography, which supposedly can reveal someone in his entirety:

I will tell you another thing that would be better, and that is, if I myself believed in anything of what I have just written. I swear to you, gentlemen, there is not one thing, not one word of what I have written that I really believe. That is, I believe it, perhaps, but at the same time I feel and suspect that I am lying like a cobbler. (Dostoevsky, 1864/2009, p. 51)

Svevo's novel analyzed here also addresses the multiple voices and I positions that can be occupied by Zeno, as the protagonist-narrator builds himself as a character, when dialoguing with another Zeno from decades ago. The autobiographical construction is marked by distinct perspectives which the narrator adopts in relation to the past and the present, none of which claims the status of truth about himself. When speaking of the past, Zeno distances himself from the young man he was, by the use of expressions such as "*I know now*", "*it seemed to me that*", "*now that I'm older*") and others that show the movement of a dynamic I. But this distancing does not necessarily mean that the mature memorialist finally reaches a higher or final stage of self-knowledge, after the examination of his life. The final chapter abruptly changes the narrative, with Zeno now writing a

diary and not his memories. In this new self-writing, Zeno admits that "a written confession is always mendacious" (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 354) and that to invent "is a creative action, not merely a lie" (p. 355). His ironic statements about himself remain uncertain as before.

Zeno does not believe in the sincerity of his confessions, in what he said before and now, doesn't justify himself (as in the Rousseau confessional tradition) and seems to reject the judgment that one may formulate about him. Furthermore, there are no epiphanies or special revelations after reviewing his life, as expected in the modern confessional tradition. The confessions of Zeno end up revealing the tricks of the autobiographical work and the impropriety of a safe reading key to understand the narrator. Would Zeno be a fantasist, a liar, a naive, a socially awkward, an ironic or a cynical person?

Zeno dialogically anticipates the speeches and thinking of his interlocutors in order to be accepted socially, to orient himself and to achieve his interests. However, his action does not proceed as he expects: Zeno is not what others expect of him, neither he behaves according to others' expectations nor what he apparently waits from himself. Zeno cannot equate the dialogue with different social voices that ambivalently positions himself, resulting not only in logical, but performative contradictions, which increase the comic effect. He, for example, aims to be recognized as a serious person, but the effect of his misinterpretations is to be recognized as a crazy person. An illustrative scene is when Zeno courts Ada and seeks to justify his volubility in his studies, which he imagines to have been talked about in the family of his beloved. In the excerpt below, it's curious how the reader seeks the true reasons for Zeno's academic fickleness, uncertain whether he is telling a lie or a camouflaged truth:

I tried to explain to them if a man confined himself to only one subject the greater part of knowledge remained hidden from him....

Then to make them laugh, I said that it was odd that I always gave up a subject just before the examinations came on.

- Mere chance – I added with a smile intended to suggest that I was not speaking the truth. The truth was that I had changed my subject at every imaginable time of the year.

And so I set out to win Ada and persisted in trying to make her laugh at me, forgetting that what I had first chosen her for was her seriousness. I am rather fantastic, it is true, but to her I must have seemed positively unbalanced. (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 68)

Zeno produces a narrative marked by inconstancy and unreliability, as he remains divided between obedience to the psychoanalyst's imperative voice (the alleged reader of his confessions), the voice of Augusta, the loved and betrayed wife, of religion, and his desire. An illustration is his interrupted confession to his wife that he had a mistress and that he was about to spend a whole night in her arms:

I was very tired and found it hard work to keep awake, even during the short time she was with me. I felt very innocent for not having been unfaithful to the extent of staying away from home all night. Innocence was so delightful that I tried to increase the sensation of it. I began putting a few words together which sounded like a confession. I said I felt weak and guilty but, seeing that she looked at me inquiringly at this point as if in need of an explanation, I drew in my horns again began talking about the sense of sin which I had in every word I spoke or breath I drew in. (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 68).

Does Zeno believe himself as guilty or innocent? Is he true or does he lie? To whom does Zeno answer and justify himself? Is his portrait an accurate description of himself, coming from a self-analysis or from resistance towards analysis? The outcome of this scene is that his wife, apparently ignorant of her husband's adventures, interprets his words as those of a religious person who resignedly believes in punishing the faults that he doesn't fully know. Zeno's description and answer lead to questioning from what position does Zeno speak, which positions are occupied right now:

It seemed to me that she had not quite understood the difference between my way of thinking and that of the monks, but I did not want to discuss it, and to the monotonous accompaniment of the wind, which had now risen, I soon fell into a long, refreshing sleep, my mind quite

eased by my attempted confession." (Svevo, 1923/2003, p. 215).

A comparative analysis of the confessional theme in both works seems revealing of the modern skepticism about the terms that make up the classic definition of the autobiography: *autos* (own) *bíos* (life) *graphein* (write). Can a life be told? Can someone write about his own life? Is the I that tells his/her story a true, single and coherent narrator? Can the narrator who recalls his past be identified to the character of the teller? Is the told story that produces the life itself, the very sense I have of myself?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Notes from the Underground, by Dostoevsky and *Confessions of Zeno*, by Svevo, aesthetically dramatize the limits of the self-consciousness and the problems of the first-person narration. Both call into question the self-evidence of some concepts and terms inherited from the consciousness philosophy that remain, albeit fragile, in modern sensibilities in decline: person, self, life, subject, identity, autobiography.

We can venture that, in the analyzed works, there is an ironic treatment of the modern autobiography and of the development narrative. This model does not fail to infuse the biographical and autobiographical practices today, still identified with a notion of "guided and finalized route by which the narrator recalls the genesis of the being he has become." (Delory-Momberger, 2009, p. 101). We still read and write autobiographies according to this dominant scheme, often aspiring to take life lessons that lead us to a higher level of wisdom and maturity. But the transformations of the modern society, especially from the second half of the twentieth century, imposed breaks and discontinuities in the modern biographical patterns, leading the social sciences and humanities to consider such impacts, identifying what remains and what changes in the way we narrate our life and the lives of others.

Now, it is precisely the set of assumptions embodied in the individualistic and rationalistic models of the self and human development that appears to be undermined by Dostoevsky and Svevo in these two philosophical novels: a teleological perspective, the notion of progressive development, the human realization as a universal value, the subject as an autonomous

and responsible being that must make his way in life and that, after a journey of learning, can consciously tell his own history. People cannot fully understand themselves, the motives that guide their actions, nor control the strange and the unpredictable that emerge in their relations with the alterity. In this sense, these works keep their relevance and fascination for contemporary readers who live in a world that puts into question the modernity pillars - reason, progress, autonomous subject responsible for his/her actions - and, consequently, reviews the autobiographical temptation, the one of writing the truth of a lifetime.

What does the aesthetic figuration of the self and autobiography in *Notes from the Underground* and *Confessions of Zeno* imply to the psychological studies, to the understanding of its objects and practices? Some tentative answers are proposed. The first concerns the way these works make visible the dialogic relationship between the psychological and the literary field. The dialogical self theory stems from Bakhtin who reflects on Dostoevsky who undermines the autobiographical model of Rousseau; Svevo's fiction offers an ironical formulation of psychoanalysis which in turn dialogues with novels and myths. Beyond the dialogic aspect in the field of self and autobiography theory, the works unveil the dialogic principle present in the very relations between science and literature, how the non-scientific and scientific discourses recognize or move away from each other, even justifying the use of both discourses as resources for psychologists education.

A second point, more central, refers to the implications of thinking the self as resulting from multivocal I positions. In fact, the indeterminate and contingent character of the self in these works and also in the dialogical self and autobiography theorization emphasize language as social practice, the fact that we make use of socially available narratives, genres and repertoires to negotiate who we are. In this intersubjective negotiation, we can accept or confront certain stories and points of view in an effort to give meaning to ourselves and to the world.

An offshoot of this view that the self "is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and another's discursive practices" (Davies & Harré, 1990/2007, pp. 244-

245) is found in the clinical field in psychotherapeutic proposals that seek to collaborate for the personal repositioning against dominant and oppressive I positions. It is understood that the psychological distress that leads to psychotherapy can result from a rigid adherence to certain self positions, in a situation that weakens the dialogic multiplicity of I positions. This monological adherence to certain dominant positions keeps the self away from other subordinate positions that would provide alternatives for the self-description and orientation in the world. This means an important ethical and political commitment in psychological research and practice, as it involves identifying hegemonic stories, undertaken by individuals and groups, which have the effect of subjugating them as positioning them unfavorably in order to promote, in an opposite way and also in dialogue, other self-narratives that allow them to resist these oppressive truths.

REFERENCES

- Arfuch, L. (2010). *O espaço biográfico: dilemas da subjetividade contemporânea*. Rio de Janeiro: EDUERJ, 2010.
- Bakhtin, M. (1997). *Problemas da poética de Dostoiévski*. (P. Bezerra, Trad.). Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária. (Original publicado em 1929).
- Barroso, I. (2010). Ettore Schmitz, aliás Italo Svevo: um resumo cronológico *Gaveta do Ivo* (Blog). Recuperado em 20 setembro, de 2014, de <http://gavetadoivo.wordpress.com/2010/09/28/ettore-schmitz-alias-italo-svevo-um-resumo-cronologico/>
- Brait, B.; Machado, I. (2011). O encontro privilegiado entre Bakhtin e Dostoiévski num subsolo. *Bakhtinianna*, 6(1), 24-43.
- Davies, B. & Harré, R. (2007). Posicionamento: la producción discursiva de la identidad (C.A.C. Puebla, Trad.) *Athenea Digital*, 12, 242-259. (Original publicado em 1990). Recuperado em 20 setembro, de 2014, de <http://atheneadigital.net/article/view/445>.
- Delory-Momberger, C. (2009). Filiações e rupturas do modelo autobiográfico na pós-modernidade. In H. Galle, A.C. Olmos, A. Kanzevolski & L.Z. Izarra (Orgs.). *Em primeira pessoa: abordagens de uma teoria da autobiografia* (pp 95-110). São Paulo: Annablume, FAPESP, FFLCH, USP.
- Dostoiévski, F. (2009). *Memórias do subsolo*. (B. Schnaiderman, Trad.). São Paulo, Editora 34. (Original publicado em 1864).
- Duque-Estrada, E. M. (2009). *Devires autobiográficos: a atualidade da escrita de si*. Rio de Janeiro: NAU/Editora PUC-Rio.
- Frank, J. (2002). *Dostoiévski: Os efeitos da libertação -1860-1865*. (G.G. de Souza, Trad.). São Paulo, EDUSP. (Original publicado em 1986).

- Galle, H. & Olmos, A.C. Apresentação. In H. Galle, A.C. Olmos, A. Kanzeplski & L.Z. Izarra. (Orgs.). *Em primeira pessoa: abordagens de uma teoria da autobiografia* (pp. 9-18). São Paulo: Annablume, FAPESP, FFLCH, USP.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2001). Dialogical self: toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology*, 7(3), 243-281.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2002). The dialogical self as a society of mind: Introduction. *Theory & Psychology*, 12(2), 147-160.
- Hermans, H.J.M., Kempen, H.J.G. & van Loon, R.J.P. (1992). The dialogical self: beyond individualism and rationalism. *American Psychologist*, 47(1), 1992, 23-33.
- Hollington, M. (1989). Svevo, Joyce e o tempo modernista. In M. Bradbury & J. McFarlane. (Orgs.). *Modernismo: guia geral-1890-1930* (pp. 352-362). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- Holstein, J.A. & Gubrium, J.B. (2000). *The self we live by: narrative identity in postmodern world*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keamey, R. (2012). Narrativa. *Educação & Realidade*, 37(2), 409-438.
- Ramos, M.C.T. (2001). Ítalo Svevo e Machado de Assis: os olhares propostos em A consciência de Zeno e Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas. *Fragmentos*, 11, 193-204.
- Rose, N. (1988). Governando a alma: a formação do eu privado. In T.T. da Silva (Org. e Trad.). *Liberdades reguladas* (pp. 30-45). Petrópolis: Vozes.
- Schnaiderman, B. (2009). Prefácio. In F. Dostoiévski. *Memórias do subsolo* (pp. 7-12). (B. Schnaiderman, Trad.). São Paulo, Editora 34.
- Smith, B. & Sparkes, A.C. (2008). Contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities: an invitation to dialogue. *Qualitative research*, 8(1), 5-35.
- Svevo, I. (2003). *A consciência de Zeno* (I. Barroso, Trad.). Rio de Janeiro: O Globo; São Paulo: Folha de São Paulo. (Original publicado em 1923).

Received: June 26, 2014
Approved: Nov. 03, 2014

Idilva Maria Pires Germano: doutora em Sociologia; professora associada do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia da Universidade Federal do Ceará; tutora do Programa de Educação Tutorial (PET) no Curso de Psicologia da Universidade Federal do Ceará, Brasil.

Ana Carolina Teixeira Bastos: aluna do curso de Psicologia da Universidade Federal do Ceará; bolsista do Programa de Educação Tutorial-PET Psicologia na mesma universidade.

Allan Ratts de Sousa: graduado em Psicologia pela Universidade Federal do Ceará; bolsista do Programa de Educação Tutorial-PET Psicologia na mesma universidade.