

# Consciousness and Autobiography

## *A Search for the Roots of Referentiality in Life Writing*

Ana Leticia Lourenço Sigvartsen



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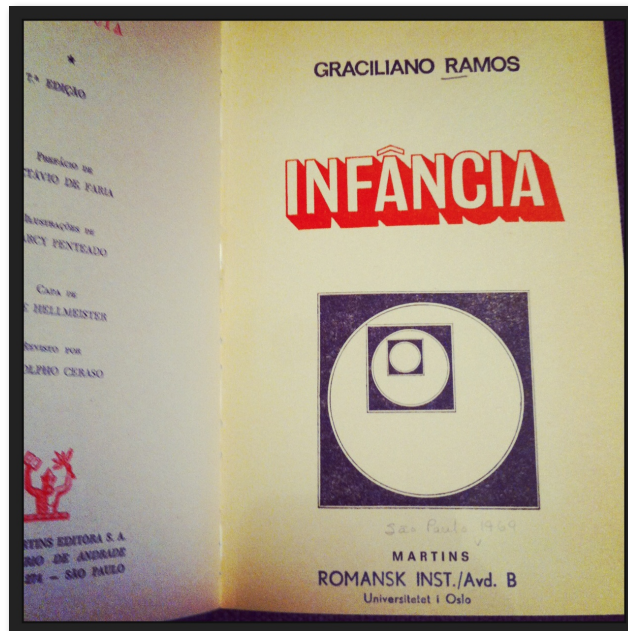
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Ana Leticia Lourenço Sigvartsen

Supervisor: Drude von der Fehr



Master's Thesis in Comparative Literature  
Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages  
Faculty of Humanities

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

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Consciousness and Autobiography. A Search for the Roots of Referentiality in Life Writing.

Ana Leticia Lourenço Sigvartsen

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# Abstract

In this dissertation I will be reviewing a few much-cited theories from the fields of psychology and neurobiology concerning the building of autobiographical memories, of a sense of self and of narrative identity. I will then compare some of these theories and findings to what literary theorists have been saying for years about the matter of fiction vs. non-fiction in the genre of autobiography.

Philippe Lejeune's idea that autobiography is in essence a contractual genre will be central to my conclusion. I recognize the importance of his well-known "autobiographical pact", and I suggest that there is yet another pact involved in the reading and writing of autobiographical narratives; what I would like to call the "neurobiological pact".

Using Brazilian author Graciliano Ramos' autobiography *Infância* ("Childhood") as an example, I will try to show how the narrative found in autobiographies relate to what is known about the narrative constructions we all make in order to form a coherent life story and maintain a unified sense of self. Steering my argumentation is the idea that autobiography does not "feel to the reader precisely like fiction" and that the critical pushing of autobiography into the realm of fiction does not agree with the fundamental human experience of self and identity.

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# 1 Introduction

"If there is a consensus is that there is no consensus about what autobiography looks like or does" (Broughton 2007, p. 40)

Much has been said about the literary genre of autobiography. Should it even be viewed as a genre? Throughout the years, many attempts have been made in order to establish a working definition or to decide whether to place autobiographies in the category of fiction or non-fiction.

As Paul John Eakin (1992, p. 29) notes, since the 1970s "the pervasive initiative has been to establish autobiography as an imaginary art, with special emphasis on its fictions", and I will show that, even today, the idea that autobiographies are closer to fiction than to non-fiction remains current. Current, but not accepted at face value. Some literary theorists have picked up on people's "intuitive notion that autobiographies do not feel ... precisely like fiction" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

Eakin (2008, p. 79) has suggested that one of the main characteristics of autobiography is that it mirrors not external reality, but the "neurobiological rhythms of consciousness", and has taken interest in the experience of the reader of autobiography. Distancing myself from claims that autobiographies, like novels, belong to the realm of fiction, I would like to propose that precisely because the form in autobiography is similar to the inner workings of the human mind when it comes to the formation of the self-narrative, we as readers are willing to distinguish it from more unconstrained modes of writing.

The making of this distinction may be aided by Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact. Lejeune defined autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence" and proposed that author, narrator and protagonist had to be identical, using the proper name of the author as reference (Lejeune, 1973, p. 298). I view the proper name, the "real person" that Lejeune speaks of, as implying the existence of a physical body that has existed in the world and possesses a system of autobiographical knowledge. I argue that the pact (as well as any genre definition) serves mostly as an invitation to draw boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional in the text. Ultimately, however, we will always distinguish *created* from *remembered*, and use our own experience of being a self with a set of memories and a "life story" to develop a sense of whether a given text is autobiographical or fictional.



I will attempt to show how the narrative in Graciliano Ramos' *Infância* relates to what is known about the narrative constructions we all make in order to form a coherent life story and a unified sense of self; in other words, that the non-fictional character of the text comes from a biologically bound form of truth which resonates with the reader.

As human beings we all have a sense of a unified self, we have memories which feel true and can be very vivid, and we have feelings of ownership and agency toward the events of our own life. I will be emphasizing the role of the body and the distinctions we all make between "me" and "others" in order to try to explain why this autobiography does not feel precisely like fiction to its readers.

## 2 Truth in autobiography

### 2.1 Does truth still matter?

Although it sounds like a reasonable assumption that one can never expect autobiographies to faithfully replicate events as they happened in the past, recent works on autobiography suggest that the discussion around truth and reality in the genre is still very much alive.

In the second edition of their book *Reading Autobiography*, published in 2010 (p. 15), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that "In trying to differentiate autobiographical narrative from biography, the novel, and history writing, we encounter a fundamental question: what is the truth status of autobiographical disclosure? How do we know whether and when a narrator is telling the truth or lying?". They proceed to answer the question by saying that the truth of the narrative is undecidable in life writing and that we need to "adjust our expectations of the truth" when reading autobiographical texts (*ibid.*, p. 16), i.e. we should approach them not as texts with a stable truth which needs to be verified, but as a process of exchange between writer and reader, resulting in different interpretations of a particular life.

Only a few years earlier, Mark Freeman (2003, p. 120) had also written about the need to rethink the terms *reality* and *fiction*, *truth* and *falsity*, *accuracy* and *distortion* in autobiography. One of the main characteristics of autobiographical writing is that the author is constantly looking at the rearview mirror. As Kate Douglas (2010, p. 21) puts it, "memory drives autobiography". Memory's fallibility is an important element in Freeman's argumentation. He quotes, among others, D. L. Schacter, who writes that the "output of human memory often differs—sometimes rather substantially—from the input. Remembering can fail not only because information is forgotten over time, but also because it is changed and distorted." (Freeman, 2003, p. 119). In autobiography, the author remembers and narrates, which means "situating experiences of the past ... in accordance with and in relation to what has happened since, as understood and reunderstood from ... the moment of narration" (*ibid.*, p. 123). But the *constructed*, Freeman argues, is not necessarily *untrue*. In autobiographical writing, the concept of truth is more complicated than the fiction/reality dichotomy tends to convey, he continues, and we need to "think beyond it" (*ibid.*, p. 127).

What Freeman suggests is that we look for another kind of truth by focusing on *narrative* time instead of clock time. By narrative time he means the kind of time which is in

our minds when we look back on past events. When we are thinking about these past events, we are adding a new dimension to them. Drawing on Hacking's work<sup>1</sup>, he argues that truth can also be the kind of truth "that is *made available* by narrative and by the poetic processes that go into the telling of the past" (*ibid.*, p. 126).

Another scholar who has written extensively about truth in autobiography is Paul John Eakin. He writes that "[i]n the age of poststructuralism we have been too ready to assume that the very idea of a referential aesthetic is untenable, but autobiography is nothing if not a referential art" (Eakin, 1992, p. 28). Eakin does not deny the reconstructive nature of autobiographical writing, but he still thinks that there is an important line to be drawn between fictional and non-fictional genres, especially because, as he notes, autobiographies "do not feel to the reader precisely like fiction" (Loesberg, in *ibid.*, p. 30).

Referring to Lejeune and Bruss, Eakin also notes that "the most successful attempts to date to establish a poetics of the genre ... focus precisely on the reader's recognition of a referential intention in such texts and its consequences for their reception" (*ibid.*, p. 29). In other words, the focus when dealing with autobiography can be turned away from the author's often obscure intention and from the evasive reality of the here and now, and toward the reader's inclination to separate the imagined from the factual.

## 2.2 Autobiographical hoaxes

Lejeune's idea of an "autobiographical pact" is very often cited in theoretical works on the genre. The pact supposes that the author, the narrator and the protagonist share the same name, and focuses not on historical accuracy, but on a sincere effort to tell the truth about the past. Lejeune himself, however, has later added that the "contract" in an autobiographical text implies "the possibility of some kind of verification" (Lejeune, 1991, p. 3).

More recent theories, such as Tonya Blowers', deal with the same issue, but seem to focus more on the way we *read* autobiography. Blowers has suggested that autobiographies can be read as textual contracts: "[R]eading the signature that is common to author, narrator and protagonist, knowing that it implies a specific mode of reading: autobiography, not fiction" (Blowers, 2000, p. 115), which is to say that there is a simultaneous acceptance of the reality outside the text as well as of the text's representative nature.

Also echoing Lejeune's pact, Smith and Watson (2010, p. 37) write that readers

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<sup>1</sup> Hacking, I. 1995, *Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the new sciences of memory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

ascribe memories and experiences in self-referential writing "to a flesh-and-blood person", the author named on the cover, and "assume that the publication acts as an ethical guarantee by publishers and agents", accepting a certain amount of inconsistencies, but not, as they call it, "intentional duping"<sup>2</sup>.

In autobiography, then, the element of fiction can come about because of at least two factors. Aspects of one's life can be fictionalized (a) because, as Nabokov (1989, ch. 1-1) once wrote, memory is only afforded "a slippery hold" in consciousness. Even when the author tries to remember things correctly or sincerely believes he/she is remembering them correctly, there is still a reasonable chance that some of it will be distorted or even entirely fabricated; or (b) on purpose, as with so-called "autobiographical hoaxes".

Autobiographical hoaxes are breaches of the "textual contract", when an autobiography contains exaggerations, impersonations, plagiarism, fabrications, false witnessing and so on, and when these are used with intention by the author. A recent and widely cited example of autobiographical hoax is James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, a book which garnered attention after it became a part of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club in 2005. Frey was later accused of fabricating, embellishing and manipulating details of his alleged experience with drugs, alcohol and crime.<sup>3</sup> What followed was stir and outrage in the media and among readers (for other cases in which issues of trust in autobiographical narrative have been brought up, see Smith and Watson, 2010, pp. 34-35).

Eakin uses the controversy surrounding Frey's book as an example of how the referential character of autobiography still matters to readers: "What the Frey episode confirms", he writes, "is that the reception of memoir is contractual: readers expect autobiographers to exhibit some basic respect for the truth of their lives—break that trust and suffer the consequences" (Eakin, 2008, p. 20).

Eakin's view is shared, more recently, by Swirski (2010, p. 74), who states that "it does matter whether what we read is fiction or not. We do care whether we are hoaxed into believing that what we read is truth or make-believe". Swirski has also noticed that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is still of utter importance to any work's identity: "Without it we would find ourselves in the midst of conceptual anarchy with no grounds to tell Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* from Eco's *The Sign of Three*" (*ibid.*, p. 69).

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<sup>2</sup> I should note that Smith and Watson (2010, p. 15) characterize Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact as "fractured".

<sup>3</sup> See for instance The Smoking Gun's article "A Million Little Lies", from January 2006, found online at [<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/celebrity/million-little-lies>]

Steven Pinker has tried to explain this distinction between fiction and non-fiction that Swirski speaks of. He writes that even though people can "lose themselves in fiction, or misremember something ..., or mistakenly believe that a stylized portrayal of a time and a place is an accurate portrayal", all of us can distinguish fictitious worlds from real ones, "as we see when a two-year old pretends that a banana is a telephone for the fun of it but at the same time understands that a banana is not literally a telephone" (Pinker, 2002, p. 215). This last example serves simply to stress the fact that even though the line between reality and fiction has been blurred by theory in the past couple of decades, as human beings we have always distinguished (and probably always will) between the two.

What I take from Pinker, Eakin and Swirski is that there may be no "Great Divide" between fact and fiction in literary works (to use the same expression Darrel Mansell used in 1976), and still it seems like the mind always seeks to distinguish between these two modes, both in the act of writing and in the act of reading.

## 2.3 A "hopelessly inventive" genre

When it comes to autobiographical hoaxes, there is in most cases an intention to deceive, but the question of truth in autobiography is naturally also problematic even when the author has the best intentions at heart. Gazzaniga addresses the issue indirectly in *The Mind's Past*:

... The interpreter, the last device in the information chain in our brain, reconstructs the brain events and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory, and judgement. The clue to how we are built is buried not just under our marvelously robust capacity for these functions, but also in the errors that are frequently made during reconstruction. Biography is fiction. Autobiography is hopelessly inventive. (1998, pp. 1-2)

What he does is to point out that our minds can be deceiving. Our brains can make mistakes, both in the act of perception and when recalling past events.

Almost a century before Gazzaniga, in 1907, Georg Misch already thought of autobiography as a genre which "of necessity must be regarded with scepticism" (in Broughton, 2007, p. 69):

It is an admitted psychological fact that remembrance does not proceed as mechanical reproduction but tends to creation. Hence autobiographies are not to be regarded as objective narratives. To regard them as merely sources of special historical information is usually to misconceive the character of the *genre*. (*ibid.*)

Much like Freeman does many years later, Georges Gusdorf, another important critic, considered autobiography to be in fact truer than experience, because the first is a second reading of the latter. It is in fact interesting to see that Gusdorf expressed over fifty years ago the same concern as Freeman, Smith, Watson, Eakin and many of our contemporary scholars: namely, the need to seek the significance of autobiography "beyond truth and falsity" (Gusdorf, 1956, p. 89):

The past that is recalled has lost its flesh and bone solidity, but it has won a new and more intimate relationship to the individual life that can thus, after being long dispersed and sought again throughout the course of time, be rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time. (*ibid.*, p. 85)

In addition to the reconstructive character of memory, there has also been a shift in the past decades in the way the self is regarded. While it was first thought of as universal and unified, the self is now known to be fragmented and fluid, an illusion of sorts (this will be explained more in depth in the next chapter). "As a result," Smith and Watson (2010, p. 201) point out, "the project of self-representation could no longer be read as providing direct access to the truth of the self. Truthfulness becomes a more complex phenomenon of narrators struggling to shape an 'identity' out of an amorphous subjectivity."

We understand by now that autobiography, like the act of remembering, will inevitably be a reconstruction of events. But although it may not always faithfully replicate immediate experience, it is not necessarily a distortion of reality or something simply imagined. As a genre, autobiography is still very much under scrutiny, perhaps (unfairly) more so than the novel. According to Broughton (2007, p. 37), "many contemporary theorists insist [that] autobiography is intrinsically a hybrid form, containing within it traces of other forms". As far as I'm aware, virtually any literary genre can be said to do that, including (and especially) the novel.

Autobiography's non-fictional character has constantly been questioned throughout the genre's history, due to the fact that there will always be some element of fiction in autobiographical texts. As Damasio (2010, p. 149) explains, however, "the process of imagination ... consists of the recall of images and their subsequent manipulation—cutting, enlarging, reordering, and so forth." This makes me wonder whether the common relegation of autobiographies to the status of "mere fictions", to borrow Freeman's words (2003, p. 115), is in itself a conception that ultimately could be turned on its head.

What Damasio's description of imaginative thinking suggests is that fiction may also contain autobiographical elements (and it usually and inevitably does). This doesn't seem to bother us much—we accept fictional narratives as made-up stories that may include non-fictional elements to a certain extent. And it is not uncommon for readers to look for elements of the author's autobiography in works that have been labeled fiction.

An interesting case in Norway is that of Karl Ove Knausgård and his *Min Kamp*<sup>4</sup> (2009-2011). Since it was made explicit that the work was highly autobiographical, even though it was characterized as a novel, many went looking for connections between the text and the outside world. The fact that a large part of Knausgård's account is based on memory like any other autobiography, and consequently of reconstructive nature, didn't seem to stop readers from seeking verification.

My point is that although the knowledge we now have about how the mind works ties fiction and non-fiction closer and closer together, as readers we seem to insist on tearing them apart again.

## 2.4 So what kind of truth do we find in autobiography?

In spite of all the doubts raised about the possibility of recalling the past as it happened and of finding a stable and objective truth for the self, no one has yet managed to put an end to the discussion about how to distinguish between reality and fiction in self-writing. To suggest that autobiography may in the end be pure fiction does not seem to agree with our own feelings of having a life story and our knowledge of who we are as individuals. At the same time, it is undeniable that the terms *reality* and *truth* are problematic when the subject looks back and tries to put together bits and pieces of his/her own past.

In a chapter named *The Elusiveness of Truth*, Roy Pascal asked himself a question which I believe is still valid: "Are we then to conclude that truth does not matter overmuch in autobiography?" (1960, p. 83). Perhaps Paul de Man was right when he concluded (1979, p. 921) that "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity ... it is undecidable". Yet, the fact that autobiography still survives as a genre and that many of us don't seem to feel comfortable calling it fiction, leaves room for inquiry.

When reading autobiographies there is, in my opinion, an acceptance of the fact that "memory and imagination conspire" (Eakin, 2008, p. 63) to allow the author to portray the

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<sup>4</sup> *My Struggle*

reality (or should we say the illusion) of the self. In Eakin's words, "we tolerate a huge amount of fiction these days in works we accept nonetheless as somehow factual accounts of their author's lives" (*ibid.*). If one accepts this idea, autobiographical reality becomes something other than physical reality, while still remaining something to which the term "fiction" does not satisfactorily apply.

Nonetheless, it does seem like an endless debate: fiction is not always purely fictional; non-fiction may never be truly referential; memories can be deceiving, the self is most likely an illusion and consciousness is an entirely private phenomenon. Yet I believe, as Pascal does, that truth is and should be an important aspect of autobiography: "Not only does the reader expect truth from autobiography, but autobiographers themselves all make more or less successful efforts to get at the truth, to stick to it, or at least to try to persuade us that they are doing so" (Pascal, 1960, p. 83).

The question remains: what kind of truth and what kind of reality is autobiography referential to? And why do we refuse to place it in the same category as fiction?

I will be choosing to focus on recollections from childhood to try to give one possible answer to this question. As Roy Pascal notes (*ibid.*, p. 71), autobiographical narratives which attempt to reconstruct childhood are based almost solely on memory (and very distant memories, for that matter), meaning that the line between fiction and non-fiction is extremely blurry. They also present facts that are often hard or sometimes impossible to verify, both for the readers and for the authors themselves, which is why I believe a childhood autobiography will be a suitable source for illustration purposes.

More specifically, I will be using Brazilian author Graciliano Ramos' autobiography *Infância*<sup>5</sup>, which was first published in 1945 and follows the first eleven years of the author's life.

In the book, Ramos shows signs of being extremely aware of the difficulty in recalling a distant past, and he offers the reader insight not only into the output of his memories, but also into the process of recalling them. Take for instance this passage from the chapter "Summer":

Deste antigo verão que me alterou a vida restam ligeiros traços apenas. E nem dêles posso afirmar que efetivamente me recorde. O hábito me leva a criar um ambiente, imaginar fatos a que atribuo realidade. (...) Certas coisas existem por derivação e associação; repetem-se, impõe-se — e, em letra de fôrma, tomam consistência, ganham raízes. Dificilmente pintariamos um verão nordestino em que os ramos

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<sup>5</sup> Childhood



não estivessem prêtos e as cacimbas vazias. Reunimos elementos considerados indispensáveis, jogamos com eles, e se desprezamos alguns, o quadro parece incompleto (Ramos, 1969, pp. 40-41).<sup>6</sup>

In the case of *Infância*, the author identified the work as autobiographical. In an interview published in 1948, Ramos was asked to talk about his first years of life in the Northeast of Brazil. His answer was "All this has already been told in *Childhood*. Is it worth repeating?" (my translation; in Silva, 2004, p. 27).

Furthermore, the text was first published in a collection entitled *Memórias, Diários, Confissões*<sup>7</sup> and at the time it was described in the newspapers as the story of author Graciliano Ramos' life (see *ibid.*, pp. 31-32).

It seems, therefore, that the autobiographical pact in *Infância* has been sealed. Despite the fact that some critics have later attempted to label it an autobiographical novel, mostly because of stylistic elements in the narrative which are characteristic of fiction writing (change of perspective, for instance), the book is still treated as the author's account of his childhood years. But is it only because of the "contract" established between author and reader that Ramos' autobiography is not read as fiction?

In the following chapter, I will explain how some of those who study the phenomenon of consciousness, such as neurologists Antonio Damasio and Oliver Sacks, psychologist Bruce Hood and philosopher John R. Searle, view the self, and why the self is characterized as an illusion by many of today's scholars. Next, I will be looking closely at how autobiographical memory is built, a process which can not even begin before the sense of self—both as agent and subject—is in place, and at the role of this Self Memory System in the life story narrative that each of us constructs. I will attempt to show how the processes I've just mentioned manifest themselves in the literary genre of autobiography by using Graciliano Ramos' book as an example.

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<sup>6</sup> From that distant Summer which has changed my whole life, only small traces remain. And I cannot even affirm that they are effectively remembered. Habit drives me to create ambience and imagine facts to which I ascribe reality. (...) Certain things exist through derivation and association; they repeat themselves, impose themselves - and take form in writing, get consistent, bear roots. We could barely paint a northeastern Summer in which the tree branches were not blackened and wells were not empty. We gather elements considered as essential ones, play with them and leave some out - the frame seems to be incomplete.

<sup>7</sup> *Memoirs, Diaries, Confessions*

## 3 Consciousness and the self

In chapter 2, I quoted Eakin as saying that "the most successful attempts to date to establish a poetics of the genre [of autobiography] ... focus precisely on the reader's recognition of a referential intention in such texts and its consequences for their reception" (1992, p. 29). As readers, you and I understand that there may be parts of a text that are created in imagination, and others that attempt to be loyal to mundane experience. Why then do we, in the act of reading, never let go of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction?

Authors too continue to write both fictional and non-fictional texts, and I think any author would say that the process of writing a novel and the process of writing an autobiography are essentially not the same. Why does autobiography as a distinct literary genre still survive, in spite of critics and scholars time and time again emphasizing that "the autobiographical act is inevitably creative, its realities ineluctably unreal", as Elizabeth Bruss (1976, p. 140) once wrote?

My approach in this chapter will be to examine some of the self's biological roots and attempt to draw a few parallels between our inherent sense of self and autobiography as a literary genre. Using Eakin's idea of autobiography mirroring not external reality, but the "neurobiological rhythms of consciousness" (Eakin, 2008, p. 79) as a starting point, I would like to explore the idea that, precisely because in our minds we have a sense of self with a life story, and because autobiography is an attempt to project this sense of self in some form, we as readers (and as writers) are willing to distinguish it from more unconstrained modes of fiction.

### 3.1 The self illusion

Although, as Lynch (2010, p. 209) tells us, autobiography "is arguably the most underhand of all literary genres, consistently avoiding the definitions fashioned for it and eluding the genre boundaries expected of it", one characteristic has rarely been contested: memory and the self lie at the heart of autobiographical writing.

Memory plays a vital role in the existence of our sense of self. As Searle (2004, p. 198) writes, "My sense that I am the same person over time, from my first-person point of view, is in a large part a matter of my ability to produce conscious memories of earlier conscious events in my life".

We all have an idea of what memory is: the ability to retain and recall or revive facts, people, previous experiences and other elements of our lives. But "What is the self?" is significantly more difficult to answer. Indeed, part of the reason why autobiography as a genre has been called into question is the conundrum of the self and its construction: "[A]utobiography is perceived to be as ineffable and irreducible as the self it figures", Anderson (2011, p. 5) writes.

There are so many worthy theories about consciousness and self that even a superficial survey of the most important ones would be out of the scope of this text. I have therefore chosen to focus on a few of the most recent works from scholars who explore the subject of the self specifically.

Bruce Hood is one of these scholars, and he questions the existence of a unified self. He refers to the self as an illusion, his view being that the story of our selves is "a constructed narrative that our brain creates" (2012, p. xiii). He presents a number of psychological studies which to him undermine the notion of a singular self:

If we are so susceptible to group pressure, subtle priming cues, stereotyping, and cultural cuing, then the notion of a true, unyielding ego self cannot be sustained. If it is a self that flinches and bends with tiny changes in circumstances, then it might as well be nonexistent. (*ibid.*, pp. 218-219)

Here Hood is stressing, among other things, that the self is shaped by context, by culture and by the reflected opinion of those around us through social interaction (as many have pointed out before him). More interestingly, he also explains that there is no center in the brain where the self is constructed: "...the self illusion is really a culmination of a multitude of processes. These usually work together in synchrony to produce a unified self" (*ibid.*, p. 233). Another scholar who defends this view is V.S. Ramachandran. In *The Tell-Tale Brain* (2011, p. 247), he says that the self is not the "monolithic entity it believes itself to be" and that the notion of a unitary self "may as well be an illusion".

To better understand what Hood means, look at the following visual metaphor:



Figure 1. A copy of Bruce Hood's demonstration of the self illusion (Hood, 2012, p. 293).

As he explains, the brain helps us "see" the invisible circle that represents the self, but the circle, like the self, is an illusion that emerges from external influences. It is a result of the brain's attempts to "organize, interpret and fill in missing information based on past experience" (Hood, 2012, pp. 293-294).

Hood brings attention to how neurons communicate with each other and to the fact that everything we experience is processed into patterns of neural activity that form our mental life. These patterns (*ibid.*, pp. 10-11) encode information such as memories, plans, knowledge of the world, feelings, et cetera. "Everything we are, can do, and will do is nothing more than this. Otherwise, we would need ghosts in the brain and, so far, none have been found", he concludes (*ibid.*).

Hood argues that the brain creates a model for the self in order to handle all the experiences that we are bombarded by every second of every day. This sounds similar to Daniel Dennett's suggestion that "of all the things in the environment an active body must make mental models of, none is more crucial than the model the agent has of itself" (Dennett, 1991, p. 427).

Dennett touches the subject of the self illusion by means of a termite colony metaphor:

So wonderful is the organization of a termite colony that it seemed to some observers that each termite colony had to have a soul.... We now understand that its organization is simply the result of a million semi-independent little agents, each itself an automaton, doing its thing. (*ibid.*, p. 416)

Like the termite colony, the human self is organized in such a way that it is easy to believe that we have a soul, some distinct entity running the show, "a benevolent Dictator ruling from Headquarters", as Dennett puts it (*ibid.*).

Fundamental to Dennett's theory is the role of language in human development. He emphasizes the fact that we human beings must constantly represent ourselves both to ourselves and to others, and we do this by means of story-telling. You and I entertain the illusion that our self-narratives come from a single source, ourselves: the "center of narrative gravity" (*ibid.*, p. 418). The self, according to Dennett, is an abstraction concocted from "the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative it is" (*ibid.*, pp. 426-427).

Similarly, Hood states that the brain creates a somewhat coherent story based on our experiences and remarks that the self is what pulls all the elements in our narrative together (Hood, 2012, p. 290). Indeed, as neurologist Oliver Sacks (1987, pp.110-111) has noted, "... each of us *is* a biography, a story. Each of us *is* a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by, through, and in us—through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations" (his italics).

## 3.2 Three levels of the self

Another interesting and much-cited scholar who explores in depth the subject of consciousness and the self, is neurologist Antonio Damasio. His definition is that the self introduces a subjective perspective in the mind, allowing the mind to be fully conscious, as he explained during a TED speech recently (Damasio, 2011). To be conscious, one needs to be awake and to have an operational mind, as well as a sense of self. The self is not a thing, he reminds us, it is a dynamic process, "and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious" (Damasio, 2010, p. 7). In other words, the self is the protagonist of our mental events.

Damasio identifies different levels of the self: a so-called *proto-self* which we are not conscious of, an ever-changing *core self* and the more advanced *autobiographical self*, from which our senses of identity and personhood arise. The two last types of self, core and autobiographical, correspond to two types of consciousness: core consciousness and extended consciousness. In core consciousness, the organism has a sense of self in one moment, now, and one place, here (Damasio, 1999, p. 16). In extended consciousness, we find a more

elaborate sense of self, as we are aware of our past, we anticipate our future and we have knowledge of the world around us. (*ibid.*).

The main characteristic of core consciousness is what Damasio calls "the very feeling of you" (*ibid.*, p. 127). In core consciousness, the *me* is formed, which is an aggregate of the following elements: perspective, ownership, agency and primordial feelings. As he explains, "perspective" refers to a standpoint, which is the body; "ownership" is the feeling that objects are being represented in a mind that belongs to me; "agency" refers to the feeling that my mind commands the actions of my body, and "primordial feelings" are the most basic kinds of feelings and reflect the state of the living body, signifying its existence "independently of how objects engage it or not" (primordial feelings are generated on the level of the protoself; Damasio, 2010, p. 185). These are said to be ingredients of a self in its most simple version. To quote Damasio (*ibid.*): "The simple self at the bottom of the mind is a lot like music, but not yet like poetry".

The core self unfolds when the organism interacts with an object. It is formed by "a sequence of images that depict an object engaging the protoself and modifying that protoself, including its primordial feelings" (*ibid.*, p. 22). Finally, there is the autobiographical self, in which we find our biographical knowledge of the past and anticipated future, knowledge about ourselves, our lives and the world we live in. Those images generate pulses of core self, and this aggregate of pulses in turn constitutes an autobiographical self (*ibid.*). By "pulses", Damasio means "singular units of consciousness occurring one after the other". This happens with such small intervals and so many at the same time, that we "only register a continuous, whirring blur" (Damasio, 1999, p. 346n4).

The more advanced autobiographical self, which is part of extended consciousness, can only be constructed by means of the core self mechanism:

In brains endowed with abundant memory, language, and reasoning, narratives with this same simple origin and contour are enriched and allowed to display even more knowledge, thus producing a well-defined protagonist, an autobiographical self. (Damasio, 2010, pp. 203-204).

For Damasio, it is in the core self of the here and now that the individual has a sense of personhood, but not the complexity of what we associate with identity (*ibid.*, p. 168). The part of our consciousness linked to both personhood and identity is, according to Damasio, *extended* consciousness.

In a review of Gerald Edelman's *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*, Oliver Sacks also writes about the difference between what he calls primary and higher-order

consciousness: "[Higher-order consciousness] is dependent on the evolutionary development of language, along with the evolution of symbols, of cultural exchange; and with all this brings an unprecedented power of detachment, generalization, and reflection" (Sacks, 1993, p. 3). From higher-order consciousness, self-consciousness arises, giving us the ability to reflect and introspect, and to be shaped by culture and history.

In his review, Sacks points out that higher-order consciousness arises from and supplements primary consciousness. Likewise, Damasio explains that extended consciousness depends on the "core you", and that it places the experiences of the core you in a much bigger context, connecting them to the lived past and anticipated future of the person's autobiographical record (Damasio, 1999, p. 196). Like the objects that interact with the core self, autobiographical memories are objects and therefore also able to generate pulses of core consciousness and a "sense of self knowing" (*ibid.*, p. 197). As Damasio explains, core consciousness operates along an interval no longer than the fraction of a second, while extended consciousness can stretch from seconds and minutes to hours and years.

Summing up, then: "Extended consciousness is ... the capacity to be aware of a large compass of entities and events, i.e., the ability to generate a sense of individual perspective, ownership, and agency, over a larger compass of knowledge than that surveyed in core consciousness" (*ibid.*, p. 198).

One difference between Damasio's description of the processes which give rise to the self in its different stages, and the vision of the self described in the previous section, is the emphasis on language. While Hood and Dennett place considerable weight on the social interactions and narrative processes that go into forming the brain's model for the self, Damasio proposes that even autobiographical selves do not require the advanced language system that humans possess (it is not unthinkable that chimpanzees and dogs also have them in some form, he adds). But due to an "ample endowment of memory, reasoning ability, and that critical gift called language" (*ibid.*), human beings are able to develop a more complex sense of personhood.

These theories seem to converge, however, when Damasio suggests that the building of the autobiographical self, i.e. the image of ourselves developed during the course of a lifetime, occurs to a great extent unconsciously. Also, Damasio recognizes that "we can vary and waver, succumb to vanity and betray, be malleable and voluble. The potential to create our own Hamlets, Iagos, and Falstaffs is inside each of us" (*ibid.*, p. 225).

It seems reasonable to say that the autobiographical self that Damasio speaks of, is the very subject of self-writing—which implies (and I will come back to this later) that the self

portrayed in the literary genre of autobiography may also be thought of as having deeper roots, since experiences must be registered in core consciousness before they can become records that in turn can be reactivated in extended consciousness. The protoself and the core self are, as Damasio suggests, "the first basis for the conscious *you*" (his italics; *ibid.*, p. 172):

You rise above the sea level of knowing, transiently but incessantly, as a *felt* core self, renewed again and again, thanks to anything that comes from outside the brain into its sensory machinery or anything that comes from the brain's memory stores toward sensory, motor, or autonomic recall. You know it is *you* seeing because the story depicts a character—you—doing the seeing. (*ibid.*)

Although Dennett, Hood and Damasio seem to have each their own suggestion of how a self is formed and maintained in our minds, their theories are not entirely incongruent. The difference is that the first two seem to be mainly concerned with self and consciousness as post-language phenomena, which would correspond to what Damasio refers to as extended consciousness.

As I will explain shortly, I believe that many literary theories of autobiography draw their conclusions from the notion of the self as it manifests itself in extended consciousness, giving less attention (or often none at all) to the more basic core consciousness. Perhaps this is why autobiography is sometimes thought of as fiction, as Freeman argues (2003, p. 115), just as the self turns out to be an illusion.

Although I do not completely disagree with this view, I would like to explore (a) the role of foundational core consciousness, (b) the processes that go into the construction of the post-language autobiographical self, and how (a) and (b) may relate to the way we read and write autobiography.

### **3.3 A necessary illusion**

Taking into account the notion of the self as an illusion, it would be naïve to suggest that there is such thing as *one* subject to be discovered in any autobiography. Especially with the knowledge we now have of how the brain works (a small fraction of which has been described here), it would be something like believing in a homunculus in our minds or a ghost in the machine. Still, the autobiographical subject, as multifaceted and elusive as it may be, *feels* like a real story in our minds. The idea that the self is an illusion does not mean that we don't have a sense of self as unified. This is a point made by all scholars of consciousness that I have mentioned so far.



Damasio (2010, p. 170) reminds us that "even at its most subtle and faint, the self is a necessary presence in the mind". It is also a *real* presence. Whether or not the self is an illusion, it is a necessary illusion, the lack of which would cause the mind to "lose its orientation, the ability to gather its parts", as Damasio explains.<sup>8</sup> The unified self may also be a necessity from an evolutionary standpoint:

The tendency toward unified control prevails during our developmental history, probably because a single organism requires that there be one single self if the job of maintaining life is to be accomplished successfully—more than one self per organism is not a good recipe for survival (Damasio, 1999, p. 225).

Although Bruce Hood, as previously explained, defends the idea of the self as an illusion, something constructed and susceptible to change, he does not deny the fact that there is a unified self at some level, the "essential self" that he dissects (Hood, 2012, p. 112). He writes that "[w]e think of our self as travelling a path in time from childhood to adulthood, punctuated by life events and the people along the way who have influenced us and shaped who we are" (*ibid.*, p. 71). And, like Damasio, Hood acknowledges that the self is a necessity, as we can read in the following passage:

If you think about the "I" and the "me" that we usually refer to as the self, it provides a focal point to hang experiences together both in the immediate here and now, as well as to join those events over a lifetime. Experiences are fragmented episodes unless they are woven together in a meaningful narrative. (*ibid.*, p. 290)

Ramachandran, who also defends the idea of self as an illusion, describes nonetheless unity and continuity as two of seven important aspects of the self (2011, pp. 250-251; the other five aspects being embodiment, privacy, social embedding, free will and self-awareness).

Ramachandran notes that the diversity of sensory experiences that we have does not stop us from feeling like *one* person, and that despite the fact that we have many (often contradictory) goals, memories, emotions, actions and so on, these still seem to be part of a single individual. This is what he means by "unity". By "continuity", he means that we have a sense of continuity of identity through time, as well as an ability, in our minds, to "travel" back to our past or project ourselves into our future.

Another significant element to consider when talking about the self as we experience it in our minds, is the importance of the body. After all, the one indisputable and unifying element of our existence (and perhaps the easiest to acknowledge, since it is a physical given) is the body. It is embodied that we travel from childhood to adulthood, and the death of our body

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1960's, British psychiatrist Ronald David Laing referred to mental disease (schizophrenia, mainly) as a "divided self".

marks the end of our life story. This idea is described by philosopher John R. Searle (2004, p. 196) as *spatio-temporal continuity of the body*, because the body I inhabit today is spatio-temporally continuous with the body of the infant from when I was born. This characteristic is, according to Searle, one of the criteria of personal identity. "Embodiment" is, as mentioned, one of Ramachandran's seven key aspects of the self. The term refers precisely to the feeling that we are "anchored and at home" in our bodies (*ibid.*, p. 251).

Damasio also points out that the body is the foundation of the conscious mind. "Although the body is the thing mapped," he writes (Damasio, 2010, p. 89), "it never loses contact with the mapping entity, the brain. Under normal circumstances they are hitched to each other from birth to death".

It should be clear by now that much of our sense of self is related to the body. "For every person you know, there is a body", Damasio writes (1999, p. 142), "you may never have given any thought to this simple relationship but there it is: one person, one body; one mind, one body". Two of the most important concepts Damasio associates with the self are ownership and agency, both of which are said to be rooted in the body:

Ownership and agency are ... entirely related to a body at a particular instant and in a particular space. The things you own are close to your body, or should be, so that they remain yours, and this applies to things, lovers and ideas. Agency, of course, requires a body acting in time and space and is meaningless without it. (*ibid.*, p. 145)

In *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Searle (1998, p. 184) treats the experience of our body as "the central reference point of all forms of consciousness". He emphasizes the brain's capacity to form a "body image" and tells us that the match between where bodily sensations seem to be and the actual physical body is "entirely created in the brain" (*ibid.*, p. 182). To demonstrate this, Searle uses the example of phantom limbs, a condition in which a patient may still feel pain in a limb which has been amputated. Partly based on Israel Rosenfield's theories, Searle explains that our sense of self is a sense of experiences affecting the body image. "My conscious experience of my own body as an object in space and time, an experience that is in fact constructed in my brain", he writes, "is the basic element that runs through all of our conscious experiences" (*ibid.*, p. 185).

### **3.4 Summary 3.1-3.3**

Although Damasio, Hood and the other aforementioned scholars explain much more in depth the science behind the self process, for the purpose of our discussion it will suffice to keep in mind the following:

(a) although the self is an illusion in the sense that it is highly malleable and it is the result of a number of different processes, we still experience our selves as a "bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (also referred to as "stability" in Damasio, 1999, p. 134);

(b) stability and singularity depend on the organism having a boundary, meaning structures that separate what is inside the organism from what is outside. Damasio writes that "If there is no boundary, there is no body, and if there is no body, there is no organism" (*ibid.*, p. 137). The "internal milieu" of the organism, as he calls it, is a precursor to the self;

(c) the important features of the simple self that form the basis for the autobiographical self, namely the sense of perspective, ownership and agency, which tell me that *I* am interacting with an object; and

(d) the sense of self described in (a) can be thought of as a center of narrative gravity, and the story of our self would then be a constructed narrative that our brain creates (as shown in section 3.1).

### **3.5 Where science and literary criticism converge: The self and autobiography**

Writing about autobiography in the first half of the 20th century, philologist Georg Misch defined the genre as "the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*autos*)" (in Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 195).

With the so-called "second wave" of autobiography criticism that came along in the second half of that century, attention was turned from the *bios* to the subject, the *autos* of autobiography. Influenced, among other things, by Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis and Saussurean linguistics, critics started looking at the self as estranged and fragmented. Smith

and Watson have written that "[a]s a result, the project of self-representation could no longer be read as providing direct access to the truth of the self" (2010, p. 201).

One can already see signs of this shift in French scholar Georges Gusdorf's famous essay from 1956, where he describes the exploration of the self as some sort of dangerous and dark pursuit. He writes, for instance, that "[s]ociology, depth psychology, psychoanalysis have revealed the *complex and agonizing* sense that the encounter of a man with his image carries" (Gusdorf, 1956, p. 80; my italics). Gusdorf still refers, however, to "the true person", the subject of autobiography which only the individual himself has access to (*ibid.*, p. 83). In 1960, Roy Pascal was aware that "one's self-knowledge may be illusory; the more one probes, the further the truth seems to recede" (Pascal, 1960, p. 70).

It was during the 1970s and 1980s, however, that the notion of the unified self, this "true person", was seriously put under fire. As James Olney explains (1980, p. 22), French critics such as Barthes, Foucault and Derrida paved the way for the idea that "the self that was not really in existence in the beginning, is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author".

Smith and Watson (2010, p. 206) bring attention to Derrida's notion of the self as "a fiction, an illusion constituted in discourse, a hypothetical place or space of storytelling". Roland Barthes, who famously announced "the death of the author" in the end of the 1960's, also thought that the self lacked a central core (in Eakin, 1992, p. 6), and Paul de Man (1979, p. 921) proposed that autobiography was not even a genre, but a "figure of reading" and that its difference from fiction was "undecidable". Referentiality in autobiography was, according to de Man, "an illusion produced by the rhetorical structure of language" (Eakin, 1985, p. 186), in such a way that the writer is "written by the discourse he employs" (*ibid.*, p. 189).

Through the lens of modern autobiography criticism, the unified self thus became a mere construct, a fiction, an effect of discourse. In 1982, Janet Varner Gunn lamented the fact that even though autobiography had gained some degree of acceptance as a genre, "it is now declared a hoax, or defined as a mausoleum preserving a 'self' which otherwise would not exist at all" (Gunn, 1982, p. 30).

Post-structuralist theories had a significant impact on later studies of autobiography. Eakin writes in the beginning of the 1990's that following the shift of perspective from fact to fiction in autobiography studies, as well as the post-structuralist attack on the concept of the unified self, "reference in autobiography remains ... a rather forbidding subject" (Eakin, 1992, p. 29).

In the past two decades, three terms have become central in autobiography criticism: performativity, positionality and relationality. In theories of performativity, identity is not seen as an essential and fixed attribute of the subject, but as something "enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses"; "an effect of storytelling" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 214). Positionality turns attention to the cultural and historical placement of the subject, and "subject positions" are viewed as "effects of social relations whose power is distributed unevenly and asymmetrically across difference" (*ibid.*, p. 215). Finally, relationality refers to the idea that "the narrator's story is often refracted through the stories of others" (*ibid.*, p. 216) and emphasizes the subject's lack of autonomy. According to Smith and Watson, all of these terms point to a disbelief in the universal, stable and autonomous individual, and shift the focus to the idea of the subject in process and in context.

At the brink of the new millenium, the possibility of referentiality was still being questioned by autobiography critics. Mary Evans, for instance, wrote in 1999 about the "impossibility of auto/biography" and argued that the genre was in "urgent need of reclassification; that its place on the library shelves is not with non-fiction but very much closer to fiction" (Evans, 1999, p. 202).

A decade later, Smith and Watson don't go so far as placing what they call "self life writing" (they do not view autobiography as a single genre) in the category of fiction. They imply, however, that the idea of the unified and stable core self remains powerless, at least in theory:

Readers often conceive of autobiographical narrators as telling unified stories of their lives, as creating or discovering coherent selves. But both the unified story and the coherent self are myths of identity. For there is no coherent "self" that precedes stories about identity, about "who" one is. Nor is there a unified, stable, immutable self that can remember everything that happened in the past. (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 61)

Even Eakin, who as far as I can tell is one of the few literary theorists really interested in neuroscience, comes to the conclusion that the self "of course, which we take to be experiential fact, is also finally a fiction, an elusive creature that we construct even as we seek to encounter it" (Eakin, 2008, p. 125).

Based on the studies mentioned in chapter 3.1, I certainly understand why Smith and Watson write that the unified story and the coherent self are myths. It is also common-sense that no one is able to remember everything that happened in the past (although there are rare

cases such as Jill Price's, who became known in the media as "the woman who can't forget").<sup>9</sup> The part I disagree with is the assumption that "there is no coherent 'self' that precedes stories about identity" and that there is no "unified, stable ... self" in the act of recalling the past (ref. what I have written in sections 3.2 and 3.3 about the core self and about the self being a necessary illusion).

Is it really that naïve and inconceivable that an autobiographical text could have anything to do with a life story or a coherent self? In the next chapter I will be reviewing recent research on autobiographical memories and how these are thought to be organized in our brains in order to form a unified story of a life based on a singular, stable self (as illusory and subject to change as these two things may be).

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Marcus, G. (2009) "Total recall: The woman who can't forget", [online], *Wired Magazine*. Found at: <[http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/17-04/ff\\_perfectmemory](http://www.wired.com/medtech/health/magazine/17-04/ff_perfectmemory)> [08.05.2013]

## 4 Autobiographical memory and the life story

It is impossible to talk about the self (at least the extended self) without talking about memory. As Damasio (1999, p. 196) explains, the sense of self arises precisely "in the consistent, reiterated display of some of our own personal memories, *the objects of our personal past*". Autobiographical selves are "autobiographies made conscious" (Damasio, 2010, p. 210), and autobiographies are made of personal memories. We need conventional memory to construct an autobiographical self and working memory (the ability to hold images in mind for some time) to make it explicit (Damasio, 1999, p. 217).

Damasio suggests that each autobiographical memory generates a pulse of core consciousness, just as it happens with objects that are perceived in the external world, thus generating "a sense of self knowing":

Whenever an object X provokes a pulse of core consciousness and the core self emerges relative to object X, selected sets of facts from the implicit autobiographical self are also consistently activated as explicit memories and provoke pulses of core consciousness of their own. (*ibid.*, p. 218)

When we remember an object, we retrieve sensory data about the object as well as the past reactions of the organism to that object. "This is why we can be conscious of what we remember as much as we are conscious of what we actually see, hear, or touch now", Damasio explains (*ibid.*, p. 161). This organization allows us to develop an autobiographical self. Thus, once again, Damasio stresses the importance of core consciousness as a foundation for all other higher-order processes: without it, we would have no knowledge of the moment, the past or the anticipated future (*ibid.*, pp. 218-219).

Autobiographical memories are an important criterion of personal identity. "My sense that I am exactly the same person over time, from my first-person point of view, is in large part a matter of my ability to produce conscious memories of earlier conscious events in my life", Searle (2004, p. 198) writes. The continuity of our memory experiences (which, as we will see in section 4.3, are organized by the brain in the form of a narrative), allows us to experience ourselves as continuing selves.

How are autobiographical memories encoded, organized and recalled? We will now take a look at a model which has been frequently cited by scholars since it was first introduced by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000): the Self Memory System.

## 4.1 The Self Memory System

The amount of research that has been done on the workings of memory is extensive, to put it mildly. According to Ball (2010, p. 11), the first experimental analysis of human memory was made already in the 1800s by Hermann Ebbinghaus, who devised three-letter nonsense syllables which he then used as mental stimuli. It wasn't until the 1970's, however, that the focus on memory research shifted to what Ball calls "real-world memory topics" and a systematic examination of autobiographical memory began.

Over the past fifteen years, interest on this specific area of memory studies has only increased, with many cognitive psychologists devoting themselves to the study of how people "encode, store and retrieve information pertaining to real-life events and personal experiences" (McAdams, 2001, p. 107).

Autobiographical memory is composed of records of who we have been, both physically and behaviourally, and who we plan to be in the future, which combine to form the story of our lives. More specifically, these records include: (a) abstract knowledge about the self; (b) general or summary forms of personal knowledge, and (c) memory of specific events (Mace, 2010, p. 4).

Memory scholars Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have proposed that autobiographical memories form what they call the Self Memory System (SMS), in which these three kinds of memory records are organized hierarchically and divided into the following three categories: *lifetime periods*, *general events* and *event-specific knowledge*. Items of event-specific knowledge are part of general events and general events are in turn part of lifetimes periods.

As Conway and Pleydell-Pearce explain, lifetime periods include knowledge of elements, such as people, places and actions, characteristic of a period. They have identifiable beginnings and endings, and include both thematic and temporal knowledge about the period. Examples of lifetime periods (which may overlap) are "When I lived with X" or "When I worked in Y" (Conway, 1990, p. 115). Furthermore, lifetime periods are usually measured in units of years (Conway, 1996, p. 67).

As to general events, they are "events that happened over periods of days or weeks



but which did not themselves directly refer to a single specific datable memory" (Conway, 1990, p. 116), and encompass both repeated events and single events (Conway's examples are "evening hikes to meadows" or "my trip to Paris"). General events represent more specific types of event knowledge typically measured in units of months, weeks and days (Conway, 1996, p. 67).

Event-specific knowledge (ESK) includes memories of single events lasting perhaps seconds, minutes or hours (*ibid.*).

As we will see in the analysis of Graciliano Ramos' autobiography *Infância* in chapter 5, all three kinds of autobiographical knowledge (lifetime periods, general events and ESK) are present when people tell the stories of their lives. According to Schacter (1996, pp. 90-91), they serve different functions. He describes general events as natural entry-points into autobiographical memories, meaning they are the ones we often describe when people ask us about our past. This is probably because they refer to experiences that have been repeated and are not very specific, although, as Schacter writes, they do capture "a good deal of the distinctive flavor of our past". Being even more general than general events, memories of lifetime periods are usually where we start looking when we want to retrieve a memory for a general event or a specific event; they provide "the skeletal structure of our autobiographical memories" (*ibid.*).

Remembering the past, then, is not the same as retrieving a single representation stored in memory, but rather combining information from each of the three levels of autobiographical knowledge (see also Singer and Blagov, 2004, p. 127).

The SMS is furthermore a model of the relationship between autobiographical memory and the self. It describes the interaction between the so-called *episodic memory system*, *working self* and *long-term self*. An image might make it easier to visualize the SMS before I explain more thoroughly how memories are generated:

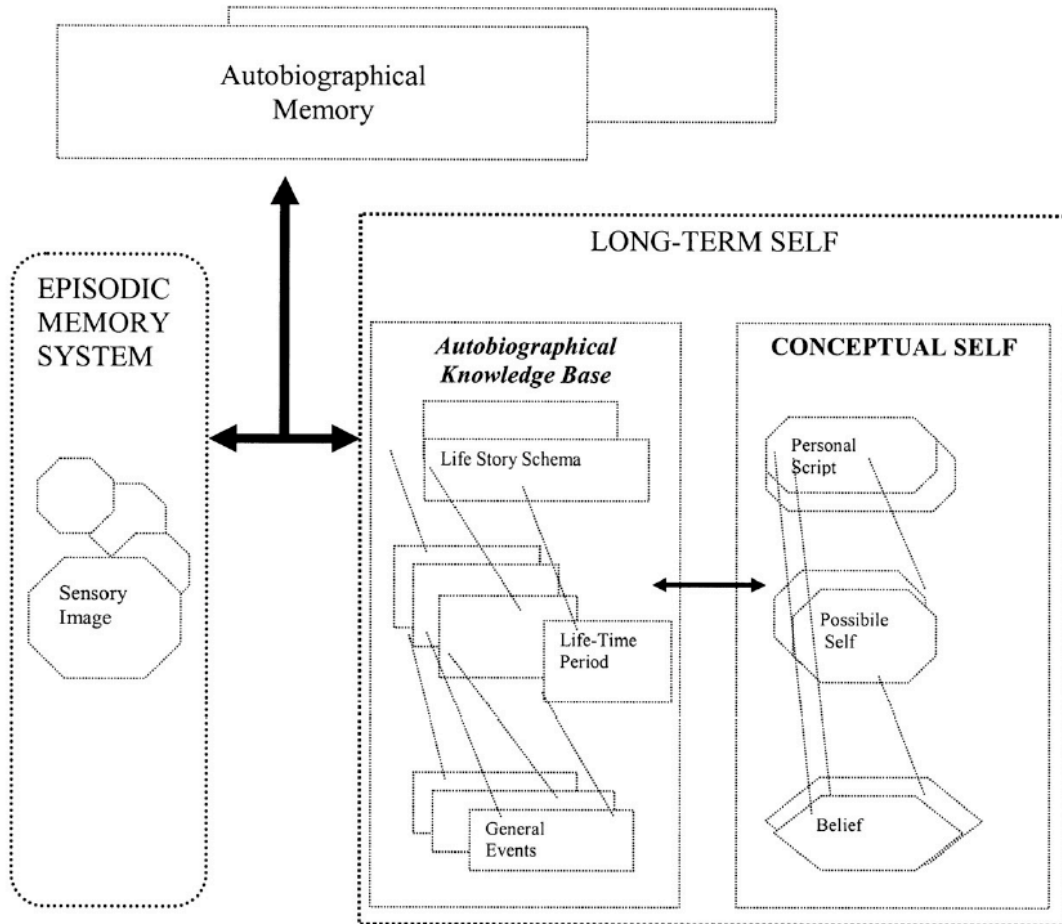


Figure 2: Generation of autobiographical memories in the SMS, borrowed from Conway *et al.* (2004, p. 498)

Let's start with the episodic memory system. Conway *et al.* (2004, p. 496) explain that this base contains details (sensory, perceptive, affective and so on) of "short time-slices of experience", which can give us a feeling of reliving a past event.

The working self mediates the formation of episodic memories in the course of a day (in Figure 2, the working self would be interacting both with the episodic memory system and the long term self). Some of these episodic memories are recalled for a short period of time and then lost, for example after a sleep cycle. A few of them, however, are retained for a longer period of time and become integrated with autobiographical knowledge. The working self organizes current experience (the "psychological present") in terms of goal processing. By doing so, it has a hand in determining which features will be retained in episodic memory records, which Conway *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. 502) believe are consolidated as summaries of the psychological present.

As to the long-term self, it consists of an autobiographical knowledge base and a conceptual self. Through the combination of elements from both the long-term self and the aforementioned episodic memory system, full-blown autobiographical memories are generated.

Lifetime periods and general event knowledge structures are found in the autobiographical knowledge base. As we can see from Figure 2, Conway *et. al* (*ibid.*, p. 499) add another level of autobiographical knowledge containing even more general information than lifetime periods: the Life Story Schema. It consists of knowledge of how a life story is constructed within the person's culture (with temporal order, dominant themes, et cetera). The life story schema contributes to the development of an elaborated life story, which we will come back to in section 4.3.

The second element in the long-term self that contributes to the formation of autobiographical memories is the conceptual self. It does so by interacting with the autobiographical knowledge base and contributing to its organization in terms of lifetime periods and general events. The conceptual self consists of abstract knowledge structures which are not temporally specific, such as possible selves, attitudes, values and beliefs, among other things. "The units of the conceptual self are socially constructed schemas and categories that help to define the self, other people, and typical interactions with others and the surrounding world" (*ibid.*, p. 500). These schemata are drawn largely from family, school, religion, myths and other cultural influences.

Conway *et al.* give a helpful example of how the conceptual self works with the autobiographical knowledge base: "an individual who held a view of himself as 'practical' instead of 'intellectual' might have a lifetime period representation of his time at university as being largely negative. General event and specific episodic memories might be preferentially available to confirm this belief" (*ibid.*).

In short, then, the working self contributes to the formation of episodic memories, which are summary records of the psychological present. These episodic memories are stored in the episodic memory system. Most of them are quickly lost, but some combine with lifetime period and general event structures from the autobiographical knowledge base. Along with the conceptual self, the autobiographical knowledge base forms what is known as the long-term self. Through the interaction of the long-term self and the episodic memory system, autobiographical memories are formed.

Guiding the construction of autobiographical memories are personal goals, and it is within the working self that goals are generated and organized. As McAdams explains (2001, p. 108), memories are "encoded and later retrieved in ways that serve the self's goal agendas. As such, current goals influence how autobiographical information is absorbed and organized in the first place, and goals generate retrieval models to guide the search process later". Conway *et al.* (2004, p. 494) suggest that a critical function of memory is to keep track of progress in goal-attainment, and goals in turn have a vital role in the consolidation of memories. They believe that "goal-transitions are critical events in memory formation and that they psychologically or cognitively mark event boundaries", i.e. they mark the end of an event and the start of another. It is even possible, Conway *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. 495) say, that the integration of episodic memories with autobiographical memory knowledge structures is not fully achieved "until the goals to which they relate have themselves been achieved or abandoned".

Here is how Singer and Blagov (2004, p. 128) explain how the SMS works in the process of recall:

Once a working self activates a goal-related search in the autobiographical knowledge base, the self-memory system guides the selection and elaboration of goal-relevant cues that access specific autobiographical memories, the evaluation of selected memories for goal compatibility, and the bringing forth of autobiographical knowledge into consciousness. The activation of particular memories is always weighed against the general needs of the overall self for affect regulation and maintenance of an acceptable self-concept.

As this description suggests, balance between goals and whichever memories are encoded or recalled is an important element of the SMS. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000, p. 268) explain that the SMS may, for instance, prevent the recall of destabilizing knowledge which could "increase self-discrepancies and reactivate dysfunctional attachment behaviors and feelings". This is relevant because we can now discuss what Conway *et al.* (2004, p. 492) call *adaptive correspondence* and *self-coherence*—two competing demands from which autobiographical memory is said to emerge.

Adaptive correspondence refers to our need to "encode an experience-near record of ongoing goal activity", allowing the working self to keep track of where it is in the process of executing goals. Self-coherence refers to a simultaneous need to maintain "a coherent and stable record of the self's interaction with the world that extends beyond the present moment", and serves to keep the working self connected to remember reality, supporting "the generation of different images or versions of the self-in-the-past and the self-in-the-future" (*ibid.*, p. 496). When coherence can no longer be achieved, which is the case in some types of brain damage or psychopathological illness, ungrounded delusional versions of the self

emerge, versions which do not correspond with reality (*ibid.*).

According to Conway, memories represent information about progress in goal attainment and therefore "have to reflect reality to at least some extent" (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the working self makes sure that knowledge and memories that confirm and support current self-conceptions are highly available and "may also operate to distort and/or inhibit memories that undermine the current self".

To call self-coherence a mere "myth of identity", as literary critics have (see Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 61), doesn't seem to be entirely accurate. Theories outlined in this chapter and in chapter 3 show us that it actually seems to be more of a biological and existential imperative.

How do autobiographical memory and the self relate in terms of the SMS model? The answer, according to Conway *et al.* (2004, p. 522), is that autobiographical memory renders "accurate records of the working self's engagement in goal activity, while at the same time insuring that such activities reinforce the coherence of the long-term self."

With that in mind, we are now starting to move from the subject of consolidation and retrieval of autobiographical material in memory to how our brains build life narratives in order to make sense of experience and maintain a sense of identity. Many of our personal memories are vivid and affectively intense, but only some memories have special relevance to our enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts and, consequently, are more significant to self-definition: they are aptly called self-defining memories.

## **4.2 Self-defining memories**

Self-defining memories (SDMs) are a specific kind of autobiographical memory characterized by (see Singer and Blagov, 2004, pp. 119-120):

- (a) affective intensity: they have the power to affect us emotionally, also during recollection;
- (b) vividness: they have a strong sensory quality, usually visual;
- (c) high levels of rehearsal: they are repetitively recalled, and we return to them because they are of significance and serve as reference points in our lives;

(d) linkage to similar memories: they tell us something about how we perceive ourselves and are therefore likely to be connected to other related memories with similar goals, concerns, outcomes and affective responses, a process which in turn reinforces self-perception; and

(e) connection to an enduring concern or unresolved conflict: they reflect long-term and central areas of concern or conflict within the personality, because they touch on timeless themes that shape the person's sense of identity. Examples of that could be conflicts with parents, personal triumphs or moments of personal insight.

It is (d) and (e) that are said to be the two criteria that differentiate SDMs from other important personal event memories (Conway *et al.*, 2004, p. 504).

Conway *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. 505) refer to a couple of interesting studies on SDMs which show that this type of memory is linked to enduring themes in an individual's life. Thorne, Cutting and Skaw (1998, in *ibid.*), for example, interviewed young adults twice on important relationship memories over a six-month period of time. They found that both memories that were recalled only once and those that were repeated in T1 and T2, tended to have similar themes. This indicates that even when SDMs vary in content, they still tend to reflect "similar motivational themes and narrative structure" (*ibid.*).

In another study by Demorest and Alexander (1992, in *ibid.*), individuals that had been interviewed about their significant personal memories were asked, one month later, to create fictional scenarios. The experiment showed, again, a thematic similarity between remembered and imagined experiences.

Thinking in terms of the SMS model, SDMs are "particularly powerful integrations" (*ibid.*, p. 507) of (a) the knowledge structures within the conceptual self and (b) elements within the autobiographical knowledge base that are linked thematically to these scripts. Based on Tomkins' script theory, Conway *et al.* explain that scripts, the abstract structures within the conceptual self, are built from units of personality called "scenes", consisting of an affect (sadness or happiness, for example), the object of that affect and sometimes also outcomes.

When a certain number of scenes are linked together, as described in (d) at the beginning of this section, the result in an abstracted script. This linking of similar memories is referred to as "psychological magnification", and it may affect how new memories are generated, in the sense that these will be prone to fit the existing narrative sequence in other SDMs, sometimes in a distorted manner (*ibid.*, pp. 510-511). Conway *et al.* (*ibid.*) refer to

this as a "breakdown in the balance between adaptive correspondence ... and self-coherence", which is another way of saying that our need for self-consistency sometimes results in distorted memories. Bruce Hood also describes the importance of coherence in his account of the self illusion: "when inconsistencies arise", he writes, "the system, strongly influenced by language, works to reestablish coherence" (Hood, 2012, p. 233). This is one of the things that have led literary scholars over the years to discuss the problem of truth in autobiography (I've already touched this subject in chapter 2 and I will go back to it in section 4.4, which deals with memory's fallibility).

Since the 1980s, many psychologists have shown interest in the idea of *narrative processing*, in which thought is organized through the devices of story. This mode of organizing information is believed to have had great evolutionary value because it allows us to test scenarios before acting.<sup>10</sup>

In his theory of consciousness, Damasio also describes narrative processing. According to him, the brain produces an extremely large amount of images relating to everything one perceives or recalls, as well as to the state of one's own body when faced with such images. He explains that the brain organizes all this material by giving it some sort of narrative structure, which means selecting certain images and ordering them in time and space (Damasio, 2010, p. 173).

Singer and Blagov (2004, p. 121) propose that SDMs are "a subset of 'narrative processing', or storied thought" and represent "momentary expressions of identity". They equate identity with an autobiographical narrative which each of us constructs "to weave together [our] past, present, and anticipated future into a unified whole". It is identity which creates a sense of coherence and meaning within a life: "If narrative identity is the autobiographical text of an entire life, self-defining memories are uniquely eloquent passages that dramatize the major themes of the overarching narrative" (*ibid.*, p. 123).

In the SMS, memories are, as we've seen, linked to a hierarchy of goals. SDMs are memories that "have the most relevance to the *life story* of identity fashioned by the

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Pinker writes that "the cliché that life imitates art is true because the function of some kinds of art is for life to imitate it" (1997, p. 543). Fictional narratives, he says, give us a glimpse of situations we might face someday and present us with strategies for deploying them, as well as outcomes. Also Tooby & Cosmides (2001, p. 23) tell us that fiction unleashes "our reactions to potential lives and realities, we feel more richly and adaptively about what we have not actually experienced". They also think that stories are told in a way that "mimics the format in which experienced events are mentally represented and stored in memory" (*ibid.*, p. 24). I suppose non-fictional stories can serve the same purpose.

individual" (*ibid.*, p. 129; my italics), and as such they are believed to play a particularly significant role in the SMS.

What I am trying to do is to establish a relationship between the sense of ownership the self has toward its own autobiographical memories (and hence to its life narrative) and the acceptance in the readers' minds of autobiography as a distinct genre of writing. For that I must proceed to explain what Singer and Blagov mean by "life story".

### **4.3 Self-narrative and the life story theory**

One of the functions of autobiographical memory is to provide a life story that guides our self-goals, Ball (2010, p. 12) writes. A theory that is often cited in the field of psychology, is D. P. McAdams' life story model of identity, which states that we all construct internalized and evolving narratives of the self. Drawing on McAdams, Blagov and Singer (2004, p. 131) explain that the life story "expresses the individual's effort to step back from both goal pursuits and accumulated autobiographical knowledge and weave these two aspects of self-understanding into an overall coherent picture of the self".

Using terms borrowed from dramaturgical and literary discourses, McAdams argues that identity takes the form of a story, with setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes (McAdams, 2001, p 101). These elements are thus not exclusive to literature, but are also believed to be present in the kind of processing which we employ when we think about past experiences. The important thing about the overarching life story narrative is that it tells us something about archetypal individuals in our lives, turning points, particular episodes that matter to our personal stories and so on.

McAdams stresses that although life stories are based on autobiographical facts, we "selectively appropriate aspects of ... experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense". Life stories reflect, in addition, cultural values and norms (*ibid.*). To draw a parallel to the SMS, we can say that the life story contains self-defining information related to lifetime periods, general events and event-specific knowledge.

For McAdams (2003, p. 195), general events and event specific knowledge constitute what he calls *nuclear episodes* in the life story, for instance high points, low points and turning points in our lives. It is here that the concept of self-defining memories fits within the life story theory, as these kinds of memories are believed to "occupy the most prominent positions within an identity as a life story".



In McAdams' life story model, it is not until late adolescence that people start giving their past, present and anticipated future the shape of an internalized and evolving self-story. During this phase, he explains, "people ... seek to integrate their disparate roles, talents, proclivities, and social involvements into a patterned configuration of thought and activity that provides life with some semblance of psychosocial unity and purpose" (McAdams, 2001, p. 102). One of the key functions of identity, then, is to integrate contrasting elements of our lives and bring them together into a meaningful and temporally organized whole.

Drawing from Habermas and Bluck (in *ibid.*), McAdams says that in order to form an integrative life story, we need to have developed understanding of four types of coherence: temporal, biographical, causal and thematic; and these are not all fully developed and ready to be used together for identity formation until adolescence. Still, this is a process that starts in childhood.

Autobiographical memory is believed to emerge at about two years of age, "when children have consolidated a basic sense of I and reflexively have begun to build up a rudimentary understanding of the me" (McAdams, 2003, p. 191). I interpret the "I" here as something similar to the feeling of ownership and agency that Damasio speaks of (the self-as-knower), and the "me" as the self-as-object. The building of autobiographical memory implies that we have a sense of events that we experience as "things that happened to me" and are related to "my life" (*ibid.*).

Later, children also start to narrate single autobiographical events with *temporal coherence* and the structure of a life story based on cultural norms: "Cultural norms define conventional phases of the life course and suggest what kinds of narrative forms make sense in the telling of a life" (*ibid.*, p. 192). Thus the life story at this stage also acquires *biographical coherence*.

During adolescence, *causal coherence* is also added to the life story, as we start to make efforts to explain through narrative how events are linked together and, as McAdams points out, "[t]raits, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences may now be explained in terms of the life events that may have caused them" (*ibid.*). Also during adolescence, stories develop *thematic coherence*, meaning that we are able to identify overarching themes that bring episodes from the life story together. In the course of adulthood, life stories develop and change, and we focus on different aspects of our life story at different stages in life.

There is one important distinction that Robinson and Taylor (1998, in McAdams 2001, p. 110) have made between autobiographical memories and self-narratives. Autobiographical memory may include episodes that have little relevance for self-concept,

while self-narratives consist of "salient experiences and concerns that constitute one's identity" (*ibid.*). In other words, a self-narrative is based on some parts of autobiographical memory (which in turn contains knowledge that is not a part of the self-narrative), as well as elements that do not belong to autobiographical memory, such as the anticipated future.

As I will explain more in depth in the next section, McAdams (*ibid.*, p. 110) has (as he calls it) a "moderately reconstructive" view of autobiographical recollections, meaning that he acknowledges that distortion of memories occurs, but at the same time thinks that life stories rely more on selection and interpretation—which brings us to the question of memory reliability, and the ways our recollections of the past may mislead us.

## 4.4 Memory's fallibility

As mentioned, memory is essential to the development of an autobiographical self, and it is hence also essential to literary autobiography. The problem with memory which is most often brought up by those who study the genre, is memory's fallibility. Hood (2012, p. 76) tells us that "[w]ithout the ability to form memories, your sense of self would be shattered". Yet it has long been known that memories, as he also points out, are not exact copies of past events, but reconstructions, which means that they change (slightly or considerably) every time they are reactivated.

It is also a fact that completely false memories can be constructed (see examples in *ibid.*, pp. 80-81; Neisser, 1994, p. 5). Even self-defining memories, which are intense, vivid and repetitively recalled, are not mere descriptions, but affectively charged reconstructions of past experiences (Singer and Blagov, 2004, p. 126).

So far in this paper I have presented different theories which point to more or less the same conclusion: that we need an "I", a core self, in order to form a continuous self narrative, or life story, and we need this life story in order to maintain a sense of identity, the "me", or self-as-object. In *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*, Sacks (1987, pp. 108-119) describes the case of Mr. Thompson, a patient with severe Korsakov's who could remember nothing for more than a few seconds. "Abysses of amnesia continually opened beneath him, but he would bridge them, nimbly, by fluent confabulations and fictions of all kinds", he explains (*ibid.*, p. 109). What this case points to is our need to produce a continuous and coherent self-narrative, which sometimes forces us to remodel reality or even unknowingly concoct "non-truths" (a term Sacks prefers).

Mr. Thompson is an extreme case, obviously, but this sort of self-invention has led scholars such as Jerome Bruner (1994, p. 41) to argue that Self is not "an entity that one can simply remember", but it is instead a result of several mental processes. Like McAdams, Bruner argues that self-construction involves telling stories using the usual elements of narrative, from which he concludes that there is no "essential self" to be known. "Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter" (Bruner, 2002, p. 4).

Using a neurological disorder called *dysnarrativia* (an impairment in the ability to tell and understand stories) as evidence, he firmly states that if we lacked the capacity to make stories about ourselves, there would be no such thing as selfhood (*ibid.*, p. 13). Because we constantly reconstruct our selves through story-telling, memories can be reshaped to fit better within our self-story at a given time. "Self-making is a narrative art," Bruner (*ibid.*, p. 4) says, "and though it is more constrained by memory than fiction is, it is uneasily constrained".

Based on what we've learned from Damasio, however, I assume Bruner is referring to the self in extended consciousness. It seems to me like there is an essential self to be known: the self that starts in core consciousness (ref. section 3.2) with the body as reference point. Through the build-up of memories which are attributed to this self, a life story and a sense of identity unfold. My point is that the autobiographical self might be subject to change and filled with uncertainty, but it is hardly baseless.

The problem of truth is considered a major methodological difficulty for scientists dedicated to autobiographical memory research. As Ball writes (2010, p. 12), "[h]ow do we know if the participant is recalling a true autobiographical memory if the experimenter was not there at the time and if the participant may not even be able to distinguish their true retrievals from false retrievals?"

McAdams notes that there are both *veridical copy theories*, which argue that some personal events are remembered accurately, as well as *reconstructive theories*, which focus on the instances in which personal events are misremembered. He cites Barclay (in McAdams, 2001, p. 107), who suggests that autobiographical memory is "a form of improvisation, whereby the person puts together a more or less plausible account of the past that functions primarily to maintain personal coherence", as opposed to being concerned with objective descriptions of events in the past.

As McAdams also notes, there is no either/or division between these two views. Some memory researchers argue, for instance, that recent memories can be very referential in the

sense that they contain a good deal of specific information from the original experience, but that events that are distant in time tend to be more reconstructive (see *ibid.*, p. 108).

As I wrote in the previous section, McAdams' life story model adopts a "moderately reconstructive view of autobiographical recollections" (2003, p. 195), arguing that goals and other personal concerns shape the encoding and recollection of self-defining memories within the life story. To explain why, he refers to Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's SMS model, which suggests that goals modulate the construction as well as the retrieval of autobiographical memories.

Westbury and Dennett (2000, p. 19) also write that what we recall is a reconstruction of what we experienced that is "consistent with our goals and our knowledge of the world". In this view, remembering is a kind of "imaginative reconstruction" (*ibid.*). For Ross and Wilson (2000, p. 232), autobiographical memory is also "a constructive process" of creative nature; something we can see, for instance, when people remember the same episode differently.

McAdams believes that the reconstruction that occurs when we recall an episode from our past can have a distorting effect, especially for memories that are very distant timewise. Still, when it comes to life stories, he thinks that recollection involves more selection and interpretation than outright distortion of the truth. By that he means that to a certain degree we choose which memories will become self-defining and which will not. Identity is consequently "a product of choice" (McAdams, 2003, p. 196), and not always of free choice, since we are influenced by social, historical and political contexts. As Neisser (1994, p. 2) also points out, self-narratives do not rely only on memories. Sometimes people include in their life stories episodes which they don't actually remember, "if the narrator is significantly sure of them".

Although it is widely accepted that we can produce false memories, what kind of autobiographical knowledge are we most prone to remember correctly? According to Thorne (1995, p. 141), research has shown that retrospective accounts of personally important and specific events are more likely to be veridical than accounts of more general events and of emotionally neutral events, and so are retrospective accounts of negative events.

Reconstruction and slight distortions of memories, do not automatically make them fictional. There is also the question which McAdams brings up concerning the degree to which a memory is distorted. The fact that we misremember peripheral details of a memory, for example, does not necessarily mean that the recall of central details will be impaired.

Conway (1990, p. 9) writes that "in autobiographical memory, ... it is not usually the case that a memory is completely false but rather that a memory relates to an event which did occur but not exactly as remembered". Conway's take on the truth vs. (unintentional) falsity conundrum is that it makes "little sense" to ask if a memory is true or not. Autobiographical memories are never, as I mentioned earlier, literal representations of the past. But, as Conway reminds us (*ibid.*), they can still be accurate without being literal. Errors sometimes even emphasize the meaning of a recalled memory, precisely because memory is usually compatible with the beliefs and understandings of the rememberer (*ibid.*, p. 11).

In his description of how memory works, Damasio agrees that "perfectly faithful memory is a myth, applicable only to trivial objects" (2010, p. 133), but he also points out that as lived experiences are reconstructed and replayed, their substance is "reassessed and inevitably rearranged, modified minimally or very much in terms of their factual composition and emotional accompaniment" (*ibid.*, p. 211), which is by no means the same as saying that there isn't any trace of reference to reality in them. Psychologist Eugene Winograd (1994, p. 243) aptly notes that "no matter how passive or dynamic one's theory of memory function, it would be very surprising from an evolutionary standpoint if our memories had little to do with the events of our past at all".

Ross and Wilson (2000, p. 237) cite many examples of bias in recall, but at the same time they remind us that "research on autobiographical recall does not indicate that biased recollections are more common than accurate recollections", and that many studies have actually shown that "people's recollections can be fairly accurate, at least for the gist of past experiences".

Renowned psychologist Daniel L. Schacter has written about the many ways in which we can produce false memories. He explains, for instance, how old memories can sometimes corrupt new ones (Schacter, 1996, p. 104), how things we only expect to happen can become incorporated into a new memory (*ibid.*, p. 102), and how present needs and beliefs can have a distorting effect on memories (also known as "recall biases", *ibid.*, pp. 105-106). Schacter also makes reference to Elizabeth Loftus' much cited study that showed how false recollections of complex experiences can be fabricated (in *ibid.*, p. 109). Repeating a false statement or rehearsing inaccurate information can also lead us to believe that it is true (*ibid.*, pp. 111-112).

In the end, however, Schacter takes a relatively moderate stand on the issue of truth vs. fiction in memory studies. He writes that we need to recognize that "memories do not exist in one of two states—either true or false—and that the important task is to examine how

and in what ways memory corresponds to reality" (*ibid.*, p. 277). He also points out that although autobiographical memories are complex constructions, there are "good reasons to believe that our memories for the broad contours of our lives are fundamentally accurate" (*ibid.*, p. 94).

To summarize what has been discussed so far in this chapter, autobiographical memory helps "ground the self within an ongoing life story featuring extended lifetime periods ..., knowledge about typical or characteristic life events and specific and sometimes vivid details of particularly well-remembered scenes" (McAdams, 2001, p. 117), some of which, as we've seen, are self-defining. Although many believe that autobiographical memories in general are fairly accurate, some degree of distortion may occur, especially at the level of event specific knowledge, and in some extreme cases, entire memories can be fabricated.

How do the ideas we've reviewed concerning the formation of autobiographical memories and their insertion within a self-narrative, known as a life story, relate to autobiography theories in the field of literature? I touched the subject in section 4.2 when I mentioned that coherence and unity perhaps should not be dismissed so quickly as "myths", relegating life writing to the realm of fiction. I will now explain this in more detail.

## **4.5 Where science and literary criticism converge: Memory and autobiography**

"It is certainly troubling to confront the possibility that our life stories could be subject to profound distortion, because in the final analysis the memories that give rise to these stories are all that stay with us from cradle to grave", Schacter writes (1996, p. 95). In addition to the fragmentary and malleable nature of the self discussed in section 3.5, memory's fallibility has also been a troubling issue in the study of literary autobiography.

Writing about the need to rethink the notion of fiction, Freeman (2003, pp. 116-117) lists some of the reasons why autobiography may by some be relegated to the status of *mere* fiction. Some of them I have already made reference to in this chapter: "In addition to the problem of false coherence, ... there are problems such as wishful thinking, defenses, illusions, delusions, and so on. (...) There is also the problem of placing meanings onto the past that, in some sense, don't belong", as well as "an impulse to dramatize untruthfully the

unsufficiently dramatic, to complicate the essentially simple, to charge with implication what implied very little".

There are yet other issues: "the fact that portions of our stories are hearsay, ... the fact that the autobiographer inevitably makes use of prevailing literary conventions, the fact that these conventions are themselves inseparable from prevailing cultural scripts". And then there are the failures of memory: "to the degree that autobiographical recollection departs from what 'really' was, in the 'past present' that it seeks, futilely, to recover, it must of necessity falsify experience" (*ibid.*, p. 119).

Freeman does not deny the hopelessly (re)constructive nature of autobiography, but he still refuses to place the genre in the category of fiction, as he tries to seek a new concept of truth which is not simply bound to the reality of immediate experience (see chapter 2).

The question of how we remember is central to autobiography and indeed it has been a subject that both authors and critics have dealt with throughout the history of the genre. Early examples can be found in St. Augustine's *The Confessions*, written circa 398-400 AD and often taken to be the origin of modern Western autobiography (see Anderson, 2011, p. 17). In one of his readings of St. Augustine, Olney (1998, p. 19) describes two models for memory. The first he calls the "archaeological model", which describes a view of memory as something fixed and static, portraying events as they occurred and merely suffering from "the decaying effects of time", such as when Augustine writes about "the fields and spacious palaces of memory, where lie the treasures of innumerable ... things" (in *ibid.*). In the "processual model", the metaphor changes from archaeological digging to weaving, suggesting that memory is always in process and always taking on new forms (*ibid.*, p. 21): "I weave these remembered experiences together into likenesses of things of the past", Augustine writes (in *ibid.*, p. 20).

Olney also finds in Augustine's texts references to how memory relates to storytelling. In *On the Trinity*, he describes our capacity to combine "imaginary visions by taking pieces of recollection from here and there and, as it were, sewing them together" into a story (in *ibid.*, p. 63). Here Augustine uses the weaving metaphor once again, suggesting that just as memory is always in process, so is the life narrative.

According to Olney (*ibid.*, p. 20), the weaving metaphor would be used to describe the operation of memory for centuries to come (indeed, Singer and Blagov use it in a quote in section 4.2, and so does Hood in section 3.3). The processual model is more in accordance with the knowledge we have today on this subject. Still we can not see in Augustine,

according to Olney (*ibid.*, p. 411), a deep preoccupation with what the written life narrative actually portrays; "to write a life ... never seemed to him an impossible undertaking".

This rather unproblematic view of the self and life-narratives changed considerably over the centuries, as Olney's following readings of Rousseau and Beckett attest (see *ibid.*, pp. 413-414), but he still finds that some things remain the same: "For Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett, memory enables and vitalizes narrative; in return, narrative provides form for memory, supplements it, and sometimes displaces it. These reciprocal relationships have not essentially changed in sixteen centuries" (*ibid.*, p. 417). Bruner (2002, p. 4) confirms this description of the relationship between reality, memory and life story by writing that "we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves ... with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future", and that, at the same time, "our very memories fall victim to our self-making stories".

Autobiography scholars in recent history have been very much aware of the pitfalls of memory. In the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, we find Georg Misch (1907, p. 69) saying that "It is an admitted psychological fact that remembrance does not proceed as mechanical reproduction but tends to creation. Hence autobiographies are not to be regarded as objective narratives". He proceeds by asserting that recollections might be affected by distorting influences and self-deception, and concludes that "autobiography is a field of auto-delusion".

Gusdorf (1956, p. 85), another early critic, notes that autobiography is not some simple repetition of the past and that recollection "reveals no more than a ghostly image of [a] life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being ... who lived that past".

Pascal (1960, p. 70) thought of memory as "the most powerful unconscious agent in shaping the past according to the will of the writer". This realization, however, did not stop him from thinking that autobiography was "at its happiest" when it was solely based on (distant) memory, as in narratives of childhood, in which he believed we could better observe the process of self-discovery. Pascal acknowledged that these memories were not completely reliable, but he maintained that in autobiography one should be interested in the past "as it appears in [the author's] mind, in his present mind" (*ibid.*, p. 71). The distortion of the historical past which inevitably happens in the process of recall was for him not only a characteristic of autobiography, but a "necessary condition of it" (*ibid.*, p. 72).



Scepticism only seemed to increase in the 1970's under the influence of post-structuralism and deconstructionism. Scholars such as James Olney (1977, p. 241) reminded us that "we can recall what we were only from the complex perspective of what we are, which means that we may very well be recalling something that we never were at all", while Mandel (1980, p. 63) pointed out that "the past is always an illusion because it never really existed".

Some of the aforementioned theorists defended the idea that the reconstruction of past experience found in autobiographies had its own truth value, what Gusdorf called "a truth of the man" (1956, p. 89). Similarly (although in slightly more scientific than philosophical terms), Eakin (1992, p. 67) suggests that the "very impurities of memory—its fallibility, its proclivity for revisionist history—that may prove, paradoxically, to be redemptive, permitting (at least) the literary assertion of identity". The continuous reshaping of memory as the self moves forward in time allows, in other words, for the development of identity, which Eakin places at the heart of autobiography as a genre. I suppose this is somehow along the lines of what Gusdorf (1956, p. 89) meant when he wrote about "truth of facts" vs. "truth of the man": that autobiography is not simply a description of the past, but also "the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to *reassemble himself* in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history" (*ibid.*, my italics). It seems to me like this reassembling that Gusdorf speaks of, is the very process of identity formation.

In spite of always having defended the idea that referentiality is central to literary autobiography, in a more recent article Eakin (2000, p. 290) writes that "memory, whether we like it or not, is one more source of fiction". Although he stresses that he does not mean to use the term "fiction" in a pejorative sense, he acknowledges nonetheless that autobiographies are based on recollections that are formed, fashioned, invented. As far as I can tell (and I provide other examples of this in chapter 6), this has been a fairly common view among autobiography scholars in the last two decades, and it is not difficult to see why Freeman suggests we need to rethink the terms "reality" and "fiction".

What makes Eakin's view somewhat distinct is that over the years he has drawn heavily on scientific research on the workings of consciousness. Although he does say that autobiographies are fictions, he contends that they are a different kind of fiction; a "memory-based kind" (which is a bit of a truism). According to Eakin, developments in memory research should naturally have consequences for the study of autobiography. The developments he is talking about refer in most part to the realization that autobiographical memory is based on constant reconstruction, not on stored information that is simply

"brought forth" in the process of remembering. The extended self (or autobiographical self, as Damasio calls it), is thus a fiction of memory, Eakin argues (*ibid.*, p. 297), and so is autobiography.

Although his field is psychology, McAdams (2001, p. 115) also talks about written life narratives in his life story model. He says that the "postmodern self is like a text, a narrative that continues to be written and rewritten over time" and acknowledges that the notion of identity is problematic: "Because all texts are indeterminate, no single life can really mean a single thing, no organizing pattern of identity can be validly discerned in any single human life" (*ibid.*). I have been trying to argue against the idea of the unified story and the coherent self as *mere* "myths" (ref. the closing passage of section 3.5). As McAdams suggests, the self has a vital integrative function on experience which seems to be highly relevant for literary studies. This is by no means to say that literary critics have been wrong all along. As McAdams also notes,

...the postmodern emphasis on multiplicity is consistent with a number of trends in social, cognitive, developmental, and evolutionary psychology today, all emphasizing the particularity, modularity, and domain specificity of human functioning. Nonetheless, a totally modular view of selfhood would seem too extreme, given people's phenomenological experiences of, at minimum, some degree of integration in daily life and given the naturally integrative power of narrative itself. (*ibid.*, p. 116)

Although one person can create diverse narratives in the course of a lifetime, many psychologists agree that identity is formed through narrative and that it creates unit and purpose in life. Life stories are furthermore characterized (as we've seen in section 4.3) by coherence. It seems to me that coherence and unity are the very foundation of who we are, the very basis without which the idea of identity—and autobiography—would be impracticable. This relates to Eakin's suggestion that memory's fallibility may be redemptive in the sense that it helps us maintain the feeling of being the "same", i.e. of having an identity (Eakin, 2000, p. 293).

Roy Pascal suggested back in 1960 (p. 67), and I agree, that there are two kinds of truth in autobiography: the truth of fact and the truth of the author's feeling, and "where the two coincide cannot be decided by any outside authority in advance". Even though factual truth is not the focus of my argumentation, I have still found relevant to discuss memory and its reputation as an unreliable source of knowledge. I've done this mainly because I feel that some critics and authors view this as a reason to suggest that autobiographies falsify experience and therefore are quick to equate them with fiction. In *The Story I Tell Myself* (1997), for instance, late author Hazel Barnes writes that her efforts to write about her own

life "have painfully confirmed [her] theoretical awareness of the degree to which an autobiography is perforce a novel" (in Freeman, 2003, p. 117). And autobiography scholar Claire Lynch (2010, p. 209) says that "although [autobiography] appears to be comprised of facts, it is very often mainly fictional" (I explore this more in depth in chapter 6).

In the last few years, Smith and Watson (2010, p. 22) have reaffirmed the longstanding fact that "narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered", since recall is not "mere retrieval from a memory bank" (*ibid.*), but a process of continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation. This agrees with neurobiological accounts of memory such as Damasio's (1999, p. 220) when he says that the brain "forms memories in a highly distributed manner". He also underscores the influence of our past history and beliefs in the formation of memories and says, as I quoted earlier, that "perfectly faithful memory is a myth" (2010, p. 133). Either way, in our minds we still distinguish between what we feel is *our* past and what is not: "The portrayal in the nonverbal narrative simultaneously creates and reveals the protagonist, connects the actions being produced by the organism to that same protagonist, and, along with the feeling generated by engaging with the object, engenders a sense of ownership" (*ibid.*, p. 203).

According to Rubin, Schrauf and Greenberg (2003, p. 888), a "full-blown autobiographical memory requires the integrative memory system, at least one modality-specific type of imagery (usually visual imagery), and, to varying degrees, spatial imagery, imagery in the other senses, narrative reasoning and emotions". More importantly, they note that a sense of "reliving" of the original experience is central to autobiographical memory (*ibid.*, p. 887). According to Conway (1996, p. 70), research has shown that sensory knowledge could be "the key feature that distinguishes memory for experienced events from memory for imagined events."

These and other similar findings suggest that event specific knowledge is central to autobiographical memories, and may play a critical role in convincing us that we in fact "remembered" an event (*ibid.*). As Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000, p. 263) later phrased it, "ESK and the imagery to which it gives rise are critical in leading a rememberer to believe the truth of his or her memories".

Why is this relevant? Smith and Watson (2010, p. 17) describe a shift in the field of literary studies regarding the way we read autobiographies: "from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding". This is precisely what I am attempting to do. Instead of looking at whether the elements of a story are true or false, I've been trying to focus more on what makes the reader—and the author—

distinguish between an autobiography and a work of fiction; not on a case-to-case basis, but in general. In other words, what makes us hang on to the notion that there is a difference between fiction and non-fiction, between an autobiography and a novel, despite academic discussions that put this notion under scrutiny?

I ended chapter 3 with the following question: "Is it really that naïve and inconceivable that an autobiographical text could have anything to do with a life story or a coherent self?" In the present chapter, I have outlined studies which suggest that we need a basic, unified sense of self (what in Damasio is referred to as *core self*) in order to generate autobiographical memories. Autobiographical memories in turn are what allow us to build life stories in our brains that give us a sense of personhood and identity (Damasio's *autobiographical self*). These "self narratives" are something we all build, regardless of whether we, at some point, choose to put them in writing. From the point of view of the author, the act of writing may indeed contribute to a reshaping of the life story. That seems to me, however, to be a natural, ongoing process which occurs not only through the somewhat performative act of text-making, but also through speech, social interactions, remembering, et cetera. The important observation here is that we would probably not write about our life stories if we didn't experience ourselves as *one* person with *a* life story to begin with. I believe this is not only the reason why we attempt to write about our lives, but also the reason why we think other people can do it, i.e. why we believe in the latent legitimacy of autobiography as a genre of literature.

In the next chapter, I will be reading Graciliano Ramos' *Infância*, which the author himself labeled an autobiography of childhood (see section 2.4), in order to try to spot which elements in the text resonate with the way we experience our selves and our life stories according to what I have outlined in the previous chapters. I will also be looking at how a few critics have read this book, to see if there is anything that would suggest that this process of identification might have occurred during their reading.

## 5 Graciliano Ramos and the self narrative

Graciliano Ramos' *Infância* was published for the first time in 1945, in an anthology entitled *Memórias, Diários e Confissões*. It covers the first eleven years of the author's life, starting with, as he writes in the very first lines, the first memory he can conjure up: "um vaso de louça vidrada, cheio de pitombas, escondido atrás de uma porta" (p. 23).<sup>11</sup> According to Karpa-Wilson (2005, p. 160), Ramos initially wrote several of the book's chapters as individual stories, which he published in newspapers beginning in 1938.

Throughout the book, Ramos paints a picture of the places, people and experiences that appear to have had significance in his life. A great deal of attention, not surprisingly, is given to the relationship between the protagonist and his parents; more specifically their role in the sense of fear that the author claims to have followed him throughout his life: "Mêdo. Foi o mêdo que me orientou nos primeiros anos, pavor" (p. 28).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some of his most vivid memories have a theme of physical abuse, such as the chapters "Um cinturão",<sup>13</sup> which I deal with in more detail in section 5.2, and "O Inferno":<sup>14</sup>

Os golpes que recebi antes do caso do cinturão, puramente físicos, desapareciam quando findava a dor. Certa vez minha mãe surrou-me com uma corda nodosa que me pintou as costas de manchas sangrentas (p. 45).<sup>15</sup>

Minha mãe curvou-se, descalçou-se e aplicou-me várias chineladas. Não me convenci. Conservei-me dócil, tentando acomodar-me às esquisitices alheias. Mas algumas vezes fui sincero, idiotamente. E vieram-me chineladas e outros castigos oportunos (p. 95).<sup>16</sup>

His relationship to literature and the exercise of reading is almost equally important (he became, after all, an author). An example can be found in the chapter named "O fim do mundo":<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "... a glazed china vase, filled with pitomba fruit, hidden behind a door" (p. 21). Citations in Portuguese with references containing only page number are from Ramos (1969) and the English translation of these citations is from Ramos (1979). Portuguese is my mother tongue, but for practical reasons I am choosing to use (with discernment) an existing translation.

<sup>12</sup> "Fear. It was fear that guided me during my first years, real [dread]." (p. 25)

<sup>13</sup> "A broad belt"

<sup>14</sup> "Hell"

<sup>15</sup> "The blows I received before they used the broad belt on me were purely physical and disappeared [once] the pain ended. Once my mother beat me so hard with a knotted rope that my back was painted with bloody spots." (p. 36)

<sup>16</sup> "My mother bent over, took off her bed-slippers, and spanked me several times. I wasn't convinced. I remained docile, trying to accommodate myself to the peculiarit[ies] of others. But sometimes I was sincere, like a fool. And the blows [with] bed-slippers and other timely punishments descended on me." (p. 66)

<sup>17</sup> "The end of the world"

Minha mãe lia devagar, numa toada inexpressiva, fazendo pausas absurdas, engolindo vírgulas e pontos, abolindo esdrúxulas, alongando ou encurtando palavras. Não compreendia bem o sentido delas. E, com tal prosódia e tal pontuação, os textos mais simples se obscureciam.

Essas deturpações me afastaram do exercício penoso, verdadeiro enigma. Isso é o aspecto desagradável do romance de quatro volumes, enxovalhado e rôto, que as vizinhas soletravam, achando intenções picarescas nas gravuras sôltas, onde a tinta esmorecia, sob nódoas (p. 53).<sup>18</sup>

His experiences in primary school are no less painful, both psychologically and physically:

Trouxeram-me roupa nova de fustão branco. Tentaram calçar-me os borzequins amarelos: os pés tinham crescido e não houve meio de reduzi-los. Machucaram-me, comprimiram-me os ossos. As meias rasgavam-se, os borzequins estavam secos, minguados. Não senti esfoladuras e advertências. As barbas do professor eram imponentes, os músculos do professor deviam ser tremendos. ... Enorme tristeza por não perceber nenhuma simpatia em redor. Arranjavam impiedosos o sacrifício — e eu me deixava arrastar, mole e resignado, rês infeliz antevendo o matadouro (p. 128).<sup>19</sup>

At the risk of sounding tautological, I should note that one of the things that most characterizes Ramos' narrative is that he makes it clear that we are here dealing first and foremost with the process of remembering, and he describes this process comprehensively. I presume that that triggers the reader to open up to the possibility of autobiography and to think about how the process of remembering occurs in his/her mind.

The question of accuracy in remembering is also an issue, since childhood memories are much more difficult to verify, both for third-persons and for the author him/herself. When childhood is narrated in a more literary fashion, the critic "is faced with the uncomfortable task of deciding what is autobiography and what is something else" (Coe, 1984, p. 3). However, as I've said before, I do not intend to find in Graciliano Ramos' childhood autobiography which passages are loyal to events as they happened in real life and which are mere constructions. A person's autobiography can only be built and accessed via that person's conscious mind, and, as we all know by experience, consciousness is an "entirely private, first-person phenomenon" (Damasio, 1999, p. 12).

It is additionally not the goal of this paper to deal with truth and falsity as these two terms are traditionally defined. In this aspect, I side with Lejeune (1973, p. 311), who argues that even if a story "is, historically, completely false, it will be on the order of the *lie* ... and

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<sup>18</sup> "My mother read slowly in an inexpressive manner, making absurd pauses, swallowing commas and full-stops, abolishing the [proparoxytones], elongating or shortening the words. She didn't understand their meaning very well. And, with such prosody and such punctuation, the simplest texts became obscure.

These distortions drew me away from the painful exercise, a true enigma. This and the unpleasant look of the four-volume novel, stained and cracked, which the neighbourhood ladies would read haltingly, word by word, find ridiculous intentions in the loose pictures, where the ink grew faint, forming stains." (p. 60)

<sup>19</sup> "They brought me some new clothes made of white cotton. They tried to put me in the yellow high-laced boots: my feet had grown and there was no way to reduce them. The boots hurt me, pressing on my bones. My socks were being torn, the high-laced boots were dry and shrunken. I didn't feel the blisters or the warnings. The teacher's beard was imposing, his muscles must have been tremendous. ... A great sadness because I didn't perceive any sympathy around me. They mercilessly arranged the sacrifice — and I let myself be dragged, weak and resigned, an unhappy lamb anticipating the slaughterhouse." (p. 87)

not of fiction". I am here only dealing with the similarities between any person's patterns of remembering and self-reference and the ones expressed in written life narratives.

My goal is to show what about Ramos' narrative makes me conceive of it as a possible attempt in the author's part to write about his life. In other words, I am not trying to find out what *makes* an autobiography non-fictional, but what makes the reader *feel* that a text shows a "real person" writing about "his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (ref. *ibid.*, p. 298).

## 5.1 Who is 'I'?

Where could I start to look for the roots of referentiality in this supposed autobiography? I choose to start at the most basic level. In his attempt to define autobiography as a genre, Lejeune (1973, p. 299) also starts with the fundamental: "[t]he identity of the narrator and the principal character that is assumed in autobiography is marked most often by the use of the first person." I think it is safe to say that first person perspective is the most basic element of the self-narrative in the mind which can be incorporated into an autobiography by the use of the first person pronoun. Some authors, of course, have experimented with the genre. Adriana Cavarero (2000, pp. 81-82) writes, for example, about how Gertrude Stein "succeeds notoriously in disturbing the fundamental tenets of the autobiographical genre." Her *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is "an autobiography of Gertrude Stein, written by Gertrude, where Gertrude herself appears in the text, however, as a character narrated by Alice." Rachel Gabara (2006, p. 157) writes about a "Western tradition of third-person autobiography", citing works by Giambattista Vico and Henry Adams, as well as about francophone autobiographers such as Assia Djébar, who have played with conventions. Just to cite a few examples.

That being said, I think it is safe to say that no one (at least no one without a disorder or a brain injury) thinks about themselves and their life stories without taking the point-of-view of an "I". William James (1890, p. 238) wrote in his *The Principles of Psychology*, that consciousness is continuous and one: "[w]hat now is the common whole? The natural name for it is myself, I, or me." As I quoted earlier in this chapter, consciousness is a first-person phenomenon, and Damasio stresses that "[y]ou know you exist because the narrative exhibits

you as a protagonist in the act of knowing" (1999, p. 172).<sup>20</sup> The "I", what Roland Barthes has called the "pronoun of the imaginary" (in Eakin, 1992, p. 6), is actually one of the most fundamental expressions of the self in consciousness. The textual "I", as Lejeune (1973, p. 302) has noted, naturally leads the reader to ask "who is 'I'?", which is one of the first steps in the process of verification seeking.

The textual expression of the self knowing comes, naturally enough, in the very first line: "A primeira coisa que *guardei* na memória foi um vaso de louça vidrada" (p. 23; my italics).<sup>21</sup> Here, the Portuguese verb *guardar* (in this case meaning "to store", as in memory) appears in the first person, past tense, which is also the form of telling in the rest of the book. The verb expresses both a feeling of ownership (that the "I" who is speaking knows objects are represented in *his* mind), as well as agency relative to the objects being represented in memory. There is a sense that the self is actively storing and retrieving the memories in question (it would be odd to say, for example, that something *was stored* in our memory instead of saying *we stored* something in memory). Similarly, Ramos writes things like "A recordação dessa antiga cena mostra-me a casa virada..." (p. 59),<sup>22</sup> which declare that the book deals with a narrator's process of remembering his own past.

There is, right from the start, a clear sense of perspective, i.e. the mind's standpoint of viewing, touching, hearing, et cetera, which is the body (ref. Damasio, 2010, p. 185); for instance in "...percebi muitas caras, palavras insensatas" (p. 23).<sup>23</sup> Another passage in which perspective is easily discernible can be found when Ramos recalls gazing upon the victim of a house fire, in the chapter entitled "Um incêndio":<sup>24</sup>

Faltava-lhe o cabelo, faltava a pele — e não havendo seios nem sexo, perdiam-se os restos da animalidade. A superfície vestia-se de crostas, como a dos metais inúteis, carcomidos no abandono e na ferrugem. Em alguns pontos semelhava carne assada, e havia realmente um cheiro forte de carne assada; (...) Não enxerguei pormenores: vi apenas, de relance, a dentadura, as órbitas vazias, o fluxo purulento.

Mudei a vista, arredei-me engulhando, amaldiçoando José, que me expusera a enorme

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Damasio (1999, p.351n3) acknowledges briefly in an endnote that one may question whether the nonverbal account which he describes as the self and knowing are illusions or fictions. Damasio's answer is clear: he does not think they are fictional. "After all," he writes, "we do come to verify independently, a posteriori, in our beings and in other beings, that the kinds of characters in the primordial plot, e.g. the living individual organisms, the objects and the relationships portrayed in the plot are in fact consistent, systematic, and widespread occurrences. In that sense they are not fictional because they respect a relative truth standard"—although he doesn't believe they can depict any absolute truth.

<sup>21</sup> "The first thing that remained in my memory was a glazed china vase" (p. 21).

<sup>22</sup> "The memory of this old scene brings back to me the house turned in different directions..." (p. 44)

<sup>23</sup> "I perceived many faces, foolish words" (p. 21)

<sup>24</sup> "A fire" (p. 70)



desgraça... (p. 106).<sup>25</sup>

The passage above is also a good example of the importance of visual imagery, which Rubin, Schrauf and Greenberg (2003, p. 889) say is "[t]he most important of the component processes involved in having and reporting an autobiographical memory that has been reported in the psychological and philosophical literatures".

Dennett writes about a so-called *intentional stance*. The term refers to children's ability to "experience the world from the subjective standpoint of an intentional, causal agent" (in McAdams, 2001, p. 104), thereby appropriating experience as their own. This happens when children are about two years of age. By the time they are three or four, the process of "mind-reading" begins, which means that they start attributing mental states to other people as well. When the feeling of "I" is in place, the objective self, or "self-as-me", can develop. Citing Howe and Courage (1997, in *ibid.*), McAdams says that it is somewhere between the second and the third years of life that autobiographical memory emerges:

Although infants can remember events (basic episodic memory) before this time, it is not until the end of the 2nd year ... that episodic memory becomes personalized and children begin to organize events that they experience as "things that happened to me". From this point onward, the me expands to include autobiographical recollections, recalled as little stories about what has transpired in "my life". (*ibid.*)

If we go back to Lejeune, he goes on to draw a parallel between the personal pronoun "I" and the speaker at the moment of discourse.

Person and discourse are linked, according to Lejeune (1973, p. 305), by means of the proper name. "For the reader, who does not know the real person [behind a discourse], all the while believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person *capable* of producing this discourse, and so he imagines what he is like from what he produces" (my italics).

I agree with Lejeune on this point and I think his use of the adjective *capable* is in accord with my idea of the reader being open to the *possibility* that there can be a self-writing-about-self, if I can put it this way. The difference here is that I don't place so much weight on the proper name. In the process of verification, the proper name will naturally be an important factor; as Lejeune writes (*ibid.*), "it is ... in relation to the proper name that we are able to situate the problems of autobiography". Even so, I am more concerned with how an autobiography can be written in a way that triggers the reader to believe that there may be

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<sup>25</sup> "It lacked hair, it lacked skin — and not having breasts nor sex, it lost the rest of its animal characteristics. The surface was covered with a crust, like that of old metal abandoned to decay. In some places, it was similar to roasted beef; and there was really a strong smell of roast beef; (...) I didn't see the details: I only saw with a quick glance the teeth, the empty eye-sockets, and the flow of pus. I averted my eyes, moving away nauseated, cursing José who had exposed me to this enormous disgrace..." (pp. 72-73)

a real person to which the narrated events refer to, i.e. that they are written by a self describing the mental images which this self has feelings of ownership, agency and perspective towards.

Damasio (2010, p. 8) explains that what allows a self to know its own mind, body, past, present and "all the rest—is the perception that any of these items generates emotions and feelings, and, in turn, the feelings accomplish the separation between contents that belong to the self and those that do not". These feelings of *knowing*, which Damasio calls "somatic markers", are what indicate a distinction between self and non-self.

This is important in this setting from two perspectives. An author must inevitably have the same sense of self vs. non-self; he or she may attempt to express the contents of his or her mind which refer to the self with varying degrees of, for lack of a better term, "non-self smudging". In cases in which the author remembers his or her past, the events narrated may or may not correspond to historical reality, but the author will still place them in the "objects that belong to the self" category. The other perspective is that of the readers, who equally distinguish between self and non-self and therefore *know* that the author does the same thing.

Ross and Newby (1996, p. 174) contend that people use certain criteria to assess their own and other people's memories. One of these criteria is *congruence* with other knowledge and experiences. They say that we "examine a memory to determine if the details agree with [our] previous experiences and with [our] knowledge of the world and people." This criterion is often invoked when we evaluate both our own and other people's memories and, I believe, it is also invoked when we read autobiographies.

## 5.2 Three levels of autobiographical knowledge

How would I as a reader go through this process of evaluation with Ramos' narrative? Before I turn my focus to *Infância*, I would like to briefly look at a reading of another literary autobiography to illustrate the aforementioned idea of congruence (at least my interpretation of it). I am talking about Daniel L. Schacter's use of Isabel Allende's autobiography *Paula* to illustrate how memory works. Beyond the autobiographical pact, which I presume contributed to Schacter's choice of this book, I find it interesting to read what sort of elements in a text would lead a memory scholar to "buy into" the veracity of Allende's account.

One of the most relevant things Schacter (1996, p. 89) says is that "[d]espite the complexity of our personal memories, our autobiographical recollections also contain a good deal of underlying structure". This "underlying structure" is precisely what I argue that we as

readers use as a basis in the process of verification which occurs either when we read (a) a text that appears to be an expression of a person's recollection process, or (b) a text which we are told, by means of the autobiographical pact, is an expression of a person's recollection process.

Schacter may perhaps have taken for granted that Allende intended to write autobiographically. The title of the book is, after all, *Paula. A Memoir*.<sup>26</sup> The proper name which is so important to Lejeune's autobiographical pact is also an indication of the author's intention: in the book, Isabel Allende is the protagonist, the author and the narrator. There is also identity of name between the characters in the book and the people in Allende's life, like the Paula in the title, Allende's deceased daughter; just to name a few of the connections between the author's life and the narrated events in the book.

But there is another feature of the text that is more relevant to my argumentation: Schacter (*ibid.*) writes that "Allende's remembered autobiography is a lot like everybody else's recollections of their lives: a complex tapestry that includes memories of specific moments and more general recollections of larger chunks of time." Here he is referring to some of the theories I have outlined in chapter 4, which, to recapitulate, suggest that experiences are constructed in memory by combining three levels of autobiographical knowledge: lifetime periods, general events and specific episodes.

Going back to Ramos' text, then, we should be able to identify at least some of its "underlying structure".

The chapter called "Verão"<sup>27</sup> (already cited briefly in chapter 2) is an interesting example of the combination of different forms of autobiographical knowledge, which as Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000, p. 262) note, "is highly characteristic (if not defining) of the recall of specific autobiographical memories":

Dêsse antigo verão que me alterou a vida restam ligeiros traços apenas. E nem dêles posso afirmar que efetivamente me recorde. O hábito me leva a criar um ambiente, imaginar fatos a que atribuo realidade. Sem dúvida as árvores se despojaram e se enegreceram, o açude estancou, as porteiras dos currais se abriram, inúteis. É sempre assim (p. 40).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I should note that Lejeune does not consider memoir to be a form of autobiography, but rather a genre *closely related* to autobiography (see Lejeune, 1989, p. 298). Since both deal with a real person's personal past, (and since I am not dealing with specific genre definition issues), I will here be placing them in the same category of non-fictional autobiographical writing.

<sup>27</sup> "Summer"

<sup>28</sup> "From this old summer which changed my life very few traces remain. And I really couldn't say for sure that I remember them. Habit makes me create an atmosphere in which I imagine facts that become reality. Undoubtedly trees lost their leaves and grew darker, the water stopped running over the dam, the gates of the corrals were left open, useless. It is always like that" (p. 33)

In this passage, Ramos starts, like many of us do, by recalling general events. According to Schacter (1996, p. 90), general events appear to be "natural entry points into our autobiographical memories", precisely because of the benefits of repetition, which Ramos acknowledges when he underscores that he remembers that trees lost their leaves and the gates of the corrals were left open because "it is always like that".

Soon enough, these general events lead to memories of specific episodes: "Um dia faltou água em casa. Tive sede e recomendaram-me paciência. A carga de ancoretas chegaria logo. Tardou, a fonte era distante — e fiquei horas numa agonia, rondando o pote, com brasas na língua. Essa dor esquisita perturbou-me em excesso" (p. 41).<sup>29</sup>

A lifetime period can be identified in the chapter's title, namely that one Summer. The whole book could in fact be said to cover a distinct lifetime period for Ramos: childhood, as the title of the book makes clear, with other shorter lifetime periods overlapping each other within the story. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000, p. 262) explain that lifetime periods "represent general knowledge of significant others, common locations, actions, activities, plans, and goals, characteristic of a period". They also say that these extensive chunks of time have "identifiable beginnings and endings", although these may be fuzzy.

As Ashley Brown (in Ramos, 1979, p. 7) writes in the introduction to the English edition of *Infância*, the book begins when the infant Graciliano Ramos is taken to his maternal grandparents' ranch in the state of Pernambuco. The beginning of this period is marked in the text: "Tínhamos deixado a cidadezinha onde vivíamos, em Alagoas, e entrávamos no sertão de Pernambuco, eu, meu pai, minha mãe, duas irmãs" (p. 25).<sup>30</sup> Then there is the time when the family settles in the small town of Buíque (which starts with the chapter "Chegada à vila",<sup>31</sup> p. 58), only to move yet again a few years later to Viçosa (which he describes in the chapter called "Mudança",<sup>32</sup> p. 183). Many of the lifetime periods described in the book are therefore linked to a place, "*When I lived at x*".

Additionally, the most extensive lifetime period described, the time when he was a child, has its beginning and ending relatively clearly marked. The book starts with the boy's first memories, which he estimates are from when he was two or three years old, and ends

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<sup>29</sup> "One day there was no water in the house. I was thirsty and I was told to be patient. A load of ... water kegs would arrive soon. It took a long time, the spring was at some distance — and I stayed in agony for hours, prowling around the jug with embers on my tongue. This exquisite pain disturbed me excessively." (p. 34)

<sup>30</sup> "We had left the little town where we lived, in Alagoas, and reached the backlands of Pernambuco, I, my father, my mother, my two sisters" (p. 22)

<sup>31</sup> "The arrival at the village" (p. 43)

<sup>32</sup> "Moving" (p. 120)

with a transition from childhood into early pubescence, with descriptions of physical changes and, in the very last scenes, a visit to a prostitute named Otilia da Conceição: "Otilia da Conceição, à beira da cama, esperava em silêncio. Arriei sôbre a mala pequena e, em silêncio também, comecei a descalçar-me" (p. 273).<sup>33</sup>

Another example of a distinct memory is the day when Ramos and his parents went to visit a neighbouring farmer. The chapter, entitled "Uma bebedeira" (p. 50)<sup>34</sup>, starts with a seemingly vivid image of the author's mother, "posta de meia esguelha, envôlta na saia comprida e larga, uma perna prêsa no gancho do silhão" (*ibid.*).<sup>35</sup> His father is described as "todo pachola, boa lança mas cavalhadas, viajando no preceito, como quem executa um dever" (*ibid.*).<sup>36</sup> Also here, Ramos is very specific about which events he remembers and which he doesn't, as in "Ignoro como chegamos à fazenda: as minhas recordações datam da hora em que entramos na sala. Meu pai e o proprietário sumiram-se... Minha mãe e eu ficamos cercados de saias" (p. 51).<sup>37</sup> Considering that Ramos was a little boy, it seems natural that he would hang on to the visual memory of the "skirts" surrounding him.

Interestingly, Ramos shows an awareness of the fact that repeated events may lead us to incorporate their details into specific memories: when the ladies give his mother some liqueur, Ramos remembers that she "tocou a linha esquiva dos beiços naquela surpresa que tingia a substância rara, cruzou as mãos, franziu a boca numa tentativa de agradecimento",<sup>38</sup> but then he notes that "Com rigor, não me seria possível afirmar que tais gestos de realizaram. Surpreendi-os, contudo, em visitas posteriores e arrisco-me a referi-los" (p. 52).<sup>39</sup>

The apparent reason why the memories of this day have persevered appears to be that this was the first time the author remembers drinking alcohol: "Quem me deu o primeiro cálice de licor foi a morena vistosa, mas não sei quem deu o segundo" (p. 55).<sup>40</sup> From the

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<sup>33</sup> "Beside the bed Otilia da Conceição waited in silence. I dropped on the little trunk and, also in silence, began to take off my shoes" (p. 174).

<sup>34</sup> "A Drunken Spree" (p. 39)

<sup>35</sup> "sitting sideways, dressed in a long, loose skirt, with one leg placed in the hook of the sidesaddle" (*ibid.*)

<sup>36</sup> "very swanky, as though he were riding in a joust, executing his part according to the rules" (*ibid.*)

<sup>37</sup> "I don't remember our arrival at the farm: my memory dates from the hour when we entered the room. My father and the proprietor disappeared... My mother and I stayed behind, surrounded by skirts" (p. 40)

<sup>38</sup> "tinted the disdainful line of her lips with this rare substance, crossed her hands, and curled her mouth in an attempt to be grateful" (p. 41)

<sup>39</sup> "Strictly speaking, it isn't possible to affirm that such gestures took place. I caught them, however, during my later visits, and I hesitate to refer to them" (*ibid.*)

<sup>40</sup> "The one who gave me [the] first glass of liqueur was the good-looking brunette, but I don't know who gave me the second" (*ibid.*)

perspective of Ramos, the adult, however, he admits that this might not have been the first time: "Suponho que não foi a primeira vez que me embriagaram. As sertanejas do Nordeste entorpecem os filhos à noite com uma garrafa de vinho forte" (p. 56).<sup>41</sup>

What I have just described are a few examples of Conway and Pleydell-Pearce's (2000, p. 262) proposed model: "ESK details are contextualized within a general event that in turn is associated with one or more lifetime periods that locate the more specific knowledge within an individual's autobiographical memory as a whole."

### 5.3 Authenticity and the process behind remembering

Where else do we find congruence between what is described and what we know about our own way of organizing our personal past? I think some of it has to do with his detailed descriptions of the recollection and storytelling processes underlying the text. A lot of it resonates with how we remember things about ourselves.

The author's awareness of the process of creating coherence, which can lead to memory distortion, is noteworthy:

Certas coisas existem por derivação e associação; repetem-se, impõe-se — e, em letra de fôrma, tomam consistência, ganham raízes. Dificilmente pintariamos um verão nordestino em que os ramos não estivessem prêtos e as cacimbas vazias. Reunimos elementos considerados indispensáveis, jogamos com êles, e se desprezamos alguns, o quadro parece incompleto (pp. 40-41).<sup>42</sup>

Eakin (2000, pp. 291-292) writes that "autobiographers rarely dramatize the working of memory itself as a process", instead subscribing to a "simple notion of memory as a storehouse in which the past is preserved intact". I don't know how true this statement really is, but Ramos shows a great level of reflection when he explains how he remembers episodes and how they fit into his life story. This is in tune with normal adults' experience of distant memories as often unclear and unreliable (ref. section 4.4 on memory's fallibility). For instance, he writes about the reconstructive nature of memory: "Assim, não conservo a lembrança de uma alfaia esquisita, mas a reprodução dela, corroborada por indivíduos que lhe

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<sup>41</sup> "I suppose that this wasn't the first time that they got me drunk. The women of the North-eastern backlands quiet their children at night with a bottle of strong wine" (p. 42)

<sup>42</sup> "Certain things exist by derivation and association; they repeat themselves, impose themselves—and in print they take consistency, gain roots. We can scarcely picture a Northeastern summer in which the branches wouldn't be dark and the waterholes empty. We combine elements considered indispensable, we play with them, and if we disregard some, the frame would seem incomplete." (*ibid.*).

fixaram o conteúdo e a forma" (p. 23).<sup>43</sup>

The text starts, conventionally enough, with the author's earliest memories. Described in the first chapter, these memories are extremely hazy and the author is accordingly very uncertain about their accuracy. About the memory of the "china vase" which was mentioned earlier in this section, Ramos writes "Ignoro onde o vi, quando o vi, e se uma parte do caso remoto não desaguasse noutra posterior, julgá-lo-ia sonho. Talvez nem me recorde bem do vaso: é possível que a imagem, brilhante e esguia, permaneça por eu a ter comunicado a pessoas que a confirmaram" (p. 23).<sup>44</sup> This particular memory lacks contextual knowledge of *where* or *when*, which leads to uncertainty about its accuracy.

For a reader the narrative may sound more convincing precisely when Ramos expresses the uncertainty in the process of remembering, such as when he describes his mother's use of "vague expressions". This is quite an interesting passage and I will therefore allow myself to include a long citation:

... *tributo, papa-rato*, maluquices que vêm, fogem, tornam a voltar. Tento arredá-las, pensar no açude, nos mergulhões, nas cantigas de José Baía, mas os diaparates me perseguem. Lentamente adquirem sentido e uma história se esboça:

*Acorde, seu papa...*

Papa que? Julgo a princípio que se trata de *papa-figo*, vejo que me engano, lembro-me de *papa-rato* e finalmente de *papa-hóstia*. É *papa-hóstia*, sem dúvida:

*Acorde, seu Papa-hóstia,  
Nos braços de...*

Nova pausa. Três ou quatro sílabas manhosas dissimulam-se obstinadas. Despontam algumas, que experimento e abandono, imprestáveis. Enquanto procuro desviar as idéias, a impertinência se insinua no meu espírito, arrasta-me para a sala escura, cheia de abóboras. Súbitamente as fugitivas aparecem e com elas o início da narrativa:

*Acorde, seu Papa-hóstia,  
Nos braços de Folgazona.*

(...)

Vacilo um minuto, buscando cá por dentro a forma exata da composição. Persuado-me enfim de que minha dizia:

*Levante, seu Papa-hóstia* (pp. 31-32).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "And so I don't keep the memory of an exquisite ornament, but the copy of it, corroborated by individuals who fixed the contents and the form." (p. 21)

<sup>44</sup> "I don't know where I saw it, or when, and if part of this remote event hadn't ebbed into a later time, I would have to consider it a dream. Perhaps I don't remember the vase very well: it is possible that the image, bright and distinct, stayed with me because I had communicated it to other people who confirmed it." (*ibid.*)

<sup>45</sup> "... *tribute, rat-eater*, foolish things like these that come and go and return in my memory. I try to put them aside and think about the dam and the birds diving into the vase and the songs of José Baía, but these absurdities pursue me. Slowly they acquire a meaning and a little story outlines itself:

*Wake up, you eater...*

Eater of what? I believed at first that it was about a *fig-eater* ... , but I see that I was mistaken; I remember *rat-eater* and finally [*H*]ost-eater ... . It is [*H*]ost-eater without doubt:

I think many of us would identify with this way of remembering things people said long time ago. The confusion ("foolish things like these that come and go"), the many attempts at remembering ("...*fig-eater* ... *rat-eater* and finally *Host-eater*"), and finally the feeling of remembering ("Suddenly the fugitive words emerge..."), of which the person conscious of memory's fallibility can never be totally sure of ("I persuade myself then that my mother used to say...").

The way other people influence what we remember is also an issue for Ramos: "... e no fim do pátio cresciam árvores enormes, carregadas de pitombas. Alguém mudou as pitombas em laranjas. Não gostei da correção: laranjas, provavelmente já vistas, nada significavam" (p. 24).<sup>46</sup> By acknowledging the many ways in which memory can fail and the past can be shaped in ways that do not necessarily reflect historical reality, Ramos seems to neutralize my need for further verification of the truth. It is useless, and he knows it. Again the description of *how* he remembers an episode and how uncertain he is about the output of his memory, resonates with me. I am not the only one who has noted this when reading an autobiography. Roy Pascal, for example, writing about errors of fact in autobiographies, gives a couple of examples of autobiographers who make mistakes and leave them intact in the text, alongside the correction. "Clearly what they felt is that their false impression was as important as the truth, and that the autobiographer has to tell us as much what the writer is as what the facts were" (Pascal, 1960, p. 68). Implicit here, I think, is Pascal's own notion that we are prone to remember or interpret things incorrectly in our own life and that the autobiographer's admission of this human weakness (if I can call it that), makes the autobiography all the more authentic.

In his explanation of the self illusion, Hood (2012, p. 83) writes that it is

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*Wake up, you Host-eater,  
In the arms of...*

A new pause. Three or four wily syllables obstinately seek to fit into the phrase. A few of them emerge that I try to abandon as useless. While I attempt to divert the ideas that occur to me, the irrelevance of it all drags me to a dark room filled with pumpkins. Suddenly the fugitive words emerge and with them the beginning of the narrative:

*Wake up, you Host-eater,  
Wake up, you Host-eater.  
In the arms of Merriment.*

(...)

I hesitate a minute, searching for the exact form of composition. I persuade myself then that my mother used to say: *Get yourself up, Host-eater.*" (p. 27)

<sup>46</sup> "...at the end of the patio grew large trees, loaded with pitombas. Somebody told me that the pitombas were oranges. I didn't like the change: oranges, which I had probably already seen, meant nothing" (p. 21)



so interwoven with personal memories that when we recall an event, we believe we are retrieving a reliable episode from our history, like opening a photograph album and examining a snapshot in time. If we then discover (*sic*) the episode never really happened, then our whole self is called into question. But that's only because we are so committed to the illusion that our self is a reliable story in the first place.

Ramos' autobiography shows a somewhat more nuanced picture of how this process occurs. For some key events of our lives, it may shatter our sense of identity to find out that we remembered something incorrectly. For instance, if someone whose identity is shaped by the experience of having suffered abuse as a child suddenly found out that their memories of the abuse were fabricated or induced by therapy. But the idea that we all just assume that "our self is a reliable story" is not entirely true, as the reading of Ramos suggests. Like Ramos, most of us accept that not everything we remember has its roots in the reality of the "there and then". And, actually, an autobiography in which this element of uncertainty is acknowledged will probably seem more convincing to a reader than one that does not.

Lejeune deals with this issue when he introduces the "referential pact". Instead of the contract sealed by the "I, undersigned" utterance, the referential pact encompasses a kind of oath to tell the truth, "the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" (Lejeune, 1973, p. 316). The interesting thing, however, is that Lejeune emphasizes that a restriction of this oath to the *possible* serves in fact as a supplementary proof of honesty:

(the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.), and to indicate explicitly the *field* to which this oath applies (the truth about such and such an aspect of my life, not committing myself in any way about some other aspect) (*ibid.*, p. 317)

Furthermore, Lejeune notes (like Eakin, ref. section 2.4) that the reader accepts a certain amount of fiction without throwing the work as a whole in the same category: "The referential pact can be, according to the criteria of the reader, badly kept, without the referential value of the text disappearing (on the contrary)" (*ibid.*).

As much as he is careful to trust his own capacity to remember accurately, there are times when Ramos provides detailed descriptions of specific events without expressing much doubt. I have a sense that detailed accounts only seem reliable when their significance is clear, i.e. when we understand why he would remember this episode so specifically, as it is the case with self-defining memories. Why could that be?

One possible explanation is that detailed recollection is often associated with emotion. Conway (1990, p. 92) cites studies which indicate that "intensity of emotional reaction and degree of life impact [are] positively correlated with memory vividness".

An example of this is the chapter entitled "Um cinturão" (p. 45),<sup>47</sup> in which he describes events that admittedly made a deep impression on him. This specific episode contains various elements which agree with the way we construct self-defining memories (characterized by vividness, affective intensity, high levels of rehearsal, linkage to similar memories and connection to an enduring concern, ref. section 4.2).

Starting with the first characteristic of SDMs: affective intensity. Besides recalling his emotional responses to what happened, Ramos emphasizes the fact that he is still moved by the memory of that episode: "Achava-me num deserto. A casa escura, triste; as pessoas tristes. Penso com horror nesse êrmo, recordo-me de cemitérios e de ruínas mal-assombradas" (p. 48).<sup>48</sup> He also notes that "Hoje não posso ouvir uma pessoa falar alto. O coração bate-me forte, desanima, como se fosse parar, uma cólera doida agita coisas adormecidas cá dentro" (p. 47).<sup>49</sup>

Some emotional responses are remembered or inferred, such as "Sei que estava bastante zangado, e isto me trouxe a covardia habitual" (p. 46)<sup>50</sup>, and "O assombro gelava-me o sangue, escancarava-me os olhos" (p. 47).<sup>51</sup> There are also a number of sensory details that contribute to the vividness of the memory: "... vi meu pai dirigir-se à rêde, afastar as varandas, sentar-se e logo se levantar, agarrando uma tira de sola, o maldito cinturão, a que desprendera a fivela quando se deitara. Resmungou e entrou a passear agitado" (p. 49)<sup>52</sup>; although the author admits that much is unclear: "Não consigo reproduzir tôda a cena. Juntando vagas lembranças dela a fatos que se deram depois, imagino os berros de meu pai, a zanga terrível, a minha tremura infeliz" (p. 47).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "A broad belt" (p. 36)

<sup>48</sup> "I found myself in a desert. The house was dark, sad; the people were sad. I think with horror of this waste land, and I remember cemeteries and haunted ruins" (p. 38)

<sup>49</sup> "Today I cannot bear to hear anybody talking loudly. My heart beats fast, so discouraged that it wants to stop, my voice sticks, my sight grows dim, a strange anger stirs up dormant things inside me." (*ibid.*)

<sup>50</sup> "I know that he was quite angry, and this caused my habitual cowardice" (p. 37)

<sup>51</sup> "Fear froze my blood, my eyes were wide open" (*ibid.*)

<sup>52</sup> "... I saw my father walking towards the hammock, moving away from the [veranda], sitting down, getting up right away, grabbing a leather strap, the damned broad belt, from which the buckle came loose when he flung it down. He muttered and came back in the house restlessly" (p. 39)

<sup>53</sup> "I can't reproduce all this scene. Joining vague memories from it to facts that occurred afterwards, I imagine my father's shouts, his terrible anger, and my unhappy trembling" (p. 37)

Also important is how Ramos recalls other similar memories, thereby reinforcing the idea that the conflicts with his parents may represent what Blagov and Singer would characterize as enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts: "Situações deste gênero constituíram as maiores torturas da minha infância, e as consequências delas me acompanharam" (p. 47)<sup>54</sup>, Ramos writes.

## 5.4 An autobiographical novel?

Some elements in the text might be interpreted as signs of a literary treatment which draws more from imagination than pure recall. For instance, when the author "remembers" a complete sentence uttered by a nameless man when he was very young: "Um deles perguntou como se havia de assar o bacalhau e outro respondeu: — Faz-se um grajau de madeira" (p. 25).<sup>55</sup> Or when he reproduces an entire dialogue, as he does in the chapter entitled "D. Maria". Here is a short excerpt:

— Leia.  
— Não senhora, respondi confuso.  
Ainda não havia estudado as letras finas, menores que as da carta de A B C. Necessário que me esclarecessem as dificuldades.  
D. Maria resolveu esclarecê-las, mas parou logo, deixou-me andar só no caminho desconhecido. (...) O exercício prolongou-se e arrisquei a perguntar até onde era a lição.  
— Está cansado? sussurrou a mulher.  
— Não senhora.  
— Então vamos para diante. (p. 132)<sup>56</sup>

Neisser (1981, p. 104) has dealt with the issue: "Verbatim recall", meaning word-for-word reproduction, he writes, "is not something we expect of ourselves in everyday life". On the other hand, memory for the "gist" of a conversation, i.e. recalling the sense of what has been said in different words, can obviously occur.

Coe (1984, p. 1) has aptly noted that while the telling of memories from adulthood relies on a "common code" of understanding between the adult reader, the adult writer and the adult narrator, the "former self-as-child is an alien to the adult writer as to the adult

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<sup>54</sup> "Situations of this kind composed the main torments of my childhood, and their consequences followed me" (p. 37)

<sup>55</sup> "One of them asked how to bake codfish and the other answered: 'You should make a wooden rack'" (p. 22)

<sup>56</sup> 'Read.'

'No, ma'am,' I replied confusedly.

I hadn't yet studied the fine letters, smaller than those of the ABC pamphlet. The difficulties had to be clarified.

Dona Maria decided to explain them, but soon she stopped and left me to wander the unknown way by myself. (...) The exercise was prolonged and I dared to ask her how far the lesson went.

'Are you tired?' murmured the woman.

'No, ma'am.'

'So let's go on.' (p. 88)

reader". Hence the author is forced to create a convincing, yet alternative world for this childhood reality in writing.

Indeed, some of the fictional "feel" in *Infância* lies in passages where Ramos writes from the perspective of the young Graciliano. Here are two examples, also from the chapter "D. Maria": "Isto pareceu-me desarrazoado: exigiam de mim trabalho inútil. Mas obedeci. Obedeci realmente com satisfação"<sup>57</sup> and "Agora, livre das emanações ásperas, eu me tranqüilizava. Mas não estava bem tranqüilo ... Dominava os receios e a tremura, desejava findar a obrigação antes que estalasse a cólera da professôra" (p. 133).<sup>58</sup> Another one can be found on page 140: "Forma de perguntar esquisita, pensei".<sup>59</sup>

He also sometimes takes the perspective of other people, which contributes, I think, to giving parts of the text the air of fiction. For example in "Vendo-me o desembaraço, minha mãe tentou agarrar-me" (p. 56).<sup>60</sup> And here is another example with his mother: "Minha mãe estranhou a manifestação rebelde, tentou provar-me que os doutôres conheciam as trapalhadas do céu e adivinhavam as consequências delas. Mas queria certificar-se de que se enganava, pelo menos na parte relativa ao enorme incêndio" (p. 89).<sup>61</sup>

The aforementioned examples are not, in my opinion, the sort of thing that would make the work lose its autobiographical "feel"—at least not when it appears sporadically, and is not presented as a prolonged dialogue.

As Smith and Watson (2010, p. 37) point out, "we allow that memories, and the experience made out of memories, can be inconsistent (as they are in much life writing), probably because we experience our own as inconsistent". A celebrated author of novels, it is almost expected that Ramos would handle the task of writing his childhood autobiography much like fictional prose; not necessarily because he didn't mind falsifying memories, but perhaps because in his attempt to put his memories into words, he chose the form he was most comfortable with.

The question the reader probably asks him/herself in this case is not whether people

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<sup>57</sup> "This seemed to me unreasonable: they demanded useless work from me. But I obeyed. I really obeyed with satisfaction" (p. 88)

<sup>58</sup> "Now, free from harsh exhalations, I was at ease. But not altogether ... I overcame my fear and trembling, I wanted to end the task before the teacher's anger broke" (p. 89).

<sup>59</sup> "A peculiar way of asking, I thought" (p. 93)

<sup>60</sup> "Seeing me so completely at ease, my mother attempted to hold me" (p. 42)

<sup>61</sup> "My mother found my unruly demonstration rather strange; she tried to prove to me that the sages knew about the complications of heaven and divined their consequences. But she wanted to be sure that she had not made a mistake, at least in the part dealing with the great fire" (p. 63)

really uttered those lines or whether the little boy actually had those thoughts, but whether Ramos remembers things this way, or if he made it up. In my mind, this process of questioning the authenticity of the autobiographical text does not invalidate it, but rather confirms its referential nature. It indirectly implies an acceptance of a "model", to use Lejeune's term (1973, p. 317); something "real" that the utterance claims to resemble, a world-beyond-the-text. The process of verification that goes on in my mind as I read Ramos' text, implies that I take for granted that it is based on the author's memories of events he experienced and is now able to recall.

Even if I did not know the text was written by Graciliano Ramos or if there was no autobiographical pact established here, would I still recognize the possibility of it being something other than fiction? The answer is yes, and I suspect I am not the only one who would think so. I believe it is because, just as elements such as dialogue and "mind-reading" sometimes make us wonder whether the author is telling the truth about his memories, other elements echo the way we build and retrieve our own memories for past events and the way we structure our own life stories.

## 5.5 Notes on the reception of *Infância*

In an essay about Ramos' fiction and non-fiction, renowned Brazilian critic and scholar Antonio Candido (who actually knew Ramos personally) writes about *Infância* as a book in which the author directly approaches his own experiences.

Although the essay was re-published in 2006, it was first written in 1955. At the time, many Brazilian literary critics had adopted the view of the literary text as an autonomous object which was to be judged intrinsically. Candido still recognized, however, that there was something about the author that excited the curiosity of the reader. He thought this was due to the fact that a novel could only give rise to an immediate interest, which was confined to the limits of that one work of fiction. A body of work, however, would inevitably lead us to investigate the reality behind it and "as características do homem a quem devemos esse sistema de emoções e fatos tecidos pela imaginação" (Candido, 2006, p. 69).<sup>62</sup>

Candido does not rule out that *Infância* may be read as a novel. He thinks that the people that Ramos describes in the book appear to be characters and that the author approaches them as literary creations (unfortunately, he does not explain this point in depth).

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<sup>62</sup> "the characteristics of the man to whom we owe this system of emotions and facts woven by the imagination"

Candido admits that all autobiography will inevitably contain doses of fiction, but he defends the idea that, in an autobiographical text, a reader will still feel "um certo esqueleto de realidade escorando os arrancos da fantasia" (*ibid.*, p. 70).<sup>63</sup> This "scaffold", this framework, would be what separates the autobiography from the novel. *Infância* is for Candido an "autobiografia tratada literariamente" (*ibid.*, p. 90)<sup>64</sup>, and he senses in it an author's desire to give it the form of a novel.

Candido sees in Ramos' body of work a clear path that, apparently by necessity, led him from fiction to non-fiction: "à medida que os livros passam, vai se acentuando a necessidade de abastecer a imaginação no arsenal da memória, a ponto de o autor, a certa altura, largar de todo a ficção em prol das recordações, que a vinham invadindo de maneira imperiosa" (*ibid.*, p. 102).<sup>65</sup>

When analyzing *Angústia*, one of Ramos' novels, Candido felt it was relevant to ask how much of the author himself one could find in Luís da Silva, the character. It is interesting to me how he justifies his own need to pose this question: there is less direct dialogue in *Angústia* than in Ramos' earlier fiction, the book is more monological (ref. what was said about dialogue in the previous section). He compares Luís da Silva to the young Graciliano from *Infância*: "...nota-se que sua meninice é, pouco mais ou menos, a narrada em *Infância*. Só que reduzida a elementos da etapa anterior aos dez anos, quando morou na fazenda, à sombra do avô materno (aqui, paterno), e na vila Buíque" (*ibid.*, p. 58).<sup>66</sup>

Candido goes on to conclude that Luís is a character built on autobiographical premises, and refers to *Angústia* as "autobiografia potencial".<sup>67</sup> These autobiographical premises, however, seem to have taken a turn during the creative process, resulting in this other person, the character, "no qual só pela análise baseada nos dois livros autobiográficos podemos discernir virtualidades do autor".<sup>68</sup>

The comparison of the character in *Angústia* to the author which we get to know

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<sup>63</sup> "a certain scaffold of reality supporting the outbursts of fantasy"

<sup>64</sup> "autobiography dealt with in a literary manner"

<sup>65</sup> "as books are written down, the need to fuel the imagination in the arsenal of memory gets more acute, so that the author, at a certain point, abandons all fiction in favor of his or her memories, which have been plaguing that fiction in a commanding fashion"

<sup>66</sup> "... we note that his boyhood is more or less the one described in *Infância*, even though it is reduced to the stage before he was ten years old, when he lived at the farm, protected by his grand-father from his mother's side (here, from his father's side), and in Buíque"

<sup>67</sup> "potential autobiography"

<sup>68</sup> "in whom, only by analyzing these two autobiographical books we can figure some of the author's essential nature"

through *Infância*, presupposes that Candido, like most readers, distinguishes between the narration of imagined events and of events that are brought forth by memory. Whether Candido actually compares two constructions—two characters if you will—, he still supposes that one of them *is* the person within Graciliano Ramos' body, while the other is someone *created by* the person within Graciliano Ramos' body. These two selves are clearly not at the same level, neither in the mind of readers like Candido nor of authors like Ramos: Ramos experienced himself as a person with an identity and a life story and thought therefore that he could write an autobiography. Candido also experiences his self in the same way, and I suppose this is why he thinks that Ramos *did* write an autobiography.

Silva (2004) deals with the reception of *Infância* by Brazilian critics. She attributes its status as an autobiographical narrative to the autobiographical pact: "Talvez as três categorias indicadas na Coleção — *Memórias, Diários e Confissões* — induzissem a crítica, de início, a 'ler' o livro segundo uma das três possibilidades" (*ibid.*, p. 32).<sup>69</sup> Not many of the critics mentioned by Silva deem *Infância* to be purely fictional, but most of them acknowledge that there is an inevitable difference between what is lived and remembered and what an author is able to express in written form.

In analyzing Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, Mandel (1980, p. 61) says that in the act of reading, we never forget Gosse is "speaking to us directly about what happened long ago. He is always *there*, telling his story". I notice this in Silva's reading as well; she refers to *Infância* as a novel (*ibid.*, p. 27), but can not help to feel the presence of the author in the text and to treat it as non-fiction:

Em outra passagem, buscando recordar um antigo verão, que muito lhe marcara a vida de menino, o autor demonstra realizar grande esforço para reunir os pequenos quadros dispersos, visto que ora se apresentam de forma nítida, ora constituem-se em profundos lapsos e omissões (*ibid.*, p. 38).<sup>70</sup>

I mentioned earlier that Antonio Candido saw a kind of progression in Ramos' work from fiction to non-fiction. *Angústia* is the novel in which he thinks we see most clearly some of the traits from the boy we would later meet in *Infância*, which was published almost ten years later: "a um livro cheio de elementos tomados à experiência de menino (*Angústia*) sucede outro, de recordações, é verdade, mas apresentadas com tonalidade ficcional (*Infância*)"

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<sup>69</sup> "Maybe the three categories indicated in that Collection - *Memories, Diaries, and Confessions* - have induced some critics, from the start, to "read" the book according to one of those three possibilities."

<sup>70</sup> "In another passage, trying to remember a remarkable old Summer of his childhood days, the author reveals the he is struggling to get together al those scattered frames, since they sometimes present themselves clearly and sometimes get deeply slipped and ommited."

(Candido, 2006, p. 102).<sup>71</sup> There was a shift, Candido argues, in Ramos' "atitude literária"<sup>72</sup> throughout the years: from a need to create something imaginatively to a need, in his words, to testify.

Brown (in Ramos, 1979, p. 12) also mentions *Angústia* as the novel in which Ramos "more boldly than before used characters and scenes from his own life", noting also that many of these appear in *Infância*.<sup>73</sup> Emphasizing the book's historical importance, Brown writes that *Infância* is "the best account that we have of the North-east of Brazil in the 1890s" (*ibid.*, p. 15) and praises Ramos' abilities as a writer:

Always extremely honest as a writer, Ramos has ... drawn directly on his own experience for his fiction. *Childhood* is a memoir written like a novel, episodic in structure but beautiful in its cumulative force and 'felt life', and perhaps he has here the form most congenial to his nature (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Octávio de Faria, who writes the preface to the seventh edition of *Infância* in Portuguese, focuses instead on how the autobiography provides biographical information about the author.

Citing a passage from the book, he writes that "vemos surgir, através do miúdo e desconfiado menino Graciliano todo o futuro vulto literário do grande e modesto, precavido e lúcido, extraordinário Graciliano Ramos" (in Ramos, 1969, p. 8)<sup>74</sup>; and finds the key to understanding Ramos' literary style in the past described in his autobiography: "... eis também, e em síntese, o caminho literário do ficcionista cujas raízes brotaram da infância de *Infância* para atingir a esplêndida floração de *S. Bernardo e Angústia*, de *Vidas Secas e Insônia*" (*ibid.*, p. 13).<sup>75</sup>

Likewise, Candido thought that Ramos' two autobiographical works (the second is *Memórias do Cárcere*<sup>76</sup>) helped the reader understand his novels, "pois não apenas revelam certas características pessoais transpostas ao romance, como esclarecem o modo de ser do escritor, permitindo interpretar melhor a sua própria atitude literária" (Candido, 2006, p.

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<sup>71</sup> "to a book full of elements taken from a boyhood experience (*Angústia*) there follows another one built on memories, it's true, but presented with a fictional tinge (*Infância*)"

<sup>72</sup> "literary disposition"

<sup>73</sup> Ref. the study by Demorest and Alexander mentioned in section 4.2, which showed a thematic similarity between remembered and imagined experiences.

<sup>74</sup> "we see growing from that small and doubtful boy Graciliano all that future literary glory of the great and modest, cautious and lucid, extraordinary Graciliano Ramos"

<sup>75</sup> Here we also have, in synthesis, the literary path of the fiction writer whose roots were born out of the childhood of *Infância* to attain the splendid blooming of *S. Bernardo and Angústia*, of *Vidas Secas* and *Insônia*"

<sup>76</sup> "Jailhouse Memoir"



69).<sup>77</sup>

The readings of Candido, Brown, Faria and Silva all concord with what I mentioned earlier about the sense that even with the "literary treatment" in *Infância*, readers are still open to the possibility of it being an autobiography, something other than fiction.

Lejeune (1973, p. 299) has pointed out that "[a]ll identity is, or is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees". Similarly, I think we all have a sense of being a self with memories that are *ours*, that refer to ourselves and our experiences. Written texts might be referential to an author's own experience to varying degrees. In section 2.1, I quoted Eakin as saying that "the most successful attempts to date to establish a poetics of the genre ... focus precisely on the reader's recognition of a referential intention in such texts". As readers, even when we are not able to verify the truth of a text, we will still have some sense of whether we are dealing with the written narrative of someone's life. We do that to a large extent, I believe, by assessing congruence with how we experience memory and the life story, seeking the roots of referentiality in the author's self by way of our own self.

This is perhaps part of why we find it difficult to say that all forms of autobiography are, in the end, only fiction. It makes sense in many levels, but ultimately it goes against our sense of being a self with an identity, memories and a life story.

## 5.6 A neurobiological pact

I mentioned in the introduction that I viewed Lejeune's autobiographical pact as more of an invitation to draw boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional in the text. This is in agreement with what Lejeune himself (1973, p. 308) writes about it:

... the importance of the contract is that it actually determines the attitude of the reader: if the identity is not stated positively (as in fiction), the reader will attempt to establish resemblances, in spite of the author; if it is positively stated (as in autobiography), the reader will want to look for differences (errors, deformations, etc.)

Lejeune's autobiographical pact may seem simplistic, but there is more often than not no other way for us to know if someone's childhood memories are "true"—not even the person having the memories, as I have attempted to show in chapter 4. In many cases, the pact is all we have. But what if someone handed you a text without telling you who the author was or whether it was fictional or autobiographical? Take for instance cases that Lejeune (*ibid.*, pp. 310-311) describes as Name of the protagonist = 0 and Pact = 0, meaning that the protagonist

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<sup>77</sup> "because they not only unveil certain personal traits transposed into fiction, but they also illuminate the writer's personality, allowing us to better interpret his own literary attitude"

does not have a name and the author "does not conclude any pact, neither autobiographical nor fictional". Leujeune's example is *Mother and Child*, by Charles-Louis Philippe. I argue that we use our own experience of being a self with a set of memories and a "life story" to get a sense of whether a given text is autobiographical or fictional; we identify or not with the way they are built.

In terms of content, our life stories can infinitely vary, but as the studies of Conway, Pleydell-Pearce, McAdams and many others have shown, the way our life stories are built and organized may actually be something most of us share, especially those in the same cultural group.<sup>78</sup> I am not suggesting that all autobiographies follow the same structure, as that would require a different kind of analysis with a different degree of empirical evidence, but there are certain similarities in the way our minds deal with memories and how these memories are organized in order to form the more coherent whole which we call identity.

If an author was, for instance, to write a novel which emulates a proper autobiography, my guess is that most readers would be open to the possibility that they could be reading an autobiographical text until they were given reason to think otherwise, for instance because of the difference of name between author and narrator/protagonist (ref. *ibid.*, p. 309).

Coe (1984, p. 3) interestingly points out that in the eighteenth century, "when the novel was striving to free itself from the imputation of vain fantasy and improbable romance", authors frequently tried to emulate the form of autobiography. By contrast, twentieth century writers tended more often to "entitle [their] work a novel when, most palpably, it is in every significant aspect based on his own lived and remembered experience".

Furthermore, the idea that an autobiographical text is only one version of a person, a life or a life event—"No autobiography is completed, only ended", as Bruner (2002, p. 8) writes—does not affect my hypothesis. We still distinguish, I believe, between the story of a person's life and the story of an imagined person's life. When I say "distinguish", I don't mean we are always able to tell what is what when reading a given text. I mean we have a feeling in our minds of what we have experienced ourselves and what we have not (or are not sure we have).

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<sup>78</sup> Part of what is needed to build a life story, such as a sense continuity over time and a sense of self, are innate to all humans, as Bruner (2002) points out, but a big part of self-making is, of course, influenced by culture. Leichtman, Wang and Pillemer (2003), for example, write about differences in the content and style of autobiographical memories of people from different cultures.

Thus, a point made in passing by Brewer (1996, p. 38) acquires relevance within my framework of thought: "In the same way that people have knowledge about phenomena in the external world, they have beliefs about the operation of their own mental processes." From that I take that we use what we know about how our autobiographical memory works, as an indication of how other people's autobiographical memory works. Accordingly, we also have beliefs about how much and how accurately some things can be remembered. That is why I think we read autobiography with a certain openness to the possibility that the author could manage to express his/her autobiographical memories and life narrative; because in our minds the life narrative and the remembered past feel very "real". I assume we use this knowledge when judging whether authors' accounts of their personal past appear reliable or not. Nonetheless, the extent of mental intention<sup>79</sup> behind autobiographical narratives, is another discussion.

This is where Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact proves relevant: because ultimately readers want confirmation of whether they should approach the text as fiction or non-fiction. That does not mean, however, that they will not have an instinctive idea, a "hunch" if you will, about what sort of text they are dealing with.

As part of his attempt to see beyond truth versus fiction in autobiography, Lejeune also asks himself how a text can resemble a life.

As a genre, autobiography is often compared to the novel. Some have argued that the latter is indeed "truer", such as author André Gide: "Memoirs are never more than half sincere, however great the concern for truth may be; everything is always more complicated than we say it is. Perhaps we even come closer to the truth in the novel" (in Lejeune 1973, p. 321). Such comparisons, Lejeune notes, only confirm that there indeed exists a so-called "autobiographical space" in which texts are read, because autobiography is in fact used as a criterion for comparison:

If the novel is truer than autobiography, why are Gide, Mauriac and many others not happy with writing novels? ... if they had not *also* written and published autobiographical texts, even "inadequate" ones, no one would ever have seen the nature of the truth that it was necessary to look for in their novels (*ibid.*, pp. 321-322).

At the core of Lejeune's theory is the idea that autobiography is a contractual genre, and he introduces different kinds of "pacts" between reader and author: the most famous

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<sup>79</sup> I use the term "mental intention" in the philosophical sense. As Brewer (1996, p. 29) notes, a number of philosophers have suggested that "memory is distinguished from imagination by the individual's awareness that they are intending to recollect in one case and are intending to imagine something in the other case".

autobiographical pact, the fictional pact, the referential pact, et cetera.

Like Lejeune, I explore the "positions of the author and reader" (*ibid.*, p. 323) more than the structures of the text — although I also argue that ultimately (beyond their acceptance of the *possibility* of autobiography), readers will have to base their judgement on texts they read. The point of this chapter has been to show that some of the elements in a text might trigger a sense of congruence in most readers, because they evoke the inherently human experience of being a continuous self in time with a set of autobiographical memories which we feel are *ours*. In this regard, one can perhaps also speak of a "neurobiological pact".

While the autobiographical pact signals to the reader what kind of premises to build their reading upon, on a different level the neurobiological pact allows the reader to distinguish between fictional and non-fictional elements based on congruence — regardless of whether the author is telling the "truth" or not.

## 6 Thinking beyond the truth concept

As I have sought to show, autobiography as a literary genre is still very much under scrutiny. One of the most problematic issues attached to the genre is our inability to place it in the category of fiction or non-fiction. Drawing on Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact (ref. section 2.2), Lynch (2010, p. 210) writes about "autobiography's central identity crisis as it moves constantly between fact and fiction". Like other contemporary autobiography critics (such as Eakin, Smith and Watson and Olney, to mention a few), Lynch is adamant about autobiography being a fiction ("Autobiography is a 'fiction', certainly", she writes), but at the same time she concedes that it is "not classifiable as a form of fiction in the way that novels or short stories are" (*ibid.*, p. 213).

During most of the twentieth century, autobiography was seen as essentially a literature of fact, different from the imaginative kind. In the 1970's and 1980's, however, autobiography began to be seen as a distinctive literary discourse, "indeed, some argued, one of the discourses of fiction" (Eakin, 2001, p. 124; ref. also sections 3.5 and 4.5).

In his influential essay from 1980, James Olney wrote about the naïve assumptions that reigned in the field of autobiography before the shift of focus from *bios* to *autos*, such as that it was possible for an individual to narrate his or her own life story unproblematically. Influenced by post-structuralist theories, Olney (1980, p. 22) contends that in written autobiographical narratives, "neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a complete entity, a defined, known self or history to be had for taking".

Decades later, there still seems to be difficult to acknowledge autobiography as a non-fictional genre (or a singular genre). Smith and Watson (2010, p. 9), for instance, think that calling life writing non-fiction "confuses rather than resolves the issue" (so does calling it fiction!).

Citing Mary Evans, Lynch writes that autobiography's "place on the library shelves is not with non-fiction but very much closer to fiction" (in Lynch, 2010, p. 216) and that the genre needs reclassification. All things considered, Lynch suggests that autobiography is a "trans-genre" type of writing, located between multiple genres, while Smith and Watson (2010, p. 4) do not even want to use the term autobiography, but instead argue that the terms "life writing" and "life narrative" are more inclusive of the heterogeneity of self-referential practices. Although I certainly understand why the clear-cut distinction between fiction and non-fiction *as literary categories* has been and should be scrutinized, I have doubts as to how

productive it is, in the case of autobiography, to simply say that it can not be placed in either one of the two categories. The inability to characterize autobiography as either fiction or non-fiction, almost makes the two categories useless for any kind of literature, since, as Mandel (1980, p. 53) reminds us, "[a]ll genres readily borrow from other genres and modes". Of course, one might also choose to defend the idea, like Mandel does, that the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy is altogether false, but where does that leave us?

Karl Ove Knausgård and his *Min Kamp* is a fitting and recent example of a work of literature that has had critics and readers alike discussing, among other things, the boundaries between fact and fiction. Writing about the book, Danish professor and critic Poul Behrendt (2011) says Knausgård's opus is neither an autobiography nor a novel, but something else entirely.<sup>80</sup> Without digressing too much, I will insist that "[t]he unicorn does not invalidate the horse", to borrow an expression from Mandel (1980, p. 62). In my view, experiments such as Knausgård's, though very interesting in terms of the discussions they generate, do not change the neurobiological fact that we experience things that we believe happened to us differently than things we intentionally imagine.

Like Damasio (1999, p. 185) says, "concepts precede words and sentences" in evolution and daily experience. "When we say 'I' or 'me'", he explains, "[the mind] is translating, easily and effortlessly, the non-language concept of the organism that is mine" (*ibid.*). Why do we keep discussing the (im)possibility of fiction or non-fiction, while still employing the same terms? Whatever we choose to call these categories, or even if we try to do away with them entirely, my point is that we will still be left with a non-verbal concept that life stories are possible (because we have them ourselves) and that they are something different from stories we invent; stories which in our minds we do not feel ownership and agency towards. "You know you exist because the narrative exhibits you as protagonist in the act of knowing", as Damasio writes (1999, p. 172; ref. also chapter 3); and this is the very basis of consciousness: "the very confection of you as an observer or knower of the things observed, of you as owner of thoughts that formed in your perspective, of you as potential agent on the scene" (*ibid.*, p. 127).

When critics say things like that the "first person" is only *naïvely* conceived as being outside language (Lejeune, 1973, p. 314) or that the coherent self and the unified story are *mere myths* (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 61), I think they are not taking enough in

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<sup>80</sup> "...i denne prosa, der hverken er selvbiografi eller roman, men noget helt og holdent tredje"

consideration a large body of neuroscientific and psychological research (some of which I have outlines in chapters 3 and 4).

I find it relevant to go back to Barrett J. Mandel and his explanation of why autobiography is *not* fiction:

Of course it is true that autobiographers use techniques of fiction, but such usage does not turn an autobiography into a fiction any more than Dvořák's use of folk motifs turn the *New World Symphony* into a folk song. At every moment of any true autobiography (I do not speak here of autobiographical novels) the author's intention is to convey the sense that "this happened to me", and it is this intention that is always carried through in a way which, I believe, makes the result different from fiction. (Mandel, 1980, p. 53)

I get a sense that Mandel was referring, at least in this passage, to more or less intentional "embellishments" of the truth in literary forms of autobiographical writing when he writes that autobiographers use "techniques of fiction", while more recent criticism is based on the "myths of identity" that Smith and Watson outline (ref. section 3.5). In other words, contemporary critics are not only talking about intentional distortions of the truth by authors of autobiography, but of the downright impossibility of *not* reconstructing (and hence falsifying) experience in life writing. At the same time, Mandel brings to our attention an important aspect that Damasio many years later reminds us of, namely that in autobiographical recollection there is a sense that "this happened to me".

As a starting point to what I've been proposing here, is the idea that even though we all know that our memories are not always true and that many fictional narratives are based on real experiences, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is so fundamental that I wonder if we still aren't caught in that "revolving door" that Paul de Man spoke of more than thirty years ago (de Man, 1979, p. 921). To me it seems like the zone between fiction and non-fiction is not a third level of referentiality, it is more like a grey zone to which we return whenever we can not tell if something is either-or—as is the case with a person's account of his or her childhood memories. Yes, there is good reason to say that the self is an illusion. And, yes, most of us understand that writing about past experience will never be a straightforward projection of experience itself. But why do we nonetheless accept autobiography as a possibility and refuse to equate it with something imagined, something fictional? As Eakin (1992, p. 27) has asked before me, "Why ... does autobiography as a kind of reading and writing continue and even prosper? Why do we not simply collapse autobiography into the other literatures of fiction and have done with it?"

At the risk of sounding simplistic, I would like to take a stand and suggest that autobiography as a literary genre is intrinsically non-fictional, because its main reference

point is a mental reality, which is the author's remembered past and his/her life story. With a novel, however, the main reference point is an intentionally imagined reality. This is not to say that one can not contain elements of the other. All genres, as I pointed out earlier, contain fictional and non-fictional elements. The main distinction, however, is that, in the minds of the author and that of the reader, there is a clear distinction between what is the experience of the self (or what they feel is the experience of the self) and what is not:

You are busily all over the place and at many epochs of your life, past and future. But you—the *me* in you, that is—never drops out of sight. All of these contents are inextricably tied to a singular reference. Even as you concentrate on some remote event, the connection remains. The center holds. (Damasio, 2010, p. 168)

Whether this experience corresponds to a historical and verifiable reality is a whole other issue, which is by no means to say that it shouldn't be a topic of discussion in autobiographical studies on a case-to-case basis. Sometimes establishing accuracy can be important. As Smith and Watson (2010, p. 221) note, for instance, "questions of ethical representation are at the heart of autobiographical studies". The question that I personally have found more interesting to ask, however, is why do we even admit into our minds the idea that anyone could write retrospectively about his or her own existence and personality and why this would be different from creating an imagined story.

I hope I have been able to show why I think part of the answer may lie in how our minds build life stories with a "center of narrative gravity" which is the self. To quote Sacks:

We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a 'narrative', and that this narrative *is* us, our identities. If we wish to know about a man, we ask 'what is his story—his real, innermost story?'—for each of us *is* a biography, a story. .... Biologically, physiologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives—we are each of us unique. To be ourselves, we must *have* ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self. (Sacks, 1987, pp. 110-111)

Without a sense of self, we would not be able to form autobiographical memories, and without memories, we would not be able to construct life stories. As Searle (1998, p. 184) writes, "A sense of self is essential to memory because all of my memories are precisely *mine*. What makes them memories is that they are part of the structure that is part of my sense of self".

The fact that we each have a sense of having a unified self (and distinguish self from nonself) with a coherent life story (even though neurobiologically speaking this may be an illusion), I believe, is the reason why we can not completely let go of the idea that autobiography is possible and that it is distinguishable from fiction. Renza might have



(inadvertently) given us a clue to this when he wrote that "we have little difficulty *recognizing and therefore reading* autobiographies as opposed to works of fiction" (my italics; Renza, 1980, p. 216). We may seek to verify the facts in works labeled as autobiographies and find out that we have been victims of autobiographical hoaxes; as GUSDORF (1956, p. 89) says, autobiography is "unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy". We may also read the autobiographies of authors who have had the intention of being truthful, but still know that in many ways autobiographies are "hopelessly inventive" (ref. section 2.3). But won't we always distinguish between the attempt to write about something experienced or something imagined because in our minds we make the same distinction?

In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James deals with the nature of the self and illustrates his point by means of an anecdote which I think is relevant.<sup>81</sup>

When Paul and Peter wake up in the same bed, and recognize that they have been asleep, each one of them mentally reaches back and makes connection with but one of the two streams of thought which were broken by the sleeping hours. ... The past thought of Peter is appropriated by the present Peter alone. He may have a knowledge, and a correct one too, of what Paul's last drowsy states of mind were as he sank into sleep, but it is an entirely different sort of knowledge from that which he has of his own last states. He remembers his own states, whilst he only conceives Paul's. Remembrance is like direct feeling; its object is suffused with a warmth and intimacy to which no object of mere conception ever attains (James, 1890, pp. 238-239).

Damasio makes a number of references to William James in his own texts, and I can imagine that this passage may also be related to Damasio's theories. When James writes about "warmth and intimacy", I presume he is referring to something which can be compared to Damasio's terms "ownership" and "perspective". The point is that, as James implies, our minds distinguish between self and others, between its own experiences and memories and imagined scenarios (ref. Damasio's thoughts in section 3.3).

Eakin approaches autobiography, like I am trying to do, not only as a literary genre, but as a mental process of identity formation. "Written autobiographies", he says, "represent only a small if revealing part of a much larger phenomenon, the self-narration we practice day in day out" (Eakin, 2001, p. 114). In a more recent work, Eakin bases some of his ideas on Damasio's theories. He notes that "individual first-person perspective, ownership and agency—these primary attributes of core consciousness are also key features of the literary form of self, the 'I' of autobiographical discourse" (Eakin 2008, p. 71). What he does here is to establish a tight connection between the self that emerges in autobiographical writing and the biological self associated with a body:

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<sup>81</sup> It is Eakin (1992, p. 7n6) who, in a footnote, brings my attention to this part of James' work.

When we write autobiography and when we read it, we repeat in our imaginations the rhythms of identity experience that autobiographical narratives describe. I believe that the identity narrative impulse that autobiographies express is the same that we respond to every day in talking about ourselves; both may be grounded in the neurobiological rhythms of consciousness. (*ibid.*, p. 79)

For all his focus on the referential nature of autobiography, I still find Eakin somehow caught up in the "revolving door" (perhaps it is inevitable), as he claims that autobiography is "a discourse of fact *and* a discourse of fiction" (Eakin, 2001, p. 124, my italics). Fundamentally, however, he proposes that autobiography is a discourse of identity.

Hood explains that our sense of identity and of self is built through social interaction, that we are shaped in part by memories that are not always reliable. The conclusion that follows is, naturally, that the self is "continually shifting and reshaping as the contexts change" (*ibid.*, p. 293).

There is little to disagree concerning the fact that identity is, to a large extent, socially constructed and deeply influenced by culture, as well as by people around us. Still, I believe, as Eakin does, that one must not forget the roots of identity in our lives "in and as bodies" (Eakin, 2008, p. 153). Eakin suggests that there is a link between the self in its literary form and the self as a biological manifestation. Self-narration, composed of image-based sequences of brain events, allows for stability in our minds, giving us the "notion of a bounded, single individual that changes ever so gently across time but, somehow, seems to stay the same" (Damasio in *ibid.*, p. 155).

This idea can be connected to a sentence I find in the last pages of Hood's (2012, p. 294) work on self illusion: "It may be an illusion, *but it is real as far as the brain is concerned*" (my italics). If the self, biologically speaking, is indeed only "the culmination of a multitude of processes" (*ibid.*, p. 233), and the story of our lives is something our brain spins for us, then autobiography (leaving hoaxes aside) might be the only genre which mirrors directly the process of self-construction.

As we have seen in the course of this paper, the self might appear mysterious and elusive, but it is there; not as a homunculus, as Damasio reminds us, but as a binding force that allows us to glue together our memories and experiences and to form a somewhat coherent whole.

When it comes to memories, we've seen that they can be deceiving, but when we have memories of events that have happened to *us*, in which we are the protagonists, these memories are the very pieces that constitute the puzzle of the self. Besides, as Thorne (1995, p. 160) remind us, "[a] memory that is part of the cognitive system is a powerful presence, a subjective if not necessarily intersubjective truth."

It is time, then, to repeat the questions I posed in section 2.4: what kind of truth and what kind of reality is autobiography referential to? And what keeps us from placing it for good in the same category as fiction?

One can spend an entire career discussing problems concerning the relation between what an autobiographer writes and to which extent this written narrative is loyal to events as they happened "there and then". One can also discuss whether it is at all possible to describe any experience through language without distorting it (or to which degree), how much we can actually remember and whether we can tell the difference between which of our memories are slightly modified reconstructions and which are products of imagination through and through. As neurobiological research suggests, however, story-telling is "something brains do, naturally and implicitly" (Damasio, 2010, p. 293). Based on the theories I have outlined in the previous chapters, I prefer to look at unity and coherence not as myths of identity, but as facts of identity. And autobiography, viewed as a "discourse of identity", is not a fictional narrative. I propose that the genre's non-fictional character can be found in its intrinsic connection to the self memory system; its sucker-bearing arms reach not outwards, towards a past that can neither be verified nor recovered, but to a past that my living body feels is *mine*. A distortion in the recall of past events is only a distortion if you compare it to the "original" experience. But when it becomes embedded in the individual's life story, a distortion may be a fiction of recall, but, I argue, it is still an autobiographical fact. I would like to reclaim the autobiographical 'I' that has been blown to pieces without naïvely denying the self illusion created in the brain, as well as to acknowledge the coherence and unity in narratives of identity (biological and literary) without forgetting that they may at times be precisely what leads to distortion. Misch's observations concerning the self in autobiography might not have been that far from recent accounts based on knowledge of neurobiology, such as Damasio's:

We live in possession of ourselves, after the special manner of a being conscious of itself and capable of saying "I". To stand as an I, or, more exactly, as an "I"-saying person, over against other persons and living beings and the things around us implies that we are aware of our independent existence, we do not merely impart impulses and perform acts as things of elementary existence, but as living beings we have knowledge of our impulses and actions as our own (Misch, 1907, p. 67).

Here lies also the answer to the last of the two aforementioned questions. I believe we "buy in to autobiography's retrospective illusion" (Eakin, 2008, p. 156) and never let go of seeing it as non-fiction because we recognize its resemblance to our own mode of shaping life stories and recalling memories. Although Olney does not reach the same conclusion as I do, he gives a hint of what I mean here when he writes (1980, p. 26) that the "reader of autobiographies ...

is a vicarious or a closet autobiographer, and ... he is able to participate fully if vicariously in the self-creation going on in autobiography".

Writing about self-invention in the mid-1980's, Eakin contends that "we may entertain the possibility that autobiography, like speech, could afford a medium in which for both the autobiographer and his or her reader the self might be apprehended in its living presence" (Eakin, 1985, p. 220). He quickly moderates his claim: "[t]his, of course, would be to assign to autobiography an ideal capacity for self-expression, and there is little likelihood of its realization in any particular instance". I think autobiography's non-fictional character can perhaps be found not on the life narrative of a self which language fails to express, if any self indeed exists; but rather in our shared *feeling* that this self with a life story exists and, as a result, our openness to attempts at expressing it.

## 7 Conclusion

In the introduction to his book *Mind*, philosopher John Searle declares that he will try to "solve and dissolve" some of the difficult problems in the study of mental phenomena. He adds that "once we do that, the subject, the philosophy of mind, does not end: it gets more interesting" (2004, p. 3).

I started working on this paper, not because I had any grandiose ambition to come up with an answer to the truth and genre definition quandaries that have been haunting the field of autobiography for decades. Like Searle, I simply thought that digging into complex, ever-present questions by looking at new research in adjacent fields could result in an interesting discussion—even without reaching any definitive answers to the questions I posed in the introductory chapter.

A starting point for this thesis has been the fact that truth and referentiality have been tirelessly debated topics in the history of autobiography criticism. By focusing on some of the most recent theories I could find on the matter of self and memory, I did encounter research which supports the claim that the self is a highly malleable, elusive entity and that memories can be deceiving in more ways than we would like to imagine. But there also seems to be almost a consensus that even if the self is as an illusion, it *is* a very real presence in our minds and it *is* indeed unified and stable to some degree; if not on a neural level, at least in terms of how we experience it in consciousness. I've come to sympathize with the notion of the self as a center of narrative gravity (as explained in chapter 3.1), as well as with the idea that it is "through narrative that we create selfhood", as Bruner (2002, p. 13) notes. More importantly, I have come to believe, like Damasio, that the self has deeper roots and that our life story actually starts as a wordless narrative.

As Damasio argues, the more advanced sense of self that we usually talk about when we talk about autobiography, may be only the tip of the iceberg. The narrative of the autobiographical self rests on top of a wordless narrative which occurs in core consciousness. And it is already in this wordless narrative that I, my mind's protagonist in its most elementary form, come into being:

The portrayal in the nonverbal narrative simultaneously creates and reveals the protagonist, connects the actions being produced by the organism to that same protagonist, and, along with the feeling generated by engaging with the object, engenders a sense of ownership. (Damasio, 2010, p. 203)

It is based on this rudimentary sense of self that we are able to produce the well-defined protagonist which is our autobiographical self (Damasio, 2010, p. 204), with its own set of autobiographical memories, i.e. its own Self Memory System, as Conway and Pleydell-Pearce have proposed (ref. section 4.1). And from these memories, a life story unravels.

I wrote in chapter 2.4 that Graciliano Ramos was once asked whether he could tell a reporter a little bit about his childhood and he replied that he had already written everything he knew about it in his autobiography. Ramos understood, as we all do, that a literary treatment of the past is never an accurate portrayal of the "there and then" of past experience—and neither is memory. In *Infância* he admits time and time again that he knows his memories of those years might be deceiving, as we saw in chapter 5. In other words, even though he signals that the story of his childhood may to some extent have been constructed, it is still the story of his childhood; the first "chapters" of the life story he has constructed in his mind.

Whether or not Ramos accurately remembers his "primeiras relações com a justiça"<sup>82</sup> (Ramos, 1969, p. 45), in his mind he must have felt a sense of ownership towards that autobiographical memory and he was its protagonist. This memory is different from something imagined, different from his fiction. I assume that this is why he characterized this book as an autobiography and not as a novel. The things we read in *Infância* might not be completely referential to Ramos' past as it actually happened, but we have reason to believe that they could be largely referential to his life story and Self Memory System—and as such, this autobiographical narrative is something other than fiction. Here we are dealing, as I have suggested in the previous chapters, with a neurobiological form of referentiality and distinction between non-fiction and fiction.

My goal has thus been to show that in our minds, we all have a set of memories we feel are autobiographical, and these differ from things we consciously imagine (even though imagination is to a large extent built on memories of real experiences). We build our life stories upon a collection of autobiographical memories, and although parts of this story may have been construed by our brains, it is still not just a story, it is *our* life story. We have a sense of which events our self has been involved in and which ones it has not. This is why I believe we as readers and as writers have always distinguished between fiction and non-fiction.

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<sup>82</sup> "first encounters with justice"

As readers, at any given moment, we may want to seek verification of what in a novel is actually non-fictional, or what in an autobiography is actually fictional. I suggest that we recognize the possibility of autobiography because in our minds we are always building our autobiographies, from birth to death, with every possible cognitive means at our disposal.

I hope I have managed to show why, in many respects, I disagree with Barthes' conclusion that the "subject is merely an effect of language" (in Eakin, 1992, p. 6), as well as with de Man's observation that "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is ... undecidable" (1979, p. 921). Eakin's work has been useful (as I mentioned in a previous section, he seems to be one of the few literary scholars interested in neuroscience). I have tried, however, to dig even deeper into Antonio Damasio's ideas, as well as to look at more recent theories and publications by, among others, Damasio, Bruce Hood, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. In addition, I have incorporated into my thesis other areas of study (which have been outlined in chapter 4; the Self Memory System and life story theory), and I have tried to take a more definite stand and use the aforementioned studies to show why I do not agree with the claim that autobiography should be viewed as a fictional genre (or something "in between").

I would like to close with a quote from James Olney's *Memory and Narrative*: "For by whatever name we call the literature—autobiography, life-writing, periautography—there exists a particularly intriguing kind of writing to be considered for which any one of the terms mentioned might be a fair enough designation" (Olney 1998, p. xvi). This kind of writing, as Eakin notes (1992, p. 3), "is nothing if not a referential art". And, as trivial as it sounds, I think we should dig for the roots of referentiality not in the outside world, but inside our embodied brains. Autobiographies are not a lot like novels. Some novels are a lot like autobiographies. And autobiographies are a lot like the stories our brains create. Between the reader and the author of autobiography a "neurobiological pact" should also be taken into account.

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