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Popular modernism: representations of modernist literature in popular culture

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Chapter 3

The Author: J T Leroy's Hoax

Modernist authors, such as Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot, have argued that the perceptions and experiences of the fictional character should not be equated with the author. The effacement of the author was taken up by the New Critics as well as structuralist and poststructuralist philosophers. In the famous essay "The Death of the Author" (1986 [1968]), Roland Barthes argues that modernist writers like Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry and Marcel Proust were the first to attempt to subvert the "Author's empire" in favor of writing (50). These authors demonstrated that the author is not the source of the text; the author does not come before, the text after. The author, Barthes argues, is "born *at the same time* as his text" (52).¹⁰⁹

In this chapter, I consider the role of the author with regard to modernist ideas concerning authors, as well as the function of the author in the contemporary literary landscape. I do not discuss a particular modernist author in this chapter, but rather the inheritance of a modernist approach of literature in the figure of the autobiographical author. I look at the way in which modernist principles, in particular the vexed status of the author as an autobiographical figure, *survive*, rather in a Warburgian sense. As Georges Didi-Huberman summarizes Aby Warburg's term *Nachleben*, Warburg's theory "refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs – as opposed to their renascence after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motive" (2003: 273).

I mention the concept of *Nachleben* because here I look at the continuity of a particular modernist principle, that of the irrelevance of the author in its contradiction with the keen interest in autobiography, rather

¹⁰⁹ Although the idea *l'art pour l'art* has been credited to Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), the modernist perspective on literature still expresses a rather new take on the relation between the author and his or her work, which has often been contested by advocates of, for instance, social realism.

than reappearances of specific modernist works. I continue to argue that modernist principles of what literature should be like are still taken to be crucial for good literature. To analyze the continuation of modernist ideas about the author in literary criticism as well as in contemporary literature I look at the figure of the self-expressive author in the case of contemporary author JT LeRoy. LeRoy is the author of the novels *Sarah* (2000), *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) and *Harold's End* (2004). The story about his authorship makes him into an apt case for this chapter, since LeRoy's work was praised for its autonomous style and lyricism, while the story of LeRoy's life was also increasingly exposed. Moreover, LeRoy appeared to be not just an author construct, as is each author, but in addition, an entirely invented author's life is connected to the name.

During approximately six years, the large readership of JT LeRoy believed that he was a teenage boy, who as a child had been pimped out as a cross-dressing prostitute by his mother. As Bruce Benderson summarizes in *Index Magazine*, "He'd survived a free-wheeling teenage mother and her abusive boyfriends, punitive fundamentalist grandparents, dangerous truckstop adventures in the sex trade, chemical addictions, and hustling on the street."¹¹⁰ At the age of thirteen or fourteen, LeRoy was reputedly saved by the psychologist Dr. Terrence Owens, who asked him to write down his stories, which resulted in intensely written books about a disturbing childhood. However, several journalists had become suspicious of the identity of the literary child star. The journalist Stephen Beachy wrote an article in the magazine *New York* in search for the true identity of LeRoy (October 17, 2005). Beachy speculated it was the mother of LeRoy's new family who actually wrote the books, and he appeared to be right. In February 2006, the author, who was supposed to be in his early twenties at that time, was unmasked as a forty-year-old woman, called Laura Albert.

First, LeRoy's work became known as autobiographic and confessional literature, yet, after the unmasking LeRoy became a perfect example of Barthes's claim of the death of the author. While LeRoy's story shows that the author's biography today has considerable influence on the

¹¹⁰ http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/jt_leroy.shtml

response to the work, the modernist idea of the autonomous work is simultaneously viewed as the only possible way to value literature on its own merits. I am interested in this apparent contradiction between critics that follow the principles of New Criticism, formulated by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, or Roland Barthes's and Michel Foucault's related point of view, and the media that increasingly scrutinize the lives of authors to the same extent as they scrutinize the lives of citizens in reality soaps and talk shows.¹¹¹

The story of Leroy's authorship not only demonstrates that the author's life is difficult to separate from his work. The "author" LeRoy knowingly deploys aspects of popular culture, which helped to sell his books and make them well-known. The account of the way in which LeRoy started writing appeals to the idea that writing is healing, and confirms the main principle of self-help books that propagate writing as medicine. Another issue is LeRoy's gender, of which he was not sure. He discussed the topic openly in interviews on the phone, during which Albert pretended to be LeRoy. After the unmasking of LeRoy, the gender question becomes even more layered. Laura Albert had her reasons for dissimulating her identity. The gender issues of the fictitious persona LeRoy are connected to the gender issues of the commercial literary market. In sum, the case study of LeRoy's authorship helps to throw in relief the role of the author in the literary landscape, revolving on the contradiction between on the one hand the modernist criteria of the autonomous and independent text, and the increasing exposure of the author on the other.

Author / Authorship / Autobiography

In 1920, T.S. Eliot writes: "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality" (1934: 56). Eliot's perspective on literary writing is a striking example of the

¹¹¹ In "The Intentional Fallacy" (1949), Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that only the text itself should be studied. Not only should a critic avoid "author psychology," in which the intentions of the author are explained, but any influence from outside; including historical or other contextual framing that cannot be found in the work itself.

antisubjectivist or impersonal aesthetics, with which modernism often is associated. Modernists distance themselves from the idea of self-expression derived from Romanticism.¹¹² The modernist perspective on the relation between author and text was elaborated by the New Critics, who argue that a work of literature should be treated as self-contained.¹¹³

In the article “The Intentional Fallacy” (2001 [1946]), W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley define the focus on the author’s intention as a romantic fallacy. The authors point out the difference between “personal and poetic studies,” arguing that research of the author’s life concerns historical study, which should be distinguished from the study of the literary text (2001: 1381). According to this formalist perspective, a poetic study does not need any information that is external to the work; all relevant information is inside the text. Later, in “The Death of the Author” (1986), Roland Barthes also argues against intentionality. For Barthes, however, the most important point is that an author’s intention can never limit the ways in which a text can be read and explained. Barthes is not a formalist. In contradiction to Wimsatt and Beardsley, he underscores the importance of the context in which a text is placed and the perspective of the reader that determines what a text might mean. For Barthes reading is a productive act. In addition, Barthes emphasizes that “any text is a new tissue of past citations,” thus undermining the idea of authorial originality (1981: 39).

The poetics of impersonality, which started with modernist reflections on writing, have been largely supported by critics and are considered to be a trait of high literature. Confessional literature, in contrast, is generally valued as lowbrow and undemanding, the opposite of what Eliot defines as genuine literature. In the authorship of JT LeRoy, I

¹¹² William Wordsworth, for instance, argues that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (2001 [1802]: 665). However, although the romantic poets defend the principle of self-expression, in his *Defence of Poetry* (2006 [1821]), Percy Bysshe Shelley also expresses something quite like Eliot’s argument, as well as that of the New Critics.

¹¹³ In *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984), Michael H. Levenson argues that “modernism was individualist before it was anti-individualist, anti-traditional before it was traditional, inclined to anarchism before it was inclined to authoritarianism” (79). However, I concur with Eysteinnsson, who writes that “such differences and developments can easily be overemphasized and are sometimes based on misleading notions of the author’s ‘presence in’ or ‘absence from’ the work as it is received” (1994: 27).

argue, those two apparently opposite perspectives come together. Although Leroy's work was branded as autobiographic and confessional, critics praised his raw style of writing, pointing out his literary talent, as for instance a quote from a critic on the cover of *Sarah* illustrates:

"Brilliantly offensive and poetic."¹¹⁴

On the cover of *The Heart is Deceitful Above all Things* the book is portrayed as "a series of connected autobiographical stories," followed by the remark, "once again, LeRoy's fantastical imagination and lyricism twists his haunted past into something utterly strange and magical." Although the book is described as autobiographical, the adjectives that define his style of writing emphasize the literary quality: "fantastical imagination and lyricism." While this description now might seem to betray the deceit of the author JT LeRoy, as does the title *The Heart is Deceitful Above all Things*, when reading it as a description of autobiographical literature, or belonging to autofiction, the emphasis on the author's imagination predominantly seems to indicate that he is a talented author and that, regardless of the autobiographic aspect, his books should be taken seriously as literature.¹¹⁵

I am interested in the question what we actually mean when we brand literature as autobiographic. How can it be excluded from high literature, as Eliot prescribes? Autobiography, intention and truth are all connected; yet, their relationship is not self-evident. If an autobiography is unmasked as (partly) untrue, the author's intention and the labeling of the book as autobiographical are easily considered to be deceitful. The question then is what the criteria are for the label "autobiography."

According to Philippe Lejeune literature is autobiographic when the reader can identify the author with the narrator and protagonist. In *On Autobiography* (1989), Lejeune defines this as the "autobiographical pact"

¹¹⁴ Also, after the unmasking, his writing was still defended as self-contained. See for example: <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/?p=44> or the article by Peter Getty on <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/>

¹¹⁵ On autofiction see, for example, Anneleen Masschelein's "Can Pain Be Exquisite? Autofictional Stagings of *Douleur exquise* by Sophie Calle, *Forced Entertainment* and Frank Gehry and Edwin Chan" (2007) or Claudine Raynaud's "Mask to Mask. The 'Real' Joke': Surfiction/Autofiction, or the Tale of the Purloined Watermelon" (1999).

(3-30). For Lejeune the author's intention, as well as his identity, is of crucial importance to autobiographical writing. In the autobiographical pact the reader trusts that the text refers to a lived exterior reality, a trait of writing which Lejeune defines as "referential" (22). When the author who claims to publish autobiographical stories appears to be fiction himself, this pact is broken. While for Michel Foucault the author's name would not be harmed by the non-existing writer, as we will see below, in Lejeune's approach of the author JT LeRoy's authorship cannot persist. In addition, LeRoy's work would rather belong to the genre of the "personal novel," which Lejeune distinguishes from autobiography (4).

In reaction to Lejeune's theory, Paul de Man challenges the assumption that autobiography depends on reference. In his article "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1984), he argues that autobiography in fact produces the life that the writer describes. The principle of truth concerning autobiography designates a relation between the content of a text and the background of the author, rather than aesthetic values of a literary style or form. De Man argues that from this we can conclude that autobiography cannot be a genre (68).

De Man makes clear that language is a system that exists in the absence of the things to which it refers, while it holds out the promise of referentiality. One can therefore always question whether the referent determines the picture or the other way around (1984: 69). Modernist works show a keen awareness of the deluding side of realist reference. Getrude Stein, for instance, probes the question of reference and autobiography in *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Considering Proust's work, De Man writes, "each example from the *Recherche* can produce, on this level, an endless discussion between a reading of the novel as fiction and a reading of the same novel as autobiography" (69).

De Man's perspective implies that, actually, it does not matter if a text is autobiographic or not, it is rather a choice if one prefers to read it that way. As Barthes claims, the author's intention is irrelevant for the meaning of the text: the text does not have a stable origin, it only has a destination. Besides, if the work is dependent on the sincerity of the

author's intention, the reader "becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer's behavior," De Man argues (71). He also observes that Lejeune's interchangeable use of "proper name" and "signature" "signals both the confusion and the complexity of the problem" (71). While the understanding of the proper name as a signature suggests authenticity, one can argue that even a signature does not guarantee authenticity or honesty, since a signature can also only exist because it can be repeated; in other words "copied" and hence falsely applied.

In *Limited Inc* (1995), Jacques Derrida analyses the assumption of authenticity regarding signatures and writing. Although one can never be fully sure of someone's sincerity, this does not mean that the subject's intention becomes meaningless or will disappear completely. Derrida writes:

... the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance [*l'énonciation*]. Above all, at that point, we will be dealing with different kinds of marks or chains of iterable marks and not with an opposition between citational utterances, on the one hand, and singular and original event-utterances, on the other (18).

The inevitable cloud that hangs over the author's intention and the impossibility of reaching certainty about anyone's intention underscores the idea that the author might as well be dead, at least in the sense that the metaphor of death is directed against a stable voice or origin for speech or language. In poststructuralist analysis, the emphasis on originality, origin and the sender of the literary message moves to language and the receiver or the reader.

Fredric Jameson, however, argues that in Proust's work, for instance, the pole of the receiver is suspended, not that of the sender. Yet, Jameson does not identify the author with the "sender," but with the

narrator. Moreover, the suspension of the receiver, according to Jameson, “endows Proustian language with an absolute presence of its own” (2007: 190). The sender’s intention hovers in a perpetual present. Joyce’s language in *Ulysses*, in contrast, “involves the bracketing of the pole of subjectivity itself and the suppression of the place of the sender as such, producing the illusion of a language that speaks all by itself” (191). In Joyce’s work, then, intentionality becomes an irrelevant concept, whereas in Proust’s fiction, the subject is manifest in such a way that the subject expresses itself, even if he lacks the intention of being understood.

In LeRoy’s work, the receiver is suspended, as is the case in Proust’s fiction. This might seem ironic, since the author, the ultimate sender, is the one who is actually absent. At the same time, this absence underscores the independence of author and narrator; the narrator’s intention is to tell an autobiographic story. While the narrator’s identity corresponds to the identity of the author, it does not refer to the real writer. Thus, the confusion of LeRoy’s authorship shows an expansion of the issues involved in authorship and the question of autobiography and intentionality. Initially, LeRoy appeared to determine the picture; as it turns out, the picture determined him. Hence, I concur with De Man, autobiography is not an aspect of the text itself, but rather a manner of reading.

If one views autobiography as a form of reading, its unmasking should be of no great consequence for the response to the work as *literature*. But in reality it is of considerable influence. Although critics often claim that in their judgment of literature the author’s biography does not play a role, from websites and articles on LeRoy it appears that most readers were fascinated by his life story. Most questions concerned his personal experiences, not his literary talent. Now that his work must be reconsidered as fiction, suddenly his writing seems less interesting. “Cooper and others said they felt betrayed by the deception,” claims *USA*

Today shortly after LeRoy's unmasking.¹¹⁶ However, others continued to defend his writing as lyrical and autonomous.¹¹⁷

The severity of the impact when an autobiographical pact is broken can be observed in the cases of other writers who have faked their autobiography. In each case there has been a public outcry and much media attention. This happened, for instance, when the American author James Frey admitted that he had fabricated parts of his life story in his memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), or when the French novelist Frédéric Tristan admitted that Danielle Sarréra was one of his pseudonyms. Another example is the book *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995) by Benjamin Wilkomirski, in which he describes childhood memories of an imprisonment in Auschwitz.¹¹⁸

Sarrera's case is reminiscent of JT LeRoy's. Sarréra was believed to be a young French girl, who wrote dark erotic stories and committed suicide when she was seventeen. Her work was praised for her authentic female voice, and several feminists analyzed her feminine style. A couple of years after Sarréra's stories were published, however, the real writer, Tristan, declared that he had made up Danielle Sarréra. In *Maskerade* (1999), Xandra Schutte writes that the disappointment was great among the Dutch feminist theorists who had analyzed Sarréra's work and her suicide, describing her as a victim of a male dominated society (111). Schutte argues that feminists who wrote about her work, as, for example, Pamela Pattynama and Sonja Heebing, were familiar with poststructuralist philosophy and agreed that writerly authenticity is ultimately impossible (109). However, as Sarréra's case showed, the author still cannot be considered entirely irrelevant for the function and meaning of a text.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ See: http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-02-07-jt-leroy_x.htm

¹¹⁷ See for example: <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/?p=44> or the article by Peter Getty on <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/>

¹¹⁸ Several historians doubt that Wilkomirski, whose real name appeared to be Bruno Wilkomirski, can have lived through the extraordinary violence he writes about, and which he only remembered at a later age. This book caused a debate around the question if a novel can be truthful without being factual. See Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth* (2001).

¹¹⁹ See Sonja Heebing, "Een gevangene die duizendmaald ontsnapt is." *Lover*, 1992 nr.3. And Schutte's reaction to a lecture of Pamela Pattynama in Schutte's *Maskerade* (1999: 107-110).

The disappointed reactions to Sarréra's non-existence, as well as those from readers to the unmasking of JT LeRoy, underscore Lejeune's argument that the effective belief that a work is autobiographical, or at least a sincere expression of its author, is crucial to the interpretation of a book.

Lejeune anticipates criticism as that from De Man as follows:

We indeed know all this; we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we do not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing (1989: 131-32).

Lejeune has a point: though we realize that autobiographical stories are constructs, autobiography lives on. However, De Man does not claim that autobiography is impossible or inexistent; rather, he doubts that it is a *genre*. He questions whether it is not rather a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (70). This implies that one cannot make a division between autobiographic literature on the one hand and fiction on the other. As a figure of reading, it indexes precisely a way of reading against which modernists protest. Proust is not against autobiographical writing, as we have seen in the first chapter; he even argues that all true literature already exists inside the author. Yet, as he argues in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, he is against an autobiographical way of reading, because that way of reading limits the text instead of granting it the openness to speak for itself.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ It seems ironic that the idea of the autonomy of the text as well as subjectivism in the fictional framework, are intricately connected in modernism and its aftermath. Astradur Eysteinnsson summarizes this dualist sense of subjectivity with regard to James Joyce's *Ulysses* as follows: “In *Ulysses*, for example, it is near impossible to detect a narrator or narrative perspective that can decidedly be said to represent the author. In that limited sense, the text might be called antisubjective or impersonal (and Joyce was indeed a spokesman of a “poetics of impersonality”), but at the same time we experience in the work radical modes of subjective representation of reality, to the extent that outside reality comes to lose its habitual, mimetic reliability” (1990: 27).

Writer / Author Function

Whereas the author is often approached as the one who “*feeds*” the book,” Barthes writes, who “lives before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it,” the author actually comes into being because of the text (52). Perhaps writing has a destination, Barthes argues, but not an origin. The unity of a text is not to be found in the author but in the reader. He argues that Proust’s fiction, which has an “apparently psychological character,” shows the mechanism of the reversal: “by making the narrator not the one who has seen or felt, or even the one who writes, but the one who *is going to write*” (51). This aspect of Proust’s writing, the portrayal of the narrator who is going to write, including his wishes and frustrations about not being able to write, is central in the first chapter. Barthes continues:

Proust has given modern writing its epic: by a radical reversal, instead of putting his life into the novel, as is so often said, he made his life itself a work of which his own book was the model, so that it is clear to us that it is not Charlus who imitates Montesquiou, but Montesquiou, in his anecdotal, historical reality, who is only a secondary, derived fragment of Charlus (51).

If possible, LeRoy’s authorship is even more the product of the reversal that Barthes describes: his historical and anecdotal existence is completely dependent on his fiction. Paradoxically, however, this makes it only more difficult to separate author from narrator. After his unmasking we know that LeRoy is none other than the fictitious speaker in his book. In the telephone interviews in which Albert pretends to be LeRoy, using street slang and imitating a boyish voice, he speaks about his life, a life that Albert made up. Leroy functions as narrator for the author, a narrator that functions as much inside as outside the work. Laura Albert not only wrote the books that LeRoy claimed he had written, but also the texts that LeRoy uttered in interviews, in which he claims his authorship. This makes his presumed autobiographical novels fiction, his authorship fictitious, and turns himself into its narrator.

In the article “What is an Author?” (2000 [1969]) Foucault analyses the function of the term “author.” He writes that it

... would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker: the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance (215).

With regard to LeRoy’s oeuvre, the division between the fictitious speaker and the real writer is much larger than readers suspected at first. However, even if LeRoy had existed, there is a division between his writing and his life; it is precisely because of this division that literature can exist.

Foucault presents the author and the writer as different functions of the “plurality of self” (215).¹²¹ He illustrates his argument with the example of someone who writes a preface to a treatise on mathematics and speaks in the course of a demonstration. The selves that speak in these different circumstances are neither identical in position nor function. I would like to add that the author function also manifests itself differently for the writer and the reader. For a considerable time, readers for instance believed LeRoy to be an existing writer; a real individual, a living boy. LeRoy was seen as living a real life, and appeared on television next to Laura Albert. Nobody knew that LeRoy in public actually was Savannah Knoop, the half-sister of Laura Albert’s partner, wearing a wig and big sunglasses. Everything was staged with the aim of making people believe that the author JT LeRoy existed. For the writer Laura Albert, however, JT LeRoy’s authorship was part of her plurality of self. Although in this case her work concerns a hoax, the discrepancy between the public image of the author and the author function is at stake in all authorship.¹²²

¹²¹ As I mention in the introduction of this study, I use the word “writer” to designate the assumed person who is engaged in the process of writing; and the “author” to designate the author function.

¹²² On www.jtleroyblog.com, Burger writes, “Laura Albert, the ‘real’ J.T. LeRoy, has spent her life playing the role of different people, often with disastrous results. This is just another example of her pathological behavior.” Even if this is true, one could say that LeRoy is a perfect example of Barthes’s argument of “death of the author.” <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/?p=44>

After the unmasking, LeRoy loses his reality and suddenly becomes part of Albert's plurality of self for his-her readership as well. Albert is now understood to be the writer, LeRoy becomes a pseudonym. Does the change of person behind the author's name influence the author's name? To take a closer look at the author's name, I would like to follow Foucault and John R. Searle and ask the question: what are the criteria for applying the name JT LeRoy?¹²³ Foucault analyses how biographical information relates to the author's name as follows:

If, for example, Pierre Dupont does not have blue eyes, or was not born in Paris, or is not a doctor, the name Pierre Dupont will still always refer to the same person; such things do not modify the link of designation. [...] If I discover that Shakespeare was not born in the house that we visit today, this is a modification, which, obviously, will not alter the functioning of the author's name. But if we prove that Shakespeare did not write those sonnets which pass for his, that would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions (210).

In short, the function of the author's name is changed principally by alterations in what we consider to be his oeuvre and not by changes to his physical existence. Hence, the name is a function of the oeuvre. With regard to LeRoy, the important change considers the author as a person. Yet, not only LeRoy's color of eyes or his parental house is wrong, he never existed at all. He is a construct, a product, thought up by someone else. If there is no real existing referent that corresponds to the person JT LeRoy, to whom or to what does the author's name JT LeRoy refer? Some identify LeRoy by referring to the ruse set up by Laura Albert. Others still refer to him as the young homeless drug-addict. Yet others prefer to think that the entire story of the hoax is itself a hoax, and continue to believe that JT LeRoy exists. In either of these cases, the hoax influences the image one has of the

¹²³ In the book *Speech Acts* (1999 [1969]), Searle asks the question: "What are the criteria for applying the name "Aristotle"?"(172).

author. But does that change the function of the author's name JT LeRoy? His books are still *his* books, regardless of the fact that he does not exist.

JT LeRoy's oeuvre has not changed, at least not in the sense that specific books are falsely included in his oeuvre. On the contrary, one could say that his oeuvre has grown, if one also includes the fictitious interviews he has given. As Foucault argues, the author's name is the signifier that unites the oeuvre of the writer, turning a number of books into an oeuvre. Even if nothing more than a name, JT LeRoy still is the functional author of that oeuvre, which is confirmed by the fact that his books are still in the public domain – stores, libraries, websites – under his name.

Referring to John R. Searle, Foucault argues that an author's name functions as a proper name. Searle argues that people do not need to describe a person in an identical fashion to know that they mean the same person. Proper names cannot be defined the way other words can: proper names lack word definitions. Searle writes that

the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lies precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to an agreement as to which descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object (1999: 172).

Although JT LeRoy cannot be called a person, a comparable flexibility of the proper name that Searle describes enables the name to continue functioning as the designation of authorship, regardless of whether the name refers to the teenage prodigy writer or his inexistence. The author's name does not need to refer to a person for its functioning so long as it refers to an oeuvre. However, for legal questions concerning authorship, truthful existence does seem important. Albert was sued by Antidote International Films Inc. for fraud when she collaborated in making a feature film of *Sarah*. The production company wanted to make the film

because it was an autobiographical story. A federal jury awarded the company \$116,500.¹²⁴

In 1969, Foucault predicted that the author name would disappear and that we would no longer hear questions such as: “Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?” (222). In a changed society, discourse would “develop in the anonymity of a murmur” (222). Apparently contemporary society has not gotten rid of these questions. On the contrary, with respect to JT LeRoy, as well as Frey and Sarréra, exactly those questions kept many people preoccupied with guessing and researching. Readers were extremely disappointed when Frey admitted that parts of his turbulent life story were fabricated.¹²⁵ Yet, if one considers the discussion forums on the Internet, the question of who is speaking has become less important concerning those who participate in the discussions themselves. In a forum on LeRoy’s authorship the participants hide behind names like “panopticon7” or “MG.”¹²⁶ It seems paradoxical that bloggers, who prefer to remain anonymous, worry so much about the authenticity of LeRoy’s author’s name and intention. Even though those names suggest anonymity, the participants appear to trust the integrity of each other; relying on a certain degree of consistency between what is written and what is thought and experienced in “real” life. In that sense, blogging is simultaneously anonymous and personal, private and public, balancing on the verge of what we generally expect of autobiography.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ See for instance, <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/>. Albert replies to the convict on <http://sf360.linkingsarts.com/features/sarah-author-laura-albert-the-real-jt-leroy-charged-with-fraud>: “‘This goes beyond me,’ Albert said, according to an Associated Press report, after testifying in the trial about a past that included sexual abuse, leading to her creation of an alter-ego author for her work. ‘Say an artist wants to use a pseudonym for political reasons, for performance art. This is a new, dangerous brave new world we are in.’”

¹²⁵ See *Reading with Oprah* (2005), in which Kathleen Rooney elaborately discusses the Frey scandal (213-240).

¹²⁶ See for instance: <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/?p=44>

¹²⁷ In “Technobiography: Researching Lives, Online and Off” (2003), Helen Kennedy argues that bloggers feel anonymous enough to go public about their private lives. In “The Digital Queer” (2005), Julie Rak argues that “individual bloggers are assumed to be telling the truth about themselves and their opinions” (174). According to Rak, identity and the “belief in individualism and the freedom of expression for individuals” is the most important aspect defining blogging identities (172). These articles show that blogging creates a particular understanding of what it means to be honest and “real.”

In sum, even when no living person is called JT LeRoy, his name still functions in the way that Foucault describes:

the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction (221).

This description fits LeRoy perfectly: he is not an author that precedes the work, while he yet functions as the binding and limiting principle of a specific oeuvre.

While LeRoy's authorship points out that an intention ascribed to the author is a construct, the commotion regarding his authorship shows that readers care about honesty when a work is sold as autobiographic. Especially the disregard for the autobiographic genre made readers feel betrayed. On the Internet, T. Burger responds to LeRoy's unmasking: "I was moved as powerfully as if I had been hit by a bus. Now I'm furious. The writing, good if written by a teenager, is rather pedestrian now that we know the source."¹²⁸ Readers are willing to accept less than good writing if the book delivers a true story. Kathleen Rooney observes similar reactions to the Frye case (2005: 217). The truth does not make one's writing better, but it does make artistic criteria less demanding. This might also be one reason for authors to choose to present their fiction as autobiographic literature. In addition, although readers admit that artistic criteria are less stern, autobiographic literature sells well, as I discuss below.

One may wonder why so many readers feel attracted to autobiographic literature and are interested in extended background information about the author's life. One answer could be that readers do not want to know about the author to understand the work better, as literary critics assume, but seek information about the author to

¹²⁸ <http://www.jtleroyblog.com/?p=44>

understand themselves better. Many readers seem obsessed with finding new definitions of identity, *feminine* identities in particular. The manner in which Laura Albert staged LeRoy's authorship can be read as a flirt with and a critique of the contemporary interest in the author. In the article "‘Blurbing’ Biographical: Authorship and Autobiography" (2001), Kate Douglas demonstrates that biographical details of contemporary authors become increasingly important for publishers and critics alike. The sale of JT LeRoy's books profited considerably from the hype of autobiographical exposure. However, while biographical information about women writers is especially marketable, Albert precisely chose to disguise her identity as a woman and to present her books as the work of a cross-dressed boy.

She / He

Albert's creation plays with the modernist belief that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon poetry," as Eliot writes and as many critics still feel today (1934: 53). However, not all modernists concur with Eliot. Virginia Woolf for instance, shows her awareness of the unreal idealism of Eliot's principle. In "Indiscretions" (1979 [1924]), she argues that although the mist of "romances or adventures of their private life" do not attach to all authors, the response to a literary work is always colored by the image of the author (75). According to Woolf, this image is first and foremost dominated by gender. This is not much different from affections that we feel during the day while "boarding an omnibus" or entering a shop," Woolf writes (72). "The attractions and repulsions of sex are naturally among the most emphatic" (73). Albert seems to concur: she explains that her decision to invent JT LeRoy was a consequence of her insecurity as a woman writer.¹²⁹ This can be read as a critique of the commercial interest in women authors, but it also recalls Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of women's "anxiety of authorship," as they elaborate it in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2001).

¹²⁹ See: http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-02-07-jt-leroy_x.htm

When Albert approached the novelist Dennis Cooper about her book for the first time, she was afraid that he “would not be interested in talking to a 30-something woman.” Therefore, “she decided to approach him as a teenage boy,” (*USA Today*, 2/7/2006).¹³⁰ While the anxiety of being a woman writer who must purloin the right to write, has been overcome in most parts of the western world, Albert’s insecurity echoes the aforementioned “anxiety of authorship” that women writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century suffered. They had to position themselves in a world that did not know a female literary tradition and preferred to keep women authors quiet. Women who wrote were seen as monsters, Gilbert and Gubar argue, and those women writers who did keep quiet risked madness. Perhaps Albert was also afraid that her novel would be reviewed as being far-fetched and implausible if she published it under her own name. Published as “autobiographical,” that critique would be prevented.

Barthes opens his essay “The Death of the Author” by quoting a sentence from the story “Sarrasine,” in which Honoré de Balzac describes a castrato disguised as a woman, immediately alluding to the question of gender: “She was Woman, with her sudden fears, her inexplicable whims, her instinctive fears, her meaningless bravado, her defiance, and her delicious delicacy of feelings” (1989: 49). Barthes holds that we will never know whether these lines express Balzac’s opinion of women, conform to “literary’ ideas about femininity,” or articulate “romantic psychology” (49). We will never know, because writing destroys every origin: preceding ideas or intentions of the author are of no importance to the text as it is read.¹³¹

Feminist critics have argued that precisely at the moment when women and minorities started publishing more frequently, suddenly the author was considered to be of no importance. In the article “Feminist

¹³⁰ See: http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2006-02-07-jt-leroy_x.htm

¹³¹ Later Barthes reintroduces the term “biography” and “biographemes” in his writings and more and more emphasizes his own subjectivity, for instance by writing about photographs from his childhood in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), as well as in *Camera Lucida* (2000 [1980]). Moreover, as Rabaté writes, “Barthes ... made no secret of the fact that he was tempted at the end of his life to write a ‘Proustian novel’” (67).

Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981), Elaine Showalter writes that the time when "scientific criticism struggled to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism reasserted the authority of experience" (181). Kaja Silverman also argues that although one could assume that Barthes's project is to "replace the male author with an androgynous author," this "self-destructive dream" leaves the female subject with no other role than assisting the "male subject in removing his mantle of privileges" (1988: 192). Silverman, however, refines the critique of authorship by discussing the various layers of sexuality in Barthes's essay. The Balzac passage

still bears the mark of male enunciation (it is, after all, a fragment of what might be called the Discourse of the Woman as Other), but no male voice comes decisively forward to claim it. This crisis is precipitated in part by the fact that "she" here refers not to "natural" but to "artificial" – or what I would prefer to call "constructed" – femininity. [...] The Barthesian fantasy would thus seem to turn not only upon the death of the paternal author, but upon the production of a female authorial voice (193).

Because the production of this authorial female voice is a product of castration or divestiture, it is a mediated and displaced voice. Yet, one could wonder if every voice is not mediated and constructed, at least partly. What would a "natural" femininity consist of? Moreover, as Silverman realizes, Barthes's project is not so much to replace the classic author with an androgynous, woman or neutral author, and neither to replace a male voice with an authorial, though constructed, female voice, as might the case in Balzac's fiction, but to replace the author with the *reader*.

Barthes's essay is first of all anti-authorial. He "seeks to move authority away from the author, the author as a source of the work, the fount of all knowledge and meaning, towards the system of language, the textual codes that produce effects of meaning," as Andrew Bennet argues (2005: 13). He summarizes, "for Barthes, language speaks, not the author" (13). In that perspective, the gender of the author is as unimportant as his

or her intentions. In other words, the gender of the person who physically wrote the text does not necessarily coincide with the gender of the voice that inhabits it: the reader finally determines what meaning or gender the text carries. Following Barthes's argument, one might still argue for the relevance of the teenage voice in LeRoy's work. Likewise, irrespective of the gender of the writer, a feminine voice can be found in Sarréra's work.

However, the construction of femininity cannot be denied in the publicity material of women authors. Douglas shows that publishers are interested in the autobiography mostly of attractive women. The marketable information on women writers is often formulated in clichés that conform to what Silverman calls an artificial femininity. While Silverman refers to the cross-dressed castrato in Balzac's story, Douglas's article confirms a similarly constructed femininity in publishing material:

Marketers and "blurbers" of female autobiographies have made this trend profitable by constructing women authors according to enduring myths of femininity: women as honest and truthful gender, or women as more self-aware, emotionally attractive, generous, or saintly (812).

Albert has successfully managed to escape this stereotypical portrayal, which would not fit her books to begin with. The reception of the stories of the boy caught up in a life full of lies, addiction and violence could have been damaged by the myths of feminine honesty and truthfulness. They could have been viewed from a melodramatic moral perspective: Albert, a generous mother figure, has written the books out of pity for poor homeless drug-addicted kids. By inventing the young author and by profiling the books as autobiographical, Albert dodged such a reception of her work. Additionally, she might have aimed to situate her books in the tradition of boy *coming of age* stories, such as *Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye*, which are known and liked by a large public.

Albert not only plays with the gender expectations of the literary market, the characters in the books also play with gender. In *The Heart is*

Deceitfull Above All Things, the mother decides whether her son, the narrator, has to play the role of her younger sister or brother with each new lover she seduces. "I wished she said what my name was, so I'd know if I was going to be a boy or a girl and how I would be expected to move," the narrator thinks when his mother tries to pick up a man (216). In telephone interviews, LeRoy often had to answer questions about gender. He was not simply a "boy," but a transgender, cross-dressing boy/girl prostitute. In an interview about *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, LeRoy said:

When I wrote *Sarah*, I was male-identified, and now I'm not. I don't know what I am. So it's easier if people decide it is not me, then I won't be held down. So many people have claimed me as their own, so I guess the best thing is to confuse them all (*New York Magazine* 10/17/05).

If it does not matter what and who LeRoy really is, and if it is irrelevant whether he is male or female, it is also irrelevant whether his gender is biological or not. For LeRoy, the difference between constructed and natural does not exist, or at least does not seem to matter. If s/he claims that s/he does not know what his/her natural gender is, s/he cannot have an artificial gender either.

This might seem ironic, since LeRoy is a construct. Simultaneously, it shows the inherent unreliability of (auto)biography. After all, each biography is a construct: composed from a certain selection of pieces of information, each shown from a particular angle. Thus, the biography constructs the author, and not the other way around. As De Man argues, the trope of autobiography is prosopopeia, the figure of speech in which an absent or imaginary person is represented as speaking. Autobiography deals with the "giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, figuration and disfiguration" (76). LeRoy seems a literal example of the trope, the giving and taking away of faces. Not just in his work, but also in

the appearances of Savannah Knoop, dressed up with sunglasses and a wig, presenting herself as JT LeRoy.¹³²

Knoop's appearance gave the author a face; yet, it was a figuration as well as a disfiguration. While LeRoy's work and interviews confused readers' gender expectations, the confusion only grew when the author was unmasked. In the relationship that the reader feels with the absent author, the author's gender appears to play a key role. To reiterate Woolf's words, "the attractions and repulsions of sex are naturally among the most emphatic" (73). Many readers felt sympathy for the white-trash boy LeRoy and felt disappointed after the unmasking. However miserable his childhood had been, his life seemed a success story in the end, which had given hope to readers. Their identification appeared to be based on deceit.

Among the numerous fans were celebrities, such as Madonna, Courtney Love and Winona Ryder; others regarded LeRoy as their guru. He had found a new family that adopted him.¹³³ Not only his heartbreaking childhood was appealing, but also the idea that precisely writing had helped LeRoy escape his misery. Hence, LeRoy's work is not simply read as autobiographic; his authorship is also framed as part of a discourse in which writing is taken as healing. This is one perspective on the relation between self and writing. Below I discuss different perspectives on the expression of the self in language, a discourse in which the self is divided and consistent, deceiving and honest.

Body / Language

Although critics often claim to subscribe the modernist principle of the separation between author and text, they still often attribute a "deep" motive, a 'creative' power, or a 'design'" to the author, as Foucault summarizes (2000: 213). Foucault argues that the aspects with which we endow an author are part of a mode of reading: connections, continuities

¹³² De Man writes: "The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization ... of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (71).

¹³³ See: <http://www.jtleroy.com/art-jt-sisterhood.html> or: <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/03/08/albert>

and exclusions with regard to the framing of literature as literature. He emphasizes that the way an author is constructed today is different from the eighteenth century. In addition, an author construction of a poet is different from the author construction of a philosopher (214). Not only the period of time or the type of work determines the author, but also the milieu or the format in which a literary work and its authorship are discussed. With regard to *Oprah's Book Club* in the previous chapter of this study, it became clear that exposure of the author's life is often associated with lowbrow forms, whereas highbrow outlets are assumed to focus on the work itself. This prejudice is no longer in accordance with reality. Highbrow forms of press increasingly write about author's lives. Yet, as long as it is printed in, say, the *New Yorker*, it is not viewed as a disreputable way of approaching literature.¹³⁴

LeRoy's authorship got frequent exposure in highbrow media, which spent a lot of attention to the therapeutic aspect of his writing, something that used to be connected to lowbrow media.¹³⁵ While in retrospect Albert's construction of LeRoy perhaps could be read as mockery of therapeutic writing, LeRoy emphasized the self-help aspect of his writing in interviews. In his introduction to an interview in 2001 for *Index Magazine*, Bruce Benderson writes:

After being abandoned at a San Francisco shelter, he met psychotherapist Terry Owens. In a remarkably short time, [Le Roy] began the daunting task of making sense of his life. One of the most useful tools became the process of writing. With precocious lucidity, he began turning nightmarish memories into stunning prose.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ I want to mention here that Faulkner's objection to the exposure of author's lives in media was a result of his concern about privacy, and not so much part of an aesthetic or literary principle. See his essay "On Privacy" (2004).

¹³⁵ The first documentary I saw about JT LeRoy, part of the Dutch television VPRO program *Ram* broadcast in 2005, did not give information about his books or his style of writing, but solely about the life behind the books: a story of drug addiction, prostitution and life on the streets; a story of a severely traumatized child, who managed to write down his experiences brilliantly and thus overcome the terror of his childhood.

¹³⁶ http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/jt_leroy.shtml

To be able to create a personal life story, in which events from the past are linked to later behavior and emotions, is considered to be an important capacity within some psychological practices, such as cognitive psychology. It is a way to form a coherent image of one's life and to "make sense of [one's] life," as Benderson formulates it. According to other psychological theories, writing can also help to escape from fear, self-torturing and self-censoring thoughts. In *Put Your Heart On Paper* (1995), the American author and writing consultant Henriette Klauser argues that getting one's thoughts down on paper often frees oneself from being consumed by them. As I discussed in the first chapter, popular self-help writing books such as Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (1986) similarly claim that one can free oneself from inner censors through writing.

If I consider LeRoy to be a fiction designed to accommodate readers' expectations, the self-help aspect of the act perfectly fulfills those expectations while simultaneously illustrating the poststructuralist emphasis on the absence of the self in writing. In the interview that Benderson conducted, LeRoy reflects on the way in which language relates to his personal emotions. He claims that writing has helped him get out of his misery, his drug addiction and prostitution. Yet, he does not say that it helped him because he could finally "express" himself; rather, writing was a form of moving away from his "emotional center," a way to distance himself to his own experiences. Leroy states,

there is emotion in there, but it wasn't connected. One reason writing was so good for me was that the emotion came out there. It was almost like ventriloquism – when I wrote, there was feeling. But it wasn't wired up to my emotional center, my brain.¹³⁷

For the interviewer, who thought he was speaking to the young traumatized LeRoy, ventriloquism might have sounded like a metaphor for writing itself, in which the narrator functions as the puppet through which the writer speaks without speaking. Reading the interview with the

¹³⁷ http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/jt_leroy.shtml

retrospective knowledge that Albert formulated these words, ventriloquism becomes a splendid metaphor for the constructed author. LeRoy served as the puppet that functioned as the author through whom Albert could speak without anyone noticing he was absent in his presence. In both interpretations, ventriloquism is a fitting metaphor for the process of writing, in which the writer describes thoughts and emotions without having to connect them to himself, because they belong to someone else: the narrator or character.

Whereas the author LeRoy seemed an ideal example of the self-help literature that stresses the beneficial sides of writing, after the unmasking his comments on the relation between emotion and writing refer to a more general perspective on language. In the interview, Laura Albert makes LeRoy comment that he feels disconnected from emotions “out there,” seeming to allude to the generalizing effect of language; to the impression that words create feelings that become part of communal ideas; images of feelings that we recognize but which no longer belong to one specific person, thus denying the most individual or personal aspects of the experience or emotion.

Besides, LeRoy’s work also shows that emotions and urges often are communicated not just through language, but through a wider spectrum of communication. A libidinal substratum is apparent, which is not surprising given the topics of the books: *Sarah* is about a twelve year old prostitute and *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* about a mother who survives by moving from lover to lover with her son. LeRoy describes the ways in which the mother approaches men, who often are rather taken by surprise by her shameless manners: “She moved in close, pressing up against his shoulders to look at the rock. ‘Uhhh,’ she moaned, and licked her lips. He took a small step back from her. She stepped forward” (2001: 215). LeRoy’s fiction shows that body language often conveys meanings that the words do not imply. Language appears as an untrustworthy and limited part of the scope of communication. Lying is more natural to LeRoy’s characters than speaking the truth.

In "Postmodernism?" (1980), Julia Kristeva points out that language, apart from being determined "because all social phenomena are symbolic," is also fragile. "[L]anguage is merely an infinitesimal yet minimal part of the totality of the symbolic experience," she argues (136-137). In this regard, I want to refer to the ambiguity of speech and gestures in Proust's *La Recherche*. While Proust's work proves the ingenious mastery of writing, it also shows that linguistic communication is just one part of communication, and often the most untrustworthy. Comparing Freud and Proust, Malcolm Bowie writes, "For both of them language is the hugely unstable medium in which desire is socialized and in which constant failures of that socialization occur: language is at once a retreat from, and a surreptitious return to, the libidinal substratum" (1990: 68).

According to Kristeva, who draws on Georges Bataille here, postmodernist writing expands "the limits of language as communicative system, limits of the subjective and naturally the sexual identity, limits of sociality" (137). However, modernist novels, such as Proust's, already do something similar, especially with regard to the symbolic economy of desire, lust, love and anxiety. In Proust's work the characters are very good at lying as well, though perhaps in a more sophisticated way than LeRoy's characters who survive through prostitution and shop lifting. In Proust's works minor slips of the tongue hint to secrets. "For example," Bowie writes, "a slip of the tongue reveals in [Albertine] an unsuspected mode of 'perverse' sexual desire (for anal intercourse)" (73). Thinking again of the image of the ventriloquist, one could say that the unconsciousness speaks as a ventriloquist through the person, especially through slips of the tongue. Or, one can say that the heritage of modernist literature speaks in LeRoy's fiction, informing my way of reading his work.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Freud's most important discovery, Jacques Lacan claims, is that there is an unconscious that appears as an independent system, which betrays itself in what we say and do. With the discovery of the structured unconscious, Freud proved that the self is not something that is identical to itself; it is always divided and directed by something that is other to itself (2004: 150-166).

Self / Language

LeRoy's remark that writing to him felt like ventriloquism alludes to the separation of language and self: as soon as an emotion or observation is expressed in language the described emotion takes on a general meaning, thus separating it from the individual experience. According to Foucault, contemporary literature foregrounds the awareness of this separation. In the book *Foucault/Blanchot* (1986), he argues that contemporary literature moves away from the "I" towards language, parting with the idea that the self expresses itself in language. He argues that

the "subject" of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of "I speak." This neutral space is what characterizes contemporary Western fiction [...]. The reason to think through fiction – while in the past it was a matter of thinking the truth – is that "I speak" runs counter to "I think." "I think" led to the indubitable certainty of the "I" and its existence; "I speak" on the other hand, distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear (13).

It is not so much the "I" that expresses itself in contemporary literature, but language that speaks in the moment that it is heard or read. Thinking of Jameson's observation on Joyce and Proust, the poles of the sender as well as that of the receiver are bracketed in contemporary literature according to Foucault. He argues that literature is no longer an expression of something interior; it exists "outside" of the writer in common linguistic conventions. Literature functions in the same manner as the words "I speak." Foucault argues that "I speak" does not give much information about the "I," except for that it speaks, that it uses language. "I speak" is

always true. It does not matter who says it, it expresses itself as if it is independent of the "I" (11).¹³⁹

While Foucault, Barthes, Emile Benveniste and Jacques Lacan are all assumed to have proclaimed the death of the subject, none of them claims that there is no such thing as a self or a consciousness. The structuralist and poststructuralist critique of the subject is often misunderstood. In *The Fate of the Self* (1986), Stanley Corngold explains:

The attack has been aimed chiefly at the Cartesian subject, the *res cogitans*, a substantial self identified uniformly with the thinking subject and cited in "philosophies of consciousness," where it is erected into the foundation of an epistemology. This is the self that developed under high capitalism into what Fredric Jameson calls "the lived experience of individual consciousness as a monadic and autonomous center of activity" (3).

Neither the poststructuralists, nor earlier philosophers like Nietzsche or Heidegger, nor for that matter Freud, strived for a disappearance of what was understood as a subject. Instead, they redefined the self as a dislocated self. The self as a unity of thought and activity is replaced by a self that is decentered.¹⁴⁰

In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious" (2004 [1957]), Lacan writes: "language, with its structure, exists *prior* to each subject's entry into it at a certain moment in his mental development" (2004: 139).¹⁴¹ Earlier he asserts that his analysis should "alert prejudiced minds"

¹³⁹ René Descartes stated that "thinking" was the essence of man, and Immanuel Kant defined the entity of "I think" as the essence of all thought and understanding. Both placed the subject at the center of cognitive and moral worlds. Poststructuralist philosophers, such as Foucault, Derrida and Blanchot defend the exteriority that was forgotten by this dominant tradition of introspective philosophy; emphasizing the importance of openness to the outside and the other. Foucault argues that this focus on the "I", and all thought on thought has led us to a deeper interiority, which leads us away from the being of language (13).

¹⁴⁰ If so, one can, however, still ask the question that Corngold aptly formulates: "What is it to recommend a self or subject that is not in any sense a center, an agent, or an origin?" (4).

¹⁴¹ Although Lacan seems to scorn Heidegger (166), Heidegger argues similarly that language is what makes man into man. In the lecture "Language" (1971), Heidegger writes: "Man speaks. ... This statement does not mean only that, along with other faculties, man also possesses the faculty

and that “the idea that the unconsciousness is merely the seat of the instincts may have to be reconsidered” (139). We do not express what we feel or think, but we think what language enables us to think. When expressing ourselves in language, we can never reach an authentic self, because we use the structure of language that is prior to our existence. Hence, Lacan analyzes the unconscious from a linguistic perspective, using the Saussurian scheme of signifier and signified. The signifier always enters and transforms the signified; words never have clear limits; the chain of signifiers always exceeds intention.¹⁴²

Jameson argues that the realization that one is always other to oneself, and that one’s linguistic expressions never represent a consistent self, is central to all modernism:

depersonalization in general, whatever the specific strategy and form it may take, is one of the fundamental characteristics of all modernism, all modern art. I believe it emerges from the gradual and historical realization that consciousness as such cannot be represented, and that it must be conveyed indirectly, by way of the detour of things (2007: 194).¹⁴³

Although Foucault also stresses such detours in subject formation, he does not do away with the self. In his later work, he writes extensively on the care of the self, arguing that the “Cartesian moment” has led to a separation between the “care of the self” and the “know yourself” (2005:14). These two modes of thinking used to be connected before Descartes’ division of body and mind. After Descartes, truth became part of the region of objective knowledge, of certainty, whereas truth used to be connected to

of speech. It means to say that only speech enables man to be the living being he is as men. It is as one who speaks that man is – man” (189).

¹⁴² Lacan writes that “the S and the s of the Saussurian algorithm are not in the same plane, and man was deluding him-self in believing he was situated in their common axis, which is nowhere. At least Freud made this discovery. For if what Freud discovered isn’t precisely that, it is nothing” (2004: 157).

¹⁴³ Likewise Eysteinnsson writes, “what the modernist poetics of impersonality and that of extreme subjectivity have in common ... is a revolt against the traditional relation of the subject to the outside world” (28).

spiritual, subjective understanding. Truth was “only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject’s being into play” (15).

Lacan also dissociates his analysis from the Cartesian cogito. At the beginning of his lecture “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* function” (2004 [1949]), he writes that his conception of the subject “sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*” (3). Although the mirror allows one to imagine oneself as a coherent and self-governing entity for the first time, it immediately betrays that that is indeed an imaginary wholeness. It demonstrates the *necessity* of the other to recognize oneself as oneself, and thereby to recognize oneself as the other who perceives oneself. The mirror stage occurs in the individual between the age of six months and eighteen months, but it affects and represents a permanent tendency of the individual: “the tendency that leads him throughout his life to seek and foster the imaginary wholeness of an ‘ideal ego,’” Bowie writes (1990: 106).

This concept of self also has an ethical aspect. Criticism of post-structuralism has argued that if one transfers the focus from the “I” to language, one moves away from the subject who can be held responsible for the language he utters. Moreover, if the subject is divided, as poststructuralist theory holds, there is no personal or social ground to stand on, and accountability would remain floating. In the article “Giving an Account of Oneself” (2001), Judith Butler responds to this criticism and argues that a “theory of subject-formation that acknowledges the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a conception of ethics” (22).

Butler does not only focus on language, but also on social forms. She concurs with Foucault that the self is formed outside of the self. Referring to Hegel’s theory of recognition in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Butler writes:

I am compelled and comported *outside myself*; I find that the only way to know myself is precisely through a mediation that takes place outside of me, exterior to me, in a convention or a norm that I did not make, in which I cannot discern myself as an author or agent

of its making. ... The perspective that both conditions and disorients me from the very possibility of my own perspective is not reducible to the perspective of the Other, since the perspective is also what governs the possibility of my recognizing the Other, and the Other recognizing me (23).

Thus, on the one hand, language precedes and denies the uniqueness of the self, but on the other hand language also enables one to think of oneself as a “self” and to understand what it means to be responsible. Lacan, in turn, argues that it is not important to know if one’s ideas conform to a conscious intention, or to what one authentically is. One should merely be able to know that one is the same as the self of whom one speaks.¹⁴⁴ I can never know whether my words conform to my inner self, because that continuously transforms, slides away and leads me away from myself. We can never know what is real, because the real is not that which speaks. Therefore it is also not important to know a *real* self. What is important is that this particular self speaks when I speak. This is something that we can never prove. Yet, it might be the only way to continue believing in some sense of individuality and some sense of authenticity.

Butler argues that one is still responsible for one’s use of language, although one is formed outside oneself and one can only come to know oneself through agreeing to use shared norms of narration. She writes that it “is a situation we do not choose; it forms the horizon of choice, and it is that which grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible” (39). Translated to the situation of the author this implies that the writer cannot be responsible for what the reader makes of his text. Yet, the author is responsible for the text that he places in the public domain, where he no longer is able to control the way it is read, understood and transformed in the mind of the reader. This is the paradox in which we are all trapped: we are responsible for language that we cannot fully control, for language that

¹⁴⁴ “The point is not to know whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather to know whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same as the self of whom I speak” (2004: 156).

determines us to begin with. In other words, as Lacan points out, we recognize what we are through that which we are not, but that nonetheless forms who we are.

Likewise, to respond to his oeuvre the author has to distance himself from it. The author dies to become a reader of his own work. Already in the process of writing the author starts alienating from his text. The process of writing time and again teaches us that a completely individual perspective is impossible, provoking an alienation that becomes stronger when writers let go of the work by publication. The writer can only transform into an “author” by allowing his words to become public and take on meanings that he had never intended. In the essay “Literature and the Right to Death” (1995 [1949]), Maurice Blanchot describes the process of alienation that the writer undergoes: the book that is sold, read and “praised or demolished in the marketplace of the world,” is not the same book the writer has written. “The writer [...] would like to protect the perfection of the written Thing by keeping it as far away from life outside as possible” (306).

The writer never knows who the reader will be: the reader is the other, anyone or no one. This unknown other will decide over the meaning of the author’s text. If the writer has to take responsibility for his text, he has to respond to the reader. The reader decides what is important. The writer in that sense is always late to his own work. Often the writer suddenly feels embarrassed when rereading his own work. This indicates that the author has died and has become a reader. The author Laura Albert chose to vanish to let her narrator JT LeRoy come alive as the person who could read and interpret her work from his perspective, escaping the task of having to deal with it herself. After the unmasking, JT LeRoy also vanished and now the other – me, you, but also Albert herself – is left. It is up to us to decide how to read and frame JT LeRoy’s work.

Conclusion

As Paul de Man argues, autobiography is not a genre, but a mode of reading, a figure “of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (70). Consequently, even when acknowledging the death of the author and the birth of the reader, the reader may find autobiographic aspects in the text. When Barthes moves from the emphasis on the author to the reader, from origin to destination, he dismisses the earlier mode of reading. Yet, in my opinion, as a reader one moves between different figures of understanding while reading: at one moment one looks from a linguistic perspective, then from a poststructuralist or feminist perspective, then again from a historic or biographic perspective. While these last two kinds of reading have been categorized as lowbrow by modernists, contemporary media and Internet culture show that the interest in author’s lives only grows: the lives of authors are scrutinized in talk shows, human interest documentaries and weblogs.

The publication of and responses to literary books have become part of the media spectacle. Laura Albert deployed that spectacle strategically. Rather than restricting the meaning of her work to the printed page, she extended her literary work by writing the life of the author. I read Laura Albert’s creation of JT LeRoy as a broadening of what a literary work and an authorship can be. We should count the interviews that Albert gave as her fictional character JT LeRoy as part of his/her oeuvre. Many theorists have pursued the impossible task of defining the boundaries of literature, film, theory, visual art, music and other art forms, and in the age of Internet and electronic culture, those divisions become ever more difficult to delineate. Albert profited from this culture. She did not commit herself to only one medium; instead, she created a character, whom she described in her books, whom she directed when Knoop was acting the part, and whom she reinvented in interviews. Albert seems to agree with Barthes’s and Foucault’s theories of the author, combined with a keen insight in the way the literary market functions today. Autobiographical literature sells well, so Albert presented her books as autobiographical. Readers loved it and turned LeRoy into their personal hero. As soon as the readers discovered

that they were deceived, they felt betrayed and judged the books as far less interesting than they had thought. Hence, we have to conclude that the reality “behind” the books cannot simply be dismissed.

Apparently, many readers want to be enabled to judge the book according to the author’s intentions, or at least to be able to judge the work in terms of its creator. This amounts to what Wimsatt and Beardsley call the “intentional fallacy.” This fallacy is a romantic fallacy; it is closer to moral judgment than to artistic criticism. Perhaps that is precisely what readers prefer: the possibility to verify their moral judgment, thus to elevate the role of the narrator. Perhaps then, it is not so much a question of choosing between oeuvre and author, but rather between an artistic perspective and a moral perspective. But can these perspectives really be separated? Whereas authors’s biographies, just as reality soaps, make us realize that the staged identities largely are constructs, formed by media and the market, precisely those *constructs* of reality incite the craving for truth, which readers hope to find behind the book. The relation between reality and fiction will be central in the next chapter as well, in which I focus on truth with regard to the presentation of the lives of modernist authors.

I conclude from this discussion that the modernist statement that literature should not be an expression of the writer’s personality is an opinion that many critics share still today. As we have seen in these first three chapters, autobiographic literature is valued as rather lowbrow compared to “real” fiction. Yet, simultaneously the author is increasingly approached as a celebrity; especially when a book sells well. Authors are regularly interviewed and invited on television shows. Hence, one could say that the opposite has happened to what the modernists, and theorists such as the New Critics, Barthes and Foucault wished for: instead of being irrelevant for the work, the author is tied even more strongly to the work than ever before. Simultaneously, one could also say that the author’s life is always a fiction. Hence, one could argue that Foucault’s prophecy is partly fulfilled: if the author becomes as fictional as the novel, the question “who *really* spoke?” loses its bearing. Just as the distinction between constructed

and natural seems to get lost in the case of LeRoy's, or anybody's, gender, the difference between fictitious or real becomes diffuse if one realizes that every author's biography is at least partly a construct.

By inventing JT LeRoy as a cross-dressing boy who wishes to be a girl, Albert could hide her own identity, hijack the idea of autobiography, and play with the gender expectations of the literary market. Today, the author has become a construct of importance to the work, because the construct is becoming part *of* the work. Publicity materials largely focus on the author. The portrayals of authors are composed from a selection of autobiographical material, often assembled on the basis of commercial motives. If one is aware of this, the step to invent a partly or completely fictitious biography is not so large. I continue analyzing these issues in the next chapter, in which I bring Virginia Woolf's ideas on biography and the self in dialogue with Cunningham's book *The Hours* (1999), a book on writing and reading, in which the author Virginia Woolf is one of the protagonists. I analyze how readers argue for true realities or constructed realities, and how the distinctions that readers make often have little to do with the distinctions that writers experience while writing.