

“When reading fills the soul”: about the experiential narrative in self-help literature

“Quando a leitura preenche a alma”: sobre a narrativa vivencial na literatura de autoajuda

“Cuando leer llena el alma”: a propósito de la narrativa vivencial en la literatura de autoayuda

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Abstract *Given the wide dissemination of self-help literature in the current Latin American publishing market, in this article we provide clues that can help to understand the mass consumption of the genre. Focusing on reading as a communication phenomenon itself – the interaction that occurs between text and reader on the cognitive, physical, and emotional levels –, it is possible to identify the ways in which the reader recognises himself in the experiential narratives that are provided in the texts. Finally, one can note a reading that affects, that moves, that “hits”, a reading that mobilises emotions and body sensations.*

Keywords: *Self-help literature; Affectivity; Emotion; Experiential narrative; Consumption*

Resumo *Considerando a ampla difusão da literatura de autoajuda no atual mercado editorial latino-americano, este artigo oferece pistas que podem ajudar a entender o consumo massivo do gênero. Incidindo sobre a leitura como um fenômeno de comunicação em si – a interação que ocorre entre texto e leitor em nível cognitivo, físico e afetivo –, é possível identificar as formas em que o leitor se reconhece nas narrativas vivenciais oferecidas pelos textos. Nota-se, finalmente, uma leitura que afeta, comove, “impacta”, uma leitura que mobiliza emoções e sensações corporais.*

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Palavras-chave: *Literatura de autoajuda; Afetividade; Emoção; Narrativa experiencial; Consumo*

Resumen *Teniendo en cuenta la amplia difusión de la literatura de autoayuda en el mercado editorial latinoamericano actual, en este artículo se ofrecen pistas que pueden contribuir a comprender el consumo masivo del género. Haciendo foco en la lectura como fenómeno de comunicación en sí misma – la interacción que se produce entre texto y lector a nivel cognitivo, físico, y afectivo –, es posible identificar las maneras en que el lector se reconoce en las narrativas vivenciales que ofrecen los textos. Se da cuenta, finalmente, de una lectura que afecta, que conmueve, que “golpea”, una lectura que moviliza emociones y sensaciones corporales.*

Palabras-clave: *Literatura de autoayuda; Afectividad; Emoción; Narrativa vivencial; Consumo*

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Introduction²

In this article, we present the partial results of an empirical study we carried out between 2010 and 2012, which is part of the investigation for a PhD (Canavire, 2013) about the representations, functions and effects of self-help reading, in the case of the Argentine city of San Salvador, capital of the State of Jujuy.³

When we take into consideration that the formation and conquest of a readership are the most complicated operations of contemporary culture, we perceive that there are differences between self-help books and the products of cultural industry.⁴ Therefore, it is necessary to question what makes these texts interesting for their readers: What leads a person to consume self-help literature? Why do they like it? Why do they buy it? Why do they read it?

Communication as a strategy for analysis permits to compose a glance from the angle of *reception*. The research was displaced from the planning of the products towards the protagonists of the world in which one lives: the consumers of goods and services which are propagated by cultural industry. This being stated, in order to avoid the projection of our own relation with the self-help texts (as a “learned reader”), we listened to reading stories.

In the capitalist context, usually the focus is on the normalisation of consumption; however it is not possible to quickly identify consumption as homogenisation. At the end of the 1980s, Barbero (1993) adverted that

² For the elaboration of this article, we had mainly recourse to the bibliography in Spanish; therefore the author of this article is responsible for the translation into Portuguese of the textual quotations.

³ Jujuy is one of Argentina's most important States and it is situated in the extreme North of Argentina, near the border with Bolivia and Chile. It has one of the minor territorial extensions among the Argentine States.

⁴ The strong presence of self-help literature on the Latin American publishing market is recognised. In Brazil, according to the report of the Instituto Pró-Livro [an institute whose mission is to develop programmes so as to transform Brazil into a reading nation] which was carried out during the period between June and July 2011, among the 25 more outstanding books figure *O alquimista* [*The Alchemist*] (COELHO, 2008), *The Secret* (BYRNE, 2007) and *O monge e o executivo* [*The Monk and the Executive*] (HUNTER, 2004). In Colombia, according to the registers of the Biblioteca Nacional [National Library], *Los cuatro acuerdos* [*The Four Agreements*] (RUZ, 1998) and *Descubre tu Don* [*Discover the Gift*] (SHAJEN, 2010) are among the first positions. In Argentina, according to the registers of the Grupo ILHSA [publisher], three of the more sold books in 2011 are of the self-help genre: *Corriéndose al interior* [Lit.: *Running towards the innermost*] (PALUCH, 2011); *Lecciones de Seducción* [Lit.: *Lessons of Seduction*] (SORDO, 2010) and *Sé tu propio héroe* [Lit.: *Be your own hero*] (DOMÍNGUEZ, 2011). Information available on: <http://www.prolivro.org.br/ipl/publier4.0/dados/anexos/2834_10.pdf> (access on: September 4th 2012); <http://www.librerianacional.com/es/index.php?option=com_catalogo&idCategoria=287> (access on October 20th 2012); <<http://www.gandhi.com.mx/>> (access on October 22nd 2012); <<http://www.tematika.com/libros/>> (access on October 25th 2012).

consumption was not only reproduction of force, but also “production of meanings”. In this acceptance, but with respect to the contemporary cultural context, Canclini (2007, p. 58) understands consumption as an opportunity for formation: “we are hybrid individuals who utilise various repertoires (cultural ones) in order to enrich ourselves, to form ourselves and to participate in distinct scenarios, which are not always compatible”.

Products such as literary texts, which are massively elaborated, are constructed, selected, acquired and used by real people with real needs, desires, intentions and interpretative strategies. Since it is like this and if we take into considering that the readers assume a constructive and creative repertoire during the interpretative reading process, we see indeed that the human practice to create significations is inserted in a world which is more and more dominated by consumption.

Therefore, the readers’ opinion is important, because they are the ones who buy, consume the books and even “converse” with them. Thus by relating these materials, we propose clues – which are far from exhausting the topic – in order to attempt to recognise and explicitly explain the forms in which the reader finds an extension of his own experience in the self-help books: he reads features of his own experience in the text.

“Aesthetic and “efferent” readings

According to what Littau (2008) exposes, one of the concerns of literary critics during the 18th century, (period of the ascension of the novel) was the fear that the readers “identify” themselves with what they read. Indeed, the novel differentiated itself from the previous narrative forms because it described scenes of daily life with a realism the readers had not known until then. It could not only relate the particular concerns of the emerging middle class, but establish a tight link with figures and readers, thus creating new identification possibilities. This situation underwent changes with the advent of modernism, “in which the texts require an active and critical participation on the part of the reader in the construction of meanings and they are prepared to break the illusion and all the identification possibility” (LITTAU, 2008, p. 108).

In the meantime, with respect to the gap between the readers of the Ancient Regime (*Ancien Régime*) and the contemporary readers, Darn-ton (1987) brings to light a case: *La Nouvelle Héloïse* [*The New Eloise*], maybe the book with the greatest sales success during the 18th century in France. Its particularity resides in its author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who inspired the obscure desires to be brought into contact with the lives that are behind the printed pages, his figures' lives and their own lives in his readers. They knew that the novel was true because they had read its message in their lives: “the writer made them see the meaning of their lives more deeply” (DARNTON, 1987, p. 248).

Sarlo (2000, p. 39) also deals with this question and she emphasises that “fiction and poetry are not only being constructed with ideologi-cal-empirical materials which, in a certain way, are part of a common patrimony which is aesthetically transformed, but that the same texts function as active makers of social fantasies. In fact, “moral and psycho-logical identifications are stimulated in the reading process and it is possible to think that they have a long-term permanence more than that of the moment of consumption and pleasure” (SARLO, 2000, p. 40).

With respect to this topic, Rosenblatt (2002) adds that, according to the purpose of reading, of an “aesthetic” reading, one can follow towards an “efferent” reading or vice-versa. If, above all, it is desirable to per-ceive, to feel or to experience emotions one will pay more attention to the affective dimension (“aesthetic reading”). If the main objective is accumulating information, solving a problem or finding instructions for a determined action (for something which one will need after reading), more attention will be paid to the referential aspect (“efferent reading”). However, both aspects – referential and affective ones – which are dif-ferent, but not contradictory – are part of a *continuum* and, to a certain extent, they will always be present during reading.

Reading and daily life

Diverse theoreticians emphasise the multiple *displacements* (identifica-tion with the figures, recognition of the readers' own experience in the

narrated situations, elaboration of a subject position), which provide the reading of literary texts and their insertion into the plot of the readers' daily lives.

In this way, referring to the modes of appropriation of the texts, Lahire (2004) questions the interpretative scheme which distinguishes between the "aesthetic disposition" (which would characterise the cultured readers) and the "practical disposition" (attributed to readers of popular origin) and he proposes, in exchange, to think in terms of "profane readers" – outside the literary field, simple consumers and spectators – and "professional readers" – writers, critics, cultural journalists.

But the "profane readers" clearly distinguish themselves from one another according to the type of social experiences which sensitise them; they generally share the taste for true, real, daily stories or, at least, written "as if" they were true:

[...] since that which the reader seeks is actually the "real" or the "veracious" such as the effect of the real or the effect of authenticity (which leads him to read novels while knowing that that which is related did not happen, but that it is written so that anyone believes that it did happen); thus the reader can, "do as if" he is reading real, true, authentic stories, without losing sight of its fictitious character (LAHIRE, 2004, p. 184).

The author argues that the readers submit themselves to the stories in this way; they identify themselves with the figures, anticipate what they can experience or imagine what they themselves would do; they approve or disapprove the moral of the story and they are deeply stirred, all this during the reading. The literary texts also provide situation models, roles to play, schemes of action, of perception, of evaluation and, in this sense, they allow the readers to find situational behaviour patterns, solution patterns (reactions, attitudes) for pleasant, difficult or problematic situations (LAHIRE, 2004, p. 185).

Bahloul (2002, p. 92-95) points out that the novels would be the favourite genre for "few readers". Within this genre there are the science fiction novels, with a focus on the adventure novels (above all when the latter evoke physical and personal achievements) and the romantic

novel (which alludes to the “heart experiences”). According to the author, this reveals that the favourite readings are those which stage the lived and realistic experiences, in which the readers can recognise their own experiences.

Finally, Petit (2006) refers to the space which reading creates as a space that is propitious for the elaboration and the re-conquest of a subject position. Sometimes, by relying on fragments of accounts, on images or on a testimony, the readers find the forces not to be immobilised by an emotional crisis or misfortune. By being able to name the situations they are undergoing, the readers can reference them, soothe them, share them; thus they can understand that these desires or fears, of which they thought to be the only ones to know them, have been experienced by other people, situations which gain voices. In this way, the author recognises a symbolisation process which goes beyond an identification or projection: “there are text fragments which function like shafts of light on a part of their own, obscure until this moment” (2006, p. 48).

The “experiential narrative” in self-help literature

Arfuch (2002) proposes to broaden the notion of “experiential narrative” to a conceptual field which articulates the multiplicity of the present discursive genres, denominated “biographical space”. In the plot of contemporary culture, diverse forms – canonical or innovative ones – appear and dispute this “biographical space”: biographies, autobiographies, life stories, intimate diaries, etc. Inclusively, in the mediatic universe, the informative logic transforms life into an essential source of thematics: interviews, conversations, portraits, testimonies and variations of the mediatic shows (talk-shows, reality-shows). To this we can add the increasing tendency in Social Sciences to have recourse to the voice of the subjects’ testimony, thus shaping the figure of the “social actor”.

In this reflection, the author argues that it is not so much the “contents” of the narration in itself, but precisely, what is important are the strategies (fictitious ones) of self-representation: “not so much the ‘truth’ of the occurrence, but its narrative construction, the modes of confer-

ring meaning upon the account, the coming and going of the lived experience or recollection; and this self-reflective quality will definitely be significant” (ARFUCH, 2002, p. 60).

Hence the necessary identification with the others, the social models of personal achievement, the life lessons, the expansion of the biographical and its increasing sliding into the intimate environments “make us think about a phenomenon, which, beyond the functional usages or market strategies, express a particular tone of the contemporary subjectivity” (ARFUCH, 2002, p. 17).

In the vast field in which mediatic, literary and academic logics hybridise themselves, we believe that the “experiential narrative” is broadly used in one particular genre: self-help literature.

In Rüdiger’s (1995, p. 143) pioneer study, it is possible to find references to the narratives which, together with the exposition of techniques, recommendations and arguments, are all to be found in self-help literature. The author argues that in these texts there are first-person narratives, life stories, in which the subject “narrates the discovery of his/her most intimate forces” and the way in which he/she uses them in order to overcome his/her individual problems, or he/she narrates “how he/she underwent a process of interior change, thus becoming a new person on his/her own”.

In a similar way, among the elements which characterise the self-help genre, Ampudia de Haro (2006) emphasises the presentation of small vignettes – partial aspects of some people’s lives –, testimonies of third parties or stories of relationships which act as “positive or negative examples for the reader”. In this sense, “they are narratives which permit that the reader identifies himself/herself with situations that are similar to his/her own” (2006, p. 56).

On the basis of the reading experiences, which were collected in different cities – Rio de Janeiro, Milan and Buenos Aires – Semán (2007, p. 143) suggests that “each reader finds a passage which, in a certain way, refers to his personal life and that, at the same time, modifies it because it permits to take it as a possibility in the middle of the chaos of representations and emotions”. According to Edílson (a reader who lives in

a *favela* [slum] of Rio de Janeiro), a passage of the book *The Alchemist*⁵ fulfils this function: the protagonist complies with the commodity to occupy a mediocre position, after having undergone various difficulties in the quest for his dreams. Semán affirms that it does not deal with a simple identification, but “with a capture, maybe dialectical, of the feature of familiarity between the reader’s personal dilemma and the hero of the novel” (2007, p. 114).

With regard to the therapeutic narratives (in which the self-help books are included), Reguillo (2008, p. 102) emphasises that the knowledge, which is published there, is free from the analytical dimensions and from the language references and that it appeals to diffuse allegories in order to exhort the “unsatisfied individual”. Thus, by separating itself from the referential function of language, “the curative narrative generates a broad space of recognition, in which the individual can find clear keys in order to identify himself/herself with Coelho’s *O guerreiro da luz* [*Manual of the Warrior of the Light*] or Chopra’s *Lords of Light*”.

Finally, to open a book about self-esteem, in Abraham’s understanding (2000, p. 396), requires a reading in which the received examples must be compared to one’s own knowledge. It is essentially “a reading which puts memories of pain, affliction, humiliation or frustration into action”.

The possibility of recognising oneself in the texts

The narratives, which are inscribed in the self-help texts – cases, testimonies, tales, etc. – lead to the encounter with the experience of *another one*, although it is the author (by means of an account of an autobiographical experience) or of the protagonists of fictitious or true stories. In front of such constancies, the following questioning appears: *is the identification with the figures a strategy of the reader (the reader who acts on the text) or an effect of reading (the text acts on the reader)?*

As we delineated it, in the present scenario the testimonies of social actors on their own uneasiness (in mediatic and institutional spaces) are

⁵ COELHO, P. *O alquimista* [*The Alchemist*]. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2008.

propagated. Therefore it is not surprising that *projecting oneself* has been imposed as a recurrent topic on the subjects' emotional interiority. Thus, in this point, the question on the way, in which the experiential narrative is inserted in self-help literature, appears, in which way it mobilises and affects the reader and promotes the editorial market this way.

The appearance of distinct narrative constructions is common – be it in the form of testimonies, short dialogues, tales or pseudo-biographies – in self-help publications. On the basis of the readers' opinion,⁶ we intended to explain the impact of this stylistic modality in the appropriation of the texts. This way, we will shed light on the different reading strategies by means of the very readers' words.

Given the fact that the responsibility for the belief is conferred on the reader, the possibility to establish contact points between the experienced situations and the narrated situations is related to the reader's capture in the peculiar net of truthfulness. Actually each reader will attribute different truthfulness nuances to the narrated episodes.

Verisimilar accounts: “I believe in what I read”

In principle, we chose the declarations of persons who consider the accounts as “real”.

In this way, Patrícia discusses on her experience as a reader:

[...] to find people who are different from us in the accounts makes us grow, to listen to them, to learn about the other one. Truth is a “marvellous” thing. I believe that all that passes in the head of whom writes – true or not – is certainly a reality for somebody. In order to convey this information, the author deals with people, with daily life. [...] in some accounts I

⁶ In order to elaborate the sample of this study, we considered the socio-demographic characteristics and the consumption characteristics. The selection criteria of the informants were: a) to reside in the city of San Salvador de Jujuy; b) to belong to a specific age group (age between 25 and 55); c) to have read at least, five self-help books in the period between 2010 and 2012. The search for the informants was carried out in two ways. On the one hand, by means of field work, we registered the customers who entered the local bookshops in search of *self-help books*, specifically. On the other hand, taking into consideration the new forms of communication (chats, SMS, forums and social networks) not only as virtual environments of social integration, but also as “data base”, we used an online resource: the social network *Facebook*. In this way, following the selection criteria we defined for the investigation, we contacted the users who mentioned as their “favourite books”, copies of the self-help genre, on their personal page. Finally the sample was composed of 35 readers (19 women and 16 men) and we conducted the interviews in a personal and presential way.

identify myself and in others I do not. Thus these things make us see what we did in the past (Patrícia, 52, housewife, divorced, two children).

Sharing is inherent in reading and, in this sense, even when one reads in privacy, there can be spaces of gratifying inter-subjectivities. Thus the pauses which reading necessarily requires (when we take our eyes off the book, for example) are populated with multiple voices and, therefore, the reader is not alone: the printed pages lead to the encounter with *another one*, even if it is the author (in the case of an autobiographical account) or the protagonist of a fictitious or true episode. Thus it is possible to know other people's experiences and their denouements, where the transcendental is the personal apprenticeship on the basis of what others experienced.

Inclusively, the ideas self-help authors aggregate to their writings are extracted from daily scenes and nothing of what is said is outside "real" life. Thus the verisimilitude of the proposal of the text, in principle, is based on common sense: they are people with concerns which are similar to those that can affect the reader. Besides this, the readers, in many occasions, refer to "identification" as the power of the text to evoke different memories, this quality to go back to the person's past. We observed that this conception adjusts itself to the pattern of the therapeutic narrative, a "narrative of memory" (ILLOUZ, 2010, p. 233), in which the person exercises his/her own memory of suffering in order to free himself/herself from it.

In the same order of ideas, Emanuel emphasises:

[...] I believe that the accounts are real. I do not know if I necessarily identify myself, but I try to establish a "parallel", between the situation of the book and some situation of mine, past or potential. So I say: "we will see... how I would do if it were with me" (Emanuel, 27, chemical engineer, single).

If from the beginning, explicit veracity is admitted in the texts, the reader will accomplish one of the mental reading operations: the *comparison* between the narrated and the individual circumstances (past or present). From the reader's perspective, this is described like "par-

allelism” – between the read and personal life – in which the quality of the “parallel”, more than marking an involvement with the figures’ emotions or behaviours, indicates a distance between the two planes. The attitude of confronting the narrated episodes with the own experience does not only stimulate the reflection on how conflicts are being resolved daily, but it makes the reader able to rehearse (imaginarily) diverse possibilities of action for future situations. Thus, in these books, it is possible to find schemes of perceptions and instructions for the action on the basis of which the reader can elaborate behaviour patterns and solutions.

So Marcela affirms her belief in the veracity of the accounts:

[...] I believe in the narratives because I heard it from other people who underwent these situations. Even when they change the figures, if they are presented in the book, in general, I believe and these narratives make me grow. If some thematic is related to me, it is certain that I identify myself with some paragraph of the book. This occurs with everybody, thus some part of the book “gripped you” (Marcela, 38 years old, accountant, divorced, one son).

Hence it is not surprising that the *identification* with the narratives of the books occurs according to their thematics. In fact, the texts, which include personal accounts or experience on affective questions, frequently become *nearer* (in relation with the reader’s experience) than others which approach questions of operational nature (for example, how to earn money).

Nonetheless, in order to make identification possible, the reader must assume that the subjects possess a *common experience nucleus* (in spite of individual variations). On the basis of this premise, the fragments of the text can come to mobilise feelings and to awaken emotional responses in the reader – this attention which is conceded to the affective aspects remembers “aesthetic reading”. Thus, the truthfulness of the accounts finds a foundation in the daily socialisation: they are events which, before the reading, were listened to through the mouth of others and were shared.

Fiction and real life

Differently, there are readers who point to the intercalation of real accounts and “fictitious episodes”⁷ in self-help texts. This is what Eugênia’s comment suggests:

[...] I think that some are fictitious, others are oral traditions which are happening, that is to say that they occurred in some moment and place. Now, what comes from Buddhism seems truthful to me. The cases Jorge Bucay cites are real. [...] it is inevitable that you see yourself in the book when it presents a recipe of how to face certain situations. Fortunately, I always perceive that my way to face the problems is coherent with what the author says (Eugênia, 40 years old, civil servant, widow, one child).

Hence different nuances of truthfulness are attributed to the narratives of the texts, according to the kind of foundation on which they are based. In this way, the readers distinguish: accounts which involve imaginary events and figures (fiction), anecdotes which are transmitted orally throughout the generations (oral tradition), religious education (religion) and patients’ case stories (scientific discourse).

Therefore, by describing a broad variety of personalities and behaviours, the text does not only provide the possibility to *see oneself reflected* in diverse situations, but it also permits to perceive behavioural alternatives and their consequences. Thus they give clues to the reader, which stimulate a daily self-evaluation: the personal behaviours become precise or deceitful according to the conformity (or not) with the precepts of the text.

On the other hand, Andréa comments:

[...] it seems to me that some are fiction, but there are others in which the authors write on the basis of their experience. I believe that they function as a “parable”. The one who reads them will project them into his life and will say: what is there of myself there? (Andréa, 32 years old, psychologist, single).

⁷ We adopted the definition of “fiction” Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2002, p. 145) presents as “actions of prevision, imaginary immersion, shared ludic feigning”.

As these interlocutors express it, the reading of the narratives can motivate a “projection”⁸ of the personal experiences into the printed pages. Hence, since they are short fictitious accounts or autobiographic episodes, we recognise that these insertions in the text mainly fulfil a *didactic function* for the reader: they make it possible to deduce some teaching by means of similarity or comparison. In this way, the contents of the text can deeply affect the reader and mobilise emotions, feelings and desires.

In view of this, the readers are not only disposed to suspend incredulity, but they are inclined to let themselves being affected by what they read. Thus we observe that reading permits to construct a link between the imaginary and the real: fiction imitates life.

The importance of the utilitarian value

Beyond the veracity of the accounts there is the capacity of *recognising oneself* in the texts, which implies a significant contribution to the reader’s life situation.

In this sense, Rafael comments:

[...] I did not ask myself if these narratives were real or not, I am convinced that they do help. Maybe the tales are not real, but the problematics are. You read and say: “this happened to me, so I will do such thing because they could do it”. For example, with regard to the books which deal with losses, a quarrel or a separation, I applied them in my life (Rafael, 28 years old, businessman, divorced, no children).

In fact, the veracity of the discourse is not very important in view of the *therapeutic* finality of the text. The value of self-help books resides in the exposition of real problems and conflicts which intimately involve the reader: in the texts it is possible to find people who face problems which are similar to yours. Hence the fact that the reader’s situation is not unique and that it is at least similar to what the others understand

⁸ In psychology, the term “projection” indicates different processes. One of the acceptations designates the operation by means of which “the subject projects himself into strange people or, to the contrary, he projects himself into other people, animate or inanimate beings. Hence the novel reader is frequently said to project himself into the protagonist.” (LAPLANCHE; PONTALIS, 2005, p. 306)

and experienced permits to visualise the conflicts from another angle: they can think and feel from *outside themselves*.

Inclusively when reading is motivated by the quest for something which is profitable, a useful transference or an “efferent reading” occurs, which attempts to involve practices and typical real conceptions: the examples we present can *be transported* to the reader’s life.

On his part, Jaime emphasises:

[...] I do not question myself if they are real or not... For example, when Jesus preached, he told a story and it did not matter if the story was real; it helped you to understand the concept. I think that they are thought so that you identify yourself in some part; they touch your weaknesses, seek your insecurities, your pains (Jaime, 33 years old, enterprise administrator, single).

Thus the readers recognise that the accounts function like *exemplifiers* of the concepts the author wants to communicate; rather than judging their quality of veracity, they rehabilitate the “teachings” (practical, spiritual ones) which derive from the examples.

These episodes narrate stories of suffering, of vulnerability, which can lead to affect the reader’s sensibility: reading *mobilises* memories of pain, affliction or frustration. In fact, one considers that the self-help narrative is supported by a “narrative of suffering”.⁹ Therefore it is not surprising that the reader centres his/her attention on those figures and situations which are related to his/her personal problems and needs: *identification* will be guided by the individual concerns at the moment of reading.

Adrián also explains his reader experience:

[...] although the situations are fictitious, if it helps it is good. The sequence of the book is guiding you, and, in a certain way, it connects you with these figures... Of course I did not go to the “Quinta Montanha” [“Fifth Mountain”],¹⁰ but in quest for a truth, for the desire for happiness, someone goes this way” (Adrián, 35 years old, single).

⁹ According to Illouz’ terminology (2010, p. 222), *suffering* is understood as being the central intrigue of the self-help narrative, that which initiates and motivates it.

¹⁰ COELHO, P. A *Quinta Montanha* [*The Fifth Mountain*]. Barcelona: GeoPlaneta, 2000.

It can happen that a book has an impact on the reader, even if it does not describe specific circumstances which are similar to his personal situation or when they are of fictitious nature. In the same way, the reader can establish complicity or bonds of identification with its protagonists and, in an indirect way, he/she can share his struggles, problems and achievements. Thus by making the scenes of the book equivalent to the scenes of daily life, the texts operate like a filter which gives meaning and form to experience.

The real importance of self-help reading resides in the reader's encounter with an *extension* of an experience of his/her own in the printed pages: in the text he/she reads fragments of his/her own life. Reading and experience are a reflection of one another, between reading and life.

Noélia's description is significant:

[...] I am already grandmother, so I am changing roles and I identify myself with other testimonies... I saw myself reflected in various parts of the book. So I keep "this", I take that which serves me and the rest I keep for about twenty years, I remember. Now my library is full of books and when I am not very well emotionally, I take a book and I read the chapter which did not serve me before (Noélia, 54 years old, graphic designer, divorced, three children).

Although the extensive range of topics and figures of the self-help books broadens the reader's possibilities of "reflection", we must not forget that the question is the relation between a particular text and a *particular reader*, whose needs and concerns doubtlessly vary with time passing. The identification with a determined figure – in the case of fictitious accounts – or testimony – in the case of real stories – is conditioned by life stages and particular reading circumstances.

Besides this, considering the *instrumental* aspect of reading, it can fulfil different functions. In an initial reading, the reader is able to extract those devices and directives which permit to maintain the balance in the situations which, at the moment, affect the sense of life. And also, in later periods, it will be possible to have recourse to the books again, in the quest for those fragments or ideas which did not reveal to be useful

before. Hence one verifies that they are not only re-readings – in order to enlighten knowledge or to be attentive to other details –, but they are readings which are dedicated to utilisation, readings which, in a certain way, are *recycled*.

Finally Analia remembers:

[...] in the moment of crisis, the books which more impressed me, were the books of the Bucay¹¹ collection. I identified myself precisely because I was undergoing these processes, you see yourself there and say: “this is I, this is happening with me”. All the accounts and stories, they put into the books have a message and this is what each one must interpret (Analia, 49 years old, nutritionist, married, one child).

On the basis of the premise that we are language beings, we understand the crucial necessity of mediations or of symbolic figurations which confer sense on experience, especially in moments of crisis. In this sense, there will be readers who succeed in *seeing themselves* in the pages of the book: “reflected” as if in front of a mirror. This way, by means of the identification with the different figures or testimonies which are presented, the reader can find words to define his own experiences. Hence we consider an experience of the projection of emotions and ideas which, in a certain way, enables you to read the painful pages of one’s own life indirectly.

Thus the experiences of the projection which is provided by self-help literature has a special significance since it involves the reader’s *sensibility* – related to problems and conflicts which intimately affect him. This way the reader’s emotional responses are canalised according to the feeling of his/her own wants or concerns. In this case, since reading can contribute to better understand oneself and to free oneself from the doubts or personal anxieties, self-help literature can be considered a *life experience*.

Some readings become *repairing*, especially in moments of crisis. In difficult situations, the appropriation of profiles or models of other peo-

¹¹ The reader refers to *Hojas de ruta [Roadmaps]*(2006) by Jorge Bucay, Barcelona: Debolsillo.

ple's behaviours, in projection or identification, can signify a means to resolve or soothe the anxiety. Thus by considering that the basic characteristic of the identification with the other is not necessarily attractive, but that it can be a determined failure, weakness or fault of the other, explains the motives for which the readers establish *familiarity bonds* between the testimonies of the texts and the personal dilemmas. This gives margin to a particular link, which transcends the intellectual domain and generates an *intimate contact* between the reader and the text. The way in which the narrator transmits the sense of what was experienced and the lives that are susceptible of identifications divide themselves into a universe between fiction and non-fiction, in the end, it will be the reader who will seek the sense of life experience.

“Shared” suffering alleviates the soul

If, as we mentioned it above, the reader recognises that the individuals possess a common nucleus of experiences (in spite of infinite individual variations), this can result in the establishment of contact points between the read episodes and the intimate dilemmas.

To this purpose, Cecília defends:

[...] in general, I always identified myself with the testimonies and this alleviated me, because I said: “I am not the only one who undergoes through this, others undergo exactly the same problems” (Cecília, 40 years old, ballet teacher, married, two children).

In some cases, the testifying nature of the stories allows the reader to recognise his own emotional concerns in situations experienced (and attested) by other people. Especially, in moments of crisis, the reader can discover (or believes to discover) that others underwent the same experiences, which are similar to his and succeeded in dominating torments which are similar to those which afflict him. This is why the nature of *exceptionality* of the personal experience is modified: the reader discovers that his interior life reflects an experience which is common to other people and therefore he can learn something *useful* with his victories

and defeats. Inclusively, according to the reading of other life stories, the reader can know the feelings (most secret and intimate ones), in a language which is shared and public. Thus we believe that the self-help book provides the reader with *a paradigm* into which he can insert himself.

Another reader, Lilian, presents the following testimony:

[...] I am convinced that the accounts are real because I hear them in the group. When I entered the self-help group, I started to hear so many stories that I realised that the books are made by people who really underwent this. On the basis of the reading, I thought: “I am not the only one who undergoes this”. It is comforting to think like this (Lilian, 52 years old, business woman, divorced).

The books of the “therapeutic self-help group” are based on one same idea: suffering is lighter when it is shared. Although this supposition is evident in the functioning logic of the self-help groups one finds it also implicitly in the copies of the genre.

Hence being based on the concept of a “common” suffering, reading provides the fact that it is shared by a similar person (the protagonist of an episode), who suffered a similar pain and overcame it: if another one could overcome pain, fault, the sensation of failure, the reader can also overcome it. And when one finds similar experiences and voices, it is possible to recognise that one’s personal situation is not unique. With a view to this, the testimonial accounts can act like a trigger so that one is immobilised when facing perturbing circumstances.

Thus, by means of the identification with a figure that possesses different qualities or that applies similar capacities in a more complete way, self-help literature provides the reader with the possibility to compensate intimate wants and failures.

To give a name to one’s own feelings

Doubtlessly reading is a space in which passions, feelings and emotions are mobilised. Hence it is not uncommon that some readers find words to *name them* in the self-help books.

Marcos describes like this:

[...] it occurs to me what occurs with poetry: “Ah! What I want to say to another person, what I feel, is summed up in this poem”. With these books, the same thing occurs sometimes, these figures say things you wanted to say (Marcos, 36 years old, dentist, single).

Self-help texts seem to enunciate those questions which deeply affect the reader in a light and full way: they express a part of *your own self* in a condensed way. This is why other people’s experiences confer a meaning on the words which name the most hidden feelings. In fact, the value of the texts reside in the providing of a vocabulary which articulates the most intimate concerns or hopes, a vocabulary for the I. Therefore, far from localising themselves in the domain of the canonical literary genres, they are produced in the sphere of the “therapeutic discourse”.¹²

On the other hand, Viviana adverts:

[...] for some moments I identify myself, when I read it is as if I transported myself, position myself into the situation, feel the emotion... this is why I like more novel-like books. For example my favourite author, Haina Czajkowski, approaches platonic love in an enchanting way, without mentioning the physical question (Viviana, 46 years old, journalist, married, two children).

Therefore reading can represent a movement of subjectivity, in the sense that the readers get partly involved with unknown contexts (they “transport” themselves) or they see the conditions which surround them with new emotions. It deals precisely with “prevision actions”, “imaginary immersion” or “ludic feigning” (SCHAEFFER, 2002). And also, when this reading experience takes place, one believes that an aesthetic reading modality manifests itself, (ROSENBLATT, 2002), when the reader’s affective aspects and emotional reactions emerge: reading does not only provide *knowledge about*, but *living by means of*.

¹² For this expression we used the meaning Illouz exposed (2010, p. 29), as “the body of declarations professionally habilitated psychologists use and the body of texts in which psychologists and/or therapy appear and fulfil their task”.

The necessity of accounts in life experience

In principle, the preceding analysis suggests two main questions. In the first place, reading inscribes itself in the context of the particularities between the real world and the narrated world. In the second place, the texts open a way towards interiority, until the unexplored territories of affectivity and emotions.

Consequently through the stories, testimonies, accounts, self-help texts give the reader the opportunity to *recognise himself* in the printed pages. From the reader's view, this process is described in different ways. One speaks of "parallelism" (when it is being developed in the comparison between the narrated and the individual circumstances of the past or present), of "reflection" (when the reader "finds himself" in an external surface), of "projection" (when, in other people's experiences, he finds words to define his own experiences) or of "transference" (when the examples he reads are transported towards his personal life).

In fact, the text does not only make possible *to see oneself represented* in various situations, but it also permits to *visualise* other forms of behaviour and their consequences: it enables the reader to test (imaginarily) diverse possibilities of action for future situations. This way, while the reader's participation in the text is encouraged, the texts also provide clues which stimulate the "self-evaluation" of the daily actions.

Obviously the readers recognise different nuances of veracity in the presented narratives. Actually they distinguish between: verisimilar accounts (autobiographical testimonies, case stories); fictitious accounts (parables, tales); and "hybrid" accounts, which incorporate real and imaginary elements. Nevertheless, in all the cases, the reader is the "guardian" who is responsible for the belief.

When it deals with testimonies, the verisimilitude of the text is based upon the cases which are exposed: they are people with concerns which are similar to those which can affect the reader. Thus, in some cases, the veracity of the accounts will be reinforced in daily socialisation, when they deal with successes which were heard from other people's mouth before.

By means of the written word, the authors tell stories of pain, of vulnerability, they tell their own suffering or that of other people. Thus, by considering that each experience account is collective to a certain extent, by means of the public exposition of the problems (of the subjects' ill-being), suffering can transform itself into a "shared" experience. In this sense, we observe that the books point to people who are involved in a crisis, who feel themselves weak or feel the lack of something in their lives. With a view to this, the texts present roles to be played or scripts of action, they indicate possible ways to get out of the states of immobility: they provide the reader with the possibility to *see himself/herself reflected* in situations which were experienced and overcome by others. This way the readers' recognition in the text take place according to the individual needs and concerns at the moment of the reading.

Doubtlessly, the necessity of sense, of accounts, of shaping one's own experience, is universal. This way, some fragments of the self-help texts can represent recourse to *give back its meaning* to personal experience. As we verified it, even if they deal with accounts of fictitious nature, the reader succeeds in establishing complicity of identification bonds with their protagonists: in the figure's skin, he/she shares his/her struggles, problems and conquests. The readers appropriate scenes, figures, sequences of the actions the author writes, thus creating equivalences between the situations of the book and those of his life. Besides this, the texts can actuate as a filter and permit the reader to attribute meanings to his/her own experience and therefore to shape it, to define it.

The reader's identification or recognition in the narrated situations is strictly linked to the *therapeutic function* which characterises the books of that genre. According to what we investigated, the value of the texts resides more in the exposition of concrete problems and conflicts which intimately involve the reader than in the veracity of the discourse. The fact that the reader's situation is not unique and that it is, at least parallel to what the others underwent and experienced, permits the reader to visualise his conflicts from another perspective: to be able to think about them and to feel them from outside himself.

Self-help reading is described as a gesture which mobilises feelings, emotions and memories more than an intellectual operation. This way, while the readers obtain useful information, they also see themselves emotionally affected. In this direction – with the reserve that it is a mass genre and not “literary works” – we believe that the *continuum* between an “efferent reading” and an “aesthetic reading” is being revealed.

With a view to this and with regard to the initial questioning into consideration, before conceptualising identification as one of the *reader's strategy* or as an *effect of reading*, we point out the reciprocal character of this function and we understand that, in any case, it deals with vestiges of literature in its readers and also with the readers' marks in literature. In the double meaning that the texts construct themselves with materials of daily life (they nourish themselves with human experience) and that, at the same time, they influence the individual ways of representing the world and interacting with it, we believe that the identifications which are stimulated in reading (as marks) can persist for a long time, far beyond the specific practice of this activity.

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