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# Truth and Pain: The Affective Discourse of Fauxtobiography

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts by Research

Under the supervision of Dr. Sarah Falcus

School of Music, Humanities, and Media

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This, like everything, for Thea.

Word Count: 25,697

## Notes on the Texts:

<b>Primary Text:</b>	<b>Author:</b>	<b>Abbreviated to:</b>	<b>Full Reference:</b>
<i>Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948</i>	Binjamin Wilkomirski	<i>Fragments</i>	Wilkomirski, B. (1997) <i>Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948</i> . Carol Brown Janeway (Trans.) London: Picador.
<i>A Million Little Pieces</i>	James Frey	<i>Pieces</i>	Frey, J. (2004) <i>A Million Little Pieces</i> . London: John Murray (Publishers).
<i>Sarah</i>	JT LeRoy (Laura Albert)	-	LeRoy, J.T. (2000) <i>Sarah</i> . London: Bloomsbury.
<i>The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things</i>	JT LeRoy (Laura Albert)	<i>The Heart</i>	LeRoy, J. T. (2001) <i>The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things</i> . London: Bloomsbury.

## Falsifying Affect: Felt Authenticity in Literary False Testimony

*To give an account of oneself will have to fail in order to approach being true.*

*Judith Butler*

From Daniel Defoe's gender-appropriating *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* in 1722, to Misha Defonseca's entirely fictional Holocaust memoir, *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997), false memoirs that exhibit the tendency to imitate the confessional mode, which typifies autobiographical acts, are neither new nor innovative. However, a re-evaluation of false memoirs as falsified "literary testimony" (Rowland & Kilby, 2014: p. i) that considers the act of reading synonymous with the intersubjective act of testimonial witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61-2) reveals a false memoir's underlying affective value. This affective value denounces the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy, which reflects the present climate of "reality-based entertainment" (Rose & Wood, 2005: p. 284) whereby the intersubjective "authenticity negotiation process" (p. 294) finds that "[a]n authentic experience [...] becomes one from which the viewer can draw any number of personally satisfying meanings" (p. 294). Consequently, the discussion that follows draws on affect studies, in a literary context, to expose and evaluate the affective value of contemporary false literary testimony. Essentially, false literary testimony imitates the narrative of:

the injured soul who overcomes daunting challenges, manages to heal, grow strong, and flourish, and who brings his [or her] pain and redemption to the public as abject confession and spiritual guide. (Seltzer, 1997: p. 325)

As such, the capability of false literary testimony to capture the affective power of traumatic experience overshadows the limited prospects of language in the direct articulation of a traumatic, empirical truth. The following paper explores the affective discourse of falsified literary testimony in Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948* (1996),<sup>1</sup> James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), and the JT LeRoy works, *Sarah* (2000) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), to ascertain the ongoing utility of the Autobiographical Pact (Lejeune, 1989),<sup>2</sup> and how affective resonance endures the exposure of testimonial falsehood.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson question: "How flexible is the autobiographical pact between writer and reader, and does it have limits?" (2010: p. 17). Philippe Lejeune's *Autobiographical Pact* (1989) is an intersubjective contract between the writer and the reader that dictates the

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<sup>1</sup> Originally printed in German in 1995, under the title *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939-1948* by the Jüdischer Verlag, a Jewish division of the powerful publishing house Suhrkamp.

<sup>2</sup> Refers to Lejeune's revision of the original 1975 essay – (1989) 'The Autobiographical Pact (bis)' in Eakin, J. P. (ed.) *On Autobiography*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

charter for autobiographical writing. The pact attends to the necessary conditions by which autobiographical narrative can be defined; it specifies that the author, protagonist, and narrator should be representative of the same person in a retrospective account of his or her life in prose (Lejeune, 1989: p. 4). Each of the texts addressed in the present study challenges and interrogates the parameters of Lejeune's Autobiographical Pact (1989), following Leigh Gilmore's assertion that traumatic testimony exposes and exploits the limits of autobiography (2001). Whilst false literary testimony does not disregard or devalue the autobiographical pact entirely, it does invite scrutiny of its parameters, which are stretched by the fallibility of traumatic narrative and its resultant affective discourse. The reader's "desire to participate vicariously in the suffering of others" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 17) through the consumption of "narratives of suffering and survival" (p. 17) reveals:

their impetus to self-reimagining through alternative identities; and their thirst for authenticity in a moment of ersatz authenticity. This is to say, even scandalous hoaxes on the one hand and, on the other, charges of fabrication used to discredit certain witnesses expose truths about the commodification of storytelling, the politics of readerly desires, and the social action that constitutes the construction and consumption of lives. (p. 17)

Essentially, readerly perceptions of fidelity and authenticity as set out in the Autobiographical Pact are abstracted through the notion of reading as intersubjective witnessing; this brings into relief the affective resonance of



traumatic testimony as an intersubjective motif, which is especially significant for falsified memoirs.

The so-called 'memoir boom' observed around the turn of the century (Gilmore, 2001: p. 16) demonstrates the literary preoccupation with the self-referential narrative form, with a particular propensity towards traumatic testimony. Roger Luckhurst states "[m]emoir acquires its contemporary significance from being a vehicle for testimony" (2008: p. 124), which acknowledges the traumatic memoir as a conceivable autobiographical endeavour. Leigh Gilmore's assertion that "the age of memoir and the age of trauma may have coincided" (2001: p. 6) recognises the literary testimony as a cultural phenomenon; it is at this intersection that the present study takes place. To be clear, that memoir is often considered a supplementary mode of autobiography implies its comparably diminished literary value. However, the general consensus as to what separates 'autobiography' and 'memoir' in generic terms follows the premise that autobiography documents the whole life of a subject, whilst memoir "refers generally to life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety [...] focusing on interconnected experiences" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 275). Rather than contributing to the already salubrious debate concerning the differences and nuances of the terms memoir and autobiography as distinct generic categories of "self life writing" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 4), I follow the contemporary and colloquial convention of using the terms synonymously throughout, as Smith and Watson agree, "In contemporary parlance autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 274).

Smith and Watson argue that contemporary concerns around the analysis of autobiographical writing must look beyond the immediacy of the text:

To theorize memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment, and agency is to begin to understand the complexities of autobiographical subjectivity and its performative nature [...] at the intersection of text and context. (2010: p. 61)

The oscillation between text and context during the interpretive enterprise of reading an autobiographical text situates the process as a cooperative and intersubjective undertaking that considers the circumstances of a text's genesis:

If we approach such self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer rather than as a story to be proved or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. It redefines the terms of what we call "truth": autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact. As an intersubjective mode, it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood, as models of the paradoxical status of self-reference have suggested. (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 16-17)

Smith and Watson intimate that autobiographical writings have more to offer than a straightforwardly factual representation of life, and that the process of reading substantiates an intersubjective relationship between the reader and the writer. This further asserts the equivalency of reading to the intersubjective process of witnessing associated with traumatic testimony that underpins the following analysis.

The proposed methodology of the 'fauxtobiography' oscillates between text and context in a helix-like formation around the false memoir. The fauxtobiographical analysis incorporates the false memoir as an autobiographical act, and the biographical metanarrative *roman fleuve*<sup>3</sup> of the author's life in the public domain, specifically relating to the *paratextual surround* (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 100) of the false memoir, which includes reviews, articles and interviews relating to the text's reception. As such, in the context of the fauxtobiography, the falsified literary testimony becomes the author's *künstlerroman*, which the *Encyclopædia Britannica* defines thus:

**Künstlerroman**, (German: "artist's novel"), class of *Bildungsroman*, or apprenticeship novel, that deals with the youth and development of an individual who becomes—or is on the threshold of becoming—a painter, musician, or poet. [...] the *Künstlerroman* usually ends on a note of

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<sup>3</sup>French term a novel featuring the leisurely description of the lives of closely related people or a sequence of related, self-contained novels (see <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/10999-romanfleuve.html>).

arrogant rejection of the commonplace life. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2015)

In literary terms, the *künstlerroman* is the text that establishes an author *as* an author, and in fauxtobiographical terms, the *künstlerroman* constitutes the autobiographically regulated literary testimony that determines the author is the autobiographical 'I' of the self-referential (meta)text. Furthermore, rather than signalling a solely temporal maturation, the *künstlerroman* also yields an emotional development through the survival of adverse and traumatic circumstances, positing the subject as a survivor and transmitting the affective resonance of the experience through the text to the reader. The fauxtobiographical structure follows Gilmore's insight: "While trauma has become a pervasive subject in contemporary self-representation, it is nonetheless experienced as that which breaks the frame" (2001: p. 8). The frame to which she refers is the metaphorical 'picture' of autobiographical self-representation; the duty of the fauxtobiography is to provide the 'bigger picture', considering the metanarrative couching of the false literary testimony and the three phases of its reception: before it is exposed as falsified, after it is exposed as falsified, and as its literary value is reassessed after the exposure of its falsification (Vice, 2014: p. 153-4). This overarching and all-encompassing structure offers the best possible framework for a comprehensive analysis of the affective power of the fauxtobiography's genesis text, and the means by which affective resonance is achieved.

Anna Gibbs explains Silvan Tomkins' term "affective resonance" (Gibbs, 2013: p. 129) as "the positive feedback loop created by affect", which demonstrates "the tendency of someone witnessing the display of affect in another person to resonate with and experience the same affect in response" (p. 131-2). The pull of affect, to be "effective therapeutically" as a "form of sympathy" must "[understand] the trauma in terms as close as possible to those of the subject experiencing it" (p. 132). Affective resonance, then, allows for the subjectivity of traumatic memory, in that its intersubjective modality is not dependent on veracity or verisimilitude with the experience itself, but in the subject's idiosyncratic affective experience of it and its subsequent articulation through the act of self-witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61). The inherent affective discourse of traumatic narrative necessitates the intersubjective act of witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 62) as opposed to readerly identification, because the possibility of readerly identification is occluded by the idiosyncratic subjectivity of traumatic experience on ethical and epistemological grounds (Eaglestone, 2002: p. 118-9). However, the model of intersubjective witnessing can inform a potential mode of understanding. Kilby and Rowland recognise that readers of testimony are "sentimental" (2014: p. 5): "We are moved by what we read and would move heaven and earth for the stories of death and suffering to have been different". Yet, when it emerges that the 'stories' of suffering did not occur exactly as recounted, ironically, readers revolt at being sold their own sentiment without the prerequisite violence. Tim Aubry confirms, "absent this actual untouchable object, [the reader's] pained sympathy cannot help but feel self indulgent" (2006: p. 143); nevertheless, the texts included in the present study

demonstrate how the affective resonance of traumatic testimony can endure as “felt authenticity” (Hunt, 2000: 12) in false literary testimony.

Chapter One considers the “deluded memoir” (Suleiman, 2000: p. 552) of Benjamin Wilkomirski. His traumatic literary testimony, *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood, 1939-1948* (1996), details a traumatic childhood spent in death camps during the holocaust, but was later proven to be an entirely fictional account of the Swiss born orphan Bruno Grosjean/Dössekker. The role of memory, the difficulty of representing trauma and the three levels of witnessing (Laub 1995: 61-2) are introduced in this chapter, as well as the hypothesis that false holocaust testimony can inform analysis of other falsified traumatic/testimonial genres. The necessity to move between text and context in the “three main phases” of a false memoir’s reception (Vice, 2014: p. 153) is established, and the value of an inclusive metanarrative ‘fauxtobiography’ is proposed in the attempt to ascertain the affective value of falsified literary testimony. These principles are carried through as an analytical framework in the subsequent two chapters.

Chapter Two uses James Frey’s embellished memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) to highlight the affective value of literary testimony for both the author and the reader, discussing the impact of exaggerating experience on the premise of autobiography and compliance with the autobiographical pact. The metanarrative produced by the accusation of falsehood, and the resultant fauxtobiography constructed by the mediatized controversy, is framed as an extension of the author’s oeuvre that reinstates the autobiographical ‘I’. The

credibility of affective discourse and the affective resonance thus engendered before the exposure of fallacy is explored; so too is the persistence of felt authenticity within the affective discourse of the embellished literary testimony post-reveal, which allows the text, and the author, to survive the backlash and maintain literary and affective value.

Chapter Three explores the role of autobiographical authorship within the fauxtobiographical structure further through an analysis of J.T.Leroy and 'his'<sup>4</sup> texts *Sarah* (2000) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001), exposing the ways readers can influence genre and modes of reading through the manipulation of the author function (Foucault, 1879). The analysis reveals the potential for polyvocal "hybrid testimony" (Boswell, 2014) as an autobiographical act that can be assimilated within the fauxtobiographical structure, situated alongside contributory hybrid testimonies of conflated authorship, to create a fractal, polyphonic metanarrative act of witness that maintains the power to affect the reader.

Each of the texts discussed within the following thesis draws on specific components within the autobiographically regulated sub-genre of false or fraudulent literary testimony, informally referred to as 'misery memoir',<sup>5</sup> to expose their affective value in spite of their desecrations of the autobiographical pact. To do so, the contextual framing of the authorship and the three phases of

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<sup>4</sup> The LeRoy construct is posited as male but publicly embodied by a woman, whilst also the pseudonymous identity of a female author.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'misery memoir' was coined by *The Bookseller* in 1995 - see Anderson 2011: 115)

the text's reception are combined with the false literary testimony as *künstlerroman* in the proposed structure of the fauxtobiography, which reconstitutes the intersubjective 'contract' between reader and writer with often mutually therapeutic results.



# Malingering Mendacity: From False Memories to Fauxtobiography

*You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it.*

*Nicole Ward Jouve*

The rise of the published traumatic testimony, or “literary testimony [...] in the form of misery memoirs” (Rowland & Kilby, 2014: p. i) is symptomatic of what Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub term “the age of testimony” (1992: p. 53) in the early nineties, an environment steered by advances within Holocaust studies that foreshadow the upsurge in literary testimony. Michael S. Roth states “Holocaust survival has become a paradigm of an identity-making trauma” (2011: p. 95), whilst Sue Vice confirms that the Holocaust is an “implicit or explicit reference point” (Vice, 2014: p. 9) in the production of traumatic narratives. Vice further asserts, “the Holocaust has [...] become suffering’s most typical expression” (Vice, 2014: p. 9) of what is, in Roger Luckhurst’s opinion, “the worst imaginable collective trauma” (2008: p. 65). Robert Eaglestone contends that, as a literary genre, Holocaust testimony is “the forerunner for a way of understanding a whole range of ‘traumatic’ literature” (2002: p. 117). However, Eaglestone acknowledges that such ‘understanding’ is problematic; he reasons:

Testimony aims to prohibit identification on epistemological grounds (a reader really cannot become, or become identified, with the narrator of a testimony: any such identification is [an] illusion) and on ethical grounds (a reader should not become identified with a narrator of a testimony, as it reduces and 'normalizes' [sic] or consumes the otherness of a narrator's experience and the illusion that such an identification creates is possibly pernicious). Testimony, then, is a genre which displays a paradoxical 'doubleness': the form leads to identification while the content and surrounding material lead away from it. (2002: p. 118-9)

Eaglestone acknowledges the reader's compulsion to identify with literary testimony, whilst also recognising that the traumatic element occludes such a response (see also La Capra, 2001). What arises instead, then, is conceivable as an act of intersubjective witnessing, which does, as Eaglestone claims, provide a useful model for the 'understanding' or analysis of traumatic literary testimony.

Following Eaglestone's rationale, the act of witnessing proffers a practical framework for interpreting literary testimony. Dori Laub proposes three levels of witnessing: firstly, "the level of being witness to oneself within the experience", which supposes "autobiographical awareness" (1995: p. 61) in self-witnessing; secondly, "the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others" (p. 61) determined by "involvement [...] not in the events, but in the accounts given of them" as "the immediate receiver of these testimonies" (p. 62), and thirdly, "the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (p. 61), a process by which the self-witness and the immediate receiver "alternate

between moving closer and then retreating from the experience with the sense that there is a truth that [each is] trying to reach” (p. 61). Accordingly, readers of traumatic testimony must inevitably engage in the act of witnessing through the act of reading, assuming the role of immediate receiver at the second level of witnessing, and potentially as secondary witness in the third. The intersubjective status of bearing witness to trauma, then, draws parallels with the “contractual” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 29) methodology projected in Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, whereby the ‘truth’ that is the mutual goal for both reader (witness/receiver of testimony) and writer (self-witness/produce of testimony) is an autobiographical one that satisfies autobiography’s imposed conventions of both writing and reading (Lejeune, 1989: p. 30).

In the introductory paragraph of his book, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (2006), Tim Aubry asks: “Why is the tingle of self recognition that accompanies identification with a fictional character so satisfying?” (2006: p. 1). This question hints at the affective potential of identification within literature, yet this affective potential is not limited by genre categories. Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson suggest:

[B]eing open to one’s own trauma is necessary in order to be open to that of another, and conversely opening to the trauma of others facilitates opening to one’s own. (2013: p. 3)

Indeed, the intersubjective process of witnessing in the act of reading traumatic literary testimony attests to this affective exchange, yet as Anthony Rowland avers:

Testimony can only be performed through form and genre, and poetic forms [...] conveying the epiphanic moment, truncated traumatic recollections, silences beyond the black print, and the emotive space that need not be repressed behind the supposed objectivity of testimonial facts. (2014: p. 4)

Essentially, testimony's value, at least in the literary sense, manifests in its ability to convey traumatic affect through recognised literary and generic conventions, as governed by the intersubjective act of reading.

In 'The Autobiographical Pact', Philippe Lejeune begins "from the position of the reader" (1989: p. 4) in his attempt to define autobiography and "how the texts function" (p. 4). According to Lejeune, autobiography is:

*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.*<sup>6</sup> (p. 4)

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<sup>6</sup> Italics in original.

Lejeune's pact establishes the parameters for the production and recognition of the autobiographical 'I' in the oneness of the author/narrator/protagonist (Lejeune, 1989: p. 5). Lejeune's pact transcends the trivialities of genre labels and is implicitly invoked wherever a text *appears* to meet its conditions. Moreover, where the pact is invoked implicitly (p. 14) by such features as first-person autodiegetic narration (p. 8) and appropriate metatextual cues, the reader is responsible for the reconciliation of the autobiographical 'I'. Conversely, where a text avers its truth-value and autobiographical nature, the reader inevitably seeks to disprove its status as non-fiction in a paradoxical mistrust of autobiographical genre markers (p. 14). Although, retrospective, self-referential narrative is always somewhat restricted by the "fallibility of memory" (Franklin, 2011: p. 11), this is particularly true of testimony, a pretext further complicated by the belatedness and inarticulability of trauma (Caruth, 1995; Gilmore, 2001; et. al.). This complicates the binary generic dichotomy, fiction/non-fiction, that autobiographical acts must not contest; as Lejeune states: "Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing" (Lejeune, 1989: p. 13). The potential for self-awareness of fictional infringement on the part of the author is complicated by traumatic narratives and victim testimony, in that these modes are limited by "the unspeakability of trauma itself [and] its resistance to representation" (Gilmore, 2001: p. 45). Gilmore posits such narratives as "limit-cases" (2001: p. 8) that "may swerve from the form of autobiography even as [they embrace] the project of self-representation" (p. 3). Gilmore further contends: "when self-representation and the representation of trauma coincide, the conflicting demands potentially make autobiography theoretically impossible" (p. 19), which forces the testimonial narrative to

“reveal and test the limits of autobiography” (p. 14) stretching the autobiographical pact without renouncing it completely.

So, what of false or fraudulent testimony? In his book *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst explains that “testimony is commonly defined as a discourse that must be uncontaminated by fiction” (2008: p. 127), and yet the misery memoir milieu is riddled with texts that are revealed to be falsified and fabricated. In her book *Trauma Fiction* (2004), Anne Whitehead argues, “producing a fake is only possible in relation to a form with a clearly established genre” (Whitehead, 2004: p. 33), hence the recognisable parameters for literary testimony, and particularly holocaust testimony, enables their stylistic imitation. The widely critiqued memoir, Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memories of a Childhood 1939 - 1948* (1996) (hereafter *Fragments*), is one such example of “false Holocaust testimony” (Vice, 2014: p. 166) that was originally published as an autobiographical text, which prior to exposure, won numerous literary prizes including the National Jewish Book Award for autobiography and memoirs, the *Jewish Quarterly* prize for nonfiction, and the Prix Mémoire de la Shoah from the *Fondation du Judaïsme Française*, all of which were predicated on the text’s integrity as an autobiographical account. The blurb for the English translation of *Fragments* reads:

Benjamin Wilkomirski was a tiny child when the round-ups in Poland began. His father was killed in front of him, he was separated from his family, and found himself completely alone in a series of death camps. Only in adulthood did he find a way to recover his memories. He recounts

these fragments with a child's unadorned speech and unsparing vision. Written with brilliant, heart-piercing simplicity, this memoir is a small masterpiece, incredible in its power to move. (1997)<sup>7</sup>

The text sensationally asserts itself as the record of a child's first-hand experience as a Holocaust survivor, which immediately invokes the autobiographical pact, and as such, provides the reader with an expectation of authorial integrity. Yet, Wilkomirski asserts:

I am not a poet or writer. I can only try to use words to draw as exactly as possible what happened, what I saw; exactly the way my child's memory has held on to it; with no benefit of perspective or vanishing point. (p. 4-5)

Wilkomirski tenders this disclaimer by way of justification for the fragmentary and underlexicalised narrative format, which he attributes to the unreliable status of his temporally distant, childhood memories that contribute to the sense of authenticity. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Bruss confirms, "the style or structure of autobiography cannot explain what is at the heart of its generic value: the roles played by an author and a reader, the uses to which the text is being put" (1976: p. 5), which proposes the wider significance of autobiographical acts beyond their verisimilitude with empirical life experience, inviting re-evaluation of their 'use'. The employment of autobiographical writing as an act of self-

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from the cover blurb on the 1997 Picador edition translated by Carol Brown Janeway.

witness endows the resultant testimony with a certain affective power; therefore the intelligibility of autobiography as testimony, and vice versa, is dependent on the intersubjective act of witnessing, and the affective response thus engendered. Hence, the opening chapter makes further claims to the text's representative veracity, as Wilkomirski asserts:

My early childhood memories are planted, first and foremost, in exact snapshots of my photographic memory and in the feelings imprinted in them, and the physical sensations. (p. 4)

That Wilkomirski emphasises the exact referentiality of his account by drawing an analogy with photography implies an exacting, identical depiction of events, but more interesting is his assertion of affective integrity. This is a particularly ambitious claim for traumatic testimony, specifically one impoverished by the limited articulation of a child's memory and the relative "reimagined consciousness" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 73) as the limitations imposed on the act of telling by both memory and trauma have an impact upon fidelity, even in authentic empirical experience. Nevertheless, it is precisely the "implausibility" (Egan, 2011: p. 2) of the depicted suffering that portends that the reader "dare not doubt" (p. 2).

Early scepticism as to *Fragments'* authenticity led to accusations of imposture (see Ganzfried, 1998; et. al.), which eventually resulted in the text's public exposure. However, Wilkomirski's survivor testimony is complicated by his apparent delusions of its authenticity (Suleiman, 2000; Maechler, 2001).



Chris Frith and Raymond J. Dolan uphold, “delusions are traditionally defined as idiosyncratic false beliefs that are held firmly in spite of evidence to the contrary” (2001: p. 115). Though Wilkomirski was presented with irrefutable documentary evidence as to his true identity, he argued that his identity was that of Latvian Benjamin Wilkomirski born in 1941, and not Swiss Bruno Grosjean - later given his adoptive parents’ surname Dössekker - born in 1939, as stated on his official documents (Maechler, 2001). Wilkomirski agreed that documentary evidence did indeed refute his claims, and yet he maintained “my memories are all I can put up against a seamless Swiss identity” (Wilkomirski, quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 131). For Frith and Dolan “a delusion arises when our representation of a state of affairs [...] is not properly constrained by our more general knowledge of the world” (2001: p. 130); thus, Wilkomirski’s delusions prioritise his memories and actually come to constitute his personal truth, rendering his testimony both true and false at once. *Fragments* is an influential text in the study of traumatic testimony *and* of autobiographical writing for exactly this reason, as it complicates the way the parameters of the autobiographical pact are upheld in terms of authorship and facticity, whilst inviting the consideration of affect value to the legitimacy of self-referential traumatic testimony.

The proven fictionality of *Fragments* poses a crisis of genre, as according to Derek Attridge:

The question of *genre*<sup>8</sup> [...] brings with it the question of law, since it implies an institutionalised classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction. (1992: p. 221)

Without the uncontested genre label of autobiography providing the “figure of reading or of understanding” (de Man, 1979: p. 921), the text is rendered fictional, “which so openly undermines the legalistic sense of what it means to testify, to bear witness” (Boswell, 2014: p. 150). Matthew Boswell observes:

The media outcry that confidently greets any fraudulent memoir—from Benjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments* [...] to examples outside the Holocaust context [...] rests precisely on their failure to conform to our expectations of the genre, with authors lacking the legitimate lived experience required to authenticate their texts. Readers still need to know of these authors: were they or were they not there? Is everything that they write in their books true? (2014: p. 145)

It is not enough that Wilkomirski believes his “deluded memoir” (Suleiman, 2000: p. 552); the reader expects evidence. The anxieties of the reader are echoed by historian Raul Hilberg who questioned: “how could [*Fragments*] make its way through several publishing houses as an autobiography?” (quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 135), which implies that the publication process should also act as a process of verification, a view supported by the journalist Daniel

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<sup>8</sup> Italics in the original.

Ganzfried who wrote the original 1998 article accusing Wilkomirski of literary fraud (see Maechler, 2001). Maechler ventures “the context and the individual facts scattered within [*Fragments*] lend the narrative the authority of fact” (2001: p. 279); however, Maechler also maintains:

[Wilkomirski’s] book is true in the emotionality it evokes, in the density of its horrors; that is perhaps also why so many genuine survivors have found their experiences expressed therein. (Maechler, 2001: p. 278)

Maechler’s observation privileges affective resonance over empirical facts in the establishment of “felt authenticity” (Hunt, 2000: p. 12) in the act of witnessing. *Fragments* functions on all three of Laub’s aforementioned levels of witness<sup>9</sup> then, as an act of self-witnessing in its role as proxy self-witness for Wilkomirski, allowing him to articulate his experience, through Wilkomirski’s secondary witnessing as the ‘immediate receiver’ of Holocaust testimony through his reading and intertextual representations, to which I will return, and by the reader’s resultant witnessing of witnessing through their intersubjective engagement with the text as testimony. That *Fragments* remains important to both Holocaust studies and biography studies despite its fallacy invites further discussion pertaining to false testimony and its contribution to literature and culture beyond verisimilitude (see also Vice, 2014). *Fragments* highlights the significance of felt authenticity through affective resonance in aspects of autobiography and emphasises the role of affect in literary testimony.

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<sup>9</sup> See page 17.

The autobiographical urge to prioritise factual accuracy over “the truth that frees and heals” (Maechler, 2001: p. 112) Wilkomirski is diminished in what Sue Vice refers to as the ‘first phase’ of *Fragments*’ reception (Vice, 2014: p. 153), even whilst it is successfully marketed as an authentic Holocaust survival memoir. The reviewer for *Die Weltwoche*, Klara Obermüller, observes: “In his book Benjamin Wilkomirski has put the truth of his life up against the officially documented facts” (quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 112), yet her tone remains sympathetic in spite of her doubts, on the grounds that the production of the text held therapeutic benefits for Wilkomirski,

I wish for him and his book readers who treat it as gently as it deserves, given its origins [sic]. It is first and foremost a piece of literature [...] but it is also the recovery of a lost identity. (Obermüller, quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 113)

From the outset *Fragments* included an ‘Afterword’ in which Wilkomirski acknowledges the inconsistency between his memories and the identity recorded in the documents he possess, claiming to be one of “the children without identity” (*Fragments*: p. 154) that was reassigned “a new identity, another name, another date and place of birth” (*Fragments*: p. 153) after the Holocaust ended. This admission is an attempt to diminish the narrative’s latent incongruities; however, as Leigh Gilmore recognises:

To admit the difference between the writer of the text and the autobiographical protagonist threatens the truthfulness of the scene [...] Such an admission reveals too clearly the constructedness of autobiography, both its inevitable affiliation with fiction and its recalcitrant realism. (2001: p. 98)

Wilkomirski's attempt to mitigate the text's 'constructedness' from "fragments of memory" (*Fragments*: p. 155) inadvertently reinscribes its status and value as testimony, as La Capra attests:

The importance of testimonies becomes more apparent when they are related to the way they provide something other than purely documentary knowledge [...] in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with - or denying and repressing - the past. (La Capra, 2001: p. 86-7)

Wilkomirski's intention as to the text's testimonial purpose is evident: "I wrote these fragments of my memory to explore myself and my earliest childhood; it may also have been an attempt to set myself free" (*Fragments*: p. 155).

Apparently following Lejeune's differentiation between accuracy and fidelity (1989: p. 23), Obermüller recognises that although Wilkomirski's testimony reveals obviously conflicting information, which pertains to accuracy (p. 23), its affective and therapeutic value, or fidelity of meaning (p. 23), lies in the narrativising of traumatic memory that permits Wilkomirski to self-witness.

If, as Roth affirms, “the suffering involved in trauma provokes our compassion, that mixture of pleasure and pain that some distance (but not total remove) from an awful event can inspire” (2011: p. 97), then written accounts of said suffering provide a platform for empathic engagement from a necessary distance, as, for Laub, the witness is “present as someone who actually participates in the reliving and re-experiencing of the event” who becomes “part of the struggle to go beyond the event and not become submerged and lost in it” (1995: p. 62). The following example demonstrates that compassionate impulse, as the reader bears witness to Wilkomirski’s naïve perception of two freezing infants that proves particularly graphic:

They lifted their thin little arms up out of the rags and I got a shock. They were white, like their faces; only the hands and in particular the fingers were black, and I couldn’t see any fingernails [...] they sucked on their black fingers, perhaps to warm them (*Fragments*: p. 70)

Wilkomirski’s proximate commentary grants the reader an eyewitness viewpoint by which to observe the profound abjection of the frostbitten toddlers. Wilkomirski fails to comprehend that the starving children have perished in the night: ““But - why are those two’s bones outside? [...] Are they ill?” I asked, beginning to feel anxious” (p. 71); his mentor, Jankl, attempts a pragmatic explanation: “Yes, it’s a sickness called hunger. Frozen fingers don’t hurt. Sometime in the night they chewed their fingers down to the bone - but they’re dead now” (p. 71). This affective discourse situates the reader as witness on two

levels, both as the direct receiver of Wilkomirski's testimonial account, and as the witness to Wilkomirski's witnessing of trauma. Far from reading this encounter as "a dramatization [sic] that offers no illumination" (Klüger, quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 281), the affective resonance of a very plausible despair manifests Roth's somewhat 'removed' compassion as felt authenticity, in connection with Laub's second and third levels of witnessing (1995: p. 61-2). If, as Anne Whitehead avers, "traumatic experience can transmit itself, through sympathetic identification, in profoundly unpredictable ways" (2004: p. 38), which highlights the possibility of intense readerly investment, the affective resonance of traumatic witness testimony is a product of the "transmissibility of trauma" (2004: p. 9) and the readerly compulsion to identify.

The Wilkomirski affair showcases the dangers of "internalisation of Holocaust memoir and testimonies [...] and the hazards of overidentification" (Whitehead, 2004: p. 9), and yet it also summons a broader discussion of the false memoir's function. Maechler documents the proposed therapeutic value for Wilkomirski in the construction of his traumatised narrative, in the attachment of memory to relevant emotions (2001: p. 271) that, in Wilkomirski's case, "resulted in devastating productivity" (p. 271). For Maechler: "Taking traumatic memories seriously means understanding what is evoked as the memory of something steadily drawing further away, and certainly not as some easy-to-read facsimile of the past" (p. 164) then, "also by both the present and the missing memories of contemporary witnesses, including [the subject] himself" (p. 164). Maechler argues that Wilkomirski's deluded testimony is a faithful representation of his own traumatised identity, which follows Jerzy Kosinski's

contention: “One cannot say that memory is either literal or exact; if memories have a truth, it is more an emotional than an actual one” (Kosinski, quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 242). Both Sue Vice (2014: p. 154) and Anne Whitehead (2004: p. 39-40) attend to the intertextual references with Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* (1965), which Wilkomirski declared, “the most touching and most shocking thing I have ever read” (quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 59). Wilkomirski’s familiarity with the text supports Whitehead’s assertion that Wilkomirski mimicked Kosinski’s child-like narrative mode (2004: p. 40) in the representation of an “internal landscape” of “highly subjective” (2004: p. 40) traumatic memory. The affective resonance of Kosinski’s narrative in *The Painted Bird* positioned Wilkomirski as second-level witness, which allowed him to assimilate his own experience into self-witnessing testimony by imitating Kosinski’s self-witnessing format. Wilkomirski’s account offers him the possibility of ‘working through’ (Henke, 1998; La Capra, 2001) his traumatic memories as “traumatic history cannot become integrated into the subject’s narrative or history of themselves because it was not fully experienced at the time that it happened” (Anderson, 2004: p. 128). Remembering and recounting his traumatic past through the affective discourse of Holocaust survival provides Wilkomirski the therapeutic benefit of self-witness, accessed via the former second-level witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61) of reading *The Painted Bird* in the same mode, in a manner that makes sense of his traumatic memories for him.

That Wilkomirski’s testimony simulates holocaust testimony provides that, following on from Eaglestone’s assertions that Holocaust testimony can inform analysis of other trauma narratives (2002: p. 117), *false Holocaust*



testimony can inform the way we analyse other *false* trauma narratives.

*Fragments*, in this context, operates as “hybrid testimony”, which as Matthew Boswell states is:

clearly not a documentary form concerned to establish bare facts, like a news report, nor is it a mode of engagement with the past that is born entirely of the imagination, like a work of fiction. It specifically demands that we navigate beyond the oppositional logic of silence and language, inside and outside, fact and fiction, truth and lies, that has dominated critical responses to Holocaust literature, refusing the absolute dominion of any of these terms. This resistance to clear epistemological categorisation links to the way that these works suggest meanings whose enormities are equally difficult to grasp. (2014: p. 153-4)

*Fragments*' status as hybrid testimony is only established in connection with the 'critical responses' referred to by Boswell, that validate the way the text circumnavigates the binary strictures of autobiographical genre. The implicit reconciliatory conflict within a false memoir necessitates a reading beyond the text in isolation, whereby the overarching metanarrative created by the circumstances of authorship, meets the “three main phases” (Vice, 2014: p. 153) of the text's reception: firstly after “initial publication”, secondly, “during the protracted process of its exposure as fraudulent”, and lastly, when the text is “reassessed in literary terms” (Vice, 2014: p. 153-4). In order to extract meaning from the text, the reader must engage with this “paratextual surround” (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 100), as any potential debates regarding fidelity, and their

associated repercussions, are all factors in the reader's intersubjective act of witnessing and the supervening evaluation of affective resonance in the first phase of reception, and felt authenticity in the third. The premise of what I call 'fauxtobiography' is to encompass the metanarrative context of the false memoir's genesis and authorship, in connection with the text itself and its contributory three-phased reception, to enable an inclusive and comprehensive analysis that befits the testimonial mode.

As Georges Gusdorf asserts, "autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time" (Gusdorf, 1980: p. 37); therefore reading such texts using this extended fauxtobiographical structure offers a diachronic approach as it aims to reinstate the autobiographical 'I' within the metanarrative frame. This method incorporates the continuation of the author/narrator/protagonist's autobiographical narrative beyond the *künstlerroman* of the initial falsified memoir, resituating it in a metanarrative text more complicit with Lejeune's original pact. If the false memoir is the *künstlerroman*, simply meaning the text that establishes the author as an author, at the front end of the fauxtobiographical bildungsroman during the first phase of the text's reception, then it is the *künstlerroman*/false memoir that primarily establishes the author *as* an author, *and* protagonist, *and* narrator throughout the composite metanarrative, which cultivates the intersubjective paradigm of witnessing between the author and the reader for the continuation of the fauxtobiographical construct during phases two and three. Fauxtobiography includes that which occurs in the interstitial space between author and text during the act of witnessing. Prior to exposure of false testimony this space is the

home of affective resonance, where the reader is compelled to identify with the narrator, yet is also distanced by the inability to completely identify with the traumatic subject. But, once falsehood has been revealed, the same resonance is reimagined as felt authenticity, which bridges “the gulf between the testifier’s horrific experience and the reader’s potential complacency” (Rowland, 2014: p. 2). The necessary inclusion of paratextual elements such as critiques and reviews, interviews, and even author photographs (Genette, 1997) provides further evidence that can allow the reader to reconcile the affective pull of the text with an author/protagonist/narrator that is both identical and therefore intelligible as the autobiographical ‘I’ (Lejeune, 1989: p. 5).

Reinstating the autobiographical ‘I’ during the phase two wake of exposure is fundamental to the analysis of the all-inclusive fauxtobiography. Paul John Eakin asserts that autobiography is not just a genre, but also “an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation” for the author (2008: p. 34) and concludes that inventing selfhood is an “existential imperative” (2008: p. 86) where the reward is self-validation and self-understanding; this is tantamount to the objectives of traumatic testimony. The therapeutic implications of testimony temper the imitation of its form, as the persisting preoccupation with both the production and consumption of published victim testimony is symptomatic of “a therapy driven culture of confession” (Rowland & Kilby, 2014: p. 1). Suzette Henke proposes the term “scriptotherapy” as a “process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (1998: p. xii); this is the process alluded to in Maechler’s investigation into the Wilkomirski affair (2001: p. 271). The narrativising of trauma is a process

towards working through traumatic experience (La Capra, 2001) that is attuned to the affective impact of the experience and the potential to come to terms with it. Gilmore contends that the writing of one's own trauma is subject to "auto/biographical demand" (2001: p. 72), and proposes an intertextual challenge at the limits of autobiographical acts by "an expansive and expanding network of associations that reaches across the boundaries of texts and lives" (2001: p. 116). Although autobiography offers a useful framework for analysis, the deficiencies of prescriptive genre terms are brought into relief by the complexities of traumatic narrative and traumatic memory, which necessitates the inclusion of metanarrative elements in the meaning-making process.

*Fragments'* self-professed 'power to move'<sup>10</sup> is most prominent in the underlexicalised descriptions of physical violence. One notable episode depicts the murder of a man Wilkomirski describes as "maybe my father" (*Fragments*: p. 6), by the soldiers he metonymically identifies as "The uniforms" (p. 6):

He looks down at me and smiles [...] suddenly his face clenches, he turns away, he lifts his head high and opens his mouth wide as if he is going to scream out [...] all I see is the line of his jaw and his hat falling backward off his head. No sound comes out of his mouth but a big stream of something black shoots out of his neck as the transport squashes him with a big crack against the house. (p. 6-7)

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<sup>10</sup> See the blurb on the back cover of the 1997 English edition, London: Picador.

The impoverished child's perspective provides only the observation of material events, which demonstrates his failure to comprehend the true horror he has witnessed; however, the descriptions of facial and non-verbal cues carry with them their associated emotions and affective power. The reader can only witness the affective journey from the point of the father's smile in the above passage to Wilkomirski's statement immediately following it:

I'm sad and very afraid because he turned away from me, but I feel that he didn't do it because he doesn't love me anymore. His own upset must have been much too much for him, and he only turned away because something unknown was even stronger than he was. (p. 7)

The incident culminates in the realisation that he has lost someone significant and is therefore alone. This imposed solipsism colours Wilkomirski's testimony throughout *Fragments*, which, coupled with his lack of "a mother tongue" (p. 1) establishes his narrative as one of "confused interiority" (Vice, 2014: p. 166). As such, Wilkomirski's testimony is excused its vagaries as a consequence of trauma's latent inarticulability (Caruth, 1995; La Capra, 2001; Gilmore, 2001; et. al.), whilst simultaneously bringing credence to it on the grounds that its affect value creates a "transmissible truth" (Caruth, 1995: p. 154) that affords a "factitious aura of reality" (Aubry, 2006: p. 13). This aspiration to realism follows Anthony Rowland's assertion that "the clarity of realism gets as close to the 'truth' of encounter as is possible in a medium which sadly cannot prove its own authenticity in the text itself" (2014: p. 3). Essentially, the text is both moving and plausible because it is affecting and, consequently, 'feels' true, which forces

the reader to engage in a metatextual exploration in order to reconcile the felt authenticity with the author's actual life experience.

In Wilkomirski's case, the circumstances of *Fragments'* authorship renders the affective discourse of the text more discomfiting during the transition from phase two of its reception as false testimony, demanding interpretive work on the part of the reader in order to reconcile the affective resonance of the events depicted with the 'real life' experiences of the author as part of phase three. Essentially, the will to establish "autobiographical truth" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 16) necessitates the reader's intersubjective engagement, as "[n]either the person nor the text can reveal any single or final truth, but both can provide activities of interpretation in which the reader is compelled to join" (Egan, 1999: p. 326). The process means "undoing the text's elaborate act of contextualisation" by discarding the Holocaust framing (Vice, 2014: p. 159) to get to the affective truth of Wilkomirski's account. For example, the significance of Wilkomirski's reunion with his estranged mother whereby he feels no affective familial connection:

Was this my mother, my dähle?

One of the children had once said that if you have a mother, she belongs just to you! So this woman belonged to me, just me? (p. 49)

In spite of his bewilderment, Wilkomirski accepts the bread his mother offers as a "gift of survival" (Jacobus, 2005: p. 141) in an attempt to inhabit the discordant Oedipal relationship. That Wilkomirski's illegitimacy determined that his mother

was forced to have him adopted (Maechler, 2001: p. 3-21) means Wilkomirski barely knew her, and frames this encounter as symbolic of a lost maternal bond as she “can never be properly missed because her meaning has been lost too early” (Jacobus, 2005: p. 142). Although Wilkomirski did not experience the material loss of his mother in the death camps of the Holocaust, the psychoanalytic scar of maternal absence permeates his literary testimony. The affective resonance is transfigured into felt authenticity as a consequence of the palpable affective equivalency between the author’s actual experience and the testimony of *Fragments*’ protagonist/narrator.

The most significant witness to Wilkomirski’s literary testimony, Daniel Ganzfried, was first to go on record to directly challenge the factual authenticity of *Fragments* as a Holocaust survival testimony, with an article entitled ‘Die geliehene Holocaust-Biographie’ (The borrowed Holocaust Biography) in the Swiss periodical *Die Weltwoche*. The article, rather than limiting its critique to the *Fragments*’ fallacy, proposes an explanation for its former literary triumph, citing the moralistic, unquestioning hero-worship of the victim/survivor as that which substantiates the sympathetic act of witnessing, as tantamount to the collective need to avoid “analysing what is incomprehensible” (Maechler 2001: p. 130), because “human understanding fails when confronted with the fact of Auschwitz” (Ganzfried, quoted in Maechler, 2001: p. 130). Ganzfried’s charges against the credibility and function of Wilkomirski’s testimony destabilises its autobiographical rudiments whilst denouncing the sentimentality of the intersubjective act of witnessing. However, the autobiographical provenance of

the Wilkomirski fauxtobiography is legitimated by his life experience, which necessitates a re-appropriation of the autobiographical pact across the metanarrative composition. The testimonial text *Fragments* established the autobiographical 'I' preliminarily, but in order to maintain it, the metanarrative of the fauxtobiography must be designated "hybrid testimony" (Boswell, 2014), which accounts for the requisite contributions of the "paratextual surround" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 100). The critical commentaries of the peritext that expedite the metanarrative frame function as evaluative witnesses for the testimonial integrity of Wilkomirski's *Künstlerroman*, as

When the critical imperative is driven by a demand for testimony in a legalistic sense, the trauma memoir is instantly put on trial and must verify its conformity to a strict pact: verisimilitude; identity of author, narrator and character. (Luckhurst, 2008: p. 137)

It is through this trial that the metanarrative text is facilitated by multiple contributors; as Wilkomirski remains at the centre of the narrative as the autobiographical point of genesis, and primary witness, the readers, reviewers and critics are sanctioned as third level witnesses to witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61). Ganzfried's attempt to destabilise Wilkomirski's literary testimony, initiating phase two of its reception, facilitates the intersubjective process of witnessing across the fauxtobiographical metanarrative in order to re-establish the autobiographical 'I' into phase three.



The Wilkomirski fauxtobiography returns to testimony and its associated intersubjective witnessing in the third phase of *Fragments'* reception. It is during the post-fallacy re-categorisation that the overarching metanarrative assumes the perpetual status of the *roman fleuve* "with never ending contributions from family members, friends, hangers-on, and critics - all attempting to explain "how it really was"" (Bok, 2001: p. 318). The original published testimony remains, but the generated metanarrative that chronicles the story of the authorship and the impact of the deception manifests as a fragmented yet collaborative bildungsroman. Whitehead, following Iser, determines that "[f]aced with a fragmentary narrative, the reader will search for connections between the pieces and actively provide the unwritten part of the text" (2004: p. 37); this practice extends to the reading of the fauxtobiographical Wilkomirski affair as a text in and of itself. That the literary agency, Liepman AG, who controlled the worldwide publishing rights to *Fragments*, commissioned historian Stefan Maechler to diminish the indeterminacies in the metanarrative by conducting a thorough study (Maechler, 2001: p. vii), conveniently provides a material, composite, documentary text that exemplifies the fauxtobiography. Maechler's text, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth* (2001), is essentially the published record of the Benjamin Wilkomirski fauxtobiographical enterprise, as it documents the authorship, the reception, and the potential affective value of *Fragments* as traumatic testimony, whilst including Wilkomirski's *künstlerroman*, *Fragments*, as a referential appendix. As such, the fauxtobiography as a species of hybrid testimony that functions at the limits of autobiography offers itself as a comprehensive analytical schematic for the discernment of affective resonance, or felt authenticity, in literary false

testimony, which posits Wilkomirski's *Fragments* as the prototype for future analytical projects.

## Testimonial Truthiness: Frey's Felt Authenticity

*People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

*Maya Angelou<sup>11</sup>*

*I always wanted to be the outlaw. And that's to a certain extent how I've lived.*

*James Frey*

To further explicate the notion of the fauxtobiographical 'text' that materialises in the wake of exposure as false literary testimony, this chapter considers how affective resonance develops with textual fabrication, as opposed to the delusion averred by Wilkomirski's *Fragments*. James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (hereafter *Pieces*) was first published in 2003 to "critical acclaim" (JamesFrey.com, 2015). *Pieces* depicts the rehabilitation and recovery of a severely drug and alcohol addicted twenty-three year old, James,<sup>12</sup> with the majority of the story taking place inside a residential treatment centre. The narrative includes intense, often excessive descriptions of drug use, violence and bodily functions, with the laconic, yet visceral tendencies of Frey's voice earning

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<sup>11</sup> The exact origins of this quote cannot be confirmed; however, its pathos is inherently connected with its irony.

<sup>12</sup> For clarity's sake, I refer the character within the text as James, and the writer without as Frey.

critical recognition, calling it “unrelenting” and “horribly honest” (*Pieces*).<sup>13</sup> All praise directed towards *Pieces* centred on the graphic honesty of Frey’s narrative and the fact that it is “extraordinary and deeply moving” (*Irish Sunday Independent*, 2004).<sup>14</sup> Marketed by Frey’s publishers, Doubleday, as a work of memoir, Frey was commissioned to undertake promotional responsibilities designed to legitimate its claim to autobiography by offering Frey as a living witness to the trauma of addiction and recovery that he suffered, as portrayed in the book’s 513 pages.<sup>15</sup> In a prepublication interview for *The Guardian*, Sean O’Hagan reports Frey’s “eye-popping honesty about his battle with addiction” (2003); he goes on to say:

As memoirs go, [*Pieces*] is neither feel-good nor touchy-feely; it is, in fact, the opposite - hard core in its delineation of the recovering addict's life. Some books make you wish you had lived them, others make you glad to the bottom of your soul that you didn't [...] *Pieces* is in the latter category, but it is also easily the most remarkable non-fiction book about drugs and drug-taking since Hunter S Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.  
(O’Hagan, 2003)

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<sup>13</sup> Taken from the jacket of the British paperback edition, (2004). London: John Murray (Publishers).

<sup>14</sup> Taken from the jacket of the British paperback edition, (2004). London: John Murray (Publishers).

<sup>15</sup> Refers to my copy of *Pieces*, British paperback edition, (2004). London: John Murray (Publishers).

O'Hagan's assessment of *Pieces* places it firmly within the autobiographical mode, whilst also leaving little doubt as to its graphic content concerning Frey's past trauma. Indeed, "memoir acquires its contemporary significance from being a vehicle for testimony" (Luckhurst, 2008: p. 125), which, as explored in Chapter One, is dependent on the intersubjective act of witnessing, and the affective response thus engendered. Importantly for *Pieces*, the straightforward concept of authorial intention is complicated by the marketing of the text after its completion, rather than in the production of a deliberately mendacious memoir. If the affective resonance of a delusional memoir can survive the scrutiny of a fauxtobiographical examination and maintain affective power, then the following analysis will determine: what is the prognosis for fabricated literary testimony, and what are the conditions under which felt authenticity can be preserved?

*Pieces* incites the act of intersubjective witnessing then, by its conformity with the generic expectations of traumatic testimony as an autobiographical act. As indicated in Chapter One, literary testimony must adhere to certain generic conventions in order to portray the affective power of traumatic experience (Rowland, 2014: p. 4). As the following passage shows, the inexorable moment of 'epiphany' in the act of testimonial self-witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61-2) occurs as James awakens from a "user dream" (*Pieces*: p. 63):

Waves of emotion begin streaming through me and I can feel the welling of tears. Everything and everything that I know and that I am and everything that I've done begins flashing in front of my eyes. My past, my present, my future. My friends, my enemies, my friends who became

enemies. Where I've lived, where I've been, what I've seen, what I've done. What I've ruined and destroyed. I start to cry. Tears begin running down my face and quiet sobs escape me. I don't know what I'm doing and I don't know why I'm here and I don't know how things ever got this bad. I try to find answers but they aren't there. I'm too fucked up to have answers. I'm too fucked up for anything. (*Pieces*: p. 56-7)

The poetic use of anaphora in "My past, my present, my future. My friends, my enemies, my friends who became enemies" (*Pieces*: p. 56) is indicative of James' desolation as he evaluates the magnitude of his self-inflicted debasement. Although James does not articulate his experience as such, the reader decodes this episode as the cognitive and bodily experience of 'cold turkey' withdrawal. Undeniably, James' narrative captures his "autobiographical truth", which "resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 16). O'Hagan describes *Pieces* as "an autobiographical tale in an essentially novelistic style" (2003), which, whilst corroborating its status as an autobiographical act, also hints at its literary form.

The literary features of Frey's memoir are evident in such stylistic nuances as the lack of graphological and grammatical markers, including paragraph breaks, speech marks and other standard punctuation; these are constructive literary choices that force the reader to undertake interpretive work. This stylistic device necessitates the intersubjective act of reading as the reader is obligated to deduce which parts of the text denote discourse such as

James' internal thoughts, speech, and observations, and which parts represent interactions, including the dialogue of others. When Leonard, another resident at the rehabilitation facility, attempts to engage James in conversation, whether James actually participates in the exchange is obscured by the lack of indicative markers for reported speech:

One of these days you're gonna talk to me.

No, I'm not.

You'll get tired of being an Asshole and you'll get tired of not having any friends and you'll talk to me.

No, I wont.

I'm gonna keep sitting with you until you do.

I laugh.<sup>16</sup>

(*Pieces*: p. 120)

It is unclear as to whether James answers Leonard 'out loud' and recorded as free indirect speech, or whether his defiant responses are an internal dialogue; Leonard's persistence only serves to enforce the ambiguity as he persists with his efforts to engage James. The effects of these omissions and stylisations can be frustrating, which in itself is a basic mode of affecting the reader, but they also remove any clear indications of what is to be considered Frey's recollection and/or reportage of exact events. James' role as an unreliable narrator, even prior to his exposure for fabrication, is underwritten by his self-imposed status

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<sup>16</sup> The graphological structure is represented as it appears in the text, including all capitalization and punctuation.

as “an Alcoholic [...] a drug Addict [and] a Criminal”<sup>17</sup> (p. 73). James repeats this self-deprecating trifecta more than ten times throughout the text, as if its repetition denotes its truth-value and confirms him as the “truly horrible Person” (p. 311) he purports to be. Sue Vice notes “a hierarchy of affective significance [...] in phrases where the capitalisation of nouns is erratic” (2014: p. 99); these provide clear markers for the reader, denoting meaningful themes and sites of extreme affective provocation, particularly evident in James’ self-defamatory mantra. Though Vice identifies Frey’s “distinctive style” (p. 98), noting its propensity “towards the aesthetic and away from the authentic” (p. 98), she also characterises the tendency to practise repetition as a one of Frey’s “stylistic ‘tics’”<sup>18</sup> (p. 100). However, the “repetition compulsion” (Russell, 2006) is a recognised trope in trauma recovery, as Paul. L. Russell contends: “the logic of affect [is] that what one cannot yet feel will deliver itself repetitively and [...] painfully until one can in fact feel what one needs to do” (2006: p. 610). For the traumatised subject “[t]he repetition compulsion, much as does an addiction, operates in lieu of a relationship” (Russell, 2006: p. 612); as such, the act of repeating his traumas allows Frey to engage with the act of witnessing, which, as discussed in Chapter One, is a three-tiered intersubjective model that incorporates self-witnessing, being witnessed by the other, and witnessing about witnessing (Laub, 1995: 61-2). Though, as Russell acknowledges “the repetition compulsion is a repeat of something that may not have actually happened” (2006: p. 614), it pertains to “relatedness [which] is what the person most needs and cannot yet feel” (2006: p. 612). In Frey’s case, the intersubjective mode of

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<sup>17</sup> Capitalization as in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Term accredited to an anonymous article in *Kirkus Reviews*, 2003.



witnessing is invoked in spite of his “authentic artistry of language” (Vice, 2014: p. 98).

Frey’s unique narrative voice attracted a substantial amount of critical attention in the early stages of phase one of its reception (see Vice, 2014: p. 153), which regained momentum almost three years after *Pieces*’ first publication in 2003. In September 2005, Oprah Winfrey selected *Pieces* to relaunch her prestigious book club, inviting Frey to appear on an episode entitled ‘The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at Night’ (2005). On the show, Winfrey expresses both her incredulity at the extreme trauma endured by James in *Pieces*, and her relief at being able to reconcile the author as a survivor (see Aubry, 2006: p. 132). The narrative arc of Frey’s addiction and recovery memoir subscribes to what Roger Luckhurst describes as “[Oprah Winfrey’s] model of tribulation and moral uplift” (Luckhurst, 2008: p. 134). The tribulation Winfrey is apparently most affected by is the graphic depiction of the intense pain of James’ surgical dentistry without the benefit of anaesthetic:

Everything goes white and I cannot breathe. I clench my eyes and I bite down on my existing teeth and I think my jaw might be breaking and I squeeze my hands and I dig my fingers through the hard rubber surface of the tennis balls and my fingernails crack and my fingernails break and my fingernails start to bleed and I curl my toes and they fucking hurt and I flex the muscles in my legs and they fucking hurt and my torso tightens and my stomach muscles feel as if they’re going to collapse and my ribs feel as if they’re caving in on themselves and it fucking hurts and my balls

are shrinking and the shrinking fucking hurts and my dick is hard because my blood hurts and my blood wants to escape and it is seeking exit through my dick and my dick fucking hurts and my arms are straining against the thick blue nylon straps and the thick blue nylon straps are cutting my flesh and it fucking hurts and my face is on fire and the veins in my neck want to explode and my brain is white and it is melting and it fucking hurts. (*Pieces*: p. 81-2)

The explicit language, coupled with the persistent anaphoric declaratives invokes the intensity of the physical pain that James is made to endure, whilst the incessant pace and lengthy, run-on structure of the second sentence indicates the relentlessness of the reparative procedure. Accordingly, Winfrey exhibits “the reflexive bodily identification that such descriptions [of physical trauma] elicit” (2006: p. 133)<sup>19</sup>. Aubry explains that Winfrey’s reaction demonstrates:

the peculiar capacity that descriptions of bodily injury have to provoke sympathetic visceral responses whose intense combination of attraction and aversion toward the described experience constitutes an experience in itself, one that transfers its affective energy to the object of representation, thus endowing it with a factitious aura of reality. (2006: p. 131)

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<sup>19</sup> This description, as recorded in Aubry’s chapter ‘The Pain of Reading a Million Little Pieces’ (2006), denotes Oprah Winfrey’s physical as well as verbal reaction to the dentistry passage, as seen in the 2005 interview with James Frey on *Oprah*.

Winfrey's confirmation of her own affective experience endows the content, and by extension the text, with an authenticity that she in turn invites her extended audience to share. Winfrey's endorsement of *Pieces* ratifies its power to affect, and with the Oprah's Book Club seal of approval, the book was propelled to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for paperback non-fiction for a total of seventeen weeks.

Another consequence of Frey's first appearance<sup>20</sup> on *Oprah*, was the tenacious inquiry as to *Pieces*' veracity undertaken by the whistleblowing website *The Smoking Gun*, which effectively mobilised phase two of *Pieces*' reception. In an online article entitled 'A Million Little Lies - The Man Who Conned Oprah' posted in January 2006, the anonymous investigators levelled compelling allegations against the veracity of Frey's account of himself as depicted in *Pieces*. The accusations specifically challenged Frey's criminal activities, as they had encountered extreme difficulty in their freedom of information search for a police mugshot (*The Smoking Gun*, 2006). The subsequent investigation revealed that Frey had both exaggerated and even fabricated his numerous arrests for drunk driving, drug use, and distribution, as well as the incident where he had alleged to have hit a police officer with his car whilst driving under the influence of Class A drugs and alcohol (*Pieces*: p. 296). Paradoxically, as Aubry notes, "these exaggerations served to reinforce, rather than undermine, [Frey's] book's plausibility" (Aubry, 2006: p. 130) much like the extreme depictions of suffering in *Fragments*, which supports Smith and

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<sup>20</sup> James Frey's 2005 appearance on *Oprah* was the first of three appearances in total.

Watson's conclusion: "it may not matter if the story of addiction and recovery is in fact "true," as long as [the reader] can experience it as compelling and convincing" (2010: p. 148). The affective resonance of the narrative will endure as felt authenticity beyond the facticity of the events it depicts, provided the narrative maintains an aura of 'truthiness' (Colbert, quoted in Aubry, 2006: p. 129) in its apparently confessional discourse. *The Smoking Gun's* investigation marks a monumental turning point for *Pieces*, raising questions about Frey, his narrative, and its status as a confessional traumatic memoir.

Leigh Gilmore's assertion that the discourse of confession is what underpins autobiographical writing's social status is imperative to the understanding that autobiography carries the unrealistic expectation of empirical truth (Gilmore, 1994: p. 57). It was under this misapprehension that Frey's addiction and recovery memoir initially met the marketplace in the early part of phase one of its reception, back in 2003. This misconception was supported by numerous paratextual elements such as interviews, reviews and articles projecting their support for *Pieces* (O'Hagan, 2003; Schaub, 2003; et. al.). Not all of the critical attention was positive, as some sceptics questioned the facticity of Frey's narrative almost immediately after its release; this first-phase reception draws another clear parallel with Wilkomirski's *Fragments*. However, most critics agreed that *Pieces*' possessed an unmistakable capacity to affect, which correspondingly endorsed Frey's literary prowess. In an online essay for his publishers that was released upon *Pieces*' first publication, Frey wrote:

I tried to be as honest as I could be, I tried to write the truth, every word came straight from my heart. I have never read [*Pieces*] from beginning to end. I can only read small sections of it. It hurts me to even look at it. It is exactly what I wanted it to be, the pain is real, I hope you feel it. I felt it, and I tried to share it, I hope you feel it. (2003)

Frey's declaration here is indicative of his emotional investment in the production of his confessional memoir, drawing a parallel with Wilkomirski's therapeutic narrativising in *Fragments*, which consequently asserts the affective potential as testimony that the text provides. The conditions 'tried' and 'as I could be' betray Frey's contention to honesty, insinuating degrees of truthfulness as opposed to a declaration of complete factual reliability. The details of James' traumatic journey may be disparate with those literally and empirically experienced by Frey, but although Lejeune's autobiographical pact dictates that the "contractual genre" (1989: p. 29) of autobiography is not graded (1989: p. 13), Frey's confessional memoir presents the juncture of identical authorship between the author and the protagonist/narrator that legitimates its status as an autobiographical act (Lejeune 1989: 4).

Lejeune's use of the term "identical" (1989: p. 4) in his proposition of authorial identity within the autobiographical pact is intended to present a finite concept; Frey's case reveals its ambiguity. Frey's phase two admission "I made [...] alterations in my portrayal of myself" (2006<sup>a</sup>) invites the question: is the 'created' "narrating 'I'" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 71) of the protagonist/narrator, James, not "identical" (Lejeune, 1989: p. 4) to the penitent

author and “narrated ‘I’” (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 71) Frey, and tantamount to *Pieces’* autobiographically compliant, unified character/narrator/protagonist? The necessity for the reader to be able to reconcile these elements of a singular entity is tied up with the theoretical parameters of autobiography as dictated by Lejeune’s pact, in particular:

3. *Situation of the author*: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical

(Lejeune, 1989: p. 4)

That Frey simultaneously ‘is’ and ‘is not’ himself, creates a discrepancy with Lejeune’s notion of the autobiographical ‘I’/identity, as, on the one hand, Frey’s capacity to be identified as author, protagonist *and* narrator is consistent with the conditions of the pact, yet his admission that he ‘created’ a dramatized version of himself as a coping mechanism renders the prior affirmation invalid. It is possible to reconcile this paradoxical construction of the authorial ‘I’/self within the ‘fauxtobiographical pact’. For Frey’s identity to be resolved as both compliant and not compliant with the conditions of the autobiographical ‘I’ simultaneously, it is necessary to allow *Pieces* to function as the *künstlerroman* in the overarching metanarrative of the controversy in the fauxtobiographical text. As a result, the fauxtobiography becomes intelligible as an amalgamation of the Frey bildungsroman and his biographical *roman fleuve*, both of which are incorporated into the “*paratextual surround*”<sup>21</sup> (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 99) of

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<sup>21</sup> Italics in the original.

*Pieces*, in its position as *künstlerroman*. In other words, it is impossible to think of *Pieces* in isolation, that is, outside of the surrounding controversy, as the text informs the context and vice versa. Sue Vice levels the charge that *Pieces* “both conceals and advertises its artificiality” (2014: p. 88) in her argument for its cultural significance, but in so doing she makes reference to the metanarrative that includes Frey’s external commentary surrounding the book in which he cites his literary influences; she states: “Frey’s memoir is a record not so much of his past addictions as of his reading” (Vice, 2014: p. 95). Vice is only able to substantiate her observations with evidence obtained from Frey’s own admissions of influence ascertained from *Pieces*’ external publicity and press coverage (see O’Hagan 2003; Barton 2006<sup>b</sup>; et. al. ref). For Vice then, the critique and discussion of Frey’s false memoir is inconceivable outside of the metanarrative composition of the fauxtobiography, which forces analysis to move between the text and context. For this assertion to stand, *Pieces* must then be considered just the originating component of the all-encompassing saga: *Pieces* is Frey’s *künstlerroman*, as the antecedent text to the metanarrative bildungsroman that chronicles the entire controversy.

By definition “the *künstlerroman* usually ends on a note of arrogant rejection of the commonplace life” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015); at *Pieces*’ end, James superciliously tests himself, and in turn his defiant personal philosophy on renouncing addiction, by purchasing and then rejecting a large glass of whisky:

I look at the bottles. The beautiful bottles filled with alcohol. I let my eyes wander until they settle, avoiding the mirrors, avoiding myself [...] I want a glass of [Kentucky Bourbon]. I want a big glass. Not one of those bullshit cocktail glasses, but a big fucking pint glass. I want it filled to the top.

(*Pieces*: p. 507-8)

James' incredible resistance is depicted as a physical stare-down with his own reflection. This Lacanian encounter with his specular image is reminiscent of 'the mirror stage' (Lacan, 1949), which functions "to establish a relation between [...] the *innenwelt* [inner world] and *umwelt* [outer world]" (Lacan, 2001: p. 1287). Addressing his reflection is a confrontation that James fails to complete numerous times during his stay at the treatment centre. Even whilst inspecting his facial injuries in the mirror, James avoids meeting his own eyes:

I open my eyes and I look up into the mirror and for the first time in five days I see my own face [...] I want to see my eyes. I want to look beneath the surface of the pale green and see what's inside of me, what's within me, what I'm hiding. I start to look up but I turn away. I try to force myself but I can't. (*Pieces*: p. 38-9)

James is able to envisage the ideal self that he has been unable to embody throughout the process of his rehabilitation at the facility. By refusing to drink from the glass, James is able to see himself as sober; thus, he takes on a 'complete' version of himself that is no longer victimised by his addicted 'fury':



The Fury screams bloody fucking murder. The Pale Green [of his eyes] softly speaks. It says you are mine, Motherfucker. You are mine and you will always be mine [...] I let go of the glass [...] Barkeep [...] Dump this shit down the fucking drain. I don't want it. (*Pieces*: p. 511)

James' mastery of 'the fury' signals a return to the "ideal-I" (Lacan, 2001: p. 1286); not only is James in the text observing himself in the mirror, but Frey is observing himself in the text, observing himself in the mirror, from a temporally distant position of self witness. This process is representative of both his recovery, and the success of his obstinate refusal of conventional treatment for addiction. This episode concludes *Pieces*, with James' final remark "I'm ready" (*Pieces*: p. 511) marking the transition from addiction to recovery, and equally from the past self of the book to the future self capable of writing it. Hence, *Pieces* is Frey's statement of self-witness and reclamation, which also, simultaneously, marks his 'coming of age' as a writer.

Self-witness, or the compulsion to articulate personal trauma, is a primary component of testimony and the intersubjective act of witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 63). The first stage, self-witnessing (p. 61), is paradoxically inhibited by the inarticulability of trauma (p. 63). Furthermore "the act of bearing witness at the same time *makes* and *breaks* a promise: the promise of the testimony as a realization [sic] of the truth" (p. 73), which facilitates confessional trauma narrative as a performative act. According to A. Modell "affects are communicative and contagious, so that [the second-level witness] is involved in the affective repetition and will collude, either consciously, or unconsciously, in

confirming or disconfirming the subject's category of perception" (quoted in Caruth Ed., 1995: p. 179). The 'truth' of James' testimony is bound up with his capacity to articulate it. Accordingly, James testifies as to the traumatic symptoms of his recovery in punishing, and often explicit, detail:

Blood and bile and chunks of my stomach come pouring from my mouth and nose. It gets stuck in my throat, in my nostrils, in what remains of my teeth. Again it comes, again it comes, again it comes, and with each episode a sharp pain shoots through my chest, my left arm and my jaw.

*(Pieces: p. 24)*

The narrative exaggerates the severity and grotesqueness of the traumatic experience with addiction by means of "falsifying downward" (Miller, 2003: p. 242 n. 3), a term William Ian Miller uses to describe someone "pretending to vice" (2003: p. 242 n. 3); in Frey's case this is an attempt to increase the affective resonance of the narrative. According to Leigh Gilmore:

Autobiography about trauma forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism. The reader is invited to find himself or herself in the figure of the representative, or to enjoy a kind of pleasure in the narrative organisation of pain, in the case of trauma accounts. (2001: p. 22)

It is this voyeurism that is invoked by Frey's descriptions of what are James' largely private symptoms of suffering:

I start gagging and as I gag, I crawl to the front to the toilet. When I get to the toilet, I vomit. The vomit is full of bile and brown shit that I have never seen before. It is full of blood. It burns my stomach, my throat and my mouth. It burns my lips and my face. It won't stop. I heave and it comes, the burning vomit comes and comes again and again. It keeps coming.

(*Pieces*: p. 99)

Frey's pragmatic narrative is, as Tim Aubry permits, a "revolt against the strategies of concealment that typically envelop everyday bodily practices" (Aubry, 2006: p. 130). James' account of physical abjection is a performance of de-concealment enacted to convey both his despair and his authenticity. Gilmore observes that "trauma narratives often draw scepticism more readily than sympathy" (2001: p. 22); however, in *Pieces* "[Frey's] scatological descriptions function as an honesty effect" (Aubry, 2006: p. 131). As Sue Vice contends, such graphic descriptions succeed under the pretext that "it would be too audacious to pass [the experiences] off as true if they were not" (Vice, 2014: p. 96) as was demonstrated in the discussion of Wilkomirski's affective discourse and its "factitious aura of reality" (Aubry, 2006: p. 13) in Chapter One. This "double bluff" (Vice, 2014: p. 96) endows James' testimony with "the grim sound of truth [that] has its own power of persuasion" (Quinney, 1995: p. 59) that in turn engages the reader in the empathic position of witness.

There is no question that Frey's testimony is hyperbolic (see Aubry, 2006; Vice, 2014; et. al.), and yet the question of his intent to deceive is problematised

by the fact he tried to have *Pieces* published as a novel before it was picked up as a memoir (Luckhurst, 2008: p. 135). In the author note included in copies of *Pieces* published after the revelations of falsehood and during phase two of its reception, Frey states:

People cope with adversity in many different ways, ways that are deeply personal. I think one way people cope is by developing a skewed perception of themselves that allows them to overcome and do things they thought they couldn't do before. My mistake, and it is one I deeply regret, is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience. (Frey, 2006: p. 2)

If, as Conway and Ross allow, people exhibit “a tendency to revise the past in order to claim personal improvement” (cited in Ross & Wilson, 2001: p. 236), then the discrepancies between the temporally distant Frey that created the James of the book, and the extant, reflective author Frey in the post-reveal phase two of the reception become significant. Within the framework of “temporal self-appraisal” posited by Michael Ross and Anne E. Wilson (2001: p. 239), it is proposed that: “people are disposed to evaluate the past in a manner that makes them feel content with themselves now” (p. 239). Furthermore:

[I]ndividuals should be reluctant to criticize [sic] a remote self if they see its defects as tainting the present self. If [...] people's past behaviour could be construed as immoral, then even exemplary conduct in the more recent past may not fully counteract the evaluative implications of their

earlier actions. As a result, individuals may seek to justify such actions to themselves or minimize their negative connotations. (p. 243)

Frey's attempt to both justify and minimise his complicity in the misleading publication of his book as a memoir, coupled with his exaggerated accounts of his past iniquity, is epitomised in the self-effacing author's note included in all copies of *Pieces* post-reveal. However, Frey's regret does not withstand the test of time. In an interview five years after the furore of phase two, Frey stated:

I will not allow people to impose rules on me that don't make sense to me, and I live and work very much outside the literary world and the literary system. What they think and what they believe and what their rules are mean nothing to me. (quoted in Aitkenhead, 2011)

Frey's recidivism is in line with Ross and Wilson's further assertion that "the model of temporal self-appraisal predicts that people will sometimes instead glorify former selves" (2001: p. 246). Frey's restructured self-perspective sanctions the mendacity he had previously apologised for. Ross and Wilson's model "is relevant whenever people feel strongly about an entity, whenever their association with it has extended over time, and whenever it helps them to accomplish important goals" (2001: p. 246); in Frey's case, his renewed egotism and admission of a 'literary system' and its 'rules' signals the need for the reappraisal of *Pieces* and its literary value. Frey credits his temporally distant, created, literary self, and his pre-publication, authorial self with enabling the realisation of his aspirations to publication, without the premeditated intention

to deceive. Frey was forced to publicly confront his deception just days after *The Smoking Gun's* web article exposed him; Frey contests: "The essential truth of the book, which is about drug and alcohol addiction is there [...] the emotional truth is there" (*Larry King Live*, 2006). Frey's contention that *Pieces'* affective resonance supplants the autobiographical pact and the reader's desire for 'truth' is purely speculative, unless his claims to emotional truth can be persuasively conferred by the reader in the re-evaluative phase three of its reception. Still, Oprah Winfrey's initial defence of *Pieces* when accusations of embellishment were first levelled legitimates Frey's claim; she called *Larry King Live*, stating: "the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me. And I know it resonates with millions of other people" (Winfrey, quoted in Aubry, 2006: p. 128). Winfrey posits herself, on behalf of her book club, as the synecdoche for *Pieces'* readership, underplaying the alleged embellishments in a show of support for both Frey and the affective value of the book.

Oprah's Book Club has a tendency towards texts that examine in print the kinds of issues that dominate her show's regular agenda (Aubry, 2006: p. 46), propagating the affective value of her selections; yet as Kevin Quirk asserts:

Careful examination of Book Club practices points to the fluid ideological nature of therapeutic values and serves as a necessary corrective to the prevailing scholarly view that they are fundamentally conservative.

(Quirk, 2008: p. 261)

*Pieces* corresponds with “the therapeutic and personal priorities that usually prevail on Oprah’s Book Club” (Aubry, 2006: p. 44), and though Winfrey is capable of treating fictional narratives as ‘real’, evaluating the issues experienced by literary characters in the same manner that she might discuss the plight of a member of her audience and their ordeal (Aubry, 2006: p. 46), she seemingly struggles to invert the paradigm on the grounds that she feels “duped [...] and betrayed” (Oprah.com, 2006) by Frey’s deception. Winfrey’s feeling of betrayal is conditioned by the expectation of truth telling in traumatic memoir (see Laub 1995: p. 73), suggesting that the affective pull of a narrative is dependent on veridical confessional discourse. This manner of thinking is flawed; although “Western culture [...] has made confessional speech a prime mark of authenticity, par excellence the kind of speech in which the individual authenticates his [sic] inner truth” (Brooks, 2000: p. 4), in Winfrey’s “realm of affect and empathy” (Aubry, 2006: p. 141) the expectation is that it is possible “to inhabit the depicted experience in order to assess whether or not [the] representations *feel*<sup>22</sup> true” (Aubry, 2006: p. 141). When Frey returns to *Oprah* in January 2006 to answer for his deception at the apex of phase two, Winfrey makes specific reference to the dentistry episode in *Pieces* by which she had previously felt so bodily affected.<sup>23</sup> Winfrey’s attempt to reconcile her own reaction with Frey’s graphic description is entangled with her need, not to legitimate his experience, but to reconcile her own experience of affective resonance that is invested in the knowledge that the suffering she is affected by actually “happened to one person” (Winfrey, quoted in Aubry 2006: p. 142). Essentially, Winfrey struggles

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<sup>22</sup> My italics.

<sup>23</sup> See above description of the dentistry episode on pages 48-9.

with the concept that the affective resonance she experienced can be elicited so overwhelmingly by fictitious discourse.

Winfrey's misconception is a common one that is underpinned by the paradoxical promise of truth embedded in testimonial witnessing. Matthew Boswell recognises:

The idea of a fictional autobiography is not uncommon but the same cannot be said of the idea of a real fictionalized [sic] autobiography, which so openly undermines the legalistic sense of what it means to testify, to bear witness." (2014: p. 150).

The idea of fictionalised testimony undermines the accompanying expectation of honesty as associated with the autobiographical act, which assumes the rigid prescriptive nature of the genre. According to Laura Marcus:

Autobiography lies between 'literature' and 'history' or, perhaps, philosophy, and between fiction and non-fiction; it becomes an acute expression of the already contested distinction between fact and fiction. (1994: p. 229)

This approach to the autobiographical act as a literary form permits the reasoning that an embellished text such as *Pieces*, that transgresses the dichotomy of fact versus fiction, still qualifies as autobiographical. Indeed, the fictive elements of the text, instead of diminishing its affective power, function as



a simulation that “illuminates the problem of human action and emotions” (Oatley 1999: p. 105). Keith Oatley argues that “the parallel of narrative with simulation” (1999: p. 106), following the Russian Formalists’ narrative structure of *fabula* and *sjuzhet*<sup>24</sup>, is dependent on the writer providing both “an event structure [...] as the material to be constructed into a mental model (Johnson-Lairs, 1983) or situation model that [...] does have aspects of representation (semantics)” (Oatley, 1999: p. 106) and a “guide [for] the reader by means of a discourse structure<sup>25</sup> that includes speech acts (pragmatics) and cues to the reader as to how this model is to be constructed and run” (Oatley, 1999: p. 106). Frey’s *Pieces* invokes the affective truth of his recovery from addiction in the event structure whilst exploiting an autobiographical discourse structure. Frey employs the self reflexive personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ both as narrative devices depicting point of view (event structure), but also to denote the autobiographical ‘I’ that invokes Lejeunes’s pact (discourse structure): “It still affects me and it still makes sense. It still moves me and it still rings true. That is all that matters. The truth. Does it ring true it does. I can feel it” (*Pieces*: p. 238). In this passage, as James reads *The Tao*, his narrative is practically didactic in its dual function. James’ account describes his own affective response to reading within *Pieces*’ event structure, whilst, in a metatextually prophetic manner, indicating authorial intention in the discourse structure. Consequently, this forces the narrative to function somewhere in the schism between fiction and nonfiction whilst persuasively maintaining its status as testimony.

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<sup>24</sup> Roughly translate to narrative and plot. See Toderov, 1965.

<sup>25</sup> Oatley borrows the terms ‘event structure’ and ‘discourse structure’ from Brewer and Lichtenstein (1981)

Frey's embellished testimony recasts him as a literary bad-boy; this is a result of the widespread "mediatization"<sup>26</sup> (O'Loughlin, 2013) of his trauma, similar to the influence of Ganzfried's article on Wilkomirski as explored in Chapter One. According to Ben O'Loughlin:

Mediatization refers to the manner in which a social event, process or practice becomes considered by those participating in it as a media phenomenon, and any media organisations involved are aware of themselves as integral to that phenomenon. (2013: p. 193)

The mediatization of the Frey controversy is underwritten by the involvement of media organisations such as the *Larry King Live* show, which invited Frey to appear in response to the journalistic uproar after *The Smoking Gun's* exposé. Having previously appeared on *Oprah* in support of his memoir in 2005 during phase one of its reception, Frey was forced back in to the public eye to defend *Pieces*, and by association his own traumatised subjectivity, as phase two began. Oprah Winfrey's awareness of her integral position in the mediatization of the Frey affair prompts her to reassert her influence by telephoning *Larry King Live* during Frey's appearance on the show, to defend Frey's memoir and his traumatic recovery from addiction. Roger Luckhurst observes, "Identification through affect produces a circuit where Oprah's choice guarantees a book's

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<sup>26</sup> The Americanised spelling of mediatized and its inflections is faithful to the source of its reference.

authenticity and the book reinforces Oprah's privileging of trauma subjectivity" (2008: p. 134); however, Winfrey's realisation that Frey's memoir, despite its resonance, is no longer compliant with this circuit facilitates the public 'U-turn' that shifts the mediatized perspective on the whole saga. The media backlash against *Pieces* expedites Frey's metanarrative text that is in itself intelligible as a traumatising event, which manifests through "the trauma of finding oneself mediatized" (O'Loughlin 2013: p. 194). The effect of Winfrey's public riposte is twofold: Frey's deception is unquestionably confronted and widely exposed as embellished, which unequivocally confirms phase two, but the dissemination of Frey's relative, autobiographical metanarrative is readjusted. Frey's reconvention with Winfrey in the wake of the exposure unintentionally re-establishes his autobiographical identity, this time as part of the fauxtobiography; by publicly lambasting a blindsided Frey,<sup>27</sup> Winfrey inadvertently presents Frey, the subject/author/protagonist of the on-going mediatized narrative, as tantamount to the troubled narrator/protagonist of Lejeune's pact once more.

James Frey's name has become synonymous with the phenomenon of false memoir in contemporary literature, yet Frey's fauxtobiographical text is his enduring autobiographical legacy; it incorporates *Pieces* as his *künstlerroman*, and metanarrative components of its paratextual surround as fragments of his mediatized hybrid testimony. As James Olney perceptively observes: "a man's

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<sup>27</sup> Frey was lured back to the show under false pretenses in 2006 – stated in his third appearance on *Oprah* in 2011.

lifework is his fullest autobiography and, he being what he is and where and when he is, neither the lifework nor the autobiography could be otherwise” (1972: p. 3). Moreover, it is essential

to consider [autobiography] neither as a formal nor as an historical matter, which would be to separate it from the writer’s life and his personality, but rather to see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates. (Olney, 1972: p. 3)

If Frey’s memoir is equivalent to traumatised testimony, then it stands that, in its telling, the context of its formation becomes a component of its construction. In his article for *Time* magazine, Lev Grossman avers:

If you look at the distortions in Frey’s book not as acts of cynical calculation or self-aggrandizement but as symptoms of his disease, they have a pathos to them. If Frey is still lying, if he can’t face his life as he lived it, he’s not whole yet. Redemption is a wonderful thing, but it’s possible that the man whose life became *A Million Little Pieces* may not have quite put himself back together again. (Grossman, 2006: p. 4)

Grossman’s observation supports the notion that Frey’s fauxtobiography is an extension of his traumatic testimony, and that in its continuation the three processes of witnessing (see Laub, 1995: p. 61-2) are still in play. As Gilmore notes, “our vocabularies about extreme experiences are biased toward

descriptions of trauma” (2001: p. 32), descriptions that will always remain impoverished and subjective next to the empirical experience (Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1995; Gilmore, 2001; et. al.). Of the autobiographical narrator, Olney indicates “one should not take [their] word for it, but should consider [their] version of the facts as one contribution to [their] own biography” (1980: p. 36). Frey’s fauxtobiography accommodates his own self-witness within a broader testimonial context, one that permeates the boundaries of his catalyst text, *Pieces*. The affective value of James’ traumatised narrative remains, in spite of literary and cultural categorisation, as Sue Vice confirms, “the furor surrounding [*Pieces*] is at best described as a case of misattributed or overly prescriptive genre” (Vice 2014: p. 97). That millions of readers bought and read *Pieces* both before and after the revelations about Frey’s embellishment came to light attests to both its affective and literary value, with less than 2,000 out of almost four million readers claiming the refund Doubleday pledged as compensation during phase two of its reception (see Eakin, 2008: 22 n.7). Oprah Winfrey’s role in the mediatization of the whole affair elevated and perpetuated prominent debates around the affect value of traumatic testimony and consequently the implications of genre codification on reading practices, despite the fact that “[t]he reading mode encouraged [by Oprah’s Book Club] is one of complete identification, affective connection rather than aesthetic analysis” (Luckhurst, 2008: p. 134). Interestingly, five years after publicly castigating Frey, Winfrey invited him back to appear on an intimate show with a one-to-one format, where she apologised for vilifying Frey and offered him the right to reply. In what was described as Winfrey’s ‘full circle moment’, she described the part that her ego played in her approach to the show in 2006, but maintains that she

was not sorry for what she said but for the way that she said it (Oprah.com 2011). Nevertheless, Winfrey's change of heart appears to be a response not only to the scrutiny she experienced as a result of the 2006, phase two entrapment, but also to the enduring affective impact of *Pieces* in spite of its erroneous nature. Winfrey's pivotal role in phase two of *Pieces*' reception is bookended by her re-evaluation of it in phase three. Additionally, numerous readers contributed to the message-board found on JamesFrey.com to assert their belief that the fictionality of the text had no impact on their appreciation or enjoyment of the book, further confirming phase three of *Pieces*' reception even before Winfrey's turnaround; however, without the mediatized reveal, would they be compelled to provide those observations, which unwittingly perpetuate the metanarrative of the fauxtobiography? It is this intersubjective continuation of the fauxtobiographical metatext that attests to *Pieces*' affective value most convincingly, as readers are interpolated to affectively evaluate their own experience of and in relation to the book, and, to feedback as a direct contribution to the longevity of the fauxtobiographical construction. That Frey remains an actual, accessible entity in the context of the fauxtobiographical metanarrative ensures the contingency of the *roman fleuve* for as long as the intersubjective act of witnessing endures.

## Memoirs of an Avatar: Polyphonic Hybrid Testimony

*If they are facts we want more evidence, if they are fictions we want more life.*

*Marian Halligan*

*Everyone needs someone to know who they really are.*

*Sarah*

A mere month after the Frey controversy emerged in January 2006, JT LeRoy, the 'author' of *Sarah* (2000) and *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things* (2001)<sup>28</sup> (hereafter *The Heart*) was revealed to be Laura Albert. The JT LeRoy/Laura Albert authorship controversy extends the metanarrative component of the fauxtobiographical structure as the notion of authorship is complicated not only by the use of a pseudonym, but by the multiplicity of the authorial structure and the resulting narrative streams. Jeremiah 'Terminator' LeRoy was the *nom de plume* employed by Laura Albert; the texts she wrote that were attributed to JT LeRoy were believed to be 'about' him, as they depicted scenes of child abuse and neglect, prostitution, alcohol and drug use, and gender confusion, all of which supported the backstory that Albert constructed for LeRoy. The LeRoy fauxtobiography is elicited by more than delusion, as with Benjamin Wilkomiski, or embellishment, as with James Frey; JT LeRoy is the product of a traumatised

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<sup>28</sup> Two further books are attributed to LeRoy, *Harold's End* (2004) and *Labour* (2006).

dissociative personality disorder (Owens, quoted in Lawson 2007), hybrid testimony, and an overly invested readership. The LeRoy affair necessitates analysis that oscillates between text and context, in a comprehensive appraisal of the fauxtobiography, its dynamic, and the author function. This approach will ascertain the consistency of the narrative's affective value throughout the three phases of its reception (see Vice, 2014: p. 153-4), in light of authorial imposture and a polyphonic authorial composition. The Leroy controversy illustrates that fauxtobiography is a particularly twenty-first century, literary phenomenon influenced by the contemporaneity of the 'memoir boom' (Gilmore, 2001: p. 16) and the literary propensity towards traumatic testimonial witnessing.

Described by Laura Albert as her "avatar" (Albert at The Moth, 2010) the JT LeRoy veil allowed her to channel her most painful and traumatic experiences and transpose them into her writing in a polemic, polyphonic testimony. The Leroy entity itself became a constructed text, manufactured by Albert in order to bridge her writing with her environment, from text to context. As such, it is impossible to consider the works attributed to JT LeRoy without also attending to the notion of authorship, and consequently to the autobiographical effect that the text and context in tandem invoke. In addition to the texts *Sarah* and *The Heart*, which will be analysed within the epistemology of the fauxtobiography as it unfolds, it is also necessary to discuss the metanarrative, paratextual surround 'as' a text, as well as the texts produced as part of the fauxtobiographical trajectory; these texts include, Savannah Knoop's post-reveal memoir *Girl Boy* *Girl: How I Became JT LeRoy* (2008), the filmic adaptation of *The Heart is Deceitful* *Above All Things* (Argento, 2004), and Marjorie Sturm's documentary *The Cult of*



*JT LeRoy* (2014) among others. The fictionalised authorship produces a tapestry of hybrid testimonies, all of which drive the LeRoy fauxtobiography, which necessitates and depends on the intersubjective feedback of the reader to sustain the *roman fleuve*, and corroborate its affective power.

The role of the reader is imperative to the autobiographical caste of both *Sarah* and *The Heart*; though both texts were released as fiction, reviewers were quick to attempt to reconcile the author, JT LeRoy, and the texts' respective narrator/protagonists with the autobiographical 'I' of Lejeune's autobiographical pact (1989). In May of 2000, Catherine Texier reviewed *Sarah* in the *New York Times*:

Who is the author? What made him a writer? Is it autobiographical? Is it fantasy? [...] Does it matter that he is 20 years old? That he grew up in rural West Virginia and later on the streets of San Francisco? That he started publishing when he was 16, under the pseudonym Terminator? It does. And yet it shouldn't. (2001: p. 827)<sup>29</sup>

By raising such queries, Texier challenges the fictional classification of *Sarah* whilst probing the author's motivation to write it, raising the question of authorial intention and facilitating phase one of the three phases of reception. By intimating intentionality, Texier deduces some correlation between the protagonist, 'Cherry Vanilla'/'Sarah', and what is known about the young author

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<sup>29</sup> Originally published May 7<sup>th</sup> 2000, quote taken from *The New York Times Book Reviews Volume One*, 2001: 827.

LeRoy in an attempt to interpret an autobiographical link, and as *Sarah* is set within the truck-stops located in the Appalachian region of West Virginia, the same area LeRoy is reported to be from, the potential for further similarities is uncovered. However, Texier also reports that the correspondence between author and protagonist should not impact the way the text is read or received, whilst acknowledging that autobiographical potential inevitably does affect reading practice. The intimation of autobiography compels the reader to deploy the autobiographical pact (Lejeune, 1989); as Lejeune confirms “[c]onfronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself [sic] as a detective” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 14); the reader will conduct further investigations in an attempt to corroborate their suspicion of a self-referential narrative.

In phase one of a text’s reception, autobiographical authorship is primarily established by the cooperative function of the metatext and peritext, which consists of all the material added to the published text during the publication process, such as the front cover, title page and dedications page (Genette, 1997: p. 5). This supplementary material can either affirm or belie the text’s genre for the reader: fiction or non-fiction, autobiography or novel. Failing the inclusion of an appropriate and compatible metatextual cue, the reader will draw their own conclusions; conflicting, missing, or indeed corresponding information initiates the reader’s analytical impulse, which manifests metatextual connections between the texts and the author. Furthermore, “when [the reader thinks they] have discovered something through the text, in spite of the author, [they] always accord it more truth and more profundity” (Lejeune,

1989: p. 14). The reader seeks to evidence their expectancy of autobiography by determining the synchronicity of protagonist, narrator and author; both the peritext and the paratextual surround (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 99) are essential in this endeavour. *Sarah's* dedication page reads: "For Dr Terrence Owens. To Sarah. To Dennis". The reader can discern that Owens is a medical professional who is important to LeRoy, and 'Dennis' is the writer, Dennis Cooper, who acted as a mentor to LeRoy during the writing process, and who, in the book's peritext, enthusiastically endorses *Sarah* on its very first page of reviews, stating:

JT LeRoy's *Sarah* is a revelation [...] LeRoy's writing has a passion, economy, emotional depth, and lyric beauty so authentic that it seems to bypass every shopworn standard that we've learned to expect of contemporary fiction. (Cooper, 2000)<sup>30</sup>

Although Cooper clearly labels *Sarah* as fiction, the reader can deduce that the 'Sarah' of the dedication page is the wayward mother of both the protagonist, Cherry Vanilla, and simultaneously of the author, LeRoy: one and the same. The implication is that the author and the protagonist/narrator share the same mother because they are in fact "identical", which implicitly instates the autobiographical 'I' (Lejeune, 1989: p. 14).

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<sup>30</sup> Taken from Dennis Cooper's review of *Sarah* as printed on the 'Praise for JT LeRoy and *Sarah*' page at the very front of *Sarah*.

In order to authenticate the autobiographical author through the texts produced, Lejeune proposes:

Perhaps one is only an author with his [sic] second book, when the proper name inscribed on the cover becomes the “common factor” of at least two different texts and thus gives the idea of a person who cannot be reduced to any of his [sic] texts in particular [...] this [...] is very important for reading autobiographies. (1989: p. 11)

If, as Lejeune suggests, autobiographical authorship can only be confirmed through comparison with a second text, then the subsequent text of *The Heart* provides the verification required to advocate autobiographical authorship. In particular, one concomitant metatextual remark that appears in both books, in addition to the author’s name, concerns both the author’s and the protagonist’s fondness for ‘whiffleball’. In *The Heart*, the young Jeremiah affectionately remembers playing the yard game with his foster father, “I spring for it, sliding like my daddy taught me when we played whiffleball” (*The Heart*: p. 4), whilst the peritextual ‘Note on the Author’ that appears at the back of both *The Heart* and again in *Sarah* declare JT LeRoy’s enthusiasm for the very same game. Coupled with the inclusion of the name ‘Sarah’ in both texts’ dedication pages as a ‘common factor’ or shared referent, and the blurb on *The Heart*’s jacket proclaiming, “A series of autobiographical stories [that] describes the relationship between a mother and her adolescent son”, an autobiographical bond between both the author and the text, and from one text to the other is established. Lejeune confirms: “Straddling the world beyond-the-text and the

text, [the author] is the connection between the two” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11). This apparent metatextual ‘straddling’ validates the autobiographical tenure of both *Sarah* and *The Heart*, which ratifies JT LeRoy as the autobiographical author, and synchronically installs him as a “real person” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11).

JT LeRoy’s manifestation as the autobiographical author in accordance with Lejeune’s autobiographical pact predicates that the autobiographical ‘I’ denotes the existence of a real person, with a proper name (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11). The metatextual cue of the proper name signifies “a person whose existence is certified by vital statistics and is verifiable [whose] existence is beyond question” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11). The interdependent agreement of terms within the autobiographical pact sanctions both the authorship and the author. Furthermore, the first-person “narrating ‘I’” (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 71) invokes the pact even though the proper name ‘JT LeRoy’ does not appear, as “the reader has no doubt that the “I” refers to the name shown on the cover, even though the name is not repeated in the text” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 14). The reader must again resolve this indeterminacy<sup>31</sup>, building on what they know of the author through their autobiographical reading, taking the constant - the maternal relationship with Sarah - and reconciling this with the child’s name ‘Jeremiah’: “‘Jere-my.’ My, like you’re mine” (*The Heart*: p. 56) as the ‘J’ in JT LeRoy. Such interpretive work petitions the proper name to sustain the texts’ interdependence and assist with the biography of the author that the reader continues to assemble outside of the text. Lejeune avers:

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<sup>31</sup> Term borrowed from Wolfgang Iser "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" (1971)

For the reader, who does not know the real person [author], all the while believing in his [sic] existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse, and so [the reader] imagines what [the author] is like from what he [sic] produces. (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11)

The reader trusts their interpretation of the text to assemble a portrait of the author that supports their notions of autobiographical identity, influenced by the experiences depicted by the narrative. Paul de Man questions “are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject?” (1979: p. 921), a question complicated in the twenty-first century context as technological advances challenge “belief in the evidential powers of photographic images” (Fetveit, 2002: p. 123). In the LeRoy works, the meaning of the works is reliant upon the “author function” (Foucault, 1979: 21), to “construct the rational entity we call an author” (Foucault, 1979: p. 21). The growing picture of the author is assembled through a cooperative reading of both the texts, and the paratext, as Jannah Loontjens asserts, “the author has become a construct that *is* of importance to the work [...] the construct is becoming part *of* the work”<sup>32</sup> (2008: p. 9). As such, “[t]he author’s biography [...] is part of the frame that cannot be separated from the image” (Loontjens, 2008: p. 9). In *Sarah* and *The Heart*, it is imperative for the reader to move between text and context in order to ascertain ‘who is speaking?’ (Foucault quoting Beckett, 1979: p. 15), as in autobiographical acts the author function is particularly

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<sup>32</sup> Italics in the original.

salient in its double duty: “The author is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the product of a discourse” (Lejeune, 1989: p. 11). In other words, autobiographical authorship contextualises the writing, whilst the writing equilaterally produces the author.

With the autobiographical author in place and phase one initiated, the traumatic narratives contained within *Sarah* and *The Heart* are established as literary acts of self-witnessing by “autobiography’s rhetorical proximity to testimony” (Gilmore, 2001: p. 20), and as such, they initiate the three tiered model of witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61) also seen in *Fragments* and *A Million Little Pieces*. Although the texts were not released chronologically (the episodes that document childhood in *The Heart* were released after *Sarah*)<sup>33</sup>, the works in tandem provide an inclusive, though somewhat fragmented, overview of LeRoy’s traumatic experiences in the years prior to their publication. The eight vignettes in *The Heart* are presented chronologically, with each one detailing a significant traumatic event within the protagonist, Jeremiah’s childhood. However, the final episode, ‘Natoma Street’, would have occurred after the events as told in *Sarah*, as the blurb on the jacket of *Sarah* describes a twelve year old whilst in ‘Natoma Street’ the protagonist admits to being fifteen years of age (*The Heart*: p. 232). This wraparound structure renders the two texts collaborative components of the author’s literary *künstlerroman*, which not only instantiates and mobilises the fauxtobiography, but also the composite configuration represents the sum of the first stage of witnessing: self-witnessing (Laub, 1995: p. 61).

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<sup>33</sup> According to Laura Albert *The Heart* was written before *Sarah*, but released afterwards as she felt *Sarah* was a more accomplished work. See Langer (2013)

The testimonial mode of self-witness is castigated within the narrative of *The Heart*, as Jeremiah is regularly silenced by the threat of separation from his mother. In 'Baby Doll', Jeremiah requires medical attention after being "split apart" (*The Heart*: p. 150) by a violent sexual encounter with Jackson, one of his mother's many partners. Jeremiah recounts the familiarity of the aftermath of such an attack:

We practice like we usually do on the way to the clinic [...] My mom's not taking me to the local hospital; instead we're going on a long drive to the backwoods clinic in the Virginia mountains with all the retired doctors that don't like to do paperwork. (*The Heart*: p. 151-2)

On the journey to the immoral clinic, Jeremiah and his mother rehearse to ensure that he does not truthfully recount his abuse, with the expectation that he will take responsibility for his own injuries:

'Anyone child abusin' you? [...] Well, did they?' She slaps my thigh.

'No, no, ma'am [...] Or sir' I glance up at her.

She nods half way for me to continue.

'Did it all myself, sir, or ma'am.' (*The Heart*: p. 152-3)

Sarah warns the child that the truth will result in his incarceration (*The Heart* 153). By this assertion, Jeremiah is convinced that recounting his attack would result in his being institutionalised away from his mother in "a mental hospital



like they did before” (*The Heart*: p.153). For Jeremiah, fear and traumatic memory activates a process that polices self-witnessing; according to Gilmore, “Such acts [...] remake the present into a site of a disallowed past’s resonance” (2001: p. 34) as, following Foucault,

scenes of self construction, whether via sexual self-definition and self actualization [sic] or through disciplinary processes of power, involve looking back in order to look forward. (Gilmore, 2001: p. 34)

Jeremiah is conditioned against the act of testimonial self-witnessing, which inhibits the “working through” (LaCapra, 2001: p. 186) of traumatic experience that narrativising affords. As such, Jeremiah’s poetic internal narrative at the chapter’s end has a dual function. Firstly, it allows Jeremiah to dissociate from his role as witness in Laub’s intersubjective third level of witnessing, “the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (1995: p. 61), whilst Jackson gives his version of events to Jeremiah’s mother in the next room: “He was all over me, talking like you, lookin’ like you, baby doll...” (*The Heart*: p. 156). And, secondly, it provides Jeremiah with a confessional arena that allows him to reflect on the affective impact of his present circumstances as he laments the loss of the familial façade. The final phrase “I will reclaim my tears petrified by the terror of loss” is endowed with a lyrical ambiguity, as it is unclear whether the affective term ‘petrified’ refers to the stone “angels’ tears” thrown from the window (*The Heart*: p. 156) that are actually “fingernail-size rocks with crosses naturally formed on them” (*The Heart*: p. 115), or to Jeremiah himself. The dual effect of this internal self-witnessing discourse is akin to Susanna Egan’s “mirror

talk” (1999), which describes, “the double voicing [...] of autobiographical acts” (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 220) that occurs specifically “in moments of crisis and decentering” (Smith & Watson, 2010: p.220). Such raw acts of testimonial self-witnessing “[affect] both the one who speaks and the one who listens” (Egan, 1999: p. 25), which provides Jeremiah with the heretofore absent second-level witness in the form of the reader, who is receiver of his reluctant testimony (Laub, 1995: p. 61).

Jeremiah’s tendency to dissociate from the affective discourse of his own traumatic testimony is symptomatic of his failure to express his own identity. This is evident in his engaged witnessing of suffering in others whilst he remains acquiescent to his own physical pain. After threatening the ruse that he and his mother are actually sisters, and attempting to assert his bodily agency by proclaiming: “She’s my mom and I ain’t a girl! [...] I want a haircut!” (*The Heart*: p. 121), Jeremiah is “punished” (p. 124) by his mother who burns him with a car cigarette lighter:

I watch the tip of my thing [penis] disappear into the lighter. I don’t move, I don’t scream, I don’t cry. I’ve learned the hard way that lessons are repeated until learned properly. (p. 126)

Jeremiah endures the immense physical pain soundlessly, having accepted the doctrine of silent suffering imposed by his abusive mother, as she warns “feeling sorry for yourself is further proof of your unrepented evil” (p. 126). Rather than articulating his own distress, Jeremiah focuses on a malnourished animal as he

anticipates the impending trauma against his personhood: “I stare straight ahead at a stray dog sniffing for something to eat in the dirt” (p. 125). Whilst his mother outlines a hyperbolic ultimatum between execution by the police, or the seemingly minimal by comparison intimate burns, Jeremiah diverts his attention to “watch the dog eating his own foot” (p. 126). This retrospective account within the ‘Baby Doll’ chapter marks the moment that Jeremiah surrenders his male identity, and foreshadows the supposed seduction of Jackson detailed above; Jeremiah believes he is only lovable as a “sexy little girl” (p. 128), which he associates with being “good” (p. 149 and p. 153) in spite of the way it limits his agency. During a telephone conversation with another of his mother’s partners, referred to metonymically as “Schneider Truck” (p. 109), using the same dissociative device as Wilkomirski in his reference to the soldiers as ‘uniforms’<sup>34</sup>, Jeremiah disconnects from the trucker’s paedophilic advances. Instead, Jeremiah sadistically smothers “a busy anthole” (p. 107), whilst digging his nail through the telephone wire in an attempt to electrocute himself (p. 107-8). Jeremiah’s inability to appropriately assert subjective agency is controlled by his confusion surrounding the Butlerian rules of performativity; for Butler, agency is determined by “performativity” of subjectivity in accordance with “the rules that govern intelligible identity” (Butler, 1993: p.145). Jeremiah’s situation is analogous with the starving dog and the panicked ants as he too is a victim of traumatic circumstance and its imposed lack of agency; his limited capacity to perform his identity without the imposition of another person’s agenda affecting his subjectivity essentially re-traumatizes him. Unable to assert his agency,

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<sup>34</sup> See page 35.

Jeremiah is the perpetual victim of his self-imposed silence, which manifests as passive cruelty and self-harm.

The performative nature of self-witnessing is further interrogated by the prevalent theme of changing identity within both *Sarah* and *The Heart*, a theme that permeates the LeRoy fauxtobiography. In *Sarah*, 'Cherry Vanilla' assumes the identity 'Sarah' (p. 19), is mistaken for 'She-Ra' (p. 28), and is later renamed 'Sam' (p. 118) after being exposed as a boy during an escape attempt. Consequently, the premise that identity is changeable is supplanted by the threat of exposure, in a prophetic comment on Laura Albert's paranoid authorship; as Albert herself confessed, "the ultimate hope is that I can reveal myself and you won't go away"<sup>35</sup> (Albert, quoted in Rommelmann, 2008). Sarah is restricted to his feminine performance in his determination to become "the best lot lizard ever" (23), in the same way that Laura Albert maintains the LeRoy veil in order to achieve her literary ambitions. When Sarah's moment of exposure arrives, Le Loup cutting his hair is depicted as deliberately ambiguous:

He moves so he is standing between my parted legs.

'Good-bye, Sarah,' he says and raises the blade above me. I see a whirl of it flash by, feel a sharp cut, followed by a vague awareness of some part of me falling to the ground. (*Sarah*: p. 113)

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<sup>35</sup> Albert used the same defensive line in the Nathaniel Rich interview in *The Paris Review* in 2006.

The haircut functions as a reverse castration, which instead of emasculating Sarah, strips him of the positively coded femininity that he understands to be the key to social acceptance and the aspirational “bigger bone” (p. 162) of success as a prostitute. He feels “forfeited and discarded” (p. 115) as a result of having the masculine identity of ‘Sam’ forced upon him, which foreshadows Laura Albert’s fate after “the reveal” (Albert quoted in Langer, 2013). For both Cherry Vanilla in *Sarah* and Jeremiah in *The Heart*, their changing characters are a survival strategy that both enables and endangers them. In a profound case of life imitating art, Albert herself assumes alternative personas within the performative fauxtobiographical structure. By enacting the role of an English social worker and LeRoy’s guardian, Emily Frasier, also known as ‘Speedie’, she confirms “I had to be an advocate by proxy for myself” (Albert, quoted in Rommelmann, 2008). Albert preserves her proximity to the LeRoy authorship whilst avoiding the direct expression of her own self-witness.

Laura Albert’s public unmasking was facilitated by a series of journalistic articles, the first by Stephen Beachy in *New York* magazine late 2005, and two further articles by Warren St. John in 2006, both of which were published in *The New York Times*. Beachy’s original article alleged that JT LeRoy was a combination of the “Warholian” public figure paired with the writing of Laura Albert, in a “dizzying production of narrative” (2005: 8). The first of St. John’s articles was pitched as a follow-up “clarifying article” (St. John, 2006a) to a profile piece on LeRoy, published in 2004, “The Unmasking of JT LeRoy: In Public, He’s a She” (2006<sup>a</sup>). St. John only alluded to Laura Albert’s involvement, citing Stephen Beachy’s article as the origin of scepticism; instead, St. John was more

concerned with Savannah Knoop, whose role as the physical persona of JT LeRoy that Beachy referred to as “Wigs and Sunglasses” (2005), saw her posing for photo shoots and attending readings and interviews in disguises, justified by JT LeRoy’s notorious shyness. The second article, printed in February of the same year, ‘Figure in JT LeRoy Case Says Partner Is Culprit’ (St. John, 2006<sup>b</sup>) documents St. John’s interaction with Laura Albert’s by then ex-partner, and Savannah Knoop’s half-brother, Geoffrey Knoop, who confirmed Beachy’s allegations. As part of the exposé, Geoffrey Knoop stated: “For [Laura Albert] it’s very personal [...] It’s not a hoax. It’s part of her” (Knoop, quoted in St. John, 2006). Geoffrey Knoop’s assessment matched Albert’s own evaluation of the LeRoy construct in her first response to the phase two reception in an interview with Nathaniel Rich for the autumn edition of *The Paris Review* (2006); She explained LeRoy as a “a mutation” and “a shared lung” (Albert, quoted in Rich, 2006) that allowed her to write, and went on to say “for me to become normal I’d have to breathe on my own” (Albert, quoted in Rich, 2006) indicating her dependence on the “emotional resonance” (Albert, quoted in Rich, 2006) of the LeRoy construct to shield her from the public scrutiny of the reveal, but also the necessity for her to shed the LeRoy mask and engage the healing properties of self witness.

Laura Albert’s deployment of an avatar as opposed to inhabiting her authorship directly exhibits a reluctance to engage directly with the act of self witness; as Dori Laub observes, “the life that is chosen can become the vehicle by which the struggle to tell continues” (Laub, 1995: p. 63). Albert commissioned

the pseudonymous LeRoy persona as a “metaphoric creation” (Olney, 1972: p. 34) of her selfhood, which James Olney explains thus:

the self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we “know” the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphORIZING [sic].

(Olney, 1972: p. 34)

As such, the ‘metaphor’ that is JT LeRoy is a manifestation of Albert’s own traumatised selfhood that allows her to both vocalise and distance herself from her personal trauma. The way Albert makes the metaphor material by enlisting Savannah Knoop to embody and project the metaphor creates the veil that allows her to disguise herself in the production of her self-witnessing account.

Roger Luckhurst states:

The trauma memoir recounts a discordance, a circling around a shattering event, from which self-knowledge arrives late, if at all, and with uncomfortable awareness of the frangibility of the self. (2008: p. 118-9)

Albert recognises her own limitations, and refers to the LeRoy veil as “asbestos gloves to handle material that [she] otherwise couldn’t touch” (Albert, quoted in Langer, 2013). Speaking of the LeRoy veil in *Interview* magazine, Albert remarks:

[I]f there's one thing I wished, it was that people would have read the work and stepped back and said, "wait, what is this material telling us? Why did she do this?" When authors hide themselves. It's not always just to meet Madonna. Sometimes it's the only way to talk about things that are too terrifying to talk about. (Albert, quoted in Langer, 2013)

In this statement, Albert acknowledges that "life writers have much at stake in gaining the reader's belief in the experiences they narrate and thus having the "truth" of the narrative validated" (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 35), which reconfirms the imperative that "the joint responsibility [of witnessing] is the source of the reemerging truth" (Laub, 1995: p. 69), indicative of the second stage of testimonial witnessing. Both *Sarah* and *The Heart*, and ultimately the JT LeRoy avatar, are the consequence of Albert's attempts to have her testimony witnessed by "someone who actually participates in the reliving and re-experiencing" of her trauma (Laub, 1995: p. 62).

Albert's LeRoy project is reminiscent of La Capra's "writing trauma" (2001: p. 186), as:

It involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analysing and "giving voice" to the past - processes of coming to terms with "traumatic experiences", limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms. (La Capra, 2001: p. 186)



In the article that foreshadowed the full-scale reveal, Stephen Beachy wrote in *The New York Times* in 2005 that: “stories of suffering [are] used to mask other less marketable stories of suffering” (Beachy, 2005: p.3),<sup>36</sup> which perceptively describes Laura Albert’s impetus for the LeRoy veil. Albert observed the ubiquity of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed little boy in narratives of child abuse and sexual trauma (Albert at The Moth, 2010), and as such she exploited that trope to ratify her own testimony, initially calling “hotlines” in a younger, male persona (Albert at The Moth, 2010) to articulate her traumatic experiences. For Albert, the affective resonance of testimony is inseparable from the mode of delivery, as “packaging is not simply confused with content, but consumed as content” (Gagné, 2012). Following Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Smith and Watson observe:

Narratives of witness [...] make an urgent, immediate, and direct bid for attention and call the reader/listener to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition. While there can be many unpredictable responses to the publication, circulation, and reception of personal narratives of suffering and loss, their scenes of witness entwine the narrator, the story, and the listener/reader in an ethical call to empathic identification. (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 134)

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<sup>36</sup> Refers to page 3 of the online version of the 2005 article.

Thus, the intersubjective nature of the testimonial framework that interpolates the reader in phase one, manifests as what Albert herself describes as “felt authenticity” (at Foyles, 2010) during the aftermath of the revelations, as part of the re-evaluations of the texts in the transition from phase two to phase three. Dennis Cooper’s reaction to the LeRoy façade supports this:

I think the JT autobiography is inextricable in the case of [*The Heart*]. If those stories weren't backed up by the authenticity of the author's autobiography, but were known instead to have come from the imagination of a woman in her late thirties, I think they would have been seen as overly deliberately provocative and shocking, and their crudeness would have been seen as flawed writing, not as the understandable and kind of interesting failings of a [sic] emotionally screwed up, homeless teenager. (Cooper, 2006)

Though Cooper recognises the crucial draw of autobiographical authorship and its power to affect the reader, he subscribes to Sue Vice’s notion of the “double bluff” (2014: p. 96) as observed in both *Fragments* and *Pieces* that suggests that, specifically in misery memoirs, extreme descriptions of trauma denote truth on the grounds that, for the reader, they appear too audacious to be fiction. Cooper fails to recognise Albert’s testimony in the LeRoy works, yet as Savannah Knoop perceptively observes in her own retrospective account, “JT’s pain seemed like a metaphor for [Laura Albert’s] own” (Knoop: p. 32). Though the author function and narrator are imperative to the process of witnessing, the narrative of witness itself remains the result of “writing trauma” (La Capra, 2001: p. 186),

where vivid yet often magnanimous accounts of trauma further endow the narrative with a traumatic, autobiographical truth and as such, expedite the *modus vivendi* of affective resonance.

The autobiographical reconciliation within the third phase of the LeRoy/Albert fauxtobiography is problematised by Albert's deployment of a male child's voice, which additionally impacts upon the narrative's affective power. The "grotesque gender confusion" (Vice, 2014: p. 53) depicted in *Sarah*, whereby the young, male protagonist aspires to be a successful truck-stop prostitute, or "lot lizard" (*Sarah*: p. 1), like his mother, Sarah:

I'd have contests with Sarah. We'd lie on our backs on some motel bed, with our heads hanging, tilted back over the edge of the bed, till [sic] our mouths, esophagus [sic], and throats would all line up. Then we'd put in a carrot as deep as we could without gagging. We'd mark the carrot with our top teeth and after we'd see who was the better head giver. Sarah always won. (*Sarah*: p. 15)

The mimicry of his mother and his aspirations towards his mother's sordid profession highlights the boy's underdeveloped sense of gender identity, whilst exposing the affective power of the naïve child narrator. This confusion is further evidenced during another sexualised encounter, which reveals the boy's gendered, anatomical misunderstanding:

I slowly reach my hand down, between my legs, to my penis.

‘What are you?’ Lymon asks, and I see a darkness slowly replacing the shock across his face.

I don’t know what to say. I feel as surprised as he is. I touch it again. It’s still there, like it always is. (*Sarah*: p. 103)

In addition to the discomfiting paedophilic encounter, the narrative’s affective power is exacerbated by lack of understanding. Smith and Watson attest:

The reader is solicited, through a voice implicit in the arrangement of the narrative and often explicit in its frame story and interpolations, to mistrust—and learn from—the erroneous judgment of the narrating child “I.” (Smith & Watson, 2010: 300 n 2).

The already limited articulability of trauma is further under-lexicalised through the child’s narrative voice, as it is with Wilkomirski in *Fragments*. It becomes apparent that Sarah cannot comprehend Lymon’s shock at his anatomy, and the dramatic irony elicits a compassionate response from the reader. Albert’s appropriation of the male child’s perspective functions as both a “distancing device” (Vice, 2014: p. 54) and an intentional affective trope. In a post-reveal appearance at The Moth in 2010, Albert talks about the ‘after-school specials’ that feature abuse, noting that they are always characterised by a blonde-haired blue-eyed boy who could be loved in spite of the horrible things he had endured (Albert at The Moth, 2010). Albert reports that during her own troubled adolescence she attended a writing class where one of her stories was read out anonymously, yet the class seemed to attribute the narrative to a particular

student whose “exterior matche[d] the story” (Albert at The Moth, 2010); she stated “I wanted to be him because he matche[d] the voice” (Albert at The Moth, 2010). However, Albert previously dissented that “if there was an added adjunct that [the readers] were also getting off on the perversity of a little boy, that is unforgivable” (Albert, quoted in Rommelmann, 2008). Albert observed that the potential to affect, shock, and evoke the “curious compassion” (Albert at The Moth, 2010) that could ultimately “make that bridge so people suddenly care” (Albert at The Moth, 2010) was inextricably linked with the male voice. Albert subsequently adopted the voice that she believed could “tell a story that fit the pain [she] was in” (Albert, quoted in Rich 2006: 159). The LeRoy authorship moderates the incongruity of narrative voice, bridging the distance between Albert’s own traumatised subjectivity and the narrative vehicle she chose to express it.

JT LeRoy remains the author of the fauxtobiography, as the lowest common denominator and the source of the emotional investment that perpetuates the metanarrative *roman fleuve*. However, the stories’ genesis is essential in terms of validating the affective impact of traumatic testimony and its status as an autobiographical act. The discrepancies around true authorship act as a reactive smokescreen for the pathos of Albert’s writing, yet the underlying trauma within the texts relates to Laura Albert’s own experiences of abuse and displacement in her teens. The scenes of abuse suffered by Jeremiah in *The Heart* were rehashed from the childhood experiences of Laura Albert, the likes of which she was forced to recount under oath at her trial for fraud (Cochrane, 2007) during phase two of the texts’ reception. The therapist, Dr.

Terence Owens (who at the time prior to the reveal believed he was conversing with the teenage boy, 'Terminator' - the 'T' of JT LeRoy), had encouraged 'Terminator' to write stories that could be read to student social workers at the University of San Francisco. These stories were a form of "scriptotherapy" (Henke, 1998: p. xii), a term Suzanne Henke uses to describe the "process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience" (1998: p. xii), which produced narratives of "thinly veiled autobiography" (Lawson, 2007). Albert claimed in an interview with Guy Lawson for *Rolling Stone* after the reveal that "[JT] wanted to put a tube connecting my head to his head, my heart to his heart" (Albert, quoted in Guy Lawson, 2007); she acknowledges that she feels separate from JT whilst also feeling he is part of her. This interview marks the evolution from phase two to phase three of the fauxtobiographical reception, in which Lawson reports:

[JT] is not merely a voice in her head but a presence, an actual being trapped inside her body, an inner manifestation of the mental illness brought on by the abuse she suffered as a child. Dr. Owens, now aware of the real identity of the "boy" he spoke with over the course of thirteen years, has diagnosed Albert with a variety of personality disorders. (2007)

Lawson's article re-evaluates the LeRoy/Albert works in light of her state of mind and past experiences, making an explicit link to therapeutic practice in their production. There is an affective connection that is reproduced across the texts of the fauxtobiography that subverts and transgresses the parameters of traditional autobiographical authorship as Laura Albert can claim JT LeRoy both

as part of her personality and part of her oeuvre as “information about the author, and the author’s oeuvre are [...] porous and interdependent” (Loontjens, 2008: p. 3). Albert’s entire fauxtobiography is essentially a:

*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.*<sup>37</sup> (Lejeune 1989: p. 4)

Lejeune’s finite description is victim to the ambiguity of language; without qualifiers such as ‘only’ or ‘exclusively’ Albert’s arguably polemic texts still fulfil Lejeune’s remit. This sense of coexistence that Albert feels with JT LeRoy is what blurs the boundaries of identity, as she believes him to be a component part of herself. If, as asserted by Olney, “the self is the intrinsic oneness of a thing” then Albert’s self-referential fauxtobiography remains autobiographically compliant in spite of its production under the name JT LeRoy.

With *Sarah* and *The Heart*, Albert confronts Lejeune’s one caveat:

“imitation cannot go back as far as the final term - namely the *name* of the *author* [...] Only cases of literary fraud therefore would escape this test” (1989: p. 15).

LeRoy’s works are problematic as autobiography given the fictionality of the author, and by association, his name. However, whilst they still bear the name JT LeRoy, the two texts, *Sarah* and *The Heart*, are still posited as autobiographical, and, the overarching metanarrative ‘life’ of the embodied JT LeRoy also yields an

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<sup>37</sup> Italics in the original.

autobiographical act, as his actions perpetuate, propagate and enrich the fauxtobiography that is 'his' oeuvre. Nevertheless, an alternative generic distinction is required to accommodate the composite form. Hybrid testimony better describes the multifactorial texts that make up the LeRoy fauxtobiography, comparable with Boswell's identification of Dave Eggers' *What is the What?* (2006) as hybrid testimony for providing "fictionalised autobiography in [Valentino Deng's] voice" (Eggers, quoted in Boswell, 2014: p. 149). For Boswell, hybrid testimony:

aims to re-establish and renegotiate the terms of the autobiographical pact, inasmuch as it underpins hybrid testimony, forcing us to ask metatextual questions of the genre and challenging assumptions about the ways that we read [...] It originates in a process of literary production involving an eye witness and a professional writer. (2014: p. 153)

Paradoxically, Albert is both the 'eye-witness' and the 'professional writer', under the 'veil' of JTLeroy. Initially, the LeRoy voice is Laura Albert, who uses the LeRoy veil to self-witness her own traumatic past, and to 'translate' the trauma of others that she witnessed in the group homes of her childhood: "In the group homes [...] I was the translator [...] I told [their] stories" (Albert at The Moth, 2010). The combination of self-witnessing, and witnessing the testimonies of others, levels one and two in Laub's model (1995: p. 61-2), establishes the testimony and its hybridised form. The LeRoy/Albert hybrid testimony is both multifaceted and cumulative; when publication of the texts necessitates 'a body', the concept of hybrid testimony is extended to include the performative



narrative of Savannah Knoop *as* LeRoy through interviews and interactions whilst she played him, and consequently, the narrative threads elicited by her embodiment of the role within the metatext of the LeRoy authorship. In her own fauxtobiographical retrospective, Knoop ventures, “Laura, JT and I were a trinity” (2008: p. 117) in an attempt to describe the shared voice of the LeRoy construct. The autobiographical ‘I’ is achieved by the coalition of the three components: Albert as author, Knoop as narrator, and LeRoy as protagonist. As a result, the JT LeRoy authorship simultaneously does and does not comply with Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, in that the published works attributed to LeRoy both are and are not ‘by’ him, as well as being both about him and not about him – meaning that the narration both is and is not his. Similarly, the autobiographical unfolding of JT LeRoy’s public life within the metanarrative of the phase one reception and promotion of the books is both fact and fiction; the obvious problem is that there is no ‘him’, although Laura Albert once likened JT to Bugs Bunny claiming, “he doesn’t exist, but he lives” (Albert, quoted in Langer, 2013). The ‘living’ LeRoy avatar subjugates what cannot be cleanly reconciled in terms of Lejeune’s “identical” authorship, as the author construct is fulfilled by a fusion of voices, all of which contribute, and all of which retain a legitimate claim to the autobiographical authorship of JT LeRoy within the fauxtobiography, and as such, reserve the right to propagate the *roman fleuve* after the revelation of literary fraud.

As a result of the conflated authorship of JT LeRoy, the *roman fleuve* of the fauxtobiography becomes fractal, with each contributor’s own texts disseminating the metanarrative. Boswell asserts that the notion of hybrid

testimony “[confounds the] traditional separation between autobiographical writing and literary invention, inside and outside, truth and lies” particularly in cases of “collaborative authorship, resting on the joint input of someone who was there and someone who was not” (2014: p. 145). The embodied avatar’s life narrative epitomises hybrid testimony; however, the roles of ‘there’ and ‘not there’ oscillate between Albert and Knoop in its production. When the reveal occurs, the LeRoy mode is split. Savannah Knoop’s memoir entitled *Girl Boy Girl: How I Became JT LeRoy* (2008) attempts to explain the complexities of the LeRoy experience, documenting her portrayal of the LeRoy avatar, the parallel experience of her own life as Savannah Knoop, and Albert’s role contiguous to the two personas. For Smith and Watson, “The multifacetedness inherent in autobiographical writing produces a polyphonic site of indeterminacy rather than a single, stable truth” (2010: p. 16). Knoop’s own autobiographical act not only contributes to the LeRoy oeuvre, as she both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ the voice of the now defunct JT LeRoy by the time of publication, but it also provides details of the whole saga from the inside, including commentary on the intrinsic role of Laura Albert. In the absence of Laura Albert’s own confessional text after the reveal, *Girl Boy Girl* bears witness to Albert’s experience, and as such becomes yet another hybrid testimony within the fauxtobiographical frame.

The LeRoy fauxtobiography is a polyphonic hybrid testimony, mobilised as a *roman fleuve*, and perpetuated by the numerous voices that enabled its construction. Albert herself acknowledged: “Everyone just added their own chapter, which is what I thought was great about the whole JT thing” (Albert quoted in Rommelmann 2008). Proximity to any aspect of the ‘JT thing’ enables

the annexation of the fauxtobiographical narrative, with new channels emerging with each new thread. The very fact that JT LeRoy was brought into 'being' by the will of the media and the intersubjectivity of reading practice, demonstrates the impact of contemporary mediatization and literary trends on generic classification and the author function. That numerous external entities aspired to the 'cult' of JT LeRoy, as part of the metanarrative, as opposed to the external witnessing of the false literary testimony of the *künstlerroman*, indemnifies the LeRoy *roman fleuve*, its affective power, and the perpetual nature of the fauxtobiography. The film adaptation of *The Heart*, directed by Asia Argento and released at Cannes in 2004, fostered numerous metatextual fractals, with the casting of many of LeRoy's celebrity friends, including Winona Ryder, Marilyn Manson and Michael Pitt, amongst others. In addition, Savannah Knoop who embodied the JT LeRoy entity claimed to have engaged in a sexual relationship with the director, Argento, whilst apparently sustaining the fictitious transgender persona of LeRoy (Knoop, 2008: p. 21). The LeRoy controversy was also scripted in to a Brazilian rock musical, *JT, Um Conto de Fadas Punk - JT, A Punk Fairy Tale* (LauraAlbert.org, 2015). Laura Albert also wrote *Labour* under the name JT LeRoy (as a continuation of the autobiographical JT LeRoy narrative trajectory concerning his relationship with his mother, Sarah), due for release shortly after the reveal in 2006; however, publication was delayed indefinitely, perpetually denying a fragment of the LeRoy oeuvre (Rommelmann, 2008). More recently, *Sarah* was re-launched as a "Cherry Edition" eBook including artwork by Matt Pipes, edited to exclude grammatical and graphological errors seemingly included in the original print to authenticate LeRoy's novice authorship (LauraAlbert.org, 2015). Jasmin Lim produced an art installation that documents

the LeRoy/Albert fauxtobiography as a cultural commentary on “identity formation and different types of “truth” - literal and figurative” (Lim, quoted in Gagné, 2011) and the way Laura Albert is vilified by the media. Years before the reveal, in *The Independent* in 2001, Mary Gaitskill stated:

It’s occurred to me that the whole thing with [JT LeRoy] is a hoax, but I felt that even if it turned out to be a hoax, it’s a very enjoyable one [...] that exposes things about other people, the confusion between love and art and publicity. A hoax that would be delightful and, if people are made fools of, it would be ok - in fact it would be useful. (Gaitskill, quoted in Rommelmann, 2008)

Gaitskill’s rhetoric points to the affective potential of the fauxtobiographical structure, and the way it interrogates readerly investment. The JT LeRoy phenomenon was devised to “entice and repel” (Rommelmann, 2008), and with every referent faction comes the renewed perpetuity of its polyphonic dissemination.

The LeRoy/ Albert fauxtobiography is currently experiencing a revival owing to the circulation of Marjorie Sturm’s feature-length documentary *The Cult of JT LeRoy* (2014),<sup>38</sup> which won the jury award for ‘Best Documentary Feature’ at the San Francisco film festival, Indiefest, in February 2015. Filming for the documentary began in 2002 under a very different premise (Skinner, 2015), but

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<sup>38</sup> 2014 is the date that the documentary premiered in New York on November 14<sup>th</sup> at DOC NYC, see [jtleroydocumentary.com](http://jtleroydocumentary.com).

was abruptly stopped after ten months due to LeRoy's apparent withdrawal. After Stephen Beachy's article exposing Savannah Knoop as the "Wigs and Sunglasses" (2005) public persona of JT, Beachy encouraged Sturm to revisit the project, which she did between 2006 and 2008 before funding dried up (Skinner, 2015). The film, in its final incarnation, includes original footage from 2002, as well as interviews with prominent figures from the LeRoy orbit. Laura Albert does not support the film, claiming it is "[her] story to tell" (Skinner, 2015), as she did when she refused to grant the rights to her life-story to Antidote International Films during the fraud trial over the film rights for *Sarah*.<sup>39</sup> What Albert fails to realise is that her 'story', as a result of the LeRoy scandal, is already public property, with "'JT LeRoy" serving as an umbrella name for an artistic collective" (Barton, 2006<sup>a</sup>) outside of her original testimony. JT LeRoy is "a conduit for many people who [have] suffered and survived [...] a symbol of hope for those who [have] undergone the same kind of trauma and lived through it" (Knoop, 2008: p. 117), and consequently, the LeRoy/Albert fauxtobiography is a model for false authorship that can convincingly convey traumatic testimony with the affective resonance of felt authenticity. Readers can access the mediatized fauxtobiography from numerous different angles, at varying epistemological points, whilst fresh contributions to the metanarrative *roman fleuve* appear to this day.

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<sup>39</sup> Alan Feuer covered the trial in *The New York Times* in a series of articles between June and October 2007.

## Affecting Falsehood: The Fauxtobiographical Future

*Trauma is never exclusively personal.*

*Leigh Gilmore*

In Leigh Gilmore's discussion of Louis Althusser's *The Future Lasts Forever* as a text that tests the limits of autobiography, she concludes that Althusser is "an unreliable narrator of his own life, and self-declaredly so" (2001: p. 40). Surely this oxymoronic distinction carries for all 'authors' who participate in the self-witnessing enterprise of traumatic testimony? Given the difficulty of narrativising trauma, and the limitations of memory, testimony is an inevitably flawed self-referential medium. However, it is not without value. The intersubjective discourse of traumatic testimony made literary in the shape of the 'misery memoir' engages both the author and the reader in the healing process of witnessing, and, as a result, the affective value of traumatic testimony permeates the exchange. This model of intersubjective witnessing remains even after literary testimony is exposed as false, as the affective value of the discourse still resonates with the reader.

The contemporary preoccupation with 'misery memoirs' or literary traumatic testimony is purportedly rooted in voyeurism and masochism (see Vice, 2014). Notwithstanding, the premise of reading as witnessing is underwritten by the readerly pursuit of affect and understanding, which offers a

less cynical if not mutually exclusive perspective. When the reader willingly participates in the intersubjective act of witnessing, their participation is determined by their expectation of authenticity, that is the authenticity of the author, the narrative, and the events depicted within that narrative. When the reader embarks on the intersubjective act of witnessing traumatic literary testimony, they are incidentally accepting the conditions for autobiographical writing as defined by the autobiographical pact. Their investment is determined by their belief in the truth value of the author's confessional self-witness, and consequently the fidelity of meaning conveyed by the affective resonance experienced in the act of reading/witnessing.

The affective resonance of testimony is a result of candid, often graphic depictions of suffering, underpinned by the realisation that the trauma was experienced, and survived, by a real, living witness. The three levels of witness as set out by Dori Laub warrant the 'working through' (La Capra, 2001) of traumatic experience by a process of self-witness through testimony, which is then received by an independent witness, and then accompanied by the prospect of acting as witness to the act of witnessing (1995: p. 61-2). That the act of witnessing trauma in others can allow for engagement with one's own experiences of trauma (Atkinson & Richardson, 2013: p. 3) provides a therapeutic paradigm that benefits both the reader and the author, as the catharsis of telling coupled with the immediate receipt of an engaged and empathic witness validates the experience for both parties and offers the prospect of healing. The presence of clear testimonial conventions exposes the potential for imitation (ref) and falsification, which can occur as a result of

authorial delusions, fabrications, and even misrepresentation and/or appropriation of a traumatised identity. Nevertheless, the achievement of such imposture is dependent on a convincing representation of the affective discourse associated with testimony, capable of eliciting a sense of felt authenticity (Hunt, 2000: p. 12).

The authors of the false literary testimonies explored within this study “occupy a ‘transdiscursive’ position” (Foucault, 1979: p. 24), as their “distinctive contribution[s]”, produce “the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts” as “initiators of discursive practice” (Foucault, 1979: p. 24). *Fragments* provides the prototype for fauxtobiography, opening up an analytical methodology that includes metanarrative elements, informing critique within established modes of understanding for literary Holocaust testimony (see Eaglestone, 2002). Invoking paradigms of witnessing offers access to the levels of discourse generated by the premise of traumatic self-life writing, and the necessary engagement of the other, in this case, the reader and critic, at all three phases of reception: initial publication, at the point of fraudulent exposure, and then as the text is reappraised in light of its fictionality (see Vice, 2014: p. 153-4). *Pieces* interrogates narrative fidelity, the complicity of autobiographical authorship, and the impact of embellishment on affective impulse and the reader’s compulsion to identify with the author. It explores how fabrication affects the production of the autobiographical ‘I’, and ultimately questions how exposure complicates the testimony’s affective resonance for the reader. Lastly, the LeRoy affair situates the role of the reader as central to the production of an autobiographical act. The author function is brought into relief, as is the problem



of authorial intention, both of which are particularly salient when addressing the autobiographical truth value of explicitly fictional works produced under a pseudonymous identity.

The notion of the fauxtobiography accommodates the oscillation between text and context in reading the autobiographically regulated genre of falsified literary testimony, incorporating the paratextual surround that the publication and reception of such texts produces as undeniably relevant to the metanarrative construct. That the metanarrative comes to function as a pseudoautobiographical polyphonic hybrid testimony mitigates the infringements to the autobiographical pact, as it is redeployed to accommodate the fauxtobiography's function as a composite life narrative with the author as the focus. The solo project of autobiographical writing is the autobiographical pact's fundamental dictum, catechising the author figure to establish a unified entity that straddles the text and context (Lejeune, 1989: p.11). The author is the lowest common denominator in each metatextual component, as the reviews, articles, and interviews of the paratextual surround deploy the author as the ratifying metanarrative constant. The inevitable backlash against apparently autobiographical texts that are exposed as other than that which they purport to be yields a specific site of indignation, fuelled by the reader's affective investment. The fauxtobiography enables the reconciliation of the autobiographical 'I' that sites the initial false memoir as the author's *künstlerroman*, and the contributory paratextual surround as the perpetual *roman fleuve* of the fauxtobiographical bildungsroman, all of which add to the author's oeuvre.

Through the proliferation of the fauxtobiographical construct, the texts attended to in this study harness the prevailing affective power of felt authenticity, which essentially underpins the critical and commercial appeal of falsified autobiographical acts. Contemporary autobiographical, or indeed autofictional texts, that prompt debate as to their authenticity will forever be critiqued in the vein of the Wilkomirski, Frey and LeRoy controversies, as each new example of false testimony will invoke these fauxtobiographies as a referential model. Accepting the autobiographical pact as the cornerstone of critique for self life writing, the fauxtobiographical structure requires the reappropriation of the reader/author contract in the analysis of the all-encompassing metanarrative in a methodology that reevaluates rather than reimagines the autobiographical pact. The pact still constitutes an imperative framework for falsified literary testimony, as it is important to understand the rules of construction in order to evaluate the implications of breaking them.

The difficulty of narrativising traumatic experience is inescapable and functions at “the borderland between autobiography and fiction” (2001: p. 48), as Roger Luckhurst confirms

trauma is not necessarily a stable or straightforwardly evidential or narratable event, but might well be mobile, subject to all kinds of transformation and revision. This might well be the defining element of a traumatic memory, and what makes it particularly amenable to fictional narrative instead. (2008: p. 137)

However, as Gilmore attests, “Once fiction’s truth is preferred to fact’s, the authority of both trauma and autobiography that derives from the eyewitness’s credibility is thrown into a crisis of legitimacy” (2001: p. 47). Yet, the fauxtobiography illustrates that this crisis can be mitigated by the authority of affect, the felt authenticity that legitimates the affective resonance of the narrative, and its affinity with autobiographical truth. The question of whether the events within the false testimony actually happened, and happened to the author, is supplanted by the texts’ affective capacity to ‘ring true’. Paradoxically, it is precisely the incredible horror of representations of trauma and suffering that aver their plausibility.

One major concern within the fauxtobiographical insight is the author’s motivation to deceive. Those who critique the falsified text often do so with a view to uncovering the impetus for the author’s fraudulent endeavour, which in part informs the production of the affective discourse that registers as felt authenticity. For Wilkomirski, his belief in the autobiographical truth of his testimony is attached to the affective resonance of Holocaust testimony with his own traumatised memories, in spite of the factitious discord. Faced with irrevocable evidence of his identity, Wilkomirski’s Holocaust affiliations are revealed to be the delusions of a traumatised psyche. For James Frey, his primary concern was the production and publication of literary coup, with a defiant protagonist named for himself, whose life narrative somewhat reflected his own addicted past. Frey’s claims as to his publishers’ manipulation of the generic categorisation of the text, in order to exploit the literary marketplace’s

preoccupation with life writing, are inconsistent with his apparent lack of sincere remorse for the deception. Frey maintains that, though extensively embellished, *Pieces* maintains its affective resonance as a relatable addiction and recovery narrative. Laura Albert makes a similar claim regarding the felt authenticity of the texts she wrote under the pseudonymous identity of JT LeRoy. For Albert, the LeRoy avatar was a distancing device that allowed her to recount her own traumatised past at a safe distance; therein is her justification for refusing to apologise. Though authorial intention does have some bearing on the reception of literary false testimony, it cannot entirely account for the reader's compulsion to identify.

The fact that each of the texts explored within this study remains in circulation to this day is indicative of their literary and affective value, and attests to the longevity of their fauxtobiographies as *romans fleuves* in perpetuity. Because the testimonial-witnessing paradigm encompasses the textual *künstlerroman*, and extends to the fauxtobiography, each new reader reinvigorates the overarching metanarrative, with some compelled to literally feedback via reviews and online forums. This renewed intersubjectivity further nourishes and disseminates the metanarrative, which in turn endorses the fauxtobiography's affective power. This resounding affective power has implications for such therapeutic practices as 'bibliotherapy'<sup>40</sup> and trauma rehabilitation, in that the 'prescription' of appropriate traumatic testimonies, real or imagined, can promote the emotional and psychological wellbeing of a

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<sup>40</sup> "The use of books as therapy in the treatment of mental or psychological disorders" – definition taken from [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

victim of trauma who is unable to assimilate their own experiences in to the recovery-focused enterprise of self-witnessing. This would be achieved by invoking Laub's third level of witnessing (1995: p. 61-2) that places the reader in the position of witnessing about witnessing.

In a similar vein, the authors at the centre of their respective fauxtobiographies are suspended in the enduring position of the third-level witness, which brings with it the permanent threat of being retraumatized by ongoing mediatization. Once propelled into the public domain by the publication of a very personal life narrative, particularly in the present digital age of instant access archives fed by Google and other internet search engines, the prospect of withdrawal is markedly remote. Of the three authors discussed above, Laura Albert was most impacted by the unavoidable expectation of unmitigated access, as she was sued for signing the film option to *Sarah* as JT LeRoy, primarily because she refused to sign over her life-rights for the production of a "metamovie" (see Rommelmann, 2008). Additionally, the reframing of footage shot by Marjorie Sturm before LeRoy's renunciation is now circulating as part of an arguably fauxtobiographical documentary that straddles the reveal. The unrelenting media pressure also affected Wilkomirski, in that the public anxiety around the authenticity of his memoir mobilised the production of Maechler's *The Wilkomirski Affair* (2001). Maechler's monograph laid bare Wilkomirski's whole life, from birth through to the moment of the monograph's completion in March 2000 (Maechler, 2001: p. ix). Wilkomirski was given the right to reply within the pages of Maechler's study, yet he was afforded no influence over the material or appearance of the final report. Though James Frey was initially the

victim of mediatized retraumatisation at the hands of Oprah Winfrey and her contemporaries, Winfrey later apologised for the impact her involvement had and again provided Frey with a platform for self-witness to the traumatic experience in a somewhat circuitous intersubjective encounter.

The present cultural moment is particularly susceptible to the infiltration of fauxtobiographical texts, given that social media and digital fora provide never-ending possibilities for self-representation. The present environment offers little regulation for self-witnessing, with the opportunity to do so just a status-update away. With it comes infinite access to the intersubjective act of witnessing, with the option to provide instant feedback and validation for one another's testimonial ventures, which, consequently, it is equally easy to withhold. Tobias Döring wrote:

Autobiography is a threshold genre [that] traces and crosses boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and history, selves and others, images and texts — sometimes drawing these distinctions, but more often blurring them. (Döring, 2006: p. 72)

As such, the parameters of the autobiographical pact in relation to literary self-witnessing are more of a suggestion than a contract. Traumatic testimony exposes the deficiency of autobiographical taxonomy as the constraints of memory and the impracticality of articulating trauma renders self-witnessing an unavoidable struggle towards autobiographical truth. Rather than striving for accuracy of information, far better to accept fidelity of meaning, as the felt

authenticity of affective discourse will inevitably supplant the prescriptions of genre.

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