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Loontjens, J.

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Resisting the Author: *JT Leroy's fictional authorship*

Author: Jannah Loontjens

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Abstract (E): In the last decade, the interest in the relation between author and text, author and autobiography, seems to have grown. In my article, I use the story of the author JT LeRoy as a framework to analyse what this growing interest means for our understanding of the word "author." JT LeRoy's work was considered to be autobiographical or, perhaps, autofictional. However, the authorship of LeRoy appeared to be based on a hoax; JT LeRoy proved to be a fictitious persona, made up by the writer Laura Albert. How does the unmasking of an author influence the reception of his/her work? And what does it teach us about the relation between reader and text, reader and author? In my article, I attempt to answer these questions, and, furthermore, I discuss how LeRoy's mixed gender relates to the question of the dead male author and the hyped "constructed" female author.

Abstract (F): Au cours de la décennie dernière, l'intérêt porte à la relation entre l'auteur et son texte, auteur et (auto)biographie, semble avoir considérablement augmenté. Dans cet article, je propose d'analyser l'histoire de l'auteur américain JT LeRoy à titre de cadre général pour une analyse de la signification de cet intérêt particulier pour notre compréhension et définition du mot 'auteur'. L'œuvre de JT LeRoy a été considérée comme autobiographique, ou même autofictionnelle. Or, il fut révélé que l'auteur JT LeRoy tout simplement n'existait pas ; il s'est avéré être un personnage fictif inventé par l'écrivain Laura Albert. Quelles sont les répercussions d'un tel démasqué pour la réception de l'œuvre de l' 'auteur' ? Qu'est-ce que cette réception nous apprend sur le rapport entre le lecteur et l'œuvre, le lecteur et l'auteur ? Dans le présent article, j'essaie de trouver une réponse à ces questions, et qui plus est, j'analyse comment l'ambiguïté de l'identité sexuelle de LeRoy se rapporte à la question de la 'mort' de l'auteur masculin et à la construction, très en vogue, de la femme-écrivain.

keywords: JT LeRoy, gender identity, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, literary hoaxes

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Article

If one views literature not as an isolated medium but as part of social and cultural networks, it can be of great value to know where, how and by whom a book is written. However, many critics defend the position that the artistic value and meaning of a literary work should not be dependent on secondary information; only the words on the page should be interpreted, not extra-textual sources. Still, a large part of the public, among them critics and academics, seem to think it does matter "who" wrote the text. Especially in recent years the lives of authors have been scrutinized, as have the lives of citizens in reality soaps and talk shows. In the light of these developments, I will use the story of the author JT LeRoy as a case study to analyse the figure of the contemporary "author."

JT LeRoy is the author of the novels *Sarah* (2000), *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001) and *Harold's End* (2004). During approximately six years, a large readership of JT LeRoy believed that LeRoy was a teenage boy, who as a child had been pimped out as a cross-dressed prostitute by his mother. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, LeRoy was reputedly saved by psychologist Dr. Terrence Owens, who asked him to write down his stories that resulted in brilliantly written books on a disturbing childhood. In February 2006, however, the author JT LeRoy, who was supposed to be in his early twenties at that time, was unmasked as a forty-year-old woman, called Laura Albert.

On the cover of *The Heart is Deceitful Above all Things*, the book is portrayed as "a series of connected autobiographical stories". LeRoy's work is not simply categorized as autobiographical, the back cover also describes his style of writing as follows: "once again, LeRoy's fantastical imagination and lyricism twists his haunted past into something utterly strange and magical." Although it is suggested that his stories are based on real experiences, the adjectives that are used to describe LeRoy's style of writing all seem closer to fiction than reality. First his "fantastical imagination and lyricism" are mentioned, which evoke fantasy rather than reality, and furthermore his past is considered "utterly strange and magical". *After* the unmasking these descriptions perhaps seem to betray the deceit of the author JT LeRoy, just as the title itself *The Heart is Deceitful Above all Things* does. Yet, *before* the unmasking of LeRoy, the emphasis on the author's imagination did not seem to indicate that his work was considered to be completely "imagined" stories; the impression was that it was autobiographical work, in which the author was able to evoke his past in a lively way. Or that it was, perhaps, an autofictional work.

Since LeRoy's work was first read as autobiographical and now must be reconsidered as fiction, one could argue that autobiography is not so much a genre of writing, but a manner of *reading*, as Paul de Man has argued in his article "Autobiography As De-Facement" (1984). In fact, if one agrees with Paul de Man that autobiographical writing might project itself and produce the life to which it refers, one could define every autobiography as autofictional. However, rather than concentrating on how the genres of autofiction and autobiography relate, what they "do" and "don't" do, instead, I will pursue the question of how the unmasking of JT LeRoy affects the *author's name* JT LeRoy.

JT LeRoy is particularly interesting to me because the story of his authorship not only shows how the author's life is difficult to separate from his/her work, but also because the story of JT LeRoy deploys aspects of popular culture that have helped his books become well known. The account of how JT LeRoy started writing, for example, appeals to the idea that writing is healing, and thereby confirms the main principles of self-help books that propagate writing as medicine. Another relevant issue is LeRoy's gender, of which he is not sure himself, and which he openly discussed in phone interviews in which Albert pretended to be LeRoy. Moreover,

after the unmasking of LeRoy, the gender question becomes multi-layered, because, as a woman, Laura Albert had her reasons for choosing to hide her identity. Hence, the gender questions concerning the fictitious persona LeRoy are connected to commercially related gender issues in the literary market.

Although the majority of literary theorists over the last four decades have agreed that the intentions and biography of an author are irrelevant to the text - either following the principles of New Criticism or Roland Barthes's and Michel Foucault's theory - authors are increasingly marketed on the basis of their life story. The first documentary I saw on JT LeRoy, made for the Dutch television program *R.A.M.* in 2005, was shot before his unmasking. This documentary did not give information about LeRoy's books or his style of writing, but concentrated solely on the life behind his books: a story of drug-addiction, prostitution and life on the streets. By examining websites and articles on JT LeRoy, I learnt that most readers were fascinated by his life story, and most of the questions discussed were about his personal experiences.

Using LeRoy's authorship as a framework for my article, I will argue that the boundaries between (fictional) biographical information about the author, and the author's oeuvre are becoming porous and interdependent. If this is the case, I wonder what, then, can be the relevance of separating author and oeuvre. Then again, what is at stake in the wish to keep them together? I will attempt to answer these questions by rereading texts by Barthes, Foucault, Philippe Lejeune and Paul de Man within and through the framework of Laura Albert's hoax. Furthermore, I will discuss how LeRoy's mixed gender relates to the question of the dead male author and the hyped "constructed" female author.

Who is the Author?

That the fictitious speaker and the author of a novel are not one and the same seems obvious to most theorists. Yet, in LeRoy's case it is difficult to separate author from narrator. As a result of the 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 a narrator of the author; a narrator outside the work. This means that the writer Laura Albert not only wrote the books that LeRoy says he has written, but also the texts that LeRoy spoke and in which he claims that he is the author of the books, which makes his presumed autobiographical novels fiction, his authorship fictitious, and himself the narrator. Yet, I will argue that LeRoy remains the *author*.

In the article "What is an Author" (1969) Foucault maintains that the author and the writer are different functions of the "plurality of self" (112). 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 in function. Foucault writes that in the first case, the "I" refers to an individual who completed a certain task, whereas in the second case "the 'I' indicates an instance and a level of demonstration in which any individual could perform provided they accepted the same system of symbols" (112). A third self could also be located; "this self is situated in the field of already existing or yet-to-appear mathematical discourses" (112). Likewise, the writer and the

author are neither identical in position nor in function, but are different aspects of the self, in which the author function, according to Foucault, "operates so as to effect the dispersion of these three simultaneous selves" (113). This would mean that the author does not "refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves"(113).

Concerning the writer Laura Albert, however, it seems odd to attribute JT LeRoy to her plurality of selves. LeRoy was believed to be a separate person; a real individual, a living boy; not just an aspect of Albert's multi-layered personhood. LeRoy was seen as alive, and appeared on television *next* to Laura Albert. No one realized at the time that when LeRoy appeared in public he was actually Savannah Knoop, the half-sister of Laura Albert's partner, wearing a wig and big sunglasses. Everything was staged with the aim to make people believe that the author JT LeRoy really existed.

However, after the unmasking, LeRoy loses his reality and does become part of Albert's plurality of self; suddenly he is nothing more than a product of her imagination. Now, Albert is the writer, and JT LeRoy the author. Does the switch of the person behind the name influence the author's name? In order to take a closer look at the author's name in an analytical fashion, I would like to follow Foucault and ask the question (paraphrasing Searle 1999: 172): what are the criteria for applying the name JT LeRoy? 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 (106).

In this fragment, Foucault argues that the function of the author's name is changed principally by alterations in what we consider to be his/her oeuvre and not by changes to his or her physical existence. Hence, the name is a function of the oeuvre. What we conceive of as JT LeRoy's oeuvre has not changed, at least not in the sense that certain books have been falsely included in his oeuvre. Perhaps one could even say that his oeuvre in fact has grown if one also counts all the fictitious interviews he has given as part of his oeuvre. However, the most important change of information pertains to the author as a person. According to Foucault this does not necessarily change the function of the author's name. Yet, it is not only Leroy's eye colour that changes, or his parental house that is different, but he never existed as such. He is a construct, a product, produced by someone else.

As long as LeRoy was believed to exist, his work could be described as belonging to the genres of autobiography or autofiction. LeRoy's work and authorship complied with Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact" that Lejeune describes in his book *On Autobiography* (1989). In the autobiographical pact the author commits to coming to terms with his life, and the reader can identify the author with the narrator and protagonist. However, when the author who claims to publish autobiographical stories, appears to be a fiction himself, this pact that depends on the principle of sincerity is brutally broken. Whereas

for Foucault the author's name would not be harmed by the non-existing writer, Lejeune's approach to the author's name in LeRoy's case does not hold up.

Paul de Man's critique on Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact can be taken to its extreme in relation to JT LeRoy: there literally is no real existing referent that corresponds to the person JT LeRoy. In his article "Autobiography As De-Facement", De Man challenges the assumption that autobiography depends on reference. He argues that one could also suggest that autobiography in fact *produces* the life that the writer describes. Language is a system that exists in the absence of the thing to which it refers, and yet, it holds out the promise of referentiality. One can therefore always ask the question if the referent determines the picture, or if it is the other way around.

Fake Autobiographies

To whom or to what does the author's name JT LeRoy now refer? Some will today identify LeRoy by referring to the hoax, the ruse set up by Laura Albert. But not everyone is aware of the unmasking yet. Some still refer to him as the young homeless drug-addict. Others, who *have* heard of the hoax, prefer to think that the entire story of the hoax is itself a hoax, and continue to believe that JT LeRoy lives. In either case, the hoax influences the image one has of the 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 doesn't exist. As Foucault argues, the author's name is the signifier that unites the oeuvre of the writer, which is what turns a number of books into an oeuvre. Even if it is 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.

Hence, it is not the author's name that is harmed or changed, but the perception of the work as "autobiographical". Whereas the author's name JT LeRoy still functions as an author's name, and thereby breaks the supposed autobiographical pact that assumes that the author's name refers to the "real" author; the response to LeRoy's work shows that readers in fact did feel part of this pact. Although Lejeune's theory implies a pact between writing and reality, the pact also seemed to work with respect to the fictional author JT LeRoy, that is, as long as he was still believed to live. This is a wry contradiction, since Lejeune precisely focuses on the reality of the self that autobiography offers.

That LeRoy's work has to be reconsidered as fiction ideally, perhaps, should be of no great consequence for the response to the work as *literature*, but in reality it is of considerable influence. The severity of the impact when an autobiographical pact is broken by a hoax can be observed in the cases of several other writers, who have faked their autobiography. In every case, there has been a public outcry, and much media attention devoted to the topic. For example, when the American author James Frey admitted that he had fabricated parts of his life story in his memoirs *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 Wilkomirski describes his childhood memories of his imprisonment in Auschwitz. Several historians are doubtful if 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 also Maechler, 2001).

Sarréra's case in particular 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 analysed her specifically "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 her book *Maskerade* (1999), Xandra Schutte writes that the deception was enormous among the Dutch feminist theorists who had analysed Sarréra's work and her suicide, describing her as a victim of a male dominated society (111). Feminists who wrote about her work, as, for example, Pamela Pattynama and Sonja Heebing, were familiar with poststructuralist philosophy and agreed that writerly authenticity ultimately is impossible. However, as Sarréra's case showed, the author could not be considered entirely irrelevant for the function and meaning of a text. These examples, as well as the disappointed reactions from readers to the unmasking of JT LeRoy, in fact 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.

Foucault predicted in 1969 that, as society changes, the author's name will disappear and that we will no longer hear questions like: "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?" (119). Society has not changed enough to have gotten rid of these questions yet. With respect to JT LeRoy, as well as Frey, Wilkomirski and Sarréra, exactly those questions kept many people busy guessing and doing research. Readers were extremely disappointed when Frey admitted that parts of his turbulent life story were fabricated. And the question if Wilkomirski's memoirs were authentic was of great importance to historians, as well as for the true victims, whom somehow seemed to be robbed of their own suffering by a fictional account of what happened in Auschwitz.

The interest in the relation between author and text, author and autobiography, only seems to have grown. Why? Perhaps readers do not so much want to know about the author to understand the work better, as literary critics mostly assume, but to let the work help understand themselves better. What we think or feel is somehow always mediated by stories in books, films, television or magazines. The judgments that are formed on the basis of these works should then be verifiable, should resonate in "real" life.

Contemporary readers seem obsessed with finding new definitions of identity; life stories to which they can relate. The manner in which Laura Albert staged LeRoy's authorship can be read simultaneously as a flirt with and a critique of this contemporary interest in the author. The sale of JT LeRoy's books profited considerably from the hype of autobiographical exposure. Kate Douglas writes in her article "'Blurbing' Biographical: Authorship and Autobiography" (2001): "Publishers and critics agree that, for better or worse, the production and popular consumption of life writing, and interest in the biographical details of contemporary authors, are experiencing a notable boom" (806). Douglas especially emphasises that autobiographical information on women writers is highly marketable. But Laura Albert precisely chose to disguise her identity as a woman. By doing so, and by inventing JT LeRoy as a cross-dressed boy who wishes to be a girl, Albert not only hijacks the idea of autobiography, but also plays with related gender expectations.

Constructed Authorship

It seems like Albert is more aware of Foucault and Barthes's theories than her teenage creation admits. LeRoy appears as a literal example of Barthes's metaphor of the "death of the author": LeRoy literally does not exist and can be considered dead; all the information on him as a person therefore must be considered irrelevant for the text, because all this information is as fictional as his oeuvre. However, immediately after his unmasking, readers of LeRoy's work - including myself - started speculating about the intentions of Laura Albert. Why did she invent JT LeRoy? Why did she want her books to be read as autobiographical to begin with?

In his famous article "The Death of the Author" (1968), Barthes quotes a sentence from the story "Sarrazine", in which Honoré de Balzac describes a castrato disguised as a woman: "She was Woman, with her sudden fears, her inexplicable whims, her instinctive fears, her meaningless bravado, her defiance, and her delicious delicacy of feelings" (49). Barthes holds that we will never know whether these lines express Balzac's opinion of women, or whether they conform to "'literary' ideas about femininity", or if they articulate "romantic psychology". He argues that 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. When the text is published, the author might as well be dead. From then on, it is the reader who decides what the text may or may not mean to her. Therefore one might still argue for the teenage voice in LeRoy's work if one reads this voice in the text itself. Or, irrespective of the gender of the actual writer, the female voice can be found in Sarréra's text.

The feminist critique of the death of the author argument was that precisely at the moment when women and minorities started publishing, the author was considered to be of no importance. In her article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981) Elaine Showalter wrote that the time when "scientific criticism struggled to purge itself of the subjective, feminist criticism reasserted the authority of experience" (181). In the book *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), Kaja Silverman refines such critique by pointing out that Barthes's project is to "replace the male author with an androgynous author," who can be heard through the body of the text. Yet, Silverman also argues that the Balzac passage that Barthes quotes,

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 death of the production of a female authorial voice (193).

According to Silverman, Barthes does propose "the death of the 'paternal author'", something that should be welcomed by feminists, but simultaneously suggests "the death of the production of a female authorial voice" (193). For the gender of the voice that inhabits the text, the gender of the person who physically wrote the text should be insignificant. Yet, Silverman argues, by quoting the fragment by Balzac, Barthes relies on a constructed, artificial female voice, not a "natural" female authorial voice. One of Silverman's objectives in

her reading of Barthes's metaphor of the "death of the author" is a defence of natural femininity, in contrast to an artificial or constructed femininity, an objective that I find highly relevant in view of a social critique of the loss or denial of the author. Nevertheless, I would argue that Barthes's project is not so much to replace the male author with an androgynous author, nor to replace an authorial female voice with an artificial female voice, but to replace the author with the *reader*. In that perspective, the gender of the author is as unimportant as the intentions of the author when writing the text: it is finally the reader who determines what thoughts or gender the text carries.

The artificial construction of femininity that Silverman describes, however, is a construction that cannot be denied, and is very dominant in the publicity material of women authors. As Douglas shows, publishers appear to be interested in the autobiography of mostly attractive women authors. The marketable information on women writers is often formulated in clichés that clearly conform to what Silverman calls a "constructed femininity". In a similar vein Douglas writes that

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

Laura Albert escaped this stereotypical portrayal, which, to begin with, would not fit her books. 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, that could have become part of the publicity material of the book. Moreover, the books could well have been viewed from a melodramatic moral perspective, as if Albert, as a generous mother figure, would have written the books out of pity for poor homeless drug-addicted kids. Albert escaped the possibility of this response by inventing the young author of her books, and by profiling the books as autobiographical.

In interviews, which LeRoy in the beginning only did on the phone, he often had to answer questions about gender. LeRoy was not simply a "boy", he was a transgendered, cross-dressed boy/girl prostitute. In an interview about his book, *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, JT 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, 17-10-05).

Albert seems to critique the interest in life stories from within through remarks such as the one above: "it's easier if people decide it is not me." If it does not matter what and who LeRoy really is, and if it is irrelevant if he is male or female, it also becomes irrelevant if his gender is "natural" or not. About Balzac's description of the cross-dressed man, Silverman wrote that his femininity was a "constructed", "artificial" femininity. For LeRoy, however, the difference between constructed and natural does not seem to 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.

Foucault wrote that the author was a construct; a tool for the writer to use, but of no direct importance for the meaning of the literary work. However, I want to conclude that today the author has become a construct that *is* of importance to the work, because the construct is becoming part *of* the work. Publicity materials for books largely focus on the author. The portrayals of authors are always constructed from a selection of autobiographical material, most often assembled on the basis of commercial motives. Every biography on the cover of a book is in this sense "unnatural." If one is aware of this, the step to make a partly or completely fictitious biography is not so large. The author's biography is not something that is literally part of the work, such as a chapter, but in the presentation of the work, it is part of the frame that cannot be separated from the image.

On the one hand, one could say that the opposite has happened to what Foucault, Barthes and the New Critics wished for; instead of being irrelevant for the work, the author (still) cannot be separated from the work. But on the other hand, one could say 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 difference between constructed and natural does not seem to matter any longer concerning LeRoy's, or anybody's, gender, the difference between fictitious or real becomes diffuse if one knows that every author's biography is a construct.

Author's biographies, just as reality soaps, make us realise that the identities always largely are artificial, formed by media and the market. Still, precisely those *constructs* of reality are accepted as (partly fictional) truths. Such fictional truths generally are also accepted in autofiction. However, LeRoy's hoax shows that the desire to know the real truth suddenly becomes very pressing when what was believed to be "real" reveals itself as pure fiction. People do not wish to see the author's background and intentions as completely fictitious. Readers clearly crave a "truth" and a "reality" behind the book. Perhaps it is not so much a question of choosing between oeuvre and author, but between an artistic perspective, in which the work as such is interpreted, and a moral perspective, in which one learns about life. However, LeRoy's hoax shows that these two perspectives are rather difficult to separate.

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Jannah Loontjens is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. She graduated with honours in Philosophy of Art and Culture (University of Amsterdam, 1999). Currently she is in her third year of her PhD research project entitled *Poetics of Writing*. She is also a writer. She published two volumes of poetry and a novel, titled *Veel Geluk* (2007). <http://www.jannahloontjens.nl/>



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