

The Writing Life:  
Authorship and Authority in Recent  
American Autobiographical Narratives

Jonathan L. D'Amore

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Approved by:

Linda Wagner-Martin

Gregory Flaxman

Mary Floyd-Wilson

Minrose Gwin

Fred Hobson

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## Abstract

Jonathan L. D'Amore  
The Writing Life: Authorship and Authority  
in Recent American Autobiographical Narratives  
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

“I was a node in a new electronic landscape of celebrity, personality, and status,” Norman Mailer wrote in 1959, describing the literary renown he earned after the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, a decade earlier. Mailer made his career as an active participant-observer in that landscape, alternately embracing and rebelling against his position and often featuring that role at the center of his texts. This project addresses the dual nature of the author as a cultural producer and product by examining self-representations in the works of Norman Mailer, John Edgar Wideman, and Dave Eggers. Their writing about themselves illustrates the tension in autobiographical narratives which requires individuals whose social identities are inherently connected to their authorship to acknowledge that position but also to humanize it by writing *against* their roles as public figures to reveal their private, “inner” selves. This dissertation enters ongoing critical and theoretical discussions of authorship, autobiography, and celebrity through analysis of texts, contexts, and “paratexts”— the apparatus which supports and surrounds a work’s presentation to the world—in order to provide insight into the conflicting and overlapping interests of writers, publishers, and readers who are jointly invested in the ambiguity between the public and private personae of authors.

*For Maura and Frank,  
this and everything.*

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge that when your dissertation project includes a discussion of Dave Eggers, any tomfoolery in one's acknowledgements would be purely derivative and inappropriate. So there will be no more tomfoolery or any other kind of nonsense in this front matter.<sup>1</sup> After all, writing a dissertation is serious business—a serious and often isolating business, which is why I am so grateful for the kindness, generosity, and friendship of everyone who has encouraged me in this long process.

I started thinking about autobiographical nonfiction years ago as an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, and my advisor there, Joseph Buttigieg, was an important mentor as I learned to research and write about this form of literature as an academic rather than as just a student. Likewise, in the early years of my graduate education at UNC, Townsend Ludington was a jovial and wise guide. I am also grateful to Lewis Dabney, who gave me the opportunity to watch the story of a literary life blossom on the page as we worked together on his fantastic biography of Edmund Wilson.

One of my first courses as a grad student was led by Jane Danielewicz, and in the years since she has been my most helpful resource in the vast and ever-growing field of

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<sup>1</sup> Except maybe for thanking my dogs, if that counts as nonsense. Scooter Jones and Plum Tucker: I couldn't have done it without you, friends. Really.

life writing studies. In my graduate school career, I have had two opportunities which have been especially relevant to my scholarly work, and I owe Bill Andrews a debt of gratitude for both: serving as coordinator of the Morgan Writer-in-Residence Program (and working in that capacity with James Thompson, whom I would also like to thank); and acting as the managing editor of the fine and important journal, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*. It is also essential that I thank the family of Diana Poteat Hobby for their generosity in endowing the dissertation fellowship that enabled me to have a semester of work on this project uninterrupted by other professional obligations.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Works by Norman Mailer:

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>The Naked and the Dead</i>  | ND  |
| <i>Advertisements for Myself</i>   | AFM |
| “Superman Comes to the Supermarket”                                      | SCS |
| <i>Armies of the Night: History as a Novel,<br/>the Novel as History</i> | AON |

### Works by John Edgar Wideman:

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| <i>Brothers and Keepers</i> | BK |
| <i>Fatheralong</i>          | FA |
| <i>Hoop Roots</i>           | HR |

### Works by Dave Eggers:

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| <i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i>                       | AHWOSG |
| “Mistakes We Knew We Were Making”                                      | MWKWWM |
| <i>You Shall Know Our Velocity</i>                                     | YSKOV  |
| <i>What is the What: The Autobiography<br/>of Valentino Achek Deng</i> | WIW    |

## Introduction

The rapid expansion of “memoir culture” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and the concomitant rise of “life writing” as a popular and productive field of critical inquiry provide a meaningful framework for exploring the prominence of the figure of the author and its attendant cultural capital in the contemporary United States. Interest in individual lives and stories about them—conveyed through books, television, or the Internet—is at an historical high; outlets for individual self-expression proliferate proportionally to that interest; new technologies allow multitudes of writers to produce self-narratives and submit them to the world rapidly and seemingly indiscriminately. The literary opportunities of the phenomenon are manifold: in addition to the increased demand for autobiographical writing by prominent authors, the social role of the individual and the cultural role of the author have become material for writers given to introspection, social critique, and the artful expression of both.

In this project, I examine the lives of individuals who happen to be professional writers, the particular ways in which professional writers choose to represent their lives, and the various means by which publishers and reading audiences participate in the consumption and critique of the resulting texts. I see these three elements (the life events, the narrative(s) about them, and the reception of those narratives) as distinct but inextricable parts of an autobiographical triptych, each of which requires attention to the

author-autobiographer as an individual defining himself or herself within and against the families, communities, and societies of which he or she is a member. Their writing about themselves illustrates the tension in autobiographical narratives which requires individuals whose public identities are inherently connected to their authorship to acknowledge and embrace that position but also to humanize it by writing *against* their roles as public figures, revealing their private, “inner” selves. The inevitable complication which makes the phenomenon worth pursuing is that, in doing so successfully, these authors confirm or enhance their public identities and reputations as *authors*. In assessing the extended autobiographical works of Norman Mailer, John Edgar Wideman, and Dave Eggers, I argue that attention to the allegedly self-revelatory act of autobiographical writing, the theory and criticism that questions the conventional expectations for such acts, and the peculiar circumstances of fame, authority, and responsibility that underpin the inward turn to autobiographical narrative by writers already identified in the public sphere as literary authors is vital to understanding the conditions of authorship and life writing in the contemporary United States. These writers in particular demonstrate a heightened awareness of their roles as authors inside and outside their texts, and in related but crucially distinct ways that range from the most apparently self-interested (Mailer’s *Advertisements for Myself*) to the most apparently selfless (the Eggers-“authored” autobiography of Sudanese “Lost Boy” Valentino Achak Deng, *What is the What*), they take measure of the relative authority they have as public figures in American society to engage and attempt to influence that society.

In his essay “The Writer on Holiday,” Roland Barthes claims that seemingly “demystifying” magazine features about writers which demonstrate their participating in

the prosaic activities of average citizens actually serve to reinforce their “celestial” image (29). “To endow the writer publicly with a good fleshy body,” Barthes writes, “to reveal that he likes dry white wine and underdone steak, is to make even more miraculous for me, and of a more divine essence, the products of his art” (31). Autobiographical literary works also operate in a similar fashion, as authors wrestle publicly with the prosaic and personal; the authors I discuss also foreground the notion that such wrestling of the prosaic into prose is an uncommon act, and hence more a reiteration or reframing of a public self rather than a revelation of a private one. The reading public’s pursuit and reception of such work is a significant element of my analysis, and I put these authors’ works in the context of an audience which seems to seek demystification even as the appetite for it perpetuates the deification of authors who reveal themselves most effectively. I analyze texts and contexts alongside the “paratexts” of autobiography —that is, the framework which supports and surrounds a text’s presentation to the world, as articulated by Gerard Genette—in order to provide insight into the conflicting and overlapping interests of writers, publishers, and readers which is centered around this ambiguity between the public and private personae of authors.

This project also considers one particular and fundamental facet of autobiographical narrative in the context of these writers’ investigations of their own lives and participations in a public: namely, the requirement that an autobiographer, to one degree or another, must present the stories of *other* individuals’ lives and incorporate those narratives into their own. In a recent article, Nancy Miller explains the model of the “relational self” which feminist critics of autobiography have been exploring in women’s autobiography for over twenty years. “The female autobiographical self,” the theorists

assert, “comes into writing, goes public with private feelings, through a significant relation to an other” (“The Entangled Self” 544). Miller argues persuasively that the notion of the relational self is essential not just to women’s life writing, but to all writers who set out to write their own lives. “Perhaps,” she suggests, “it is time to understand the question of relation to the other—to others—as being as important, foundational, to the genre as the truth conditions of the ‘autobiographical pact.’ Not the exception but the rule....Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose” (544). In a mode of writing which privileges the individual perspective, the recognition that one’s private life—and in the case of celebrities, both major and minor, one’s public life—involves either a connection or a willful disconnection with others is an act of the most basic self-awareness as well as a complicated acknowledgement of the ethical obligations to others associated with writing about “real life.”

In short, this study analyzes the autobiographical narratives of established authors to reach conclusions about two significant subjects in contemporary literary studies: 1) the role of authorship in public and critical discourse about books and 2) the nature of autobiography in light of increased public attention and significant theoretical consideration of the form. These writers and their narratives demonstrate that the figure of the author, which is an Enlightenment-era creation and has been subject to intense scrutiny in poststructuralist criticism, is crucial to the public reception of literary fiction and nonfiction, and that life *as* an author is central to established writers’ attempts to present their personal histories in their texts and their interactions with the public. In particular, the author looms over an autobiographical text as both an artist and a subject,

the creator and the content of the narrative. As such, the author can be seen as the primary motivating factor for a potential audience to buy and to read a book. The reputations and the writing of Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers also suggest that the process and product of self-representation in text is as slippery, mutable, and inexact as autobiography theorists have suggested, and as inextricably tied to their authentic experience of their lives as “pure” autobiography purports to be. The coalescence of authorship and autobiography constitutes the conditions which authorize these writers to submit narratives about their lives for public consumption, to speak for others intentionally or obliquely, and, paradoxically, by stepping back to assert or consider their authority to do these things, to re-legitimize their skills, insights, and ethics as authors and autobiographers.

The genesis of this project was my interest in the career of Norman Mailer, a writer who saw himself subjected to gossip tabloid interest in his personal life and also believed that the artist is a special, essential cultural figure. Mailer is the foundation for this project’s interest in the interplay between writers’ reputations as authors and as individuals because his work is one of the foremost examples in postwar literature “of the way in which celebrity authors are often concerned about their uneasily intermediate position between the restricted and large-scale fields,” as critic Joe Moran writes in his book *Star Authors* (using theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology to suggest a distinction between “high art” and “pop culture”), “which in [Mailer’s] case manifests itself as a desire to be successful while still being taken seriously” (72). By embracing the fact that he was, for better or for worse but unquestionably for certain, a public figure, Mailer used the popular image of his persona as a tool in the many political, cultural, economic, and

literary fights into which he threw himself. The infuriated awareness of coalescing corporate and political power in Mailer's writing from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s leads him to argue for individualism as the only reaction to the cloying and depersonalizing effect of mass culture. His autobiographical writing in those years is rich evidence to argue that an authorial turn to one's own life narratives can be seen as an act against a system to co-opt and consume public lives.

Wideman approached the public nature of the writing life from a different tack. Like Mailer, he writes with a sense that self-representation in his texts is a method for acknowledging that his reputation as an author derives from a constructed, social narrative about him as much as his own textual production. But Wideman is, simply speaking, not so famous as Mailer was, nor is he so narcissistic about his image. Wideman instead presents a sense in both his writing and his conversations about his writing that he must be mindful of his image because of the responsibility that attends such an image. His autobiographical work pivots around his awareness that he is writing not only about himself, not only for himself, but about, for and *with* others. Because of that awareness, he carefully claims the authority his reputation gives him as well as the responsibility that come with it as he works with his family, his communities, and his readers to build his texts. Brick-and-mortar institutions (prisons, schools), social ones (the justice system, the Homewood community), conceptual ones (African-American manhood, basketball, writing), and, most importantly, the institution of the Wideman family all serve as established systems in which Wideman acts and writes as an individual and as a collaborator.



Eggers's varied career marks still another intersection of autobiographical narrative and the public role of the author. Eggers is, in the twenty-first century, the closest middlebrow America has to a full-fledged literary celebrity, and as a result, he is one of our most discussed and most divisive young authors. His fame can largely be explained as much in the context of his life as a literary person as in the context of his literary oeuvre, and, much like Mailer, he has consciously played with his reputation in popular media. Additionally, his first published work, unlike those of the other writers in this project, was a memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* —or, as Yagoda describes it, “an impressive attempt to kill the memoir, or at least deconstruct it until it was unrecognizable” (237). His various professional identifications as a memoirist, a fabulist, an ironist, a collaborator, a screenwriter, an activist, a philanthropist, and a publisher create a perfect opportunity to study both how a writer proceeds after achieving fame for writing memoir and how that literary fame inflects every other public act an individual undertakes. For Eggers, the embrace of contradiction appears to be an authorial strategy both for narrative and for life.

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The rise of poststructuralist and deconstructionist critical theory in the 1960s and 1970s neatly parallels the (decidedly less famous) beginnings of the serious, sustained, and influential investigations of the nature and art of autobiography at roughly the same time. While Elizabeth Bruss, George Gusdorf, Philippe Lejeune, and Jean Starobinski were publishing the studies that constitute the foundations of the contemporary field of

life writing studies, their more widely read fellow critics were in the midst of a revolutionary conversation about the relation between texts—a new, broadly construed rubric—and the world outside of them. With the correspondence between the world of language and the concrete world to which it is conventionally understood to refer made tenuous by the new ideas of deconstruction, it is no surprise that the practice of autobiographical writing became a rich subject for critical inquiry, as scholars began to question the very possibility of authentic self-expression—or at least pursue the idea that subjectivity might be further detached from self-expression than previously believed.

Autobiography—or more inclusively, autobiographical narrative—is, for lack of a more refined word, a particularly juicy subject for investigation in light of the literary and critical paradigms of postmodernism. In fact, almost all the major critical theorists of poststructuralism and/or postmodernism have confronted the ambiguity inherent in writers turning their literary eye upon themselves. With Roland Barthes as the most prolific of these critics on the subject (and, in fact, a practitioner in his later years), the notable theorists who directly addressed autobiography include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida (including his considerations of the earlier, related thought of Sigmund Freud and Jean-Paul Sartre), Julia Kristeva, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson. With full acknowledgement that the degree of agency and autonomy in the position is subject to extended and irresolvable debate, I believe that it is productive to consider that the author or writer or *scriptor* (following Roland Barthes's terminology) functions at the intersection of the world and the word, making a conscious effort to capture the connection between the two as well as to share it.

The responsibility for the production of a text lies with the writer, though largely his or her own participation in the act of creation is consciously left outside the created text. Though the writer is inevitably a part of the world represented and the primary agent of the words representing it, once the two merge as a written work, the writer's existence becomes peripheral. However, the complicated historical vision of the role of the writer as creator—even when attempting to be a mere facilitator of sorts; that is, finding the words which allow an unambiguous presentation of fact—has become particularly troubled in the years beginning after the second World War. Critics following the lead of the poststructuralists have considered notions of texts that view the concept of authorship as superfluous to meaningful analysis. At the same time, interest in certain cultural studies approaches to text have conversely seen the identity of the author as not only significant to textual interpretation but central to understanding individual texts' impact and resonance in the communities and broader culture into which they are disseminated. Additionally, heightened self-consciousness about the nature of creative expression has led many authors to write explicitly about their sense of their inextricable presence within texts *within* the very same texts they are writing. A variety of manifestations of this practice have become hallmarks of postmodernist fiction, and the self-consciously authorial approach to creating texts has extended well beyond the aegis of fiction, into the practice of journalism<sup>2</sup>, biography<sup>3</sup>, and, in great volume, autobiography. In response to

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<sup>2</sup> Journalism practiced by participant-observers who openly acknowledge by their limited scope of perspective and the very real possibility that their role in the action affects the objectivity of their reporting has visible beginnings in works such as George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1931) and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), but becomes a "movement" in what Tom Wolfe called "The New Journalism," notable for its widely-read participant-observer reports in magazines such as *Esquire*, *Harpers*, *New York*, *Rolling Stone*, by

these recent phenomena (in concert with valuable critical perspectives ranging from postcolonialism to the science of memory to disability studies), literary scholars have given increased attention to the *art* of autobiography and other non-fiction writing. This response is in many ways a reflection of the increased awareness of writers undertaking such projects that their texts are as much artifice as conventional fictional ones, and can likewise be judged as art.

The writer is, on the practical, empirical level of putting words onto paper, governor of his or her text. Even the journalist, the chronicler, and the historian can control his or her body of writing through method and mode. Yet, traditionally, we recognize a clear distinction between the novelist and the journalist in the amount of

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writers including Wolfe himself, Mailer, Joan Didion, Jimmy Breslin, Michael Herr, Gay Talese, and Hunter S. Thompson. The New Journalism phenomenon is relevant to this project insofar as Mailer is one of the movement's principal figures, but a fuller discussion of the conditions of the magazine industry that contributed to the popularity of this "style" of journalism is the purview of another project. Wolfe's anthology *The New Journalism* (1973) gave the approach its name and a cogent, interesting contemporary explication, and a few decent trade books explore the moment, including Carol Posgrove's gossipy but fairly comprehensive history *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, but Didn't We Have Fun? Esquire in the Sixties* (1995) and Marc Weingarten's *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Historian Jo Burr Margadant explains some of the influence biographers recognize in postmodern thinking in her introduction to *The New Biography*: "Given the new self-consciousness of historians about their own role as creators of the history that they write, a narrative strategy designed to project a unified persona has become for the new biography nearly as suspect as claims to 'definitive' biography. The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence or an individual with multiple selves whose different manifestations reflect the passage of time, the demands and option of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to represent that person" (7). Recent examples of the changing practice of biography include the inventive if bizarre biography of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch* (1999) by Edmund Morris, which uses a self-conscious mostly-fictional version of the biographer as a narrator, and the inventive if exhausting *Dickens* (1991) by Peter Ackroyd, which overtly fictionalizes Charles Dickens's life in sections, including a moment in which biographer and subject "meet," and attempts a biographical work that mimics a novel Dickens himself might have written.

power each writer has over the events of the text—the story. Because the journalist and the historian are bound not just to fact, but to the story as it has happened, the agency wielded by a novelist to create rather than find meaningful moments is not applicable. Any writer is always responsible for some degree of interpretation, though, precisely because of his or her control over style and command of the razor of inclusion and omission. Any event, fictional or factual, becomes compelling and significant *in prose* through the degree of artistry with which the author writes it. Naturally certain happenings are, of their own accord and qualities, more interesting and important than others; in choosing to write, though, an author inevitably interprets the significance of such an occurrence and reveals some measure of this in the written work. Thus, when the subject of a piece of writing is actual or factual—rather than fictional, though the tenuousness of such differentiation has been a point under critical consideration for several decades now—the author who is self-conscious of his or her roles as an interpreter of facts and *creator* of the text concerning them must confront that position; such writers often do so with overt doubt of their ability to overcome their subjectivity and “tell the truth.”

Recognizing the place at the junction of world and word also means recognizing one’s position within each sphere. Several writers (the practitioners of the New Journalism, for example) have eschewed objective remove and embraced their own shared existence with the experiences they are attempting to represent; they have even acknowledged the value of their personal experience as the portion of the larger public event most accessible to them. When attempting public history they have, in many cases, turned to private experience as the launching point for analysis. The incapacity of one

individual observer to absorb a situation and speak authoritatively about it drives the contemporary writer-observer to seek out a manner of interpretation that is meaningful and justifiable, and the result can be a shift in perspective from observer to participant-observer. For example, the participant-journalist role that Mailer plays in *Armies of the Night* (1968) contains a distinct type of agency for creation, as one's actions and decisions *during* an event can manipulate both the event itself and the possibilities for presenting that event in writing. This shift in perspective often seems to demand that the author also devote textual attention to the self as well as the situation.

When the subject of a text, either nominally or indirectly, is the creator of said text, the distinction of the writer's roles inside and outside the events described, his or her capacity for objectivity, and the reader's approach to these issues are conceptually and materially vexed. The attempt to tell one's own story in print invites readers to trust a particular point of view that is, to one degree or another, biased toward its subject. Whether the writer's explicit and implicit motivations are financial, political, familial, artistic, or any combination thereof, a reader must be mindful that autobiographical work has the potential to generate the financial and cultural capital of successful authorship as well as similar types of capital that redound to individuals whose stories the public responds to eagerly or sympathetically. In many instances, the successful publication of wholly or partially autobiographical work can be a valuable, productive, and richly deserved means of access to an audience for individuals—or communities represented by such individuals—who have been historically, politically, and systematically excluded

from the organs of power.<sup>4</sup> When the author who already has such means and access along with a reputation for literary ability and a comfortable amount of cultural capital, if not necessarily a wealth of it, turns to autobiography, as the writers discussed in this project do (with the exception of Dave Eggers, who first earns his literary reputation through his autobiographical work—a distinction pursued in Chapter Three), critical readers must be mindful both of the many complicating rhetorical issues inherent in autobiographical writing as well as of issues related to authorship and reputation that attend the reception of works by established writers.

In his seminal essay “The Autobiographical Pact,” Philippe Lejeune codified for the first time the conditions which identify something as “autobiography,” implicating three parties—author, publisher, and reader—as essential to his definition. His idea is that for a work to be considered true “autobiography,” the writer and reader must enter a pact, sanctified by the publisher, in which it is understood that the author of the text, its narrator, and its protagonist are the same person, essentially indivisible. He identified autobiography as 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” (Lejeune 4). Under close scrutiny, this concept seems inadequately inclusive, precluding hosts of inventive though not explicitly fictional techniques, such as

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<sup>4</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in the introduction to their collection *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, explain this concept well. A marginalized figure can assert an empowered self by “deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain” in the construction of “an ‘I’ that becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention” (xix).

third-person narration (e.g., *The Education of Henry Adams*)<sup>5</sup> or indirect self-biography (e.g., *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*)—works that may not meet the exclusive definition of the pact but which are, effectively though arguably, the same in intent and effect. Though the autobiographical pact, in praxis, is an imperfect concept (Lejeune himself admitted so and revised the idea in “The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)”), a great deal of what it suggests about the relationships entangling writers, their autobiographical subjects, and readers is important to understanding and critiquing the ways that autobiography and its related forms differ in content and reception from other literary categories. As Lejeune’s revised definition—“a discourse on the self ... in which the question ‘who am I?’ is answered by a *narrative* that tells ‘how I became who I am’” (Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact (Bis)” 124)—implies, a narrative that purports to make an authentic revelation about its writer may be shrouded in invention and fictional technique yet still support analysis of its relation to an author’s life.

The focus of this project is directed primarily at autobiographical narratives written by *litterateurs* because such texts open themselves to analytical inquiry at the levels of literary practice, personal and public historical narrative, artistic intent, and consumer and critical interest. First, our conception of these writers’ literary careers necessarily includes the autobiographical writing they produce because, as is especially the case with Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers, their autobiographical narratives are nearly universally judged of a quality equal to or better than their other literary work. It is

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<sup>5</sup> Lejeune addressed this approach to autobiographical narrative (with a number of varieties) in a later article, “Autobiography in the Third Person” (1977). Mailer wrote autobiographically in the third person in *Armies of the Night* (see Chapter One) and in many other pieces of nonfiction in the 1970s through *The Fight* (1975), after which he moved away from the technique—and, in fact, from autobiographical narrative altogether.



difficult to approach these writers' bodies of work without consideration of these memoirs, and it is now impossible to imagine the course of their careers without these books. Second, as is the case with the autobiographies of major cultural and political figures as well as historicist analysis of works in other literary genres, a literary autobiographical narrative is a practical tool for understanding a historical moment or a cultural phenomenon from a (partially) representative individual viewpoint. Mailer's chronicle of a significant political event in the national response to the Vietnam War, Wideman's account of learning the dehumanizing processes of the American prison system through his brother's incarceration, and Eggers's anxious accounting of both parental loss and youthful indirection in the now mostly ignored American years between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the events of September 11, 2001 are all examples of texts which merge personal experience with the potential for productive cultural and political history. Third, though one of their intents is fairly plainly to describe events from the authors' lives, such narratives appear crafted with skill and intention to achieve more as texts than mere chronicle or reportage, and so can be engaged as efforts at art. Fourth, these narratives also have "lives" as books, sold and circulated to the financial benefit of the writers and their publishers because of their content, the perceived artistic quality of that content, and the identities of the authors who both lived and recorded the experiences that are the source of that content.

In the remainder of this introduction, I will establish a critical background and analytic apparatus for this project's investigation of the autobiographical work of established literary authors. I have divided this survey of the relevant ongoing critical and theoretical conversations into four sections: "The Life of the Author"; "The Life of the

Book”; “The Life in the Book”; and “The Lives of Others.” These discussions cover ideas and material that fit together to form the foundation for my chapters on individual authors. “The Life of the Author” briefly surveys the modern history of the concept of authorship, the poststructuralist vision of the irrelevance of the author figure to critical analysis, and the characteristics of literary celebrity that make the identity of the author important to both cultural and critical discussions of autobiography. The conversation of the author’s significance outside the pages of his or her texts to the reception of the narratives they relate continues in “The Life of the Book,” which applies Gerard Genette’s theories of paratexts to autobiographical work. This section also considers the recent climate for publishing life writing and explores the connection to memoirs by literary figures. “The Life in the Book” takes up the question of autobiographical writing’s possibilities and limitations, fitting the convincing theoretical evidence for the division between the writing and the written self into the argument that extends from the previous two sections. Finally, “The Lives of Others” addresses the inevitable implication of others’ lives and their narrative vision of them into an author’s autobiographical writing, the responsibilities of an author toward those he or she represents, the imbalance of power inherent in such representation, and the strategies with which he or she writes about those relations.

### **The Life of the Author**

The memoirs and autobiographies of individuals already publicly recognized as authors, especially those written in the later twentieth century, raise interesting questions about

the nature of authorship and the changing perception of the figure of the author in Western culture since the Renaissance. Because authorship historically connotes some degree of “inspiration”—whether from God or from the writer’s own genius—a narrative purporting to record some or all of the author’s own life—her personal segment of reality rather than imagination—complicates the creative aspect of such authorial work. Further, because the idea of the author is functionally connected to the legal construction of copyright, as Martha Woodmansee has detailed in her critical history *The Author, Art, and the Market*, a writer’s legally sanctioned ownership of her own life story—including the lives of other individuals involved—is a situation laden with potential for misunderstanding and abuse, particularly when that writer, by virtue of being an “author,” has access to such protections that others do not.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the author function and the protection of copyright do not extend to any utterance about one’s own life; one cannot copyright, say, a story about particularly bad dinner party related over coffee to a friend. Likewise, as Michel Foucault explains in his widely read essay “What is an Author?” the notion of an author, as opposed to the “signer” of a private letter or the anonymous scribbler of rhyming graffiti on a wall, is reserved for certain types of texts. Foucault writes, “[W]e could say that in a civilization like our own there are a certain number of discourses that are endowed with ‘the author function,’ while others are deprived of it” (107). He asserts that the author as a figure recognized as responsible for certain texts is “characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society” (108). Memoirs and other literary autobiographical

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, because the current conditions of copyright in the United States make it so that the holder and her estate maintain control of the copyright practically in perpetuity, such complications as they relate to the lives of others are amplified.

narratives are indisputably a part of such discourses in our contemporary society, and writers who craft narratives of their own lives, particularly when they do so alongside work in other literary genres, attain a public status as an author that then inscribes their authority to speak and write on subjects often only tangentially related to their personal experiences.

Woodmansee's account of the history of the author figure in eighteenth-century Europe succinctly traces the evolution of an idea that is the foundation for American legal thinking on authorship and that continues to inform current critical perspectives on writers' relations to their texts. She explains first that the Renaissance vision of an writer's work "was an unstable marriage of two distinct concepts" (36). The literary man (indeed, authors were almost exclusively male) "was first and foremost a craftsman; that is, he was master of a body of rules, or techniques, preserved and handed down in rhetoric and poetics, for manipulating traditional materials in order to achieve the effects prescribed by the cultivated audience of the court to which he owed both his livelihood and social status" (Woodmansee 36). This measure of authorial skill persists into our contemporary book criticism, divorced from courts and patrons but still attached to the function of pleasing an audience. Praise of an author as a fine craftsman is a method either for putting icing on the cake of greatness or for mitigating criticisms for lack of depth, insight, or timeliness by acknowledging a writer's skill for composing florid prose or constructing compelling plots. The second condition of Renaissance authorship Woodmansee describes accounted for literary achievements which seems to transcend mere craftsmanship. "To explain such moments a new concept was introduced," she explains: "the writer was said to be inspired—by some muse, or even by God" (36). And

though the two conceptions of the practice of writing, as master of a set of skills and as vessel for divine expression, “would seem to be incompatible with each other,” they continued to coexist, “often between the covers of a single treatise, until well into the eighteenth century” (Woodmansee 36).

In the eighteenth century, the “author” came to be seen as a figure distinct from other mere writers because of the element of inspiration in literary work. The element of craftsmanship was diminished or discarded altogether by theorists of the time, who also reconceived the source of literary inspiration as internal rather than divine. As a consequence, the act of literary creation seemed also to imply ownership of one’s text. “‘Inspiration’ came to be explicated in terms of *original genius*,” Woodmansee notes, “with the consequence that the inspired work was made peculiarly and distinctively the product—and the property—of the writer” (37). As the public began to see such writers as possessing a special genius and the rights and responsibilities connected with it, the producers of literature earned a new enshrinement as unique figures. Woodmansee summarizes the process by which the concept of the author, which persists in similar form today, was born:

[M]oments of inspiration move, in the course of time, to the center of reflection on the nature of writing. And as they are increasingly credited to the writer’s own genius, they transform the writer into a unique individual uniquely responsible for a unique product. That is, from a (mere) vehicle of preordained truths—truths as ordained either by universal human agreement or by some higher agency—the *writer* becomes an *author* (Lat. *auctor*, originator, founder, creator). (37)

The emphasis on origination is the key to claims of ownership. Woodmansee cites the thinking of (Englishman) Edward Young in his 1759 essay “Conjectures on Original Composition” as a foundation for the formal establishment of the principle of copyright

in German law in the following decade.<sup>7</sup> Young's essay foregrounds the significance of "originality" as the mark which distinguishes literary art and philosophical thought from mere "learned" writing, for the author "reverences" himself by giving preference to "the native growth of thy own mind" over "the richest import from abroad" (qtd. in Woodmansee 39). Truly original works will be identified with their creator, he insists. And most importantly, as Woodmansee describes, Young's thinking "makes a writer's ownership of his work the necessary, and even sufficient condition for earning the honorific title of 'author,' and he makes such ownership contingent upon a work's originality" (40).

At the same time that the figure of "author" was being originated, so to speak, two other concepts and a terminology to describe them were also achieving a status of codification: the idea of "autobiography" and that of the "individual." The regularization of "autobiography" as a word with a recognizable meaning occurred in Europe in the late eighteenth century, according to Robert Folkenflik's survey of the term's beginnings in the introduction to his collection *The Culture of Autobiography*. Folkenflik traces the development of the awareness of autobiography as a literary endeavor along with the evolution of the word itself, noting the concomitant rise of the use of "self-biography" (by nineteenth century critic Robert Southey, for example) and "autobiography" (in writings and reviews by his contemporary Isaac D'Israeli), as well as the related German version "*autobiografen*." His history is most interesting for its revelation that there were no common words beyond the French *memoires* (which they continued to use and of course still do) and the inexact "confessions" for a type of writing that had been practiced

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<sup>7</sup> Woodmansee notes that the Germany copyright law is regarded as the first precedent for legally protecting the work of author as his personal property.

for some time before the “invention” of the word “autobiography,” and hence critical distinctions were imprecise or not made at all.

As an example, Folkenflik cites the famous biographer Samuel Johnson (who wrote and destroyed his own autobiography well before such a term existed), explaining that he preferred autobiography to biography because “the autobiographer is closer to useful truth, and because he knows it, he will be less likely to distort that truth than a partisan.” However, Folkenflik points out, it is clear that “Johnson does not need a special word for autobiography because he thinks of it as a form of biography” (7-8). The significance of this lack of distinction is that if autobiography is thought of as identical to biography in practice, incredibly vital questions about identity, memory, authorship, self-reflection, and self-representation have not been asked. Yet Johnson’s view was not necessarily the prevailing one, as some thinkers in the eighteenth century did consider, at the least, questions of personality as important to the reading of autobiographies. Folkenflik includes an excerpt from a fairly humorous analysis by German poet Friedrich Schlegel which demonstrates an awareness of the author’s motivation and creative agency in telling the story of his life. Schlegel writes:

Pure autobiographies [*Autobiographien*] are written either by neurotics who are fascinated by their own ego [I], as in Rousseau’s case; or by authors of a robust artistic and adventuresome self-love, such as Benvenuto Cellini; or by born historians who regard themselves only as material for historic art; or by women who also coquette with posterity; or by pedantic minds who want to bring even the most minute things in order before they die and cannot let themselves leave the world without commentaries. [They] can also be regarded as mere *plaidoyers* [legal pleadings] before the public. Another great group among the autobiographers [*Autobiographen*] is formed by the autopseusts [self-deceivers]. (qtd. in Folkenflik 4)

Obviously, work which we might now regard as autobiography was written before the term for it was put into use, but the need for the word did coincide with an explosion in the writing of autobiographical narrative in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The interest in the story of one individual's life, and individuals eager to write and disseminate those stories, coincides with both the establishment of the legal and literary concept of authorship and the broader philosophical inquiry into the nature of the individual.

Michel Foucault opens his essay "What is an Author" by briefly taking account of the historical moment that Woodmansee describes. "The coming into being of the notion of the 'author,'" Foucault observes, constitutes the privileged moment of *individualization* in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences (101). As Raymond Williams details in *Keywords*, the common use of the term and the concept of the "individual" that we share today also began in the late eighteenth century, at which time, as advances occurred in both biology and political thought, "a crucial shift in attitudes can clearly be seen in uses of the word (Williams 163). That shift became fundamental to many ideas of the Enlightenment, at which time the arguments in political theory "began from individuals, who had an initial and primary existence, and law and forms of society were derived from them" (164). The coincident establishment of the concepts of "author," "autobiography" and "individual" in the Enlightenment period, therefore, are not so surprising, because the enterprise of an individual turning his special genius upon his own life to better understand it and the society around him seems particularly attuned to the issues of the day. The value to readers likewise undergoes a shift at the time, as Woodmansee explains the "radically new conception of the book" at

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<sup>8</sup> In one paragraph, Folkenflik casually cites over a dozen works from between 1820 and 1850.



the time of the American and French Revolutions, which, as “an imprint or record of the intellection of a unique individual—hence a ‘tremendous betrayer’ of that individual—entail[ed] new reading strategies” (55). Neoclassicists, she says, had believed that the pleasure of reading “derived from the reader’s recognition of himself in a poet’s representations (a pleasure guaranteed by the supposed essential similarity of all men).” The new conception of writing and authorship located the “pleasure of reading...instead in the exploration of an Other, in penetrating to the deepest reaches of the foreign, because absolutely unique consciousness of which the work is verbalized embodiment” (55).

The relevance of this relatively ancient history in a project which includes in its purview at least one primary text published as recently as 2008 and all within a period still shakily identified in literary studies as “contemporary” may appear oblique; however these concepts, though challenged and adapted by poststructuralist and postmodern thought, remain effectually in practice in the works discussed, and most other similar texts being produced. Though the spirit of the Enlightenment and the possibility inherent in its dominant thought of a grand unifying narrative for humanity have faded in the postmodern era, the emphasis on individuals’ narratives has not. Mailer engaged in the practice precisely because he believed the empty conformity-minded forces of corporations and technology required resistance in the form of individual perspective and creativity. Wideman and Eggers also turn inward to create autobiographical narratives with the awareness that their experiences are simultaneously unique and eminently repeatable. Their authorship, as a practical matter of publishing and legality, is almost taken for granted; in establishing authorship in relation to copyright, questions of

“original genius” have been discarded, though the issue of originality persists. The reading public’s appetite for the work of individual authors, especially their autobiographies, has only grown since the eighteenth century. In this regard, the value and significance of the eighteenth century ideas remain unmitigated.

However, legitimate challenges to the somewhat uncomplicated notion that an author is the sole, creative progenitor of his texts began to circulate among linguists and literary theorists in the twentieth century. Explorations of the nature of language itself complicated impressions of the author as a unique genius *and* master craftsman in complete control of his work. Theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, working in Russia just after World War I and the Russian Revolution and so of greater influence in Western Europe and the U.S. later in the century, explored the concept of language’s meaning deriving largely from social contexts and the demands of communication. Bakhtin’s particular interest in “artistic prose” as a site for examining his ideas leads to a vision of the writer working as one voice marshalling others but not operating independently of them. In addition to dealing with the inability of language to precisely describe objects that are frequently more complex and contradictory than words can encapsulate, Bakhtin explains in his important essay “Discourse in the Novel,” “[T]he prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it.” Bakhtin insists that the meaning, value, and even the very existence of the writer’s language depends upon the cacophonous chorus of voices into which her work enters. “For the prose writer,” he continues, “the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices

create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they ‘do not sound’” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 278).

In Bakhtin’s formulation, the author of artistic prose has an independent voice in the chorus, capable of artistic “nuances,” but is not a completely independent agent of language. As for the role of the lives of authors and their relation to texts, the primacy of language and form as the locus for criticism that arose alongside modernism diminished the relevance of the author as a presence in texts. The rise of formalism and New Criticism insisted that the events of an author’s life were peripheral and even extraneous to critical interpretation, and the subsequent popularity of poststructuralism and deconstruction emphasized language as an entity entirely outside the explicit control of the author and unattached altogether from the author as a source of meaning or a figure beyond the constructs of language.

In “What is an Author?” Foucault explains that the “current usage” of “the notion of writing” which was in vogue among poststructuralists erased the figure of the author as a specific individual producing a work and instead seemed to “transpose the empirical characteristics of the author with a transcendental anonymity” (104). Foucault’s explication of the effect of the view of writing rather than authorship as primary, even primal, is actually an echo of the early formulations of authorship that Woodmansee describes, a combination of aesthetic production and religious inspiration. “Giving writing a primal status seems to be a way of retranslating, in transcendental terms, both the theological affirmation of its sacred character and the critical affirmation of its creative character,” Foucault says. “To imagine writing as absence seems to be a simple

repetition, in transcendental terms, of both the religious principle of inalterable and yet never fulfilled tradition, and the aesthetic principle of the work's survival, its perpetuation beyond the author's death, and its enigmatic *excess* in relation to him" (104-105).

Roland Barthes's famous 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" sets out to explode the "positivism" in the modern literary view of the author, "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology, which has attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (143). Repeating the principles of his objections to popular interest in authors' personal lives that he first articulated in "The Writer on Holiday," he writes in a tone verging on frustration about the continued "reign" of the author "in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines," and remarks that literature's image in "ordinary" culture is "tyrannically centered" on the personality of authors. He continues to complain that in criticism, "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" ("The Death of the Author" 143). Barthes's prescription for meaningful criticism is the relocation of authority for textual meaning from the writer to the reader. Because texts are not a collection of words with a clear, "theological" meaning, but rather, in an echo of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash,...a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146), the writer cannot be an author or an originator of anything, merely a "*scriptor*," as Barthes

says, or an aggregator. Instead, the reader is charged with constituting the text as a unified, meaningful whole:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. ("Death of the Author" 148)

The shift of authority from writer to reader, the moment Barthes describes as the "birth of the reader" which makes a necessity of the "death of the author," is a shift of creative power from the author to the critic and, at least in theory, a democratic move from the world's relatively few writers to its many readers. The model and the many critical and theoretical adaptations that follow it are attractive for myriad reasons to those who sought new modes of critical inquiry and a means to work against the dominant Western hegemony supported by cultural and literary work, much of it focused around the figure of the author. The theory of the author as a locus of cultural power as Barthes and poststructuralists colleagues articulated suggests that the same system which supports the author-based mode of critique supports the patriarchal structure of society. In *Intertextuality*, Graham Allen explains the point of view that puts the figure of the author at the center of political and cultural debate:

The ideology of the author, that which argues that the author's dominance over the text is unquestionable, depends upon the same kind of logic which we have already seen Barthes attacking with regard to the idea of the 'work.' Notions of paternity, of authority, of filiation—fathership, ownership, giving birth, familial power—all attach themselves to the name of the author in order to endorse it at the same moment as they express through it dominant social structures of power. (71)

The connection between the author and the organs of power, however indirect, is a view that prevails, among many other reasons, because of limited access to publishing and distribution. In the case of autobiographical work, the ability to tell one's own life story is, regardless of its compelling elements or potentially influential perspective, tantamount to the ability to tell it in print. Issues of access complicate the wholesale application of the poststructuralist move away from the author precisely because the subversive qualities of such criticism remain subversive, and authority remains located in the traditionally white, male, heterosexual "establishment." Even with the democratizing technological advances for printing, publishing, and distributing texts, the means to acquire cultural capital and effectively distribute a writer's work remain shuttered to most (including, in fact, most white, heterosexual males). The sense that power-brokers control the social functions of literature is, in fact, so evident and so widespread that no less an establishment figure than Matthew Bruccoli, the indefatigable academic champion of F. Scott Fitzgerald, can, shortly after asserting "luck" as one of the essential bona fides of a successful author, criticize the "critical establishment" which he sees functioning primarily in "the groves of academe" and its almost exclusive responsibility for "an author's reputation": "Reviewing and criticism in American literary journals is controlled by and addressed to constituencies of politics, gender, race, and sexuality," he says, discussing the "Role of the Writer in the Twenty-First Century," "They write for each other. Authors who are connected are rewarded with praise, prizes, recognition, promotion and tenure, contracts, and even book sales. It is hard for a writer who is just a writer to get inducted into this mafia" (Bruccoli 143). Bruccoli believes a shift transferred power from critics interested in "quality" to those interested in identity politics, yet his

articulation of the system essentially describes the function of the critical and publishing establishment that has been in place in the U.S. for the better part of its existence.

These practical and political considerations about the way that texts find their way into print clarify the significance of the writer's identity outside the functionary role as the producer of texts. And indeed, as Barthes's steadfast work criticizing the attention given to certain writers as special geniuses demonstrates, it is apparent that he was quite aware of the kinds of power the author could maintain in public life. Joe Moran, in his book *Star Authors*, pursues the question of the relation of authors as public figures to the reception of their work. He points out that, first, in the theoretical debate over authorship, "Barthes and Foucault, then, are criticizing not so much the common-sense notion that individual authors write texts, but the kinds of mystical associations which cluster around them in capitalist societies, naturalizing them as the only authoritative source of textual meaning and as a locus of power and authority within a culture" (Moran 59). The life of the author, regardless of the figure's "death" in the poststructuralist practice of criticism, most certainly did not disappear from the bowels of the publishing industry nor from the bastions of book criticism that support it. Critic Kate Douglas, discussing the importance of the life of the author to publishers' presentations of autobiographical texts, summarizes this condition. At a time when two, or perhaps even three generations of literary theorists have been raised on the notion that the biography of the author is almost irrelevant to the text," she writes in "'Blurbing' Biographical: Authorship and Autobiography," "in the contemporary world of book publication and marketing, the author has if anything become even more crucial to a book's success" (806).

The author as a celebrity (or perhaps more accurately for most, mini-celebrity) figure continues to draw attention to writer's personal lives as the subject of gossipy profiles intended to draw audiences and as a lay-person's key to deciphering the complex canonical works by major authors. In *Biography: A Brief History*, his recent survey of the history of the purpose and practices of the genre, career biographer Nigel Hamilton exalts in the current popular interest in life writing, unmistakably gleeful to take note of the fact that, despite the "ridicule" that postmodernists levied against "human identity, encompassed in an individual author's name" while attempting to "trash" biography and autobiography as mere "incantations by imposters," "[f]ortunately, academe did not control either biography or autobiography, which went along pretty much in the same vein, regardless of doomsayers" (209). Hamilton continues to celebrate the triumph of biographical narrative, triumphantly and, frankly, snidely observing, "To the chagrin of Roland Barthes—who despised the universalist assumptions of a French culture that did not include him—the lives of authors, especially French authors (Balzac, Baudelaire, Zola, Proust, Sand, Dumas, Hugo, Rousseau, Gide, Colette), now proved popular in the English-speaking world as never before" (210). Though obscured by its unbecoming tone, Hamilton's account amply demonstrates the relevance of the figure of the author to the popular reception for certain books and the particular interest readers invest in the *life* of the author, and by extension, academic criticism that intends to account for the lives of texts in the world outside their pages.

Seán Burke, in his book *The Death and Return of the Author*, considers the need for a broader critical perspective for reading texts that sustains the connection between a writer's work and her life. "Needless to say, work and life are not opposed, not even in



the casual manner by which night is opposed to day,” he points out, adding that the “principles of any such counterpoise are themselves impossible to imagine.” He continues, Nor either is an author’s life necessarily contingent, something which can be summarily extricated and reduced to a position of irrelevance or inferiority in the reading of a text” (188). At the very least, criticism must be able to account for the centrality of an author’s life to the production and circulation of texts, if not necessarily to their meaning. Burke then ponders the questions that arise when a given text hovers around an auto/biographical subject, and the *meaning* of a text is contingent upon its connection to author’s real experience:

The grounding assumption of theoretical objections to “life” is that through appealing to the biographical referent, we are importing phenomena from one realm into another wherein it is alien, improper, incongruous. Yet, even whilst suspending reservations about this demarcation between life and an abiotic writing, what does a pure textualism or formalism do with a text which incorporates the (auto)-biographical as a part of its dramaturgy, a text which stages itself within a biographical scene? (Burke 188)

It is for this reason that I believe attention to the figure of the author, particularly as it relates to reading and circulation of texts, remains important. Additionally, the autobiographical narratives of writers who have establishment-sanctioned reputations as authors demand critical attention specifically because—in important ways intrinsic and extrinsic to their writing that I enumerate below—their lives as authors straddle the blurry boundary between private and public life in a fashion that is uniquely centered in the book. Their writing lives, that is, their lives as authors, and the methods with which they present them in their autobiographical work both contribute to readings of the theoretical divide between a writing self and a written one while simultaneously insuring that the author herself has a felt presence inextricable from interpretation of her text.

Joe Moran, writing about the public interest in the private lives of authors and how those authors' public persona circulate in the mass media at some indistinct distance from those private lives, argues that there is a connection between New Critical or poststructuralist emphasis on texts rather than writers and on the effects of book publicity and the popular press's portrayal of writers. "If the main contention of anti-intentionalist textual criticism is that a text 'is not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)'," he notes, "a similar case might be made for the way in which celebrity has impacted on the work and public personality of authors. The academy's scepticism about the figure of the author thus has more similarities than might at first be apparent with celebrity's appropriation of the authorial personality" (58).

Moran's *Star Authors* and Loren Glass's *Authors, Inc.* are two significant critical works addressing questions about the life of the author in the twentieth century through the lens of the modern realities of celebrity culture. Glass examines the public lives of authors in America in the very broadly defined period of literary modernism, with special emphasis on popular literary authors' autobiographical writing. He positions Mark Twain's model of celebrity authorship, such as his careful control of his photographic image and a style that maintained a consistent authorial voice across his writing, his public appearances, and his interaction with the press, and how that model was adopted, changed, and developed by widely read modernist writers in the twentieth century. He looks specifically at the autobiographical work of Jack London, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway, as well as Mailer. Glass sees the confluence of public attention to art in the early twentieth century, more streamlined and simultaneously more diverse

avenues for distribution of literature, the burgeoning of “middlebrow” culture and a growing “intellectual class,” a broadening belief in the modernist ideal of the artist as a heroic (usually male) figure, and even the beginnings of the film industry as the ideal conditions for literary celebrity. Glass ends his study with Mailer, identifying his straddle of modernism and postmodernism and the change in mass culture as the end of the era and the possibility of literary celebrity in America. His summation of the conditions that he interprets as the end of the possibility for authors as celebrity figures counters Brucoli’s contention that small journals and academics wield real power; Glass claims that the mosaic literary institution of the past now lacks the authority to make writers into public figures because the components of that institution are so diffuse and its influence overcome by entertainment media:

Indeed, the bohemia that nourished the literary personalities of the early and mid-twentieth century no longer exist. The sort of dissident experimental apprenticeship that determined the careers of Hemingway or Kerouac no longer centrally informs the work of contemporary authors. Little magazines and small, independent houses continue to publish, but since the Beats, they neither speak for a coherent class fragment nor attract the attention of the mass media. Nor, since the heyday of the New York intellectuals, does a coherent class of cultural critics continue to arbitrate literary distinction in such a way as to get the attention of the culture industries. (Glass 200).

The diminished attention given to the public lives of authors naturally cleaves to the diminished share of attention given to reading books in culture generally. Yet the perceived public personalities of authors do sell books, as the content of publicity machinery that surrounds publication proves. Moran’s *Star Authors* argues, as does this dissertation, that the public lives of authors—some of whom, like Dave Eggers, are celebrities within a smaller, more tightly constrained field of American popular culture

but are celebrities nonetheless<sup>9</sup>—remain significant to both the content of published works and their production and consumption. Moran is even successfully able to argue for that avant-garde novelist Kathy Acker was a celebrity in her life, a “product of a difficult mediation between bohemian and mass culture,” despite her own “implacably hostile” attitude toward the American fixation on celebrity (133). Our contemporary “culture industries” do give heed to literary authors, occasionally those as studiously transgressive as Acker, even if that attention comes in a crowded, overheated, and increasingly ephemeral media environment. Citing the examples of J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, two writers whose hermetic removes from public society magnify their lack of a public identities into subjects of massive cultural curiosity, Moran explores the qualities of the public interest in literary figures who seem, more than other pop culture figures, to have authentic private existences rather than manufactured fodder for marketing copy and gossip magazines. “Author-recluses clearly tap into this longing” for access to a public figure’s “real” life, Moran says, “because their ‘private’ selves seem to be more authentic than that of other celebrities, untouched by the contaminating effects of the publicity machine” (64).

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<sup>9</sup> Eggers’s 2003 marriage to novelist Vendela Vida provides some evidence of his popularity as a public figure beyond the name on his books, yet yoked to his writing. A piece in the online culture magazine *Salon* announcing the wedding begins: “For all you **Dave Eggers** groupies out there (and you know who you are), he’s now officially unavailable. The literary darling tied the knot with writer **Vendela Vida**” (Croft). “Groupies,” a term more often heard in reference to rock stars, Hollywood actors, and professional athletes, is used ironically here, but intentionally. “Literary darling,” a phrase that seems more of the 1950s than the 2000s, is used without irony. By 2009, a reviewer of the film *Away We Go*, for which the couple wrote the screenplay, assesses the significance of their involvement, noting that they are “sometimes referred to as ‘the Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie of the literary world’” (O’Leary).

On the spectrum of celebrity in America, authors certainly stand at the low end in terms of broad name recognition. With exceptions such as J.K. Rowling or Stephen King, writers whom a majority of Americans might identify as readily as a film director such as Stephen Spielberg or a politician such as Hillary Clinton—not to even consider a blockbuster film star like Angelina Jolie or a pop musician such as Michael Jackson—are scarce or nonexistent. Yet, with the support of popular tastemakers like Oprah Winfrey, who has regularly hosted Toni Morrison on her program and has spotlighted the work of Cormac McCarthy, among others, or *Time* magazine, which published an issue with Jonathan Franzen on the cover in 2010 (with an accompanying article identifying Franzen as a member of a “perennially threatened species: the American literary novelist”), some vestige of the author-as-celebrity moment Glass sees as having peaked with Hemingway remains.

In particular, the sustained and growing interest in memoir and autobiography is an indication that the reading public craves some combination of a writer’s work and her life. In some regard, the fascination with life narratives overlaps with the public fascination with celebrities, insofar as the core of that interest is an either voyeuristic or sympathetic investment in the personal history of an individual, usually an individual both beset or rewarded by particular circumstances—in the case of authorial autobiography, particular circumstances which often though not always involve *being an author*—and also entangled in common, quasi-universal conditions. Richard Dyer, the foremost theorist of Western celebrity culture, posits that the popular “ideological investment” of the public in celebrity culture

is in the stars seen as individuals, their qualities seen as natural. I do not wish to deny that they are individuals, nor

that they are grounded in the given facts of the human body. But I do wish to say that what makes them interesting is the way in which they articulate the business of being an individual, something that is, paradoxically, typical, common, since we all in Western society have to cope with that particular idea of what we are. (*Heavenly Bodies* 16)

We can build a similar narrative to describe the general success of autobiography in recent decades as well. Memoirists, even of the most unusual personal backgrounds, demonstrate (to one degree or another) in compelling prose how it is they went about “the business of being an individual,” and share that with readers inevitably engaged in the same business. David Marshall makes a similar point in *Celebrity and Power*, asserting that “the celebrity is centrally involved in the social construction of division between the individual and the collective” (25), and by reenacting such divisions and connections, memoirs likewise contribute to that construction.

Finally, in his seminal work *Stars*, Dyer makes the point that much of the appeal of celebrity figures comes from their “ordinariness,” that “stars represent what are taken to be people typical of this society” but that their wealth and success are what make them “singularly absent from our actual day-to-day experience of society.” Though wealth and success allow the stars’ popular “human qualities” to exist in the public eye without “being muddled by material considerations or problems,” it is clear to the critical eye that wealth and visibility are distancing factors (43). In the case of authors, financial compensation for their work may be relatively modest,<sup>10</sup> especially when compared to

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<sup>10</sup> Though not always, of course. News stories pointing out that J.K. Rowling is more cash-rich than the Queen of England abounded in the mid-2000s; in *Of a Fire on the Moon*, Mailer describes the public attention that arose when a rumor began that he had been given a \$1MM advance for the novel that would eventually be *Ancient Evenings*; and Eggers received \$1.4MM for the paperback rights to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and over \$2MM for its film rights, prompting him to write an entire

movie stars, yet success, in the form of publishing, and even the practice of writing narratives of their own “human qualities,” draws readers to the life stories at the same time that they inscribe a distance between author and audience. Identification with celebrities at the level of the “ordinary,” however, is only one aspect of the complex relation between the public and stars in any cultural media; another significant node of connection is a sense of shared aspiration. John Cawelti (in one of the very few studies of the connection between celebrity and authorship written earlier than the late 1990s) observes that “celebrities are our stand-ins at important events, and the author, playing the role of celebrity, helps to guarantee and reinforce his position as our witness of contemporary reality”—a position enacted and embraced in particular by Mailer in his literary journalism—“In addition, he represents the significance of his book and through his public comments we can share in some of the excitement accompanying its publication. Through the author’s performance as a celebrity, we stand-in at the birth of an important literary work” (173).

Though the correlation between celebrities such as actors and socialites and even modestly famous writers is evident, distinctions stemming from the unique, semi-removed nature of written expression exist. With reference to both Dyer and Marshall, Glass carves writers out from the specific field of celebrity produced by an impersonal “system” of “corporate culture industries,” because writers “have sustained an ethos of individual creative production over and against the rise of these culture industries in which they nevertheless have to participate” (4). The quality of “authorial consciousness” which—particularly in the modernist formulation—attaches it to a unique individual

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novel around the premise of radical philanthropy and founding an small charitable empire in the Bay Area (see Chapter Three).

perspective if not necessarily genius “stubbornly persists as something more than an empty structure, complicating the easy dismissal of the celebrity’s subjectivity in so much recent celebrity theory” (Glass 4). However, if the acceptance of authorial subjectivity persists above the tide of critique against the emptiness of celebrity, the conditions of an expanding mass culture still threaten to divorce the writer’s subjectivity as expressed in his work from his public persona. Moran describes the “danger” that

the anti-individualizing effects of the literary marketplace—the creation of the author as a ‘personality’ by a vast network of cultural and economic practices—will actually threaten the whole notion of authorship as an individualistic activity, taking away from the author at the same time as it apparently celebrates that author’s autonomy as a ‘star author’. The author becomes gradually less in control not only of her work but also of her image and how it circulates, at the same time as the machinery of celebrity asserts what literary critics call ‘the intentional fallacy’, which assumes that she is wholly in control of it (61).

The literary marketplace, therefore, appears to be the battleground in a war over literary authority, a war between the system of selling and marketing texts—frequently autobiographical ones—on the basis of an author’s manufactured reputation and disembodied name, personality, and even face and the still-important project of circulating the work of individual writers with legitimate cultural, political, and artistic agendas in search of an audience. In the United States in the years since the second world war (if not longer), this conflict is the defining condition of the life of the author and one of the primary functions of what I call the life of the book.



## **The Life of the Book**

In *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, critical theorist Pierre Bourdieu considers the place of literature as art in a field that has come to be dominated by economic interests. “Commercial literature has not just come into existence recently,” he writes, “nor is it new that the necessities of commerce make themselves felt at the heart of the cultural field. But the grip of the holders of power over the instruments of circulation—and of consecration—has undoubtedly never been as wide and as deep as it is today” (347). Bourdieu made this observation in 1992, and in the two decades since, the corporate hold over the machinery of publication has only intensified. Bourdieu’s pithy assessment of the result of commerce’s sway over literature is absolute: “the boundary has never been as blurred between the experimental work and the *bestseller*” (347).

While it is possible to argue, perhaps, with the enlarged notion of the “bestseller” which Bourdieu must use to make such an assertion, the profound effect of the conditions which draw Bourdieu to his conclusion are real. In *The Economy of Prestige*, English challenges Bourdieu’s assessment of the blurred boundaries, but in doing so, reiterates the encroachment of capitalist interests into literary production. Examining the impact of the three most prestigious American literary prizes (The Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award) on sales results, English finds that, since 1980, “not a single number-one bestseller has ever won any of the major awards,” which he compares to the list of Pulitzer winners from 1925 to 1940, a third of which were the top-selling book of their respective years. “The ‘blockbusters’ have come to dominate the top-ten lists, while prizes have supported a more and more distinct

hierarchy of symbolic value, with less and less of the mixing or confusion of categories that Bourdieu and many others have decried,” English claims (331). On the other hand, he does not deny the influence of commercial interests, because “the distinct hierarchy of consecrated authors and works” enacted by the literary prize-system is consistently leveraged, “via journalistic attention, in the marketplace”; English sets out only to emphasize that a literary “scale of value,” removed from “bestsellerdom,” is a consequence of the commercialization of the publishing industry, but one which still relies upon the apparent and institutionally reinforced impression of distinctions (331). In the world of “literary” publishing—one just as slavishly tied to profit as any other publishing segment—a ready and reliable public marker of quality is the name and the life of authors, especially those “consecrated” by the (increasingly commercial) institutions of academe, the prize system, and the media.

As Bourdieu stated and Woodmansee’s history of the author demonstrates, commercial interests have been a part of literary culture for centuries. However, the demonstrable shift of the feelings among publishing professionals in the last fifty years is well documented. Memoirs by well-known literary editor Jason Epstein and by Andre Schiffrin, the longtime chief publisher at Pantheon (the first U.S. publisher of Foucault) and the founder of the New Press, have detailed the evolving standards of publishing in the increasing corporate industry. In *The Business of Books*, Schiffrin, a steadfast defender of the notion that publishers are obligated to seek out new, interesting, and challenging ideas at the risk of losing money on some titles, laments the shift that occurred when large multinational media corporations began purchasing individual publishing houses in the 1960s, a trend that accelerated until the late 1990s when

consolidation was mostly complete.<sup>11</sup> The effect of the profit-oriented nature of major corporations on the traditional institution has been what Schiffrin terms “market censorship” at the expense of the “free marketplace of ideas.” “The market, it is argued, is a sort of ideal democracy” Schiffrin explains. “It is not up to the elite to impose their values on readers, [corporate] publishers claim, it is up to the public to choose what it wants—and if what it wants is increasingly downmarket and limited in scope, so be it. The higher profits are proof that the market is working as it should” (103). Market censorship, then, is the shift from publishers taking risks on difficult work to putting out titles which are likely to sell enough copies to turn a profit—even in a category like “literary fiction,” which *Bookselling for Dummies* helpfully defines as “novels and short stories published with a smaller audience in mind” (Drenth 52). Schiffrin notes that even academic presses operate under the increasingly difficult constraints of covering costs, and turn to market-friendly fare to bankroll their more staid or narrow scholarly texts. “A

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<sup>11</sup> Pantheon’s history is illustrative. Founded by colleagues of Schiffrin’s father, all European exiles, in New York in 1942, Pantheon established itself as a publisher of international fiction and intellectual nonfiction. It maintained its identity through its purchase by Random House (which had merged with esteemed house Alfred A. Knopf in 1960) in 1961. The entire Random enterprise was purchased by RCA in 1965, and a profit-first philosophy was instituted. Subsequently sold to billionaire S.I. Newhouse in 1980, Random House and its many subsidiaries hardly resembled their earlier, smaller shops. Pantheon continued to publish important, challenging, often-unprofitable books, but at the cost of publishing more middlebrow content. German media giant Bertelsmann AG purchased Random House in 1998, completing the transition from several small independent publishers to a international conglomerate with sales of \$1.6 billion in 1999. It has continued to grow since. Pantheon remains a significant imprint associated with quality, in particular in its publishing of graphic narrative, beginning with the groundbreaking *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and today including significant authors in the medium such as graphic memoirists Marjane Sartrapi and David Beauchard.

surprisingly large number of them have turned to baseball as a subject worth covering,”<sup>12</sup> he writes,” books about movie stars proliferate.” Furthermore, Schiffrin’s memoir was published in 2000, almost a full decade before our current economic recession and the ethic of austerity which has swept through most businesses, in particular the culture industries. Therefore, the practical effect on publishing has been that if a press wishes to issue a book which is not obviously commercially viable, the book and in most instances its author must engage in comprehensive marketing strategy—and, because such strategies are supported by little financial investment, they frequently center around the writers’ life and personality as much as his work.

Linda Scott, in her essay on “Markets and Authors” in the *History of the Book in America*, puts the marketing efforts of the biggest book publishers in the context of contemporary advertising:

The top ten publishing companies, which control more than 50 percent of adult trade book production, spent a combined total of \$23 million in 1999 to advertise *all* their books. By comparison, Procter & Gamble put \$91 million behind a single brand of laundry detergent the same year. The automobile industry spent more than \$10 billion a year in advertising. The promotion of single products such as Crest or Coke cost between \$35 million and \$350 million each. Thus, when the book publishing industry puts a few hundred thousand dollars behind a ‘big’ book, the impact is that of a whisper in a roaring crowd. (77)

Instead, book publishing relies upon “publicity.” Publicity, as opposed to advertising, enlists the cooperation of mass media outlets, niche periodicals, literary journals, bookstores, literary events, and (very recently) social networking media. Though the content of a given book is, of course, taken into consideration both for choosing a target

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<sup>12</sup> Not all scholars find this practice distasteful: cf. D’Amore, Jonathan. *Rogers Hornsby: A Biography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2004.

audience and for constructing a marketing narrative, the author herself is, frequently, the prime participant in the enterprise and the source of content for publicity materials. At the same time, the publicity machine's "version" of the author necessarily supplants her private identity in the marketplace. In *Authors, Inc.*, Glass explains the history of the publishers' appropriation of the author's image, performing a useful analysis of the nature of literary property that extends Woodmansee's analytic history of the author, his work, and his control of his work as his own property into the twentieth century. After briefly challenging the notion that the "commercialization of literature" is a product of only our contemporary era, he explores the intervention of marketing and advertising into the distribution and circulation of books beginning in the late nineteenth century that effectively "inverts the calculus whereby the literary value of the text would correspond to the labor and talent of the author," and instead literary value is produced by the apparatus of its "corporate promotion" which precedes publication and any actual reading of the text (12-13). In this formulation, the publishing company profits from the author's copyright, and the labor and talent of the author, such as it is, is made secondary to the author's reputation (or elided altogether), a reputation generated by the cooperation of publicists and media, with the writer himself a willing participant or an indifferent bystander.

Dyer's analysis of the process in which "stars are involved in making themselves into commodities" makes an interesting corollary to the process by which an author joins or submits to the mechanisms of publicity. As he explains in *Heavenly Bodies*, celebrities, particularly film stars, "are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone" (5). The same is true for the writer working to

publicize her own book, and is compounded when that book is a memoir. The writer produces a commodity—his book—and then is usually asked to commodify himself—to make himself into a part of the commodity which his publisher is selling, by attaching his “personality” to his book through publicity. In the case of the memoirist, his life has already been commodified in his book (one of the more mundane manifestations of the division between the written self and writing one that I will discuss in the subsequent section, “The Life in the Book”), and then re-commodify himself as separate, but attached publicity material.

The often complicated and nuanced apparatus that “enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” is the subject of Gerard Genette’s theoretical work, *Paratexts*. Genette’s book provides an comprehensive taxonomy and history of the “accompanying productions” of texts, which he calls “paratexts,” in order to understand how these things, which do not necessarily “belong” to a text but do “surround” and “extend” it, work to “*present* it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book” (1). Genette calls paratexts “the threshold” of the text and cites Lejeune’s version of the notion from “The Autobiographical Pact” as “the fringe of the printed text.” The paratexts of books, though not distinctly *of* the text, are functionary elements for all manner of commercial and critical engagement *with* the text, from categorization to gift-giving to historical contextualization to, perhaps most significantly, the connection of the text to the name of the author who wrote it. Genette emphasizes the plurality of purpose

between commodification and understanding with which publishers and authors imbue their product's paratexts:

Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

Paratexts, therefore, are a complicated web that include material directly authorized by the writer, conditions required by the publisher, and content designed to appeal to and to influence a (potential) reading audience. In a project investigating the relation between a writer's life and how he writes about that life, the paratexts that accompany an autobiographical text are an essential element of the public presentation of that relation.

Genette divides paratexts into two categories: first, the “peritext,” which includes all the material and textual elements that are physically a part of the book, from paper, font, and binding to images to blurbs and introductions, and, of course, the title of the text and the name of the author; second is the “epitext,” which constitutes the book's peripheral attachments, such as advertisements, bookseller displays, author interviews and appearances, and even reviews, any paratextual element “not materially appended to the text...but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space” (344). Of the many peritextual elements, some are more mundane (but not necessarily less complex) than others, and many, such as font and paper choice and the design of the book jacket, work both to present information and to connote a mood or style deemed proper for the text. The name of the author, on the other hand, has a

multivalent attachment to the text. It is first a visual element of the text's presentation, typically printed on the cover following a simple principle Genette defines: "the better known the author, the more space his name takes up" (39). With two exceptions noted—the author may be famous for "extraliterary reasons" or the publisher may engage in "magical thinking...lead[ing] to promotional practices that somewhat anticipate glory by mimicking its effects"—the author's prominence is almost exclusively connected to the success of her previous writing. In this case, the paratextual element is performing part of the classificatory aspect of the author function described by Foucault, who spelled out the common-sense notion that the author's name allows one, from a distance of place or time, "to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (107). Presenting a text with an author named also demonstrates that "this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech...On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status" (Foucault 107).

The author's name serves as a mark of authority, particularly in nonfiction writing, which is why pseudonyms are so infrequently employed by historians, by established fiction writers, or by autobiographers. Genette coins a term for the common practice of publishing a text under its writer's real name: "onymity." Onymity is very important "in all kinds of referential writing, where the credibility of the testimony, or of its transmission, rests largely on the identity of the witness or the person reporting it...and this is all the more true when the witness himself plays a part in his narrative" (41). He invokes Lejeune's autobiographical pact in support of his assertion, and, with the many circumstances which modify the requirement of identity between writer,



narrator, and protagonist excepted, reinforces the concept that an author's name "is a constituent element of the contract and has an effect that blends with the effects of other elements" (41).

The authorial signature, then, is a significant, essential element of the peritext, one that is a constituent component of the process of authentication, notable even when absent, and a valuable tool for the establishment of textual authority. It is also, frequently, a fundamental identifier for the text beyond the scope of the book itself, as Foucault's explanation of its classificatory function partially demonstrates. The name of the author, along with the text's title, also transmits out away from the text itself, repeated and echoed on virtually every piece of the epitext. The title and the author's name are both an appendage of the text itself and its most irreducible element, the pronoun to the complete text's antecedent, its most reliable signal to the public of the text's existence. This irreducible identifier, therefore, makes the figure of the author frequently the most crucial paratextual element for a book's reception and commercial success. The title—allusive, alluring, mysterious, timely, or banal—primarily refers inward to the text's content, and frequently at only the most superficial level. The author's name, on the other, frequently provides some clue to the book's content, but also—more significantly in marketing campaigns—provides a clue to the book's character. The author's personal history, her personality, her public identity serve to draw readers to the text. In the case of autobiographical work, the allure of the author's personality promises to permeate the content and the character of the text, and hence is doubly significant. The author's name and, by extension, the author's public identity and the implication that it reflects her private life, are probably the most important components of the epitext.

The epitext, as Genette repeatedly reinforces, is “a whole whose paratextual function has no precise limits and in which comment on the work is endlessly diffused in a biographical, critical, or other discourse whose relation to the work may be at best indirect and at worst indiscernible” (346). Indeed, “scraps” of epitext may be found at any moment in the wash of life and material that surrounds both the author as an individual and his book as a physical object out in the world. Something may become epitextual if its connection to the text is established by the author herself, by her publisher, by critics, or by readers. Genette finds the distinction between the publisher’s epitexts—posters, newspaper ads, press releases, etc.—and the authorial epitext meaningful. The publisher’s epitext “does not always involve the responsibility of the author” who is often “satisfied just to close his eyes officially to the value-inflating hyperbole inseparable from the needs of the trade” (347). On the other hand, the authorial epitext, which Genette further distinguishes into public and private, is always authorized by the writer, even if the uses to which it is put are not.

In short, the life and the mind of the author outside his text are the primary constitutive elements of the authorial epitext. Of course, his own commentary on a particular text, elicited via interviews, public appearances, prefaces for reprint editions (which are, almost paradoxically, peritext to the reprint and epitext to the original edition), can be helpful and persuasive. However, the biography and the reputation of the author, which may indeed function as epitext outside his control, are especially important to this project and to studies of authorial autobiography, because of the correspondence between the life inside the text and the life outside it and the relative size of the authorial epitext built upon these writers’ reputations.

The public perception of the author's personality, private life, and professional intentions are frequent points of complaint and provocations for intervention for those writers whose reputations circulate in a wide ring around the books they produce. Mailer is probably without peer in both his sensitivity to his public image and its effect on his texts' reception and his engagement with it. His contention, by the middle of his career in 1968, that he had "learned to live with his legend" and his direct confrontation of his reputation in his writing (most aggressively in *Advertisements for Myself*, *Armies of the Night*, and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, but repeatedly and persistently in the years around the *Playboy* interview) are evidence that he was thoroughly aware of the paratextual effect (though he would not have used the term) of his public image on his work. His reputation, it must be noted, is a not necessarily evil monster born of both his literary success—he became a well-known writer because *The Naked and the Dead* was a well-received and widely read book—and his personal history of bad behavior.

Likewise with Wideman and Eggers, their public images exist as a result of their literary work and its positive reception, but the reading public's attention to them has a notably personal cast to it as well. Wideman's academic accomplishments (his Rhodes Scholarship, his professorial appointments) his family circumstances (a brother and a son serving life sentences, a daughter who played professional basketball, and a love life which is, if not sensational, a part of the public record), and his racial identity merge with his work's accolades to illuminate most readers' impressions of his books—both at the initial awareness of their existence and at interpretive engagement, because of the depth with which his personal history infuses both his fiction and his nonfiction. Eggers, who uses his own peritext to the paperback version of *A Heartbreaking Work of*

*Staggering Genius*, the rights to which he famously received \$2 million, to comment upon the massive paratextual presence that developed around that work, is simultaneously a prototype for the contemporary young *litterateur*, a partially reclusive figure reluctant to discuss his writing with journalists, a publisher responsible for presenting the work of other writers to the public, and an outspoken champion of the enterprise of literature as a charitable force for good in the world. Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers are conscious manipulators of the epitexts surrounding their work and, to one degree or another, victims of the necessity for epitexts to impress upon audiences the value and distinction of the texts via the life and reputation of their writers.

The semi-authorized epitexts that require the participation of the author but which are mediated and distributed to the public by academic interlocutors and magazine profilers are the primary vehicle with which these public images are cultivated. The popular press profile, typically arranged as a marketing device by publishers, serves to fine-tune a writer's public image. Profiles are an opportunity for the author (and by extension his publisher) to engage previous iterations of his public image and to reinforce or correct them with both his behavior and his statements. They also act as a reminder to the reading public that the name printed on books for sale stands for a real, fleshy human being who does things like drink coffee, wear casual clothing, and ride in taxicabs. They are the *sine-qua-non* for the publicity machines behind widely read and moderately esteemed writers. And writers who take themselves seriously frequently if not invariably complain that they are superficial and unreal. From a critical perspective, Barthes mocks the magazine profile as a transparent tool that sets out to prove that authors, presented in profiles as "specialists of the human soul," share "the common status of contemporary

labour” in order to convince “our bourgeois readers that they are indeed in step with the times: they pride themselves on acknowledging certain prosaic necessities.” The result is the celebration of “a sublime contradiction”: “between a prosaic condition, produced alas by regrettably materialistic times, and the glamorous status which bourgeois society liberally grants its spiritual representatives (so long as they remain harmless)” (“The Writer on Holiday” 29).

If Barthes’s critique sounds an especially cynical note, the vision of the profile or publicity interview from the author’s perspective is often nearly as disenchanted. Mailer, despite his seeming ubiquity in the 1960s, was a loquacious interview subject but, relatively speaking, an infrequent one. He told poet Paul Carroll in 1968 that he begins interviews “with a general sense of woe” but consents to them because “about every two or three years, I feel I have to have a psychic house cleaning” and tests his ideas in “the brutal form of the interview” (Carroll 74). An interview with Dave Eggers, likewise ubiquitous in the 2000s, published on *Salon.com*—his former employer, at that—begins, “Let it be known that Dave Eggers does not want to be interviewed.” He answers Amy Benfer’s first question on the subject, saying “I thought I reached a point where I could never do it again, maybe a month ago. I’ve had a couple of ridiculous interviews” (Benfer). This interview appeared less than three months after the publication of his first book-length work.

Interviews with popular press outlets typically occur at the urging of publicists or at the initiative of the journalist and, as Genette puts it, “the author—who does not expect much more from it than free publicity—goes along rather passively, and apparently without the underpinning of a strong intellectual motivation” (360). The skepticism

authors, at least those who wish to be taken seriously, convey both in general audience interviews and in other, more academic venues is expressed eloquently by Wideman in an interview with critic James Coleman, who at the time was preparing the first scholarly monograph about Wideman's work. Wideman's perspective on interviews, profiles, and the enterprise of criticism, both in service to the culture industries in glossy magazines and to intellectual discourse and social action, is worth quoting at length. Coleman asks, "What good are critics?" and Wideman responds:

The good ones are very good. Criticism in this country, since it's such an established institution, reflects some of the worst things about the country. It tends toward *People Magazine* profiling, and it promotes an interest in the artist rather than an interest in the work. The work, if it's good, is doing serious business. Artists in their private lives often do pretty junky, tacky, trifling business. What I do or who I do it to and how I do it—these personal matters are just gossip.... If we didn't have pictures of writers, would critics discuss books on the basis of what's in them?... Gossip mongering, personality contests trivialize art, and it will inevitably go that way if critics pander to the publishing industry's tendency to promote superstars and ignore art.... One reason I am sitting and talking with you the way I am is because writing by Afro-Americans remains a stepchild, and Afro-American critics, if given a chance, may be able to do things that their fellow critics won't do. (*Blackness and Modernism* 161-62)

Wideman concludes his thoughts by defining his "not-so-hidden agenda" for giving interviews. "Ideally," he says, "the good critics will get the writer to audiences that are looking for him or waiting for him and his work" (162). This illuminating response to Coleman's open question echoes Barthes on the nature of magazine profiles, and then, in the same breath, echoes the mundane detailing such humanizing profiles truck in, the "pretty junky, tacky, trifling business" of artists' private lives. But Wideman explains a writer's potential motivation for participating in the work of publicity and epitextual

productions, which do, in spite of the philosophical conflicts between profit-driven publishing corporations and their art-driven authors, work toward those parties' shared goal: putting the authors' books in the hands of readers who want to read him.

Wideman's motivation, however, takes the tone of an individual's seeking to reclaim for himself his image, which has been manipulated and propagated for commerce, in his effort to make the lives of his books match his presumably noble intentions for them. And, in the case of the three writers covered in this project, the felt necessity of seeing their work reach an audience with their paratexts under authorial control serves the purpose of presenting their versions of the lives of the authors, their autobiographical texts.

### **The Life in the Book**

The autobiography of an individual who is already known as a writer, according to Mutlu Konuk Blasing's articulation in *The Art of Life*, "represents a self-examination that is at the same time private and public, for the interaction of personality and collective life that autobiography embodies is reflected in the author's personal appropriation of the language of the times" (xv). Working from Blasing's vision of the protagonist of such an autobiography as "the paradoxical private-person-as-public-hero," Glass argues that the autobiographical hero "can be seen as the textual location where the modernist creative consciousness comes up against the public personality. In authorial autobiographies, we witness the author explicitly attempting to reappropriate the public discourse that determines the authorial career" (7). These efforts at reappropriation—if that is what they

truly are—must be considered in the light of the poststructuralist criticism that made valid arguments *against* the concept that texts could intentionally and effectively engage the real world as agents of change. Yet the life in the book that an autobiographical narrative constructs does, inarguably, correspond to the life of the author outside of it, even if we accept that writing cannot indistinguishably reproduce life. In *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin directly engages Barthes's anti-referential vision of autobiography, giving the theorist's arguments a full and fair hearing, and still concludes that "autobiography is nothing if not a referential art, and the self or subject is its principal referent" (3). How, why, and if autobiographical narratives contend with lived experience and the competing narratives that public discourse and other private individuals construct about a writer's life are the significant questions that textual analysis of authorial autobiography and social and cultural contextualization of those narratives attempts to answer.

"Celebrity authors," according to Moran, "do more than simply 'reflect' or 'react' to their celebrity in their work; these texts form part of literary celebrity itself, precisely because it is created symbolically through literary and cultural texts." He says that the authors he discusses, who are all "literary" figures but vary in the kind and depth of their engagement with the publicity machine as well as in quantity of books sold, all share the quality "of passionate ambivalence about the experience [of literary celebrity], which veers between hostility and acceptance, and blindness and insight into their own relationship to their fame" (149). This relationship to fame is what Mailer realizes in the image he presents of himself early in *Armies of the Night*, living in "the sarcophagus of his image" (5). Implicit in this description is the belief that inside one's image is a living,



breathing private person, and explicit in it is the concept of one's public image as a container for a private life ended, a deceased individual.

In writing autobiography, an author like Mailer can creep out from his sarcophagus, but in doing so he builds another one. Foucault argues that modern culture "has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence." This vision of the writer's sacrifice of his life is especially provocative when considering the autobiographical writer. In Glass's articulation of modern authorial autobiography as the effort to reappropriate a public image, the writer is giving a public, textual life to a specific realization of his private self. But in Foucault's explication of the authorial "sacrifice" in writing, doing so also eradicates that private self's real, lived connection to the text. "The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality," Foucault continues, "now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer" (102). Likewise, the subject which is written about also surrenders its life to the page. As novelist and translator Lydia Davis puts it, "A thing can be killed by its very preservation.... Preservation implying that it has no life force of its own but needs outside help to remain in existence, remain in the world," though no longer "alive" (88).

The divide between the living, writing author and the narrative she composes about her life has been the focus of intense critical scrutiny in life writing studies for several decades now, and the irresolvability of the tension speaks to its almost infinite usefulness for both creative writers and for critics. A writer can use his or her own life as

material for professional work in a way that distances the finished text from the private person, and at the same time, preserve a version of that private person in public. A critic can explore questions of subjectivity and narrative, of agency and authority, by skimming the nuances of distinction between what can purport to be both a documentation of history and the creation of a separate, textual world. To paraphrase Blasing, autobiographical narrative can be the private person's conversion into a public hero or a public hero's masquerade as a private person.

The apparent contradiction in autobiographical writing matches the process of writing for a public audience itself, according to memoirist Bernard Cooper. He says, "The process of writing a memoir is insular, ruminative, a mining of privacies; once published, however, the book becomes an act of extroversion, an advertisement to buy, a performance of self rather than its articulation" (114-5). This sentiment underscores Dyer's evaluation of "what is at stake" for the audiences drawn to stars—not exclusively or even usually memoirists, of course—living public lives, that is, "the degree to which, and manner in which, what the star really is can be located in some inner, private, essential core" (*Heavenly Bodies* 12). In short, the pursuit of that inner core for public consumption by the "star" himself is what authorial autobiography does. "But the star phenomenon cannot help being also about the person in public," he continues. "Stars, after all, are always inescapably people in public. If the magic with many stars is that they seem to be their private selves in public, still they can also be about the business of being in public, the way in which the public self is endlessly produced and remade in presentation" (*Heavenly Bodies* 12). Again, authors who present autobiographical narratives to the public experience the same phenomenon. Their writing lives are a matter

of public record and in some ways stand in for their real selves as the defining characteristic of their public image. On the other hand, their writing is likewise a part of their private lives in the same way other individuals' occupations are a part of theirs. The business of going about their daily lives, as Dyer says of stars, involves going about the business of having their work circulate in public; thus, to write autobiographically about their private selves is to account for the experience of their public selves. The effect is frequently, as I stated above in regard to Barthes's "The Writer on Holiday," to demythologize the special character who is the "creator" of texts and simultaneously to demonstrate the special circumstances which beget them.

A book, published and written, is part of the author's life and in many respects becomes part of the paratext of later works.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the incompleteness of the connection between the writer and her written work, however much a part of her life that work becomes, is a fundamental aspect of much if not most of the serious theoretical and critical approaches to autobiography—even those which identify the political

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<sup>13</sup> An excellent example of this interconnection between writer's lives and the books they write is the late career of Joan Didion. In her case, some of her earlier writings are a part of what is now her most popular text, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a memoir of the year after her husband passed away and her daughter suffered through a prolonged illness that eventually took her life as well. The readership's ready identification with Didion's grief combined with her skill as a writer made a popular success, but quite literally the content of the book would be fundamentally different if she had not published previously (and in fact, if her late husband John Gregory Dunne had not himself). Her memoir of her husband's death refers specifically to a previous piece of writing she had produced about their marriage—indeed, about their marital troubles—but the reference to "In the Islands" establishes both a narrative event for *The Year of Magical Thinking* and an epitextual relation between the original magazine piece and the later memoir. The real life events which make up Didion's narrative include another narrative of real life events, a multiplier effect which emphasizes both the separation between an autobiographical text and the life it describes and the indivisible connection between them.

imperative of an autobiographical voice to bring public attention to real though oft-ignored communities and issues. The crux of the division, from a practical perspective, is temporal: any autobiographical writing cannot encapsulate the totality of the autobiographer's life. As Domna C. Stanton summarizes the broadly accepted idea, autobiography can "never inscribe the death of the speaking subject" as biography can, and thus is "necessarily un-ended, incomplete, fragmentary, whatever rhetorical closure it might contain" (135). So while *Hoop Roots* may be about John Edgar Wideman's life and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* may be about Dave Eggers's, they are quite obviously not equal to the *whole* of their authors' lives. The "rhetorical closure" Stanton alludes to may indeed seal off one narrative thread in a writer's life, but that very ending demarcates the separation between writer and subject. Bakhtin spells out the impossibility of a pure relation between an author writing about himself and the textual self he creates when he writes that "even had he," that is, an author

created an autobiography or a confession of the most astonishing truthfulness, all the same he as its creator, remains outside the world he has represented in his work. If I relate (or write about) an event that has just happened to me, then I as the *teller* (or writer) of this event am already outside the time and space in which the event occurred. It is just as impossible to forge an identity between myself, my own "I," and that "I" that is the subject of my stories as it is to lift myself up by my own hair. (256)

Bakhtin's explanation is a step toward the poststructural view of the "death of the author" in favor of the concept of the scribe that Barthes articulates. Bakhtin's vision of autobiographical writing is one that relies upon temporal divisions between one's past experience, the present memory of those past experiences and recording of the memory in writing, and the future self who proceeds after having written. Barthes, in his early essay "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," asserts a cleaving of the subject

from the writer, and of author from his text that exceeds the temporal separation of Bakhtin. “In order to argue that the author himself (whether he is obtrusive, unobtrusive, or surreptitious) has signs at his disposal which he can scatter through his work,” Barthes writes skeptically, “one must posit between this ‘person’ and his language a strict complementary relation which makes the author an essential subject, and narrative the instrumental expression of that subject.” Barthes rejects this assumption, insisting “The *one who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the *one who writes* (in real life) and the *one who writes* is not the *one who is*” (261). When he advances to write “The Death of the Author,” Barthes furthers the question of temporal and narrative distinctions by insisting that critics abolish the author-concept in favor of the “scriptor”—the figure responsible for a text, but neither its subject nor its creator, and a presence affiliated only with that text, not with an individual beyond the text, with a life, a reputation, an education, a salary, or an appetite. Barthes writes,

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.” (“The Death of the Author” 145)

The implications of Barthes’s vision in these selections for autobiography are plentiful and complex. If the author as the past of the book is an illegitimate and incorrect perspective on a text, then the exercise of writing autobiographically is no different than any other literary exercise, for the “real life” referred to in an autobiography is no more

or less removed from its textual iteration than George Lucas's "galaxy far far away" from "a long time ago" in *Star Wars*, because, in fact, Barthes's view of the text insists that it is not an iteration at all, but a separate organism unto itself. And an author's real life, while perhaps part of the mental processes of memory which prompt writing, is necessarily independent from the writing itself, and the writer independent from his text in an even more fundamental manner than that which Bakhtin describes. The notion is one that Barthes was perhaps uncertain of himself and sought to explore in practice, for he proceeds, in the years after "The Death of the Author," to essentially abandon the philosophical and critical consideration of the author in favor of pursuing his own doppelganger through a series of autobiographical — yet necessarily, in his view, fictional — literary escapades.

Eakin takes notice of the limitations of this identification in his discussion of the nature of reference in autobiography, *Touching the World*. He engages Barthes anti-autobiographical experiment with his own theories, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, primarily because of the book's reputation as an illustration of "the demise of classical autobiography and its concern with the self" (4). Barthes's effort can be taken, says Eakin, as a reversal of the traditional, conventional conception of autobiographical intent. The long-standing critical faith in autobiography's earnest attempt to present one's own life is best briefly demonstrated in the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacque Rousseau. Rousseau, though he was aware of the autobiographical process as one beset by the limitations of human memory ("if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory") and though he is a clever writer who does not promise more than he can deliver, insists that in his text, "I have displayed myself as I

was” (17). There is a hint of Bakhtinian theory in this formulation, as it acknowledges a separation between the historical self and the present-day writing one. However, Rousseau’s *Confessions* has stood as a model for literary-minded autobiographers for centuries because he combines a spirit of inventiveness with an earnest grappling with his past. On the other hand, Barthes’s text actively works to counteract that notion that the book’s subject, “R.B.,” has anything “to do with reference, with retrospect, with the self, with mimesis of any kind” (Eakin *Touching the World* 5). In fact, Eakin sees *Roland Barthes* as explicit refutation of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, as Barthes labors to ensure that “the identity of name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist has no referential consequence whatsoever” (6).

The act of writing oneself, if one accepts Barthes’s premises, loses all cathartic value and any insight of psychological or specifically historical relevance to the author’s life. That is, if one is creating in an “autobiographical” text a whole other being, what do we do with the idea that autobiography is written to make sense of real personal experience, either for the writer or his or her audience? The written self, according to Barthes’s view, does not refer to the real self; if this is the case, then the real self persists as a body (a figurative and a physical one) of “value-neutral” experiences, occurring *seriatim* but without a sensible public representation. The act of writing autobiography, in fact, may seem to be as suited to obscuring personal history as it is to understanding it—in the way that Eakin summarizes Barthes’s project, as an “evocation of autobiography as an art of self-abolition” (*Touching the World* 6).

Gloom and impossibility are not the only ends of this lack of identity between the real and the written self. While the authors included in the project are savvy to the

practical implications of the postmodern dispersion of authority and the seemingly flimsy philosophical underpinning for “pure autobiography,” there is a sense of purpose to their autobiographical turns. Self-representation is—as Barthes’s work emphasizes and virtually every life writing critic would acknowledge—“discursively complex and ambiguous,” and therefore the translation of life to text is, according to Sidonie Smith, “a ‘radical disappropriation’ of the actual life by the artifice of literature [that] takes place at the scene of writing.” She continues:

The “I,” something apparently familiar, becomes something other, foreign; and the drift of the disappropriation, the shape, that is, that the autobiographer’s narrative and dramatic strategies take, reveals more about the autobiographer’s present experience of ‘self’ than about her past, although, of course, it tells us something about that as well. (*Poetics* 47)

A second self (or a third, if one counts the past real self, the written self, and the writing self) does allow material evidence for the investigation, intellectually at least, of the real self, though the act of self-evaluation is, of course, not without its vexing dislocations and psychological circumlocutions. However, despite the fact that Barthes’s position toward language and representation in autobiography is among the more radical in widely read criticism, even his perception of the impossibility of actual reference is not one born purely of pessimism or anger nor one utterly convinced of the futility of autobiographical writing. (He did, after all, engage in the practice, believing he might prove a point about it, which suggests some sense of its utility.) Writing may not capture the past and present as it was and as it is for the future, but the writer’s *effort* to create verisimilitude with the world in words can be perhaps more meaningful to public discourse than achieving verisimilitude. In Smith’s words, the autobiography may be more representative of the “present *experience* of ‘self’” than of an historical self, but the reader’s attempt at



understanding an author's present understanding of his historical self can, and through reading—as the continued interest in autobiography demonstrates—be informative, useful, and provocative.

Eakin summarizes *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* as an attempt “to separate the world of private experience from the world of public discourse and theory” (*Touching the World* 19); such an agenda is the critic's version of the celebrity author's attempt to reappropriate his public image. Both critic and author have the tools of their trade at their disposal, and both recognize that words, even when used in an effort to be truthful, create their own reality, their own “experience.” Barthes's autobiography asserts and reasserts his belief that although he is “writing [him]self”—that is, his mind—he is actually experimenting with a whole other existence—“freewheeling in language” (*Roland Barthes* 56). Our language does not have the capacity to literally speak our minds in a manner thoroughly intelligible to others: no one else can ever fully *know* our experience. And so any effort to indelibly convey the matter of one's mental experience of self is destined to be incomplete, even in its most compelling and refined presentation. On the other hand, an individual's body, in contrast to his or her mind, is a concrete if relatively small component of the collective public experience. This is why, later in life, even after turning mostly from criticism to his (non)-autobiographical writing, Barthes took a fervid interest in photography as a referential art, argues Eakin, because he believed photography can “achieve the representation of being in the most absolute terms” (19).

Writing does not achieve such thorough representation, but writing which suggests photography by referring to the physical is more absolute. Thus, in writing the self, writing one's body becomes the most accessible, most referential, and therefore

most “successful” autobiography.<sup>14</sup> The physicality of the texts I am discussing, particularly the corporeality of the language the protagonists frequently choose to describe their experiences, is essential for the quality of real, felt presence it brings to autobiographical narrative, and notable as a characteristic these writers employ so thoroughly in their (labeled) fictions. Respected fiction is often commended for evoking sensual perceptions that readers recognize from their own physical experience or are made to “feel” through the proxy of language. Likewise, in autobiography, points of connection to some element of the reader’s experience often come not from an overlapping knowledge of place or sense of shared experience, but through the evocation of a shared sensory perception.

Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers each relate intimate personal experience from a relatively “safe” point of view, considering Barthes’s, Bakhtin’s, and Smith’s descriptions of the temporal, psychological, and philosophical division between authors and their autobiographical subjects. While this distance removes the narrated-I’s experiences from the narrating-I to a degree, each writer also relies on a bevy of concrete,

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<sup>14</sup> The body does not, however, represent an uncomplicated and positive subject of universal communion, particularly in regard to race, sex, and gender. At the most fundamental level, the body is viewed as the first and foremost identifier of “the other” from the perspective of the white male hegemony and has been, of course, a means for the subordination of those “others.” A large corpus of writing treats the subject of the female body in women’s autobiography, but again, the most interesting and useful is a work by Sidonie Smith. Her *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993) investigates the nature of a “universal subject” and its traditional masculinity and, in turn, the approach to embodiment and disembodiment in women’s autobiography. David Paul Huddart explores questions of corporeality in Western notions of “The Other,” among other relevant questions, in *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (2008). The proliferation of work approaching autobiography through the lens of disability and/or trauma studies has further deepened the field’s perspective on the body, most notably in Couser’s *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (2000) and Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001).

physical, *bodily* details that ally the reader to the narrated-I and indirectly back to the author. In this way, the author humanizes his public image by exposing his physical self, a body that feels and functions like the reader's body—and not like a film star's, which is polished and photographed (and, in our contemporary celebrity culture, Photoshopped) to appear as ethereal as possible. The linguistic possibilities of writing the body allow a physical and, in turn, intellectual and emotional intimacy with the audience that brings a sense of authenticity to authorial autobiography.

On the other hand, the evocation of sensory, tactile presence in a written experience is undermined not only by the complications of subjectivity and authorship Barthes enumerates, but by the growing consensus in psychology and law concerning the inadequacies of eyewitness observations. Of course, no eyewitness is closer to the events of one's biography than the subject him/herself, but this position automatically limits the possibility of any accurate representation. Remembering, as Gilmore phrases it, that the eyewitness is "the most sought after and most suspect interpreter of events" ("The Mark of Autobiography" 6), a distanced approach to representing the events of one's own life may, in fact, verify the writer's position as a qualified interpreter of his own actions. A self-conscious approach to the very act of constructing an autobiographical narrative—of which Mailer's third-person strategy in *Armies*, Eggers's hyper-earnest framing of *A Heartbreaking Work* with "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book" and prefatory notes on "Dialogue," "Omissions," etc., and Wideman's fluid manipulation of first-, second-, and third-person in all his autobiographical nonfiction are signal examples—serves to acknowledge the limitations of the eyewitness perspective and hence writer and reader proceed aware of those limitations and beyond them. By openly

complicating their relationships with their self-characters, the three authors in this project reassert an authority that questions about bias or factual inconsistency might otherwise have diminished or undermined altogether.

By actively driving a wedge between their writing selves and their written selves, rather than passively assuming such a division, Wideman, Eggers, and Mailer address the inconsistency that practiced writers of fiction might see as inherent in making autobiography. The shift from a conventionally self-accounting confessional or the grand narrative of the self to the less conventional—but, in this era, counter-intuitively more authoritative—distanced perspective accommodates for the limitations of memory and representation. It also allows for the application of the techniques of these authors' experiences as fiction-writers and frequently the actual incorporation of fictional elements into otherwise non-fictional texts. These authors confront our contemporary expectations of fictiveness in autobiography by writing narrative as if they *were* (and certainly on occasion they are) writing fiction.

In 1998, Mailer told the *Chicago Tribune*, “The idea that non-fiction is reality and fiction is fiction is something that I have been trying to disabuse people of for 50 years...I have always liked to mix the categories in order to confuse people to the point where they will begin to see that there is not that much difference” (Taylor 1). This perspective is one Mailer arrived at, of course, after fifty relatively successful years of crafting both fictional and nonfictional narrative. His belief, I think it is clear, is not that non-fiction *is* fiction, but that its compelling and useful form requires narrative—and narrative shaping. On the scale of public historical events as “reported” in his signature works of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mailer is, in effect, putting into practice the ideas of Hayden

White, who insists that “the appeal of historical discourse” derives from “the extent to which it makes the real desirable...and does so by its imposition, upon events that are represented as real, of the formal coherency that stories possess” (21). Mailer’s “History as a Novel, the Novel as History” takes the form of the dominant storytelling genre of the modern era, the novel, and applies it to historical events in order to give them significance—or rather, to make their significance evident, as far as Mailer is concerned. On a personal scale, Mailer’s same techniques reflect Eakin’s assessment of the ordering that comes from overlaying narrative form onto real life. “There is always implicit in the exercise of the autobiographical act,” Eakin writes, “the idea that it supplements the life that has been lived, a sense that life as it was requires the improvement of art—the closure, the coherence, the permanence conferred by the stamp of form” (*Touching the World* 51). The “stamp of form,” when applied with the hands of an writer whose career revolves around the creative manipulation of language, metaphor, and narrative devices, suggests an opportunity for art to “improve” life at the same time that it presents an opportunity for obfuscation.

In the recent *Self Impression: Life Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), Max Saunders discusses the interplay of narrativity, fictionality, and the aesthetic in autobiographical work that takes the self not as an authentic, ineffable subject but rather as an “artifice,” “the self *as* an impression.” This articulation of some autobiographical projects as aesthetic suggest that the skillful application of narrative to lived experience, then, does not necessarily pose the either/or of clarification or obfuscation of “the real.” Experienced prose stylists and authors with established public images such as Wideman, Eggers, and Mailer can work in the space

between fiction and nonfiction without shrugging off either label precisely because they locate their experience as writers and observers in the space between the writing self and the written one, a shifting space constructed both by the writers and the public's experience *of* them. As Saunders says, "to perceive or consider lives as like works of art is to entertain the idea of lives, and the persons and selves living them, as both creative and created; self-transforming and thus artificial, and generally subject to the same aesthetic principles as works of art, including works of literature" (507).

Despite the monumental influence of the poststructuralist effort to displace the author and shatter the preconceptions of subjectivity, both in autobiography and other literary forms, the influence of the figure of the author as an orienting guide to the written word and the general if not universal faith in the capacity of narrative to explain or to represent the truth of collective and individual history persist—and remain essential and important points of intervention for critics of life writing and literature in general. In this light, the notion that "expert" writers, inducted into a literary establishment as authors, are especially adept at constructing narratives which are both art and explication merits further analysis. When working autobiographically, such writers would seem to be most capable of presenting a true version of themselves because of their perceived narrative skills, and so also potentially most able to divorce their "true" selves from the public narrative they produce, or, further, to multiply narrative selves so as to render attempts to find any steadiness or coherence among them fruitless. Productive close readings of literary texts—fiction, nonfiction, or in between—see depth and layering in the narratives they examine. In an inventively written autobiographical narrative, the skill of the prose stylist might provide a sense that the narrative hews closer to real, lived experience, but

the layering of traditional literary devices such as foreshadowing or metaphors, philosophical musings, political agendas, and outright fictionalizing without the appearance of fictionalizing all complicate the reception of the text as merely a record of historical events. Such skill and practice, combined with fairly ready access to publishers and the machinery of publicity, particularly when compared to more ordinary citizens, amount to a significant measure of power over the lives of others who are implicated, directly or indirectly, in an established author's autobiographical narrative.

### **The Lives of Others**

Whether labeling their work fiction or nonfiction, writers who use their own lives as source material assume a tremendous amount of control in mediating the balance between writing and reality, yet they work within the same constraints that they live: namely, that we are not alone. Save for the true hermit, an individual's life is inevitably and inextricably tied up in the actions, decisions, and ideas of other individuals. To write about one's own life, then, requires an author to manage the lives of others, simultaneously binding him to that shared reality and endowing him with the freedom to manipulate it.

James Phelan's article, "Narratives in Contest; or, A New Twist in the Narrative Turn," clarifies the interplay of one individual's constructed narrative as a part of a larger frame of other, multiple, "competing" ones. He proposes a "new twist" in narratology and its broader application in cultural studies:

A twist in the direction of locating the analysis of individual narratives within a larger, often implicit contest

among alternative narratives. While others have pointed out that narratives often compete with one another in certain contexts, such as politics and the law, I want to make two stronger claims: (1) the potential for such contests is built into the nature of narrative, and (2) we can improve our analyses of a wide range of narratives by attending to that contest. (168)

If we accept that the narrative from one's life an individual presents in an autobiography is in contest with other narratives, explicit or implicit, about or around that life, what work can be done investigating the moments when an author of an autobiography makes an effort to engage with the "authors" of one or more other narratives in that contest? Just as a life does not form and develop independent of other lives, neither does a narrative of that life form and develop independent of other narratives. Mailer's autobiographical narratives march straight into the contest of narratives, for he sees the changing cultural landscape of the postwar U.S. as the site of a contest which privileges the easy, consumable narrative of an individual's life. He does not frequently adopt allies from less threatening alternative perspectives, however, as the other two writers in this project do, in collaboration, not necessarily in contest, with the narratives and the lives of others.

"Collaboration" in life stories takes place constantly, of course. Many parts of the narratives we tell about ourselves are repetitions and reinterpretations of the narratives others tell about us. In the writing of one's personal narrative, however, such collaboration is often intentionally or unintentionally ignored. These writers have made the strategic decision—one at times weighted purely to their own benefit, and at others an earnest attempt to do justice to the collective experience of family, place, and/or politics—to incorporate alternative narratives into what is conventionally a singular and irreducible practice. Wideman and Eggers at various times claim their privilege as



governor of their text to direct it as they choose, yet also proceed to meld two or more narratives into one, paradoxically preserving and erasing their individual natures simultaneously, and the implications of that act. As Thomas Couser states regarding collaborative autobiography, “Although the process by which the text is produced is dialogical, the product is monological; the single narrative voice—a simulation by one person of the voice of another—is always in danger of breaking, exposing conflicts not manifest in solo autobiography” (35). The works I have chosen to discuss are largely but not entirely “collaborative,” but nonetheless purposefully heighten the conflict Couser describes, exposing their acts of giving “voice” to another as they assert the necessity of doing so. The title of Couser’s third chapter, in fact, “Making, Taking, and Faking Lives,” alludes to the potential sources of ethical conflict inherent in writing one’s life story while accounting for the lives and stories of a proximate other; namely: production, appropriation, and re-creation. This project extends the conversation begun by Couser and other critics, including Eakin and Elizabeth Bidinger, by locating the ethical decisions and implications they have shown to be inherent in autobiography within a larger framework of self-interested (without connotation) decisions an autobiographer faces in producing her text and the conditions of publishing and distribution which further complicate the matter of authorial self-interest and deepen a writer’s potential ethical obligations to others.

The authors’ approaches to telling their own stories *with* the stories of others acknowledge that both the life narrated in an autobiography and the narrative of that life are part of a larger web of individual and community narratives. Generally, these writers conscript and absorb others’ narratives into their own either unconsciously or

apologetically, though in doing so they still implicitly select their “companion” narratives from a host of other unvoiced ones, as well as real and imagined audiences for the finished text. The technique of employing a companion narrative within an autobiographical one provides the author an ally—explicit, implied, or conscripted—in the larger contest of narratives to which an autobiography inevitably if not aggressively enters.

Regardless of who undertakes an autobiography or the expressed purpose of the project, Janet Harbord explains that it cannot be “simply about the constitution of a stable, knowable self, even if that is the desire in the writing” (32). The communal nature of lived experience intervenes in personal reflection, of course, but likewise the conditions for actually writing and producing a text from that reflection requires “engagement with the various cultural resources available, forms which are recognisable to institutions, publishers, and audiences. Such conventions do not repress the potential text of the ‘self’ but constitute its possibilities” (Harbord 32-33). Smith makes a similar argument in discussing the “poetics” of women’s autobiographies. She notes that while the perceived creative element of structuring lived events in narrative form suggests that the possibilities for autobiography may seem limitless, the autobiographical act is thoroughly and ineluctably bound by the conventions of the cultural and linguistic systems surrounding the author. For autobiographers who are women, in particular, these constraints are dictated by external forces and require inventiveness to deploy to effect:

While the fictive patterns that could serve as plots, characters, and speaking postures for self-representation would seem limitless, such is not the case. As she examines her unique life and then attempts to constitute herself discursively as female subject, the autobiographer brings to the recollection of her past and to the reflection on

her identity interpretative figures (tropes, myths, metaphors, to suggest alternative phrasings). Those figures are always cast in language and are always motivated by cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation pressing on her at the scene of writing. (*Poetics* 47)

Even in working with the techniques of fiction, the writer of autobiography depends upon forms that originate(d) outside her experience, and if true self-representation is impossible in these terms, the process involves a depth of engagement not just with the self but with the contextual, intertextual world of language and experience in which one's self is bound.

Of course, the writers covered in this project are men. And of course, with the exception of John Edgar Wideman—who, though he is African-American, has had access to many of the privileges and opportunities of American academe and publishing, an advantage for a writer that he has engaged directly in his own work—the writers covered in this project are white. Thus, when they write, though they are “motivated” by the same “cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretation” cited by Smith above, their texts primarily enter the world buoyed by the institutions of dominant American culture rather than constricted by them. Linda Anderson's summary of the fundamentals of the conventional view of life writing reinforces this. “Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal,” she writes in her survey, *Autobiography*, “it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and, we may add, Western and middle-class—modes of subjectivity” (3). Laura Marcus likewise sees the value of autobiographical writing as a medium for authorial and critical investigation of the self, and acknowledges the limitations that come from the privileging of such a mode of inquiry. “Although autobiography—as concept or as a body of texts—is undoubtedly a crucial site for explorations or constructions of selfhood and identity,” says Marcus, “the

focus on universal subjectivity, or the denial, resulted in a neglect of ethnic and gender diversity and differential subjectivities, and a highly abstract concept of identity” (183).

Gilmore sees the implications of this dominant—though challenged from many angles—perception as one which has governed the conditions of authority that then allow for the production and circulation of autobiography as legitimate matter for critical intervention. “Autobiography is a form in which the self is authorized,” Gilmore writes, “although autobiography is not itself simply a self-authorizing form” (“Policing Truth” 72). The reception of individual autobiographers as authorities on their own lives and as relevant participants in the cultural conversation rests upon their identity and their relation to the institutions of power in society, and writers who resist the dominant ideology in their work are “deauthorized” by what is perceived as their failure (72). This project addresses writers who are readily acknowledged as authorized to speak about their own lives and those of others, having been born to or worked into a position for legitimate personal inquiry combined with public commentary.

And while such autobiographies seem to be the authors’ efforts to locate themselves within private spheres, the purpose they seem to serve is to locate those private spheres within the public context and often appear to help make sense of an historical moment by looking at its individual players. A postmodern concept of history privileges the fractured, individual, and incoherent cacophony of voices which constitute its narrative, yet, as White argues, history makes sense or has meaning only when framed by a narrative structure. History in this sense still eschews totality and must include a multitude of narratives in order to investigate and reproduce a version of the system of action and consequence. John McGowan adds that while the concept of Hegelian *grand*

*récit* remains attractive even in the wake of postmodern criticism, “it is too fixed.” Like Hegel, McGowan says, postmodern theory denies the possibility of “self sufficiency,” but also “works to imagine totalities and narratives more fluid, more open to chance, and more tolerant of heterogeneity than Hegel’s universalizing Reason” (27-28). “Tolerant,” however, does not necessarily indicate “inviting.” Being in a position “authorized” to submit one’s private narrative of self to the collective narrative of history carries with it a relatively enormous amount of social power. Though postmodern history may welcome diverse perspectives, inclusion is not guaranteed. The possibility for omission from the “record” is still quite real for marginal voices, as a function of a systematic repression rather than outright suppression.

Julia Watson grapples with the systemic support of certain modes of autobiographical authorship and the preservation of power in her essay “Toward an Anti-Metaphysics of Autobiography.” With the blossoming of life writing criticism in light of the postmodern theorizing of history and literature discussed above, Watson’s chapter in Folkenflik’s collection is an early argument (1992) in a critical trend that has aimed to undo what she calls the “*bios*-bias” in the study of auto-bio-graphy that has privileged “white European-oriented males” and “paid only lip service to deconstructionist gestures” of Barthes and Derrida (59). As she says, “*Bios*...is not synonymous with identity, but signals the significance of a life within authorized traditions of representing lives in Western culture.” Watson and Smith, along with Miller, Eakin, William Andrews, and a large and vital cadre of other critics have worked to expand the field’s purview and its perception of subjectivity and identity. Watson argues that

[p]ractitioners of mainstream theorizing of autobiography  
have maintained a canon of autobiographical texts that

clearly is narrow and insufficiently representative, but theorists who challenge metaphysical readings of autobiographical texts, whether from the point of view of feminism or of post-structuralism, need to grapple more intensively with how the historical practices and traditions constituting Western subjectivity have shaped a metaphysics of selfhood that informs the texts even of those who attempt to write against it. (57)

For Watson, the *bios*-bias is so pervasive that studies of autobiography texts which seem to or are held up to “rewrite canonical parochialism” (she cites Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman, “‘sanitized’ treatments” of Stein and Kingston, *Black Elk Speaks*, and Baldwin, Wright, and Malcolm X) actually serve to preserve the canon’s structure, because “although the *bios*-bias has been revised to undermine the ‘truth’ and stability of the life being represented,” the persistent focus on canonical structures “points to the stubborn persistence of *bios* as giving cultural status to particular lives”—indeed, that autobiography remains “the genre of exemplary lives” (60-61). As an antidote to this stubborn persistence, Watson reads a text by the (then East) German writer Christa Wolf which is both autobiographical, fictional, and, as Watson puts it, “anti-autobiographical” (59). Her summation of Wolf’s text encapsulates the challenge of reading autobiography reliably, and its potential richness for criticism and theory that accounts for the collective experience of autobiography which stems from the individual. Because Wolf writes her “memoir” *Patterns of Childhood* with a perspective that “mistrust[s] autobiography as a form of false consciousness,” Watson argues, she is able to reconstruct “the autobiographical paradigm itself as a multiply reflexive, irreducibly plural dialogue with memory about the construction of subjectivity” (75).

The publishing industry in the U.S., as controlled by centralized corporate interests as described in “The Life of the Book” and as committed to the production of

biographical and autobiographical books as described in the opening of this introduction, remains primarily invested in the *bios* as the focal point for public interest and as the legitimating condition for the writer's authority to tell his own story. McGowan describes the power that derives from "institutional arrangements" which "establish an inequality among agents participating in the activities enabled and organized by the institution" (253). In publishing, the white, male writer benefits from the power of the institution, and despite the occasional popularity or wide acceptance of work from others, the inequality remains. And from that inequality, the established author draws a tremendous amount of authority to control not only the narratives he composes about his own life or ideas, but those whom are drawn into his text as well—not to mention the degree of control he may have over the paratextual elements that accompany his narrative into the world. "The very freedom to fabricate is accompanied, in the West, by the freedom to contest—and to expose," the biographer Hamilton writes in his defense of his enterprise and questions that arise regarding the ability of a writer to speak authoritatively—and truthfully—on any life, his own or otherwise, as he dismisses the blurring that occurs between fact and fiction due to the very nature of narrativization. Hamilton writes as if the *freedom* to issue a contest to fabrication is tantamount to the ability to have that objection broadcast. "Such freedom, which extends to the millions of individuals who read and view biographical work," he continues, "is as much a measure of democratic reality as parliamentary government" (283). I would add that "democratic reality" generally does not, as American history has shown, equate to the equal access to the levers of power in government or in life writing.

Thus, in many important ways, critics can enact an (imperfect) balance against that power. It is certainly in this spirit that Wideman spoke to Coleman in the interview cited above. It is in the same spirit that I take up the issue of autobiographical narrative written by those individuals who might be considered “exemplary” literary figures. The expansion of conception of the canon of autobiography and not just the expansion of the canon itself, as Watson explains, is essential. However, I also believe that part of that reassessment includes a consideration of authors with seemingly ready access to culture industries and how those authors, in what is at least partially recognized as a revelatory literary act, behave in their writing and in their lives when they claim an awareness of their special access. The era(s) in which these writers are working and the strategies with which they undertake autobiographical acts allow for a discussion which isolates them as public figures, considers the special nature of their individual careers and autobiographical writing, but puts their efforts plainly in the context of the environment and the profession which they practice. And their work, if not always as openly “mistrusting” as Watson sees Wolf’s perspective, is consistently skeptical of its own nature and unsure of its own efficacy.

These authors are concerned about their books’ lives in the world, for the benefit or criticism which redounds to them, and to varying degrees, to anyone described in their books. The public exchanges, economic and intellectual, surrounding these texts are a real, active force upon their effect in the contest of narratives. And it is in these exchanges where the conditions of self-interest are most relevant, but also most challenged, for hosts of others, from agents and editors to media outlets and critics, have some vested interest in the book’s reception by audiences. The decisions a writer makes



(usually) after completing a manuscript version of her narrative must anticipate the decisions of all those actors in one way or another. The impact of these games affects the autobiographers' reputations, fortunes, and agendas; likewise, in these collaborative efforts, the games affect the others with whom the writer constructs her narrative. That potential impact is rarely lost on them or their collaborators, whether the anticipated effect is hopeful ("Since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!" Valentino Achak Deng writes to the reader in his preface to Eggers's *What is the What?* (xiv)) or potentially negative and quite personal (Wideman's worries near the end of *Brothers and Keepers* that the relationship he developed with his brother in creating his book will be irreparably damaged by that same process's denouement. "Once I'd gotten the book I'd come for, would I be able to sustain the bond that had grown between us?" he asks. "Would I continue to listen with the same attention to his stories? Would he still possess a story?" (200)).

That these selected writers cast the representation and incorporation of related narratives in the foreground of their works while asserting their own final control over their texts makes evident that the "web of entanglement," regardless of how far-reaching, is both a lived experience and a literary one. Autobiographical selves, as Miller says, "come into writing" via the context of other selves; naturally, though, those relations pre-exist the autobiographical document. The autobiographer's task is to compound those relations into a narrative of the self, an act which requires accounting for the "contest of narratives" simultaneously in life and in text. Questions about the figure of the author in textual production, textual analysis, and textual distribution show how complicated a fair and thorough accounting can be—and how potentially ineffectual. Regardless of the fixed

or indeterminate nature of the subject, these writers, as they shape language in order to present their sense of the self and its relation to others, enter a space which is the intersection of the individual and the social, as Bakhtin's simple expression demonstrates. "Language for the individual consciousness," he says, "lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin 293).

As a source for exploration of the privilege that attends access to the means of publication and distribution, of the rigor involved in contending with one's reputation and experience in writing and in the machinery of publicity, and of the care required for reproducing and sharing the life narratives and private experiences of others, the autobiographical narratives of and the writing lives of Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers are plentiful springs. *Writing Lives: Authorship and Authority in Recent American Autobiographical Narratives* aims to plunge into the depths of these writer's self-representations and account for the variety of interests that they enlist for their own work—or which enlist their work for other causes, some pure, some purely academic, some purely financial. My own perspective for analysis follows a Bakhtinian perspective on discourse, which sees three sources performing in concert, outside the exclusive control of the author but still dependent on his "part."

Discourse (as all signs generally) is interindividual. All that is said, expressed, is outside of the 'soul' of the speaker and does not belong to him only. But discourse cannot be attributed to the speaker alone. The author (the speaker) may have inalienable rights upon the discourse, but so does the listener, as do those whose voices resonate in the words found by the author (since there are no words that do not belong to someone). Discourse is a three-role drama (it is not a duet but a trio). It is played outside the author, and it

is inadmissible to inject it within the author. (qtd in Todorov 52)<sup>15</sup>

An autobiographical narrative begins with the lived experience of the writer and takes form through his expression of it. In both his experience and his self-representation, he depends upon the collective and intertwined conditions of life, language, and narrative. And in his transmission of his text to a reader (whether critic or consumer), the third party joins, and, where there is meaning to be made, we make that meaning together.

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<sup>15</sup> This excerpt in *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle* by Tzvetan Todorov is the only available English translation of this passage.

## Chapter One

### Norman Mailer's Existential Autobiography

"I was a node in a new electronic landscape of celebrity, personality, and status," Norman Mailer wrote in 1959, describing the literary renown he earned after the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, a decade earlier (AFM 92). As a participant in that landscape, he both embraced and rebelled against his role; as an observer of it, he aimed to make sense of the individual's place in an increasingly corporation-oriented monolithic society. For Mailer, and for many writers working in the United States after World War II, the self-conscious turn inward to explore the connections between his personality and his public reputation became an essential aspect of the literary project of understanding the forces working for and against individual expression in postmodern American culture.

Mailer realized, after a period of justified critical attention and the related public interest in the progression of his writing career, that his audience, his work's reception, and his own measure of his success would be inextricably connected to his literary reputation and the public persona that he and the "electronic landscape" together generated and sustained. While such writers as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway through to many of Mailer's contemporaries realized that their authorial personae were integral to their critical and financial successes, Mailer's embrace of the nuances of self-promotion and his acceptance of the inevitability of an

author's partial abdication of control of his or her reputation marks a newly formed postmodern conception of authorship. In this conception, highlighted most vividly by Mailer's nearly unparalleled engagement with the popular media about both his written work and subjects often largely unrelated to that work, writers confronted their world as a three-headed beast, one entity with a single name and three discrete parts: one's work, one's public persona, and one's private self. Because of his awareness of the "electronic landscape" and his conscious effort to manipulate his encounters with it, both in the pages of his books and his appearances in "public," Mailer's writing from the late 1950s into the 1970s is a signal part of the shifting art and business of literature after the second world war, as well as a new and important form of autobiographical expression.

Mailer's enormous self-regard and uninhibited exercise of his shouting voice (in print and in person) is such a matter of public record it hardly merits a footnote to reassess.<sup>16</sup> I contend that, as an intentional counterbalance to that reputation, he soaks the

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<sup>16</sup> But this is a dissertation, after all: In "Courtly Norman: The Legacy Derby," critic Donald L. Kaufman describes the role of the press in emphasizing Mailer's shouting voice, though he notes the symbiosis involved as well, calling the relationship a "ready-made twosome, Mailer and the media, mutual enablers." However, he believes that, especially between *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Executioner's Song*, "Mailer was typecast as ruffian extraordinaire—a 24/7 bully-brawler in salons and saloons, the epitome of egghead violence" (281). Mailer, though, did contribute several performances in his *enfant terrible* mode: aside from drunkenly stabbing his second wife in the back, his most famous and awful offense, he unsparingly critiqued his (gay) friend James Baldwin's writing as "sprayed with perfume"; he repeatedly and viciously sparred with prominent feminists of the era, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, and Kate Millett; he nearly came to blows with his frequent rival Gore Vidal on an episode of the *Dick Cavett Show*, and in the verbal melee called Vidal's work "no more interesting than the contents of the stomach of an intellectual cow"; in the same appearance he said Cavett, Vidal, and fellow guest Janet Flanner were "intellectually smaller" than him and asked if the audience were "all truly idiots" (Cavett, "In This Corner"); later in his career he insulted *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani, whom he believed had a vendetta against him and his work, as a "token" minority. For a fairly humorous summary, see Boris Kachka's *New York* magazine piece, "Mr. Tendentious" (January 7, 2007).

authorial manner with which he approaches the many autobiographical writings that constitute his contribution to “The New Journalism” within in a pervasive and surprising, though also calculated, humility. Cast amidst reportage and analysis of everything from pornography to heavyweight boxing to presidential politics, Mailer’s catalog of personal failures, shortcomings, and disappointments serves to explain his own inability to become the great American author it was his goal to become, and exemplifies the impossibility of any writer’s doing so. He tries to say that the deck is stacked against all writers in the age of the military-industrial complex and “corporation land,” as he described the changing nation. By undermining his own authority, he underscores it. By diminishing himself, and yet reasserting his special talent, Mailer carves out a space for himself in an era which was, as he saw it, creeping away from the individual toward a monolithic culture populated by philistines unconsciously under the sway of corporations.

In two works published within a decade of each other, Mailer attacked the triptych of written work, authorial persona, and private self in two divergent ways that nevertheless demonstrate his heightened sense of the fractured identity that accompanied public life. *Advertisements for Myself*, published in 1959, is a self-compiled collection of previously published and unpublished writing, interspersed with several “advertisements”—a hodgepodge of critical self-assessments, bombastic excuse-making, professional apologia, conventional retrospective personal narrative, and naked confession and self-exposure. *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, Mailer’s account of the 1967 march on the Pentagon in protest of the Vietnam War, employs most of the same autobiographical elements, but in a radically different form. The third-person account of *Armies* casts Mailer’s extreme self-consciousness

against the relief of massive public happening, a technique which ostensibly uses its “ambiguous comic hero” as a tool for the telling of history and which indirectly provides a personal narrative of that hero’s relationship with his reputation (AON 53).

Mailer’s writing about himself in these middle years of his career emphasizes his public identity as a decidedly *public* identity—many of the situations he finds himself in revolve around his reputation. He enlists in a variety of cultural debates, is assessed by critics and peers outside the scope of his published work, and is capable of undertaking non-authorial projects like starting a newspaper or making films because he is a well-known writer. He perpetuates that fame by his continued participation in it. However, by laying bare his private calculations and motivations for his participation in his public image, much of his writing—*Advertisements* and *Armies* in particular—undercuts and revises many of the commonly-held assumptions about his relationship with his reputation. In many ways, his dissatisfaction with his image is a result of his dissatisfaction with the way he himself has cultivated it: the mistakes he has made, the insufficient effort he has given, his failure to achieve the lofty goals he established for himself. A revolution is his goal; he is its agent; the fact that the revolution does not come is not so much the failing of his audience, or of his failure to reach them. No doubt, he is frustrated at the reception his “good” work receives—and he expresses that frustration at great length and in many formats and media—but Mailer exhibits an awareness, first in *Advertisements* and later in *Armies of the Night*, that if he indeed wishes to be the great writer he proclaims himself capable of being, he must be a *better* writer than he has been.

The author Mailer interacts with the public version of himself throughout these texts at the same time that he wrestles with it in a variety of public fora in these years. His

writing presents his image, his reputation, and others' impressions of him as a defining aspect of his character, as he defines his "real" self and his "real" motivations against others' perceptions and expectations. And while the public self is separate from that private or real self for Mailer, and despite his assurances and contemporary audiences' (varying) awareness of the artificiality and constructedness of public personae, Mailer's presence as a public figure is, inextricably, a real part of his private life. In the early pages of *Armies of the Night*, he reports (in the third person) that "Mailer" possesses "the most developed sense of image," a result of the fact that "people had been regarding him by his public image since he was twenty-five years old." That "developed" sense of his public persona entailed a skill at craftily burnishing the image as well: "He had in fact learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image—at night, in his sleep, he might dart out, and paint improvements on the sarcophagus" (AON 5). Mailer sees his relation to his public self in the same light that has led numerous critics to assess his worldview as Manichean: his perception of his image is both dichotomous and unified. It is fixed and malleable; extrinsic and intrinsic; true and false; imprisoning and protective; dead and alive. It is up to him, he decides, to turn that duality into an asset, to use seize the better parts of his reputation for himself if his critics intend to use the negative aspects against him.

Throughout both *Advertisements for Myself* and *Armies of the Night*, he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that he is intentionally manipulating his reputation in the service of his finances, his libido, and his aspirations. In laying bare his machinations and motivations, yet masking them under another layer of literary artifice (for, however honest, humble, egotistic, and authentic Mailer's voice seems in these works, he and his



readers maintain an awareness that he is carefully crafting narratives and framing his self-representation), Mailer breaches the electronic landscape—even if only momentarily—in a form and with a mindset that embrace the limitations he sees for himself and his work in the burgeoning postmodern world.

The dualism in Mailer's self-conception, his straddle (or seesawing, perhaps) between the modern and postmodern views of literature, and his ambiguous if not ambivalent embrace of his public reputation are the root of the value of these writings. He was, in the words of critic Loren Glass, "the last celebrity author," and his career epitomizes the generation of post-war American writers whose work spans a muddy river of time between high modernism and "a postmodern world of fragmented cultural fields that offer neither the continuity for authorial celebrity nor the refuge for authorial genius" (177; 196). When Mailer puts himself and his reputation squarely in the focus of his critical eye, readers witness a writer raging against circumstance, and profoundly humbled by it; we see the last celebrity author as among the first of a new model of necessarily apprehensive and uncertain writers, nodes on a electronic landscape seemingly without horizons.

### ***Advertisements for Myself: Text as Paratext***

"I think we can all agree it would cheat this collection of its true interest to present myself as more modest than I am," Mailer ends the introductory paragraph of the first entry in *Advertisements for Myself* (17). And indeed, the book's "true interest" does lie with Mailer's pages of self-assessment rather than the many uneven and largely unrelated

collected pieces. Because Mailer was consumed by unwelcome critical response to *The Deer Park* at the time, *Advertisements*, as a complete text, aims to excuse his recent shortcomings, rehabilitate his creative reputation, and bolster the perception of him as an author in command of his own talent. It is a text that ostensibly rejects the claims of his detractors yet affirms many of their suspicions. The writer “imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time” sets out to make the case for that perception as a capable, credible instigator (AFM 17). The effort is not, naturally, a modest one. The book’s value, however, is not the success or failure of Mailer’s immodest steps toward an improbable goal, but the strategies with which he takes those steps. There is great deal of narcissism—a favorite topic of Mailer’s since he considered it a personal weakness—in this collection because a degree of narcissism is foundational to many autobiographies. The attention an autobiographer must pay to his ego and to his own development requires at least a period of narcissistic self-inquiry. Yet Mailer neatly cleaves that self-inquiry into the greater narcissism of self-promotion and a candid and humble self-critique. The advertisements in *Advertisements* are a unique autobiographical form; what he calls in the table of contents a “Biography of a Style” is really the beginning of Mailer’s long project of composing the authorized biography of his public self. However, these self-reflective pieces do not amount to the autohagiography that the critics and the public might have expected from him at the time.

As I said in the introduction to this project, the authorial autobiography, like literary biography, seems to me to do two things: it demystifies the author—and reinscribes his or her particular talent. For Mailer, beginning in *Advertisements*, writing

about his past success and his continued ambition makes him authentic, a man striving to reach the pinnacle of his chosen field. He accomplishes an impressive double feat: he displays the limitations of his genius—articulates them with detail and clarity—without truly questioning his genius. He asserts both his accomplishment and his potential, in fact, by casting them in relief against his failures. He accounts for both the failures and the successes in a manner which engages the reader in his reasoning; one cannot deny Mailer's account of his state of mind, his goals, his perception of his experiences as an author and as a celebrity, yet we must question it. The complexity of his accomplishment in *Advertisements* is inherent from the beginning: these are *advertisements*, and a reader must regard the confession, the self-critique, and the boastfulness as a package of self-promotion, albeit one undercut both by the content and the sincerity of the self-revelation. Further, the word “advertisement” is an acknowledgement of the states of both himself and the changing consumer and critical market for writers in which he was working. Even interpreted ironically, the advertisements for himself are selling something, a commodity he needs an audience to buy (and, given his stressed financial situation at the time, increased sales of his books would have been a boon). Mailer plainly wants his reader to think of him as a great writer—as *the* great writer of his generation—but he wants to earn that reputation. The “full measure of the man” must include both his skills and his shortcomings. Mailer aims to provide (his version) of both.

His ambition as a writer is, at least in its public expression, practically unparalleled, and his aspiration was a permanent and abiding part of his life. “Before I was seventeen I had formed the desire to be a major writer,” he reports in “Advertisement for ‘A Calculus at Heaven,’” the piece thus advertised being a long short story about war

written in 1942, when Mailer was nineteen years old and not yet drafted into the army. Mailer's inclusion of this piece and other late juvenilia in "Beginnings," the first section of *Advertisements*, serves as a demonstration of his early talent and an easy benchmark against which he can demonstrate his great improvements. His reading of these stories is notably harsh if not unrelentingly so. "The Greatest Thing in the World," compared negatively to Truman Capote's early writing, reads "like the early work of a young man who is going to make a fortune writing first-rate action, western, gangster, and suspense pictures" (AFM 70). Mailer grants his "Maybe Next Year" a "Salinger-ish" quality, and suggests the style is inspired by Faulker (though he reduces the comparison by labeling the influence as "borrowing") (AFM 84). "A Calculus at Heaven," written in his senior level English class at Harvard, earns the most punishing assessment, despite its display of the author's "young, fairly good mind": "I don't see how I can recommend [the story]," Mailer writes in its advertisement, except out of a reader's curiosity in his early development, "for its tone gives away the peculiar megalomania of a young writer who is determined to become an important writer" (AFM 28).

The advertisements for these early pieces, though circumspect about the works' ultimate value and even critical of the works' execution, serve a function similar to a conventional product advertisement by making an indirect connection in the reader's mind between the writer in his formative years and the authors whose influence he claims. Besides the aforementioned J.D. Salinger and William Faulkner references, the three advertisements in the "Beginnings" section claim Ernest Hemingway, James T. Farrell, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, and Andre Malraux as aspirational company for Mailer's budding career. He recounts a conversation with writer

and editor Edwin Seaver, who first published “A Calculus at Heaven,” about the influence of *Man’s Fate* on the story.

“You admire Malraux greatly?” Seaver suggested.  
“I’d like to be another Malraux,” I blurted.  
“Well,” Seaver said, with real kindness, “maybe you will,  
maybe you will.” (AFM 29)

The older Mailer, somewhat less impetuous than his blurting younger self, modestly allows that “I have not come remotely close” (quickly modified with an exculpatory aside: “who has?”), and yet the connection between Mailer and Malraux—between all these writers and their self-proclaimed protégé, in fact—is left to linger with the reader. The technique is an invitation for scrutiny—of which he is certain his early work will not merit much—and for comparison with the writers he considers great. Yet that comparison, if it seems unfavorable to early Mailer, is one he must invite. His striving may be more polished by 1959, but it is hardly less grand. The final word of “advertisement” for himself delivered in *Advertisements* (coming before two pieces of his never-to-be-published novel-in-progress, the well-known story “The Time of Her Time” and the virtually unreadable cosmological ramblings “Advertisements for Myself on the Way Out: Prologue to a Long Novel,” and some poetry) is almost moving in its profound longing for literary transcendence. “For if I have one ambition above all others,” Mailer essentially ends his collection, “it is to write a novel which Dostoyevsky and Marx; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner, and even old moldering Hemingway might come to read, for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way” (AFM 477).

In “Norman Mailer as Midcentury Advertisement,” an article that aims to make the case for reading *Advertisements* in the twenty-first century, critic David Castronovo

frequently grants Mailer some of the literary company he sought to keep. Calling the best parts of the collection “a classic achievement in a long tradition of literary discontent,” Castronovo variously compares sections of *Advertisements* to the work of Thomas Carlyle, James Joyce, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, with passing reference to Marx, Freud, Rousseau, Blake, and Norman O. Brown along the way. Castronovo rightly reads the book as Mailer’s attempt to understand the transformative mid-century social and political culture and to define his place in it. However, Castronovo also vaguely minimizes the “dismissive, turgid, unreasoned, fragmented, uneven book” that is “larded with self-indulgent and all-but-impenetrable prose” when he sees it turning too far inward. He calls Mailer’s advertisements “the tough-guy writer’s apologia for his literary life: why I did what I did, what I endured” (180). Castronovo’s formulation of Mailer’s self-assessment echoes Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, which he calls a “discourse of the self...in which the question ‘who am I?’ is answered by a *narrative* that tells ‘how I became who I am’”(120). In fact, Mailer’s autobiographical project, begun in *Advertisements* and refined in *Armies of the Night*, is essentially his account not just of “who am I?” but of “who I want to be, why I haven’t been that person, and why it is unlikely that I will.”

This “apologia,” I assert, is an important text to consider in a larger project which aims to understand writers’ approaches to the concept of authorship in the later twentieth century as well as the means with which establishment writers set out to understand and convey their private lives within the context of their public ones. In Mailer’s case, he rose to prominence at the same time that television, transistor radios, consumer air travel, rapid expansion of mass circulation magazines, and a confluence of post-war cultural

shifts enabled the creation of contemporary mass culture and changed the nature of prominence itself. The role of the author diminished, even died as he saw it, in a world that had “no room for the old literary idea of oneself as a major writer, a figure in the landscape.” That notion was exploded by the realization that “[o]ne had become a set of relations and equations, most flourishing when most incorporated, for then one’s literary sock was ready for merger” (AFM 233).

In *American Culture, American Tastes*, cultural historian Michael Kammen traces the lines connecting and distinguishing mass society and mass culture as well as popular culture and mass culture, pinpointing the moment of American mass culture’s thorough emergence in the years immediately after World War II and into the early 1950s, concomitant with the appearance of Norman Mailer on the literary-intellectual scene. Kammen identifies the changes in the publishing industry (such as improved paperback production, distribution, and marketing) that led to a further commercialization of the literary trade that put authors such as Mailer, who were not necessarily a part of pop culture, squarely within the field of mass culture. And once an author began to circulate in mass culture, that commercialization encouraged, if not outright commanded, that he move from a medium of his making (the literary text) to the other media of mass culture that facilitated attention and, publishers hoped, sales. In effect, as major literary publishing advanced into mass culture, the opportunities to create and distribute the epitexts—those paratexts, using Gerard Genette’s terminology, which are connected to texts but are not physically a part of a book—multiplied exponentially, and as a result publishers and the public demanded more. The increased competition for consumer attention led publishers to use wider exposure for authors as a marketing tool, and the

public's increased curiosity about celebrities "real" lives meant that that wider exposure probed more deeply into authors' private personalities.

Participation in mass culture brought with it mass awareness, and a kind of power that attached to Mailer as a result of his embrace of his place on the "electronic landscape." His friend, the playwright Maria Irene Fornes, saw the effect of the rapidly expanding mass culture on him, noting that "for Norman fame was power." She observed, "You see yourself one way, and then that self becomes institutionalized, something public. With Norman the world cared about what he said and did, so he created himself, and the world responded" (qtd. in Manso 284). In the "Fourth Advertisement for Myself," Mailer acknowledges the pleasure that came from feeling the world "respond" to him and the effort he put into adjusting himself to maximize that pleasure:

I had gone through the psychic labor of changing a good many modest habits in order to let me live a little more happily as a man with a name which could arouse quick reactions in strangers. If that started as an overlarge work, because I started as a decent but scared boy, well I had come to live with the new life, I had learned to like success—in fact I had probably come to depend on it, or at least my new habits did. (AFM 240)

In an interview with Mailer biographer Peter Manso, James Baldwin, Mailer's friend and intellectual sparring partner at the time, commented that "one of the irreducible difficulties of being an American artist lies in the peculiar nature of American fame, the system of rewards and punishments. It's very difficult...not to become show business" (Manso 294). What Mailer accomplishes—and what a number of his contemporaries and those who follow will also begin to do—is "become show business" in his writing, and vice versa. By figuring his work as "advertisements"—and featuring in



those advertisements the exposure of his personal qualms and professional digressions—he unites his text with its paratext. In fact, by allowing his text to serve as its paratext, he might even help circumvent the potential damage to his reputation that his participation in the media culture occasionally causes. He confesses in the “First Advertisement for Myself,” that he has “a changeable personality, a sullen disposition, and a calculating mind,” which means he “never [has] good nor accurate interviews” because he is incapable of concealing from reporters “that I do not like them” (AFM 21-22). And so it is a clever gambit to turn his work into its own advertisement. By intentionally blurring the lines between public and private and between text and paratext, Mailer manages to combine his literary fame with his literary project, and he attempts to transfer the attention paid to his personality to the work for which he actually craves attention.

*Advertisements for Myself* is a kind of literary adaptation of the advertisement for *The Deer Park* which Mailer himself placed in *The Village Voice* after the book came out to a miserable critical reception. The ad, which Mailer reproduces in *Advertisements*, recasts the most brutal of the reviewers’ putdowns as “nothing but RAVES” and repeats them in the conventional visual form of endorsements (among the highlights are “Moronic mindlessness... Golden garbage heap”; “Disgusting”; “Dull”; “Embarrassing [sic]”; “Silly”; “Nasty”; and “Junk”).<sup>17</sup> Mailer describes the ad as his way

of saying good-bye to the pleasure of a quick triumph, of making my apologies for the bad flaws in the bravest effort I had yet pulled out of myself, and certainly for declaring to the world (in a small way, mean pity), that I no longer gave a dog’s drop for the wisdom, the reliability, and the authority of the public’s literary mind, those creeps and old ladies of vested reviewing. (AFM 248)

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<sup>17</sup> The half-page ad ran on page 8 of *The Village Voice* on November 16, 1955. It appears in AFM on page 249.

*Advertisements* pursues a similar agenda: he wants to circumvent his critics to present himself to that public literary mind as a brave intellectual revolutionary, even if the process is no “quick triumph” and even if it requires revealing his own “bad flaws”: “too many fights for me, too much sex, liquor, marijuana, Benzedrine and seconal, much too much ridiculous and brain-blasting rage at the miniscule frustrations of a most loathsome literary world” (AFM 22). Mailer is willing to expose the negative aspects of his work and his character in the hope that the positive lingers longer with readers, that his fame, his reputation, and his ambition cooperate to provide him with elusive, pleasurable, and frankly indefinable success.

The book-length advertisements echo the “tender notion” Mailer insists was behind the *Deer Park* ad as well; that it “might after all do its work and excite some people to buy the book” (AFM 248). Mailer craves an audience, and will use the lowest medium of mass culture, the advertisement, to reach that audience, even as he rejects that other paratextual medium, reviews. The advertisement of *Advertisements* is Mailer’s means of addressing his reputation with his readership directly and adequately, to set the stage for his real work. “An author’s personality can help or hurt the attention readers give to his books,” he observes in the “First Advertisement,” “and it is sometimes fatal to one’s talent not to have a public with a clear recognition of one’s size” (AFM 21). So Mailer undertakes the task of sizing himself up for his readers, to the length of approximately 500 pages. His strategy is a shameless abuse of his fame and an act of hubristic self-promotion; despite the glibness behind the gestures, it is also an admission to or at least a concession of weakness and failure.

Mailer's setbacks—described alternately as failures in commerce and in art—are often the genesis not of modest plans and a cowed reassessment of his potential but heightened, exorbitant expectations for his future work. He reports that his inability to sell a story called "The Paper House" to a "lady's magazine" sparked his emergence from the listlessness of "many dead months." "I was done with short stories and markets and editors and agents and thoughts of making my way back as some sort of amateur literary politician, done with trying to write less than I knew, rather than getting ready for something too large" (AFM 154). By chronicling his difficulty dealing with the business of selling his writing, Mailer seems to say here, he can get down to the business of accomplishing it. Facing resistance and hostility for his work, his solution is to aim higher. He even continues to make outsized plans for *The Deer Park*, which takes center stage in *Advertisements* as his most trying project, artistically and most certainly commercially. He intends to keep fighting for the story by adapting his novel into a monumental stage drama. "When I am feeling indecent about it," Mailer projects in "Advertisement for *The Deer Park* as a Play," "I think it has a chance to affect the history of American theatre" (AFM 442). He proceeds to include an excerpt in which "little of this possibility is present," in effect, making this an advertisement more for a projected failure than any grand reconfiguration of the face of American drama (AFM 442).

The greatest limitation on his ambition, Mailer explicitly and implicitly acknowledges throughout the "Advertisement" sections of the work, is himself. In a short introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer looks back at the change that text's success wrought in his vision of his career. The novel "catapulted the amateur who wrote it into the grim ranks of those successful literary men

and women who are obliged to become professional in order to survive—no easy demand, for it would insist that one must be able to do a good day’s work on a bad day, and indeed that is a badge of honor decent professionals are entitle to wear” (NAD xii). He needs to be a working writer to maintain his image as a successful one, yet throughout *Advertisements*, and in his subsequent autobiographical writing, Mailer emphasizes the distractions and diversions with which the business of being an artist impedes his art. Yet it is not commerce alone—the limits of his concentration and his will also, he concedes, constrict his production. The great aims he sets out for himself are greater than he thinks himself capable of achieving. “But,” he explains, “that long novel which has come into my mind again, a descendant of *Moby Dick* which will call for such time, strength, cash, and patience that I do not know if I have it all to give, and so will skip the separate parts, avoid the dream, and try a more modest ascent on the spiral of Time” (AFM 156). Mailer’s ambitions know no limits, but his pursuit of those ambitions recognize many. The megalomania of that young writer has not necessarily diminished in the seventeen years that intervene between “A Calculus at Heaven” and *Advertisements for Myself*, but the evidence throughout the latter text shows a Mailer resigned to the idea that the grandiose masterwork of his imagination is beyond his intellectual—and physical—capacity.

His awareness of his limitations and failures may have led Mailer to multiply the conditions that bred them. The harder he worked to produce profound, quality prose, the less sure he was he would produce it. Describing the effort he put into constructing *The Deer Park* in the central “Fourth Advertisement for Myself,” he describes a shift from elation at how quickly he was composing strong work to a brutal “restless[ness],”

worrying that “the consequences of what I was doing were beginning to seep into my stamina” (AFM 236). Even reflecting on his characters provokes a crisis both psychic and physical. Remarking on *The Deer Park* protagonist Sergius O’Shaughnessy, Mailer explains that “I was now creating a man who was braver and stronger than me, and the more my new style succeeded, the more was I writing an implicit portrait of myself as well. There is a shame in advertising yourself that way, a shame which became so strong that it was a psychological violation to go on” (AFM 238). Although he sees himself as too weak to face his own work, his ambition insisted that he proceed despite the “punishment” that came with writing O’Shaughnessy: “Yet I could not afford the time to digest the self-criticisms backing up in me, I was forced to drive myself, and so more and more I worked by tricks” (AFM 238); tricks intended to manipulate his mind and body, such as marijuana and seconal. The result was that he could continue writing, with “the most scrupulous part of my brain too sluggish to interfere” (AFM 238). With this confession, Mailer manages again to employ his most common autobiographical gambit; he contrives an explanation for why his work (and his life) might not be functioning at full strength while simultaneously insisting that there is real value in what he produces. “My powers of logic became weaker each day,” he writes, guiltily, then lets himself off the hook: “but the book had its own logic, and so I did not need close reason” (AFM 238).

The power, such as it is, of Mailer’s advertisements for himself reside largely in his willingness to expose his sense of inadequacy in the face of his own ambition. He is a ferocious critic of both the culture and of his peers, yet reserves much of his vitriol for himself. *Advertisements for Myself*, as much as it purports to sell the author’s strength, is

a catalog of his weaknesses and a lamentation for what he seems to see as an almost wholly wasted life. He brings his “Last Advertisement” toward its close with a comparison to Fitzgerald that is not flattering. “Fitzgerald was an indifferent caretaker of his talent, and I have been a cheap gambler with mine,” Mailer writes.

As I add up the accounts, I cannot like myself too much, for I was cowardly when I should have been good, and too brave on many a bad chance, and I spent my first thirty years abusing my body, and the last six in forced marches on my brain, and so I am more stupid today than I ought to be, my memory is half-gone, and my mind is slow; from fear and vanity I paid out too much for what I managed to learn. When I sit down, soon after this book is done, to pick up again on my novel, I do not know if I can do it, for if the first sixty pages are not at all bad, I may still have wasted too much of myself, and if I have—what a loss. How poor to go to death with no more than the notes of a good intention. *It is the actions of men and not their sentiments which make history*—the best sentence I’ve ever written—but I would hate to face eternity with that for my flag, since I am still at this formal middle of my life a creator of sentiments larger than my work. (AFM 477)

### **“The Shits are Killing Us”**

Ultimately, however, whether he feels his work’s quality has exceeded its reception and survived his own personal inadequacies, in *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer states frankly that he expects better than what he has achieved in the years between his service in World War II and his 1959 self-edited collection. Yet he also believes those forebears to whom he wished to be compared, such as Dos Passos, Faulkner, Steinbeck, and, foremost among them, Hemingway, had achieved little in the same years. In “Last Advertisement for Myself Before the Way Out,” some 400 pages past their first mention in his “Beginnings,” Mailer caustically observes that “no one from that generation of

major American writers who came before my own has put out work of the first importance since the war” (AFM 474). Their drought comes from forces internal and external; these are men “defeated by war, prosperity, and conformity” (AFM 476).

Neither has he seen little promise of true greatness in the cohort of writers whom he sees as the most prominent members of his literary generation. He devotes eight relentless and unrestrained pages to “Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room,” evaluating the men he considers his fellow American writers of promise with the poise of fairness, if not its practice.<sup>18</sup> He is unsparing, even for these few writers he holds in some high esteem. James Jones, “the only one of [his] contemporaries who [he] felt had more talent” than himself, “had no art for living with his weaknesses”—an art of which Mailer claims some mastery—who must “dare not to castrate his hatred of society with a literary politician’s assy cultivation of it” to succeed (AFM 463-64). James Baldwin is “too charming to be a major writer” who must “climb the mountain and really tell it” in order to produce a “testament, and not a noble toilet water”; otherwise, Baldwin “is doomed to be minor” (AFM 471-72). William Styron lacks “moral courage” (AFM 465); Truman Capote, who writes “the best sentences word for word, rhythm upon rhythm,” does not appear “serious about the deep resources of the novel” (AFM 465); Ralph Ellison’s “exceptional” talent is still not quite capable of overcoming the “rage,

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<sup>18</sup> It is notable—to this writer and to Mailer himself—that he has “nothing to say about any of the talented women writing today.” Confessing he finds fault with himself in being unable to read women writers, Virginia Woolf foremost among them, he nonetheless takes a sentence to be savage about “the sniffs I get from the ink of the women.” With the exception of some of Mary McCarthy, Jean Stafford, and Carson McCullers, these “sniffs” he finds “always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy frigid, outer-Baroque, *maquillé* in manniquen’s whimsy, or else bright and stillborn” (AFM 472). The assessment no doubt confirmed, if not created, the “dozen devoted enemies for life” he feared it would, evidenced by the many, many debates and battles he waged with feminists in the years to follow.

horror, and disgust” he sees in the world, “and so he is forever tumbling from the heights of pure satire into the nets of a murderously depressed clown” (AFM 471). He is even less kind about J.D. Salinger (“I seem to be alone in finding him no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school” (AFM 467)) and Saul Bellow (“I do not think he knows anything about people, nor about himself” (AFM 466)).

Despite a seemingly transparent attempt to diminish these peers, these evaluations, coupled with his bleak assessment of the previous generation, have an effect not unlike his attempt to align himself with the greats in “Beginnings.” These almost-great writers, he is saying, have done nothing remarkably great in the years since World War II, and the reason is a combination of personal limitations and cultural ones—a notion that Mailer has elaborated upon at length as it regards himself throughout *Advertisements*. The prognosis he delivers, for the “talent in the room” and implicitly for himself, is that “the novelists will grow when the publishers improve” (AFM 473). A “miracle” of courage from the publishing houses could “wear away a drop of nausea in a cancerous American conscience, and give to the thousand of us or more with real talent, the lone-wolf hope that we can begin to explore a little more of that murderous and cowardly world which will burst into madness if it does not dare a new art of the brave” (AFM 473).

Michael Kammen’s discussion of “the Great Debate” about the value and danger of mass culture to a healthy, thinking society encompasses intellectuals including such writers and scholars as Theodor Adorno, T.S. Eliot, Dwight MacDonal, and Gilbert Seldes. Mailer’s critique (and acceptance) of his experiences with both book publishing and other media (including his own founding of the *Village Voice*) in *Advertisements for*



*Myself* fits squarely in that debate. With the account at the center of the text of his many trials bringing *The Deer Park* to publication, he bookends the collection with two scathing critiques of the blight he saw descending on American culture. In both the “First Advertisement for Myself” and “Last Advertisement for Myself Before the Way Out,” Mailer sets up and eviscerates the forces he saw intentionally and accidentally conspiring to undermine the artists with vision, daring, and native skill like himself. “America is a cruel soil for talent,” he asserts matter-of-factly about his literary environs, and his assessment of the landscape (part electronic plane of the American present, part moldy remains of American past) is fairly hopeless. “Our literary gardeners,” he writes, “our publishers, editors, reviewers and general flunkys, are drunks, cowards, respectables, prose couturiers, fashion-mongers, old maids, time servers and part-time pimps on the Avenue of President Madison” (AFM 475). If the host of literary middle-men work harder to serve their corporate masters than their authors, they do not do so against the will of a resistant public, but rather one likewise in thrall to commerce over art. The audiences for literature

seem to consist in nine parts of the tense tasteless victims of a mass-media culture, incapable of confronting a book unless it is successful. The other part, that developed reader in ten with education, literary desire, a library, and a set of acquired prejudices is worse, for he lacks the power to read with a naked eye. His opinion depends on the sluggish and culturally vested taste of the quarterlies, and since these magazines are all too often managed by men of large knowledge and small daring, the writers they admire are invariably minor, overcultivated, and too literary.... Their real delight is in the abysmal taste of the majority, for a broad vein of good taste in American life would wash away the meaning of their lives. (AFM 475)

To Mailer's eye, cowardice among artists and those responsible for cultivating art in the face of the deadening forces of mass culture made those artists and their alleged allies equal partners with the ad-men, the CEOs, and the politicians in the transformation of the cultural landscape. He and his contemporaries were responsible parties as well as the victims of their predecessors, the best of whom were now "deadened into thinking machines, and the worst [...] broken scolds who parrot a plain housewife's practical sense of the mediocre—worn-out middle-class bores of the psychoanalytical persuasion who worship the cheats of moderation, compromise, committee and indecision, or even worse, turn to respect the past" (AFM 476).

In this rage, Loren Glass sees Mailer's "anachronistic" grasp at maintaining the modernist point of view in "an emergent postmodern order" (179). As *Advertisements* makes clear, Mailer saw the corruption, corporatism, and conformity of the post-war years as every bit as dangerous to the social and intellectual liberty he valued as the technologies, financial disasters, and geopolitical unrest of the first half of the twentieth century were to Stein, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald. Glass expounds on the psychological benefits and tactical advantages in his personal culture war that Mailer's anger won him:

The irony of a young postwar novelist feeling compelled to remind his modernist elders of their youthful oppositional stance was not lost on Mailer. It accounts for his conviction, throughout his career, of being temporally eccentric, of being somehow both in and out of his time....It would be this very eccentricity that would free Mailer up to circulate his public personality in the mass media while simultaneously maintaining a residual modernist sense of being apart from or above it all. (179)

Mailer thought it essential to keep himself alert to and apart from the worst tendencies of mass culture because he keenly felt the force of "the dead air of this time," as he describes his era in the "First Advertisement" (AFM 19), in which he believed "I

have been dying a little these fifteen years” since his college graduation (AFM 18-19). Making a report to his Harvard fifteenth anniversary report, he had written that he suffered from “the brawl, the wasting of the will, and the sapping of one’s creative rage by our most subtle and dear totalitarian time, politely called the time of conformity” (AFM 18).<sup>19</sup> Rephrasing the idea for *Advertisements* to assure absolute clarity of meaning, his pithy summation is simply, “The shits are killing us” (AFM 19).

If, indeed, “the shits” were killing Mailer and his contemporaries, he was unwilling to submit without a fight. Castronovo identifies the strident, clear-eyed, unrelenting critiques of time in *Advertisements* as Mailer’s first and most vital volley in that battle. He sees the text as “a symbolic tale of one consciousness in its struggle to stay alive”(180). Mailer had already started a project of delineating a method of survival in a world hostile not just to proper literary expressions but to “the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas” (AFM 337). In “The White Negro,” Mailer’s most famous and controversial essay, he spells out a code of action that may supply an antidote to what he sees as stultifying cultural conformity and may serve as a disinfectant for the “stench of fear that has come out of every pore of American life” since the war (AFM 338). First published in 1957 in *Dissent* and centrally located in *Advertisements*, the essay is Mailer’s encomium to the hipster, a figure who sees that the only way to resist conformity and fear is “to accept the terms of death, to live with death

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<sup>19</sup> Mailer reports that a typo in the Class Report transformed the phrase to the “slapping of one’s creative range,” and speculates that “as the years go by and I become a little more possible for Ph.D. mills, graduate students will begin to write about the slapping of my creative rage” (AFM 19). Though I have studied Mailer for more than a decade, this graduate student finds himself with virtually nothing to say about the slapping of Mailer’s creative rage, whatever that might mean. It is not, I humbly submit, for lack of imagination.

as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self” (AFM 339). It is no accident that Mailer’s vision of the hipster coincides with his vision of his own career—accepting the inevitability of culture’s new conditions and choosing to pursue a path simultaneously inside it and out. To fight conformity requires a complete abdication to “the rebellious imperatives of the self.”

Negotiating a middle ground between two impossible states of being, the self which completely rejects and withdraws from society and hence abandons his status and the self which submits to society and abandons his independence is Mailer’s overriding concern in “The White Negro” as well as in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” his first major piece of writing to follow *Advertisements for Myself* and his superlative first foray into major print journalism, covering the 1960 Democratic National Convention for *Esquire*. “The White Negro” posits the language and attitude of Hip as a means to circumvent convention and maintain control of one’s movements in and against society’s tides. “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” identifies John F. Kennedy as a model for publicly circulating a calculated image, both serious and likeable, on a grand and massive scale without damaging one’s privacy and control. Both essays inform the strategy which Mailer developed and honed in the years after *Advertisements* in which the increasingly garrulous and increasingly prolific Mailer put himself in the public eye, undertaking scores of interviews and appearances and crafting his particular style of participant journalism, culminating but not ending in *Armies of the Night*. The two pieces are the most notable and prominent non-autobiographical pieces that help illustrate the strategy

Glass describes Mailer employing, inventing “a public persona as both sword and shield, as a way to enter the mass cultural arena without being engulfed by it” (27).

“The White Negro,” Mailer reports in the “Sixth Advertisement for Myself,” was written “in the fear that I was no longer a writer,” and fits in with a part of his work “which has nothing and everything to do with me” (AFM 335-336). A romance of a particularly American existentialism, the essay lays out the means with which Mailer thinks it possible to live “a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action” (AFM 341). He envisions action as a solution to conformity and sees in the hipsters “the desire to murder and the desire to create, a dialectical conception of existence with a lust for power, a dark, romantic, and yet undeniably dynamic view of existence” that perceives individuals moving “through each moment of life forward into growth or backward into death,” a reflection, I assert, of Mailer’s own restless position between the modern and postmodern, his desire to lash out fruitlessly but satisfying in his flailing modern incarnation and to make art from within the void, even if it amounts to little, in his burgeoning postmodern one (AFM 342-43). What draws Mailer, ultimately, to Hip is its perceived ability to isolate and intensify the dual experiences “of elation and exhaustion” in a way that keeps the *individual* alive. Its language is “imbued with the dialectic of small but intense change...for it takes the immediate experiences of any passing man and magnifies the dynamic of his movements, not specifically but abstractly so that he is seen more as a vector in a network of forces than as a static character in a crystallized field” ( AFM 348-49). Survival on the “electric landscape,” Mailer implies, requires a philosophy and a language that acknowledges the landscape’s vexed existence.

Hip, as articulated in the essay and throughout his other notes and letters on the subject, though presented as rooted in existential philosophy and compelled by a profound and unwavering acceptance of mortality, is ultimately a performance, borrowed from Mailer's troubling, largely unnuanced conception of the urban African-American male. He identifies a primitive existentialism in his formulation of the American black man—"an alien but nonetheless passionate instinct about the meaning of life has come so unexpectedly from a virtually illiterate people"—because black men have lived in "a pass where paranoia is as vital to survival as blood" and so has "stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could" (AFM 357, 341). The ugly part of Mailer's vision of black men is his insistence that they sacrifice "the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body." The trick to survival, his semi-mythical "Negro" demonstrates, is to accept that life *is* danger and hence to live "in the enormous present" (AFM341), in which Mailer sees real freedom and the possibility of uninhibited personal pleasure. Mailer's vision of the hipster and prescription against the malaise of postwar culture is an intentional cloaking of white American existential dissatisfaction with black American existential jeopardy.

The state of mind, even as narrowly defined by Mailer, which black men assumed to survive in a country which did not value their lives filled him with a sense of awe, and served as a model for all men (and grudgingly, perhaps, women) to face their existence in a world that not only did not value their existence but was, worse, oblivious to it. He sees the survival of African-Americans in the "most intense conditions of exploitation, cruelty, violence, frustration, and lust" as a sign that "the Negro" might hold greater control in the new age than "the radical." For Mailer, who fancied himself a radical, the

impact of this realization was great, and it shows itself in the latter part of *Advertisements* as he rebukes the “thesis” of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, insisting that “the Negro is the least invisible of all people in America” (AFM 471). Writing with something approaching jealousy, he makes a case that African-American life was not just more existentially honest, but more real and more distinct:

That the white does not see each Negro as an individual is not so significant as Ellison makes it—most whites can no longer see each other at all. Their experience is not as real as the experience of the Negro, and their faces have been deadened in the torture chamber of the overburdened American conscience. They have lost all quick sense of the difficulty of life and its danger, and so they do not have faces the way Negroes have faces—it is rare for a Negro who lives it out to reach the age of twenty without having a face which is a work of art. (AFM 471)

For Mailer, to really live is to be really visible.

Spectacular visibility was never an issue for Mailer’s other “existential hero” of the time, John F. Kennedy. “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” is nine tightly-packed, verbally overwrought magazine pages of equal parts pure wonder at and diagnostic exposition on the process and setting that led Kennedy to become the Democratic nominee for president in 1960.<sup>20</sup> Mailer sees Kennedy as a mutable yet powerful force: he is “the edge of the mystery,” “a great box-office actor,” a “young professor,” a man with the “manner of a fine boxer,” “a dry Harvard wit,” and an “appearance that changed with his mood” as well as, in an inscrutable analogy, “the eyes of a mountaineer” (SCS 4). Most importantly to Mailer, this politician, unexpectedly yet necessarily, had a strain of the underground in him: “Yes, this candidate for all his record,

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<sup>20</sup> The article was retitled “Superman Comes to the Supermart” by *Esquire* editor Arnold Gingrich, who apparently hated the piece and published it only because “we had left space in the issue,” according to Clay Felker, another of the magazine’s editors (Manso 304). Mailer was infuriated.

his good, sound, conventional liberal record, has a patina of that other life, the second American life, the long electric night with the fires of neon leading down the highway to the murmur of jazz” (SCS 1). Kennedy was “the Hipster as political candidate.”

Mailer’s conception of the nation laid out in “The White Negro” and *Advertisements for Myself* remained unchanged by 1960, even as his sense of a looming emptiness in its people was heightened. Looking back over the Eisenhower era, he pinpointed an “existential turn” America needed to make,

to walk into the nightmare, to face into that terrible logic of history which demanded that the country and its people must become more extraordinary and more adventurous, or else perish, since the only alternative was to offer a false security in the power and the panacea of organized religion, family, and the F.B.I., a totalitarianization of the psyche by the stultifying techniques of the mass media which would seep into everyone’s most private associations and so leave the country powerless against the Russians even if the denouement were to take fifty years, for in a competition between totalitarianisms the first maxim of the prizefight manager would doubtless apply: “Hungry fighters win fights.” (SCS 3)

In his youthful hunger to be more extraordinary and more adventurous, Kennedy seemed to promise a solution. In his biography, Mailer saw, “the wisdom of a man who senses death within him and gambles that he can cure it by risking his life” (SCS 4), a clear echo the existential manifesto of “the white Negro” that hoped to provoke America into a change in which “the mean, empty hypocrisies of mass conformity no longer work” (AFM 356).

The Kennedy described in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” struck a nerve in Mailer, I believe, because he represented the possibility of being a public figure and a public servant, while still preserving a calculated inscrutability that helped insulate the



individual from the collective death that was mass society. In a time that was disheartening to Mailer, literally depressing him, Kennedy offered hope that the new era could be managed, manipulated, and improved through a combination of the politician's deft negotiation with his public image and the hipster's existential disregard for it. Mailer attempted to embrace his own strengths and his weaknesses, his talents and his vices and expose them to his audiences because he believed that to have a vexed image and a complex identity meant that, at least, he still had an identity. In the Kennedy article, he demonstrates his worry that identity and personality were being obliterated, at the expense of art and liberty:

The twentieth century may yet be seen as that era when civilized man and underprivileged man were melted together into mass man, the iron and steel of the nineteenth century giving way to electronic circuits which communicated their messages into men, the unmistakable tendency of the new century seeming to be the creation of men as interchangeable as commodities, their extremes of personality singed out of existence by the psychic fields of force the communicators would impose. This loss of personality was a catastrophe to the future of the imagination, but billions of people might first benefit from it by having enough to eat—one did not know. (SCS 3)

Mailer chose to write about himself and accept that he would be written about in order to keep himself alive. If the mass media intended to construct and circulate his image in a manner that made it flat, empty, enervated, and hence dead, he would contribute to the image in order to control it, to stay alive in order to be able to speak. Allen Ginsberg, who knew Mailer in those years, told Manso he saw the “spiritual motive” in Mailer’s writhing to keep himself in the public eye, to make a “public address.” Ginsberg rejected the idea that Mailer was “grandstanding” or that his “celebrity was a problem.” Ginsberg said that he and Mailer shared “an awareness that there is a living world and mind outside

that is influenceable and influencing, and that if you talk directly to it you can break through and communicate, actually alter the attitude of mind or human consciousness through a work of art” (Manso 287). Glass’s insightful reading of Mailer as an anachronistic modernist is especially apropos to the consideration of Kennedy and the hipster because those two figures are the foundation of Mailer’s exhortations that Americans wake up to live for themselves and fight against “the shits.” If the modernist Mailer would settle for nothing less than a “revolution in the consciousness of [his] time,” his nascent postmodern self had to suspect it was not coming.

### ***Armies of the Night and the Many Marching Mailers***

The precarious balance between a righteous vision of an artist’s ability to remake the world and a resigned acceptance that imagination had been stamped out of contemporary culture to the point of irrelevance haunted Mailer’s work in the years after Kennedy’s election. His frustration with that precariousness was deepened by JFK’s assassination and the start of the war in Vietnam. The mood pervades the entirety of *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, published first in *Harper’s* in March 1968 and in book form a couple months after. Biographer Mary Dearborn sees the mood of the book as “distinct, constant ambivalence,” and suggests that much of it can be read as “a conflicted love story of sorts, about Norman and his country” (243-44). His participation in the 1967 March on the Pentagon—the subject of the work—was reluctant, anticipating merely “a wasteful weekend,” and his assessment of it after the fact and in the middle of a over 120,000 words devoted to the event, is decidedly

noncommittal, especially for someone of such strong opinions. In short, Mailer declares that “the March on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever” (AON 53).

The ambiguity of the event is the root of the complexity of its coverage. The literary modernist in Mailer believes “one’s own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam,” and yet his agreeing to participate in the march against the war eventually allows him to unite literal action with literary. The result of that union, however, casts the shadow of ambiguity over both. The Mailer in *Advertisements for Myself* who wanted to make a revolution and lamented his inability to do so is resurrected here, desperate to push back against the corporate military-industrial machinery responsible for the battles abroad and at home, but largely unconvinced that words or action can make a change. The only solution is to aim for understanding.

What a reader witnesses in *Armies* is a professional Mailer emboldened by the success of his contributions to the (as yet unnamed) New Journalism and the provocations of *An American Dream* and *Why are We in Vietnam?* as well as one further defeated by his inability to be *the* great novelist and the potential impossibility of it, so much so that he was spending increasing time in journalism, theater, and filmmaking. Readers also get mediated but seemingly honest access to the personal Mailer, at this point in life somewhat calmed and detoxified after his most vile and infamous “private” action, the stabbing of his second wife Adele Morales in late November 1960 (shortly after the publication of “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” and Kennedy’s election), his subsequent involuntary stay in the psychiatric ward of Bellevue Hospital, their divorce, his third marriage and divorce, and a fourth marriage, which was adequately

successful in 1967. That personal history was already quite public, however, thanks both to its sordidness and to the media's taste for the sordid, and Mailer, forever conscious of his public image, tacitly acknowledges his tumultuous past and explicitly celebrates his current marital equilibrium with Beverly Bentley.

In fact, his successful marriage redeems his view of himself, to a degree, and likewise his view of his country. The fact that Beverly, "a Southerner and an Army brat," should be "so subtle, so supple, so mysterious, so fine-skinned, so tender and wise," leaves him no choice but to "decide that no it could not be an altogether awful country." Yet, of his four wives, he says, "he understood [Beverly] the least"—could not even determine "if her final nature was good or evil?"—and so, likewise, despite the "heavy-handed" analogy, the same ambiguity is cast on his country. However, his key to loving his wife was to "never lose sight of [her] absolutely unquenchable even unendurable individuality" (AON 170-71). No such option existed for his scrutiny of America.

Making dramatic metaphors from his own personal experience about the condition of the U.S. is, it could be said, the whole point of *Armies of the Night*. The individual perspective is the only logical response to a country largely giving over to "corporation land," one of Mailer's abiding concerns in the book. The spread of conformity and consumerism across the country, helped along by "corporation land's whip—the television set," had paved the way for the interests of faceless bureaucracy and the inhumane indifference of "Capitalism," the forces responsible for the "obscene" war in Vietnam, "the worst war the nation had ever been in" (AON 253, 79). The war, the march to protest it, in fact, all of the twentieth century as Mailer saw it, "was entrenching itself more deeply into the absurd," and so, if the events he was participating in

took place in one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the* crazy house of history, it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such a history should be not only off very much to the side of history, but that he should be an egotist of the most startling misproportions, outrageously and often unhappily self-assertive, yet in command of a detachment classic in severity (for he was a novelist and so in need of studying every last linament of the fine, the noble, the frantic, and the foolish in others and in himself). Such egotism being two-headed, thrusting itself forward the better to study itself, finds itself therefore at home in a house of mirrors, since it has habits, even the talent, to regard itself. Once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History. (AON 54)

In her essay, “Norman Mailer and the Radical Text,” Kathy Smith insightfully dissects Mailer’s crazy house metaphor and touches on the ambiguous but necessary advantage its privileging of a subjective perspective on history projects. “In the fun-house mirror,” she notes, “the subject watches the transmogrifying self observing the self-observing subject” (187). Mailer’s version of history is “reflected in this metaphor of the distorted images created by the act of looking. The metaphor is a rich one, inviting distortion of meaning, inviting the preemption of the event by the self, whose difference from itself requires a reexamination of the true story” (187). The tension created is a productive one that simultaneously holds up “the viewing subject’s eye” as “the only legitimate mediator between the word and the event” and insists that “this eye is no longer ‘sanctified’”; a tenuous authority, the only possible kind under the circumstances of the time, is established (187-88). Mailer’s choice of the third person furthers both the metaphor of the house of mirrors, for his character becomes an alternately horrifying distorted image and a pleasantly unfamiliar one, and the force of the subjective point-of-view, by complicating the reader’s sense of his motivations.

His self-characterization in the third person is a technique which serves two purposes in his history/novel hybrid. First, it submerges him in the text, in the events recorded and the moments reflected upon, rather than in the moment of reflection. Mailer is a participant in the history, not merely its observer. On the other hand, the decision to use the third person rather than the first foregrounds Mailer, isolates him as the protagonist for the novel, and as such, privileges his thoughts, motivations, and actions and casts the public historical event as the subjective, narrative experience of an individual. As Smith explains, “his provisional contexts have the effect of uniting the writing act and the event, but the union is always fraught with tensions—between text and context, and between his direct experience of the event and its subsequent reproduction as text...both story and self are compositers of an indistinct meaning constructed with unreliable tools” (191).

Autobiography theorist Jean Starobinski notes in “The Style of Autobiography” that, although it is “a seemingly modest form,” autobiographical narrative in the third person accumulates and makes compatible events glorifying the hero who refuses to speak in his own name” (77). Mailer is not uncomfortable declaring himself the “hero” of *Armies*, but leavens the assertion by insisting his character be “a comic hero,” a strategy which he paradoxically asserts is intended to quiet the “immediate questions about the competence of the historian,” that is, himself (*AON* 53). The third-person narration of this autobiographical work allows Mailer a freedom both to glorify himself, as Starobinski suggests the technique generally works. It also lets him enact a calculated debasing of Mailer the Great Literary Figure, as John Hollowell points out in his discussion of the tactics of Mailer’s journalism, insofar as the writer “establishes an ironic distance

between himself and the world, which tempers his exuberant self-assertions with a new sense of modesty” (93). The effect is a humanizing one. The struggle to define himself against the depersonalizing forces of the media that foster and promote his public image and hence to establish the authority to speak as himself and not “Norman Mailer” leads him to his particular style of self-representation, which purposely creates the space in which both Norman Mailer and “Norman Mailer” coexist.

The remainder of this chapter turns its attention to the style and technique of *Armies*, primarily Book One, because understanding Mailer’s autobiographical project in of dividing himself (public persona from private man, participant from observer, Novelist from Historian from journalist, “modest everyday fellow” from “wild man”) as a method for painting a unified portrait of himself is fundamental to his simultaneous project of dividing and analyzing American culture (individual from corporate, literary from commercial, radical from bureaucrat, hip from square) in order to synthesize it. Mailer’s early biographer, Hillary Mills, traces the shifting actions, motivations, and ideologies of “Mailer” in *Armies* as an embodiment of the consensus character of America itself. “By moving from the drunken, obscene-talking revolutionary provocateur of Thursday night to the man of action stepping boldly across the police line on Saturday to the humble lover of Christ on Sunday,” posits Mills, “Mailer had managed to encompass the spectrum of American sensibility within himself. It was a sensibility that only the most expansive, sensitive—and egotistical—of American writers could claim to possess” (255).

The distancing of the narrator from the protagonist in *Armies of the Night* is a technique infrequently employed in autobiographical writing but, of course, common to

fiction. By foregrounding himself in the narrative, making “Norman Mailer” the protagonist of a novel, he can present a character participating in the events, making them real and immediate as a novel can with fictional event, and his narrator’s voice is stripped of opinions about the events but is used as a vessel for reporting the Mailer-character’s opinions, interpretations, and rationalizations. The narrator’s voice is understood to be the voice of Mailer-the-author—and the distance between narrating-Mailer and narrated-Mailer lends an authority to the narrator-author by neutralizing his position. It is a position which simultaneously identifies the narrator with his readers and establishes a trust, inviting the audience into a shared perspective on controversial events and complicated motives, and challenges readers by reminding of the complex relationship between author and narrator and protagonist. Approaching the text from a psychoanalytic perspective, Andrew Gordon aptly summarized the value of the duality of author and protagonist, a tactic that “gains him the benefits of both self-exposure and self-protection, for the reader can laugh along with him at the worst excesses of the foolish Mailer while admiring the serene wisdom of the *other* Mailer who tells the story” (189).

The split between writer and actor is purposeful enough, and still the narrating-Mailer ensures that the narrated-Mailer is far from a singular entity himself. The multiplicity of Mailers in *Armies* performs, unsurprisingly, multiple functions for the author. Fracturing his protagonist into several personae—all of which cohere with the primary character but who “appear” at the moments when that persona is, in essence, called upon by the situation—demonstrates his awareness of his fractured public image and his own fractured sense of his goals, his motivations, his identifications, and his achievements. And while Mailer plainly thinks of himself as a more complex than the



average person and openly acknowledges a greater insight into his own complexity than into that of others, his own fractured character models for reader the fracturing—or potential fracturing—of the other individuals included or not included in the novel. Robert Lowell, Dwight MacDonald, and Ed de Grazia, to name three of the most developed examples, present themselves (according to the narrator) and are engaged as characters in varying positions which Mailer seems to suggest are coherent, even if their individual actions, statements, and receptions seem inconsistent, or even contradictory.

The many Mailers, of course, are a short-hand system for identifying the many roles Mailer sees himself playing in his life. The persona are designations for roles moreso than they are individual personalities, and identifying the roles signifies the unreality of the situation. The Novelist, the Historian, the Ruminant, the General: all of the characters, are independent from one another and yet a piece of the same. These self-formulations take the form more of a caricature, in fact, than a character. They are images in a funhouse mirror, grotesques in Mailer's hands, in the mold of Sherwood Anderson or Flannery O'Connor, exaggerations which cast reality in a harsher, clearer light. Mailer's technique allows him to point out and isolate the various expectations he and others demand of Norman Mailer.

These grotesques are rhetorical masks for Mailer to wear, roles he allows himself to play, in service both of personal gratification at living outside himself and of making a point about his public perception. "Everything added up to a depiction of the self that was overblown and yet wildly unflattering," journalism critic Kevin Mattson says in his essay "That's Not Writing—It's Hying," and insists that *Armies* is a "logical extension" of *Advertisements for Myself* that "could just as easily be entitled *Advertisements Against*

*Myself*' (25). But the effort of the autobiography in *Armies* is not to actively write *against* himself as it is to acknowledge his complexity, just as *Advertisements* were far from whole and unequivocal self-promotion. By emphasizing the ambiguous virtue of his character and acknowledging the degree to which he is inclined to pose in order to provoke, Mailer wrests control of his public image in the text by complicating it beyond the simple narrative of the "literary *enfant terrible*" (a phrase which had been essentially a Homeric epithet for Mailer in the press since the mid 1950s). He makes his character weak, exaggerates that weakness, and through his confession of the weakness, it is conscripted into his service as honesty.

Throughout *Armies*, Mailer emphasizes the ambiguity of his character by expressly acknowledging the elements of which he knew his audience were most aware and most critical. And, cannily, he manages to complicate the reader's perception of a weakness by explicitly mentioning it has potentially useful components. In a passage near the opening of the book, he manages to portray himself as modest and mild-mannered as well as prone to wildness:

But as Mailer had come to recognize over the years, the modest everyday fellow of his daily round was servant to a wild man in himself: the gent did not appear so very often, sometimes so rarely as once a month, sometimes not even twice a year, and he sometimes came when Mailer was frightened and furious at the fear, sometimes he came just to get a breath of air. He was indispensable, however, and Mailer was even fond of him for the wild man was witty in his own wild way and absolutely fearless—once at the edge of paralysis he had been ready to engage Sonny Liston. He would have been admirable, except that he was an absolute egomaniac, a Beast—no recognition existed of the existence of anything beyond the range of his reach. (AON 13)

Mailer teases the reader with the notion that his “wild man,” the source and subject of Mailer’s legend, is nearly “admirable,” and craftily pulls back to admit that indeed, the excitable “gent” within him is, as his audience surely believed, an egomaniac and a beast.

So attuned to his image, Mailer believed he constantly “pa[id] for the pleasures of his notoriety in the impossibility of disguise” (AON 78). However, if disguise seems impossible, role-playing was not. In his study of blackface minstrelsy in America, Eric Lott reads Mailer’s articulation of the hipster in “The White Negro” as a performance in that tradition. “Mailer and other white Negroes down the years,” Lott says, “inherited a structure of feeling that no doubt preexisted but was crystallized in the responses of the first minstrel performers to the allure of black men” (55). In Mailer’s disastrous drunken speech at the Ambassador Hotel on the Thursday evening of the March, a similar pleasure in transgression via performance takes place, as the opportunity to perform, to strike out on his own, unrehearsed and uninhibited, becomes the ultimate existential experience for Mailer. He first accosts the crowd with pointless Irish accent, then shifts after failing to identify any black members of the crowd, to mimic some imagined African-American dialect: “Well ah’ll just have to be the *impromptu* Black Power for tonight. Woo-eeeeee! Woo-eeeeee! HMmmmmmm” (AON 38). He finishes with a southern drawl and “a couple of rebel yells” before reluctantly yielding the stage (AON 38).

In this behavior and in his objective though unapologetic recounting of it, Mailer intentionally provokes an audience who knows him through his reputation. His image and its many accurate and inaccurate, sympathetic and unsympathetic representations, that used such performances as their starting point but which proliferated well beyond his

control, freed him from the restraints and inhibitions others might understandably feel in a moment as public as the assembly. And in writing about it, he can take back some of that control. What Mailer's memory of the event, recounted in *Armies*, allows his readers to see is the exercise of that freedom. Mailer may put on the "grunt" of Cassius Clay and the "brogue" of Brendan Behan, the holler of a country gentleman, and the intemperance of the "Prince of Bourbon," but he is not inhibited by his reputation because he has ceded full ownership of his public image and allowed that it was just one of a series of masks he could wear.

In the narrative of *Armies of the Night*, while the work deeply depends upon the Mailer character's state of mind, prejudices, and observations of others, it is his presentation of the physical actions of the character Mailer which propel the textual and historical action. Often, the more significant physical experiences should be embarrassing for Mailer. His ordeal in the Ambassador Theatre is highlighted by his drunken micturition on the floor of the theater's restroom before his strange, animated speech. His hangover is the pivot point of Part II, "Friday Afternoon," in which his day begins with "Mailer awakening with a thunderous electronic headache" and, by evening, "Mailer's hangover was now about gone" (AON 54-55, 79). On the verge of arrest the next day during the March itself, Mailer-author looks back significantly at Mailer-character's body: "It was his dark pinstripe suit, his vest, the maroon and blue regimental tie, the part in his hair, the barrel chest, the early paunch—he must have looked like a banker himself, a banker gone ape!" (AON 131)

The attention to personal, physical elements of his narrative give Mailer both the patina of authenticity for the historical account and the tools for narrative. The events he

describes—minus the hangover, which we can safely take his word for, based on the accounts of his drunkenness the previous night—are verifiable: the *Time* article that opens *Armies* is real, published in the October 27, 1967 issue, amidst an extended report on the March on the Pentagon, exactly as transcribed by Mailer; his misdirected urination is central to the small report, “A Shaky Start.” As noted above, the sequence of the physical conditions, however, drives the narrative in the manner of fiction. Mailer’s presentation imposes a poetic order—a narrative—to what otherwise might be a mere catalog or chronicle of his bodily actions. Making this story rather than a type of list is a function for fictionalizing, in a way. As historian-theorist Hayden White writes, “The point is that narrativization produces a meaning quite different from that produced by chronologicalization. And it does this by imposing a discursive form on the events that its own chronicle comprises by means that are poetic in nature” (42). The notion that these reports are confessions of faults and wrongdoings is also central to the multi-layered sense of the work as autobiography and history and novel. Mailer *is* confessing to a great deal in this book: he is confessing to many things already performed in public, for which he is already visibly culpable, at no more than half a year’s remove. The act of confession, then, must serve a larger purpose for Mailer’s project. Consider the substantial effort Mailer puts into establishing himself as a lucid quasi-prophetic voice in this work and the playfully confessional tone seems purposeful.

Writing in another context, autobiography scholar Leigh Gilmore provides a helpful frame for Mailer’s rhetorical strategy in *Armies*. In her article, “Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority,” she writes that “authority is derived through autobiography’s proximity to the rhetoric of truth telling: the confession”

(57). Gilmore's observation primarily concerns women attempting to enter the public discourse from a marginalized position. On the other hand, Mailer hardly considers himself a marginal figure, nor would it be right for him to assert any sort of social injustice levied against him. Yet, in absorbing if not faithfully practicing his philosophy of Hip, Mailer has claimed marginalization for himself, as critic Richard Poirier has identified. Elegantly diagramming Mailer's self-marginalizing technique, Poirier explains, "Mailer's resolute practice is to probe for a feeling of repression where there would for others be evidence only of the power of the oppressor, to find in the apparent majority the characteristics of a minority, and to cultivate in himself what might be called the minority within" (109-110). And so, accepting that in Mailer's mind he is a minority, we can understand his need to qualify this text and his story as valuable historical narrative—even in the crazy house of history, looking at the distortions in the mirrors, the author needs to legitimate his authority as a storyteller who can be trusted. Hence, the confessions, the intimacies, the frisson of immediacy he imparts to the "History as a Novel" section of the book.

Stephen Spender makes the apparent but unspoken quality of confession in autobiography plain: "There are crimes to which we confess because they secretly flatter our sense of our own strength. But no one confesses to meanness, cowardice, vanity, pettiness: or at least not unless he is assured that his crime, instead of excluding him from humanity, brings him back into the moral fold" (121). For Mailer, confessing to his outrageous hold of the auditorium stage on the Thursday evening of the March, the urination, the propensity for drink, his hesitancy to let himself be arrested, the reluctance to participate in the March at all: these are several of the latter forms. We might call these

“left-handed confessions,” after the idiomatic “left-handed compliment”: as Spender points out, the gritty details are not included to ease the burden of guilt; they are confessed to make Mailer human for his audience, to “bring him back to the fold” and facilitate the reception of his grand observations. Mailer openly reveals these machinations to the reader, describing his formulation of the strategy to turn a “deficiency to an asset” before the speech at the Ambassador and tacitly acknowledging that he is repeating the technique in the text itself:

No, he was off on the Romantic’s great military dream, which is: seize defeat, convert it to triumph. Of course, pissing on the floor was bad; very bad;...Well, he could convert this deficiency to an asset. From gap to gain is very American. He would confess straight out to all aloud that he was the one who wet the floor in the men’s room, he alone! While the audience was recovering from the existential anxiety of encountering an orator who confessed to such a crime, he would be able—their attention now riveted—to bring them up to a contemplation of deeper problems...Man might be a fool who peed in the wrong pot; man was also a scrupulous servant of the self-damaging admission; man was therefore a philosopher who possessed the magic stone; he could turn loss to philosophical gain. (AON 31-32)

In his effort to achieve humility *and* authority, he allows others to do the work of noting his importance. A literary character might seem unrealistic or contrived if she narrated a list of her qualities; likewise, an autobiographer might be read as excessively conceited—and less authoritative—if he identified his own positive traits. Other characters, however, can compliment the protagonist (actual or fictional) for the reader’s edification. Mailer’s interaction with his fellow men of letters, particularly Robert Lowell and Dwight McDonald, can do such work for him, after a model Gertrude Stein establishes in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Life writing critic Timothy Dow

Adams explicates Stein's process: "This unique literary situation allows Stein to gain a detached perspective. If she were to name herself a genius directly, she would be an egomaniac; however, for 'Gertrude Stein,' a literary character, to call herself a genius through the persona of 'Alice B. Toklas,' another literary character, is apparently egomania twice removed" (*Telling Lies* 20).

The conversation with poet Robert Lowell at "The Liberal Party" before the evening lecture is an episode representative of Mailer's self-conscious arrogance throughout the book. As Mailer describes it, the situation is funny and authentic. He knows his observations are seeded with hubris and a slight, but calculated, mal-intent, and he greedily accepts his role of *provocateur* both as protagonist in the tale and reporter of it. The account begins with Lowell's reiteration of a sentiment he had earlier expressed to Mailer: "Yes, Norman, I really think you are the best journalist in America." Mailer has established a reputation for the reader, through Lowell; then he goes on to affirm and confirm his literary strengths in similar fashion (and includes a left-handed compliment for Lowell):

The pen may be mightier than the sword, yet at their best, each belong to extravagant men. "Well, Cal," said Mailer, using Lowell's nickname for the first time, "there are days when I think of myself as being the best writer in America."

The effect was equal to walloping a roundhouse right into the heart of an English boxer who has been hitherto right up on his toes. Consternation, not Britannia, now ruled the waves. Perhaps Lowell had a moment when he wondered who was guilty of declaring war on the minuet. "Oh, Norman, oh, certainly," he said, "I didn't mean to imply, heavens no, it's just I have such *respect* for good journalism."

"Well, I don't know that I do," said Mailer. "It's much harder to write"—the next said with great and false graciousness—"a good poem." (AON 22)



Despite the humor here, what is most evident is Mailer's resistance to categorization. He does not want to be the Journalist, even the best in the country. He is a writer, capable of working in any genre and synthesizing genres to elevate his art and his subject. To merely report the facts of a situation, regardless of how well that reporting is done, is too "easy" for him. The complete writer in him—the combination of the Novelist, the Journalist, the Philosopher and the Poet—demands that he find both the factual subtleties in his subject and the metaphor for the larger picture. Mailer's conceit, we learn from this passage, is that, even before the success of this book, he has been an insightful author in all regards, one great enough to challenge even an established master like Lowell.

Mailer's telling of these weekend happenings comprises a revealing look not only at the state of the liberal intelligentsia and the legions of adamant Vietnam protesters, of the violent, impregnable indifference of the Pentagon and the massive military, political, corporate, and cultural power structure it represented, but also into his own personality and ideology. The relationship between the author and his two subjects—the people and events of the evening before the March on the Pentagon, and himself—provide a context in which Mailer's larger, unconventional, and often incoherent artistic project to simultaneously analyze the national character and remake it—begun over a decade earlier—can be understood. That project, since it endeavored to understand Mailer's role and relation to that national character, required an objective and unsparing analysis of himself. *Armies of the Night* is a book with a multipart agenda, not the least of which is to take pointed if good-humored jabs at Mailer's critics and to nominate the author as a prominent, influential, insightful (perhaps, he would have the reader believe, *the most* prominent, influential, insightful) observer of the American scene in his times. Yet in

emphasizing his unsavory behavior, his place as just one person far from the center of the massive crowd, his *smallness*, the narrative is at its most insightful and likely its most influential.

“It is part of Mailer’s genius—unconscious, perhaps—to have been able to calibrate his deficiencies precisely to the deficiencies of the moment. His clichés have been celebrated as brave insights because they have mirrored exactly the defining clichés of the time,” writes conservative cultural critic Roger Kimball in a negative critical assessment of Mailer’s work published in the later years of Mailer’s life (4). Though intentionally ungenerous in his reading of both Mailer and the American culture of the 1950s and 1960s, Kimball’s essay successfully probes what Mailer set out to accomplish in *Advertisements for Myself* and *Armies of the Night*. He turned inward in order to look outside himself at a time when he and many others saw the loss of individuality at the expense of corporatism, conformity, and war as the greatest threat the American national character had faced. One of Mailer’s earliest academic critics, Leo Braudy, explains that “Mailer has made the difficulties of being a writer in America one of his most powerful themes because he has seen its inseparable relation to the difficulties of being a human being in America, filling contradictory roles, being asked to believe contradictory things” (8). Mailer’s folly, if that is what we should call it, was not in his attempt to sort out the contradictions, which he did with varying success, but to hope that he could change them. He understood that his career embodied several prominent aspect unsettling dynamic of mass culture that set in and reached across literature, popular culture, politics, economics,

and hosts of overlapping social and cultural communities, that of the relation between public and private, between celebrity and personality, between commerce and art.

## Chapter Two

### Process and Play in “Great Time”: John Edgar Wideman’s Interactive Autobiographical Project

Like Norman Mailer and Dave Eggers, the literary production of John Edgar Wideman has been vast and varied. Observers who might wish to place these writers in categories more narrow than simply “author” would find such an endeavor necessarily difficult and frankly unnecessary. Considering that Wideman’s work ranges from some staidly traditional academic criticism to experimental “microfiction,” attempts by scholars, critics, publishers, and students to classify him professionally have generally depended upon the nature of the particular text being discussed. Most magazine features and interviews characterize him by his academic bona fides, the critical successes of his early novels, and the color of his skin. After journalists, critics, and publicists tried out a number of warm epithets over the course of his career, such as “The Astonishing John Wideman,” “former Rhodes Scholar and respected professor of African American Studies,” “one of America’s most distinguished writers,” “award-winning Afro-American novelist,” and “two-time winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award,” his recent late-career book-jacket bios identify him as “author of more than twenty works of fiction and

nonfiction,” which accounts for both the prolificacy and the diversity of his work via the sure route of simplicity.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, he has been a novelist, a memoirist, a biographer, an essayist, a poet, a critic, an editor, an historian, and a teacher at overlapping instances in his career, never fully abandoning one category for another, and explicitly seeking out the intersections of these literary vocations. Wideman himself has expressed a humorous ambivalence for the many attempts to identify his relation to his work and his audience by taxonomy, insisting that the context for categorization is what makes it accurate, and thus acceptable to him. Asked by an interviewer how he “define[s]” himself “as a writer,” Wideman replies:

Well, that is almost like asking: “Which name do I prefer?” When I play basketball, some of the young guys call me “Doc.” I like that. Some of the old guys call me “Spanky.” That’s okay, too. But, now, I don’t want other people to call me by those names. Names are contextual. They make sense in certain situations. And all these literary labels are okay with me, as long as people don’t get confused and call me out of my name; that is the important thing. (Samuels 23)

The label Wideman appears to covet for himself—most likely because its connotation manages to suggest a specific task that is also unbounded by generic or disciplinary constraints—is “storyteller.” In a variety of interviews, beginning in the 1980s and extending to the present, he either discusses his art in terms of storytelling or explains his ambition to model his writing after the best storytellers. The act of

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<sup>21</sup> These phrases, and numerous others like them, appear in publications as diverse as *Look* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, *Callaloo*, and the *New York Times*, as well as the book jackets of many of his novels and story collections in the 1970s and 1980s. The biographical description cited last in the sentence above appears to be Wideman’s current “official” author bio, as it is used for both *Fanon* (2008) and *Briefs* (2010).

storytelling has been important to him throughout his life, he tells Charles Rowell in 1989; it provides him with “a very satisfactory, personal kind of experience for me, going way back” (87). Though he does not “consider [him]self a gifted oral storyteller,” he informs another interviewer, he is “envious of the storytelling ability of lots of members of [his] family” (Olander 168). As a result, he works to incorporate the power of oral storytelling into his texts. In still another interview, Wideman insists that he wants his writing to “capture the energy and the force of oral storytelling,” that he aims for his “stream of prose . . . to work on the reader the way a good storyteller works” (McGinty 189). The nature of Wideman’s writing—his fiction, his nonfiction, and the range of work in between—remains true to the storytelling dynamic, as the structure and voice of much of his work suggests the intimacy of a family kitchen or other conversational space. Such intimacy, however, must be manufactured, as Wideman tells his interviewers, given the entrenched formality of the literary enterprise and the rigid, immutable inflexibility of printed text.

A book can be a means to share experiences, emotions, and ideas and have the potential to create through language the illusion of closeness between writers and readers. Yet books qua books connote a separation—of time, distance, and even identity—between the teller and the listener. Wideman’s work acknowledges the gap, and embraces the challenge. As an individual with influential roots in both elite academic and intellectual institutions and financially modest neighborhoods,<sup>22</sup> Wideman manifests the

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<sup>22</sup> Briefly, on Wideman’s background: He was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1941 and raised primarily in the city’s largely African-American Homewood neighborhood, a locale which features very prominently in his writing. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania on an athletic scholarship, was the first black captain of the school’s basketball team, and then studied at Oxford as just the second African-American Rhodes

complexity of his sometimes seemingly incompatible duality in a multi-valenced voice, one simultaneously “author” and “storyteller.” Much of his writing, particularly his nonfiction, places sentences constructed in the formal diction of professional scholarship immediately beside ones built with the slang and rhythms of his old neighborhood, punctuated with textualized grunts and exclamations. As Jacqueline Berben-Masi describes the effect, it is the work of an academic who employs what he calls his “‘other voice,’ what he sometimes refers to as his ‘other language’” (“Of Basketball and Beads” 35). In Wideman’s writing about subjects closely related to his personal history, Berben-Masi sees “an alternation between the scholarly and the colloquial, creating a linguistic blend that leaves the author’s indelible mark on the work.” Wideman’s text may alternate from “voice” to “voice,” but the proximity of those voices and the fluidity with which he shifts between them demonstrate their interdependence in a way that reflects the author’s own complex state of being. Berben-Masi explains that “the coexistence of two voices allows both sides of the author’s being to come to the fore and impress upon the reader a complicity that runs the gamut from the intensely personal to the strictly intellectual” (“Of Basketball and Beads” 35).<sup>23</sup>

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Scholar. He has been on the faculty at Penn, the University of Wyoming, the University of Massachusetts, and most recently Brown University.

<sup>23</sup> Berben-Masi explores the duality in Wideman in part through gender, identifying Wideman’s vision of the personal and the intellectual as “the women’s domain” and “the men’s,” respectively. Wideman’s tribute to his maternal grandmother in *Hoop Roots* as well as his meditations on bedroom intimacies are a significant part of that analysis. That separation is neither complete nor consistent in his work, of course, precisely because his “authorial” voice(s) register(s) his multiple influences at once. Berben-Masi is one of the best and most sensitive critics of Wideman’s work, and her articles, beginning with “Beyond Discourse: The Unspoken versus Words in the Fiction of John Edgar Wideman” (*Callaloo*, Fall 1985), have been essential to this chapter.

Wideman's literary voice bridges the space between his individual, exceptional experience—that of a groundbreaking academic, a still-rare black intellectual in the mostly white academy, and a celebrated, award-winning major author—and his community background—his family, his childhood neighborhood, his fellow African-Americans. His pursuit of the storyteller's role is both a device for, put simply, telling his stories, as well as a means for mediating the tension between these “identities,” a tension which he articulates and meditates upon frequently. Using Edward Said's terminology, Jerry Varsava has shown that, after his initial few “canon”-oriented books in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wideman “has dealt with the intersection of the *filiative* and *affiliative*, the *natal* and the *cultural*, in a variety of ways”; that is, his biological, born, “instinctual” associations and his chosen, “prioritiz[ed]” ones (427, 425). Varsava argues that Wideman is attempting to resolve his filiative and affiliative connections by shifting the allusive aspects of his literary work from Western canonical references to Frantz Fanon and Frederick Douglass, “slipp[ing] the yoke” of “classic liberal education,” and then “celebrat[ing] the filiative order of his natal community by relying on the slow, natural rhythms of oral storytelling with their emphases on the vernacular, on anecdote, on collective memory, and on indigenous (not panoptic) myths” (Varsava 427).

Though Wideman uses his storyteller's role to forge connections for himself, bridging gaps between past and present, individual memory and collective memory, family and son/brother/father, liberal education and community traditions, author and audience, that role also reinscribes his sense of separation. In an interview with James Coleman, author of the first book-length examination of his work, Wideman describes his



feeling that the storyteller is inevitably removed from the community he speaks to and about:

The novelist or the writer is a storyteller, and the process for me that is going to knit up the culture, knit up the fabric of the family, the collective family—all of us—one crucial part of that process is that we tell our own stories. That we learn to tell them and we tell them in our own words and that they embrace our values and that we keep on saying them, in spite of the madness, the chaos around us, and in spite of the pressure not to tell it. And so that storytelling activity is crucial to survival, individual survival, community survival. So the storyteller, the artist, is a crucial member of the community. He is also someone who perhaps by definition is outside the community—and should be and will always be—and so that yearning to be part of it may be one of the natural conditions of the storyteller. (*Blackness and Modernism* 156)

When writing fiction, even stories based closely on his family experience, such a remove feels appropriate and understandable, as the author inscribes a space of his own creation outside himself *and* outside the community. However, when Wideman turns his writer's gaze upon his own life and writes (mostly) nonfiction—while maintaining his “storyteller's” voice—he enforces his separation, by virtue of his authorship, not just from his family or community, narrowly or broadly defined, but from all others. That notion of a connection with others through language and the concomitant and inevitable isolation of the author/storyteller is central to Wideman's autobiographical writing and fundamental to his work in all its modes.

Wideman's accomplishment in autobiographical nonfiction, in my view necessitated by his sense of the storyteller's position vis-à-vis his subject and his audience, is a series of narratives that say something meaningful about three distinct but inseparable subjects: himself, people near and significant to him, and the process of composing a text that aims to be just, reliable, and, indeed, meaningful in regard to

himself and those people. Beyond that, these texts are frequently important meditations on the concept of race, black culture in the United States, and more abstract conceptions of family, but such meditations begin with and never supersede the personal. Berben-Masi believes that Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), *Fatheralong* (1994), and *Hoop Roots* (2001) constitute "a seamless piece" as an autobiographical project that "explor[es] the formative and most defining links most important to his adult life" and compares the work to other autobiographical texts that puts their primary focus on subjects other than on the authors themselves, all the while developing a complex, nuanced, and highly revealing self-portrait ("Of Basketball and Beads" 35). These books are Wideman's non-traditional autobiography, though each foregrounds his relationship with another family member and a subject of signal importance to Wideman's self-examination rather than the author's life itself.

*Brothers and Keepers*, his first explicitly nonfiction text, is a narrative about his brother Robby's involvement in a crime that resulted in a man's murder, Robby's conviction and incarceration for that crime, and the previously distant brothers' process of reuniting and understanding one another in the context of Robby's imprisonment; it is an exploration of the American system of prison and punishment and presents itself as a biography of Robby (and, as I discuss below, Robby's quasi-autobiography) as much as an autobiography of John. *Fatheralong*, a series of personal essays and stories that center around Wideman family fathers and sons, also addresses the subject of American cultural geography and its connection to African-American communities and family in the U.S. Finally, *Hoop Roots* is a work of a man clearly entering the later part of his career, comfortable in his achievements and uncomfortable with both his life's path and the

nature of his art. The book subtitle claims as its subjects “Playground Basketball, Love, and Race,” and Wideman’s self-reflexive ramblings cover the territory of Pittsburgh’s outdoor courts and his grandmother’s house in Homewood and measure the considerable effect the people in both places early in his life, most notably his maternal grandmother, had on his later decisions. All three center Wideman himself as a subject and the storyteller—and as a result de-center him, making him an observer and the author looking back, trying to understand and convey the importance of something and someone else.

The remainder of this chapter will address Wideman’s self-conscious wrestling with his roles as author, subject, and family member in his autobiographical texts, a project, stretched over the last three decades, that comes into particular focus in these three books, though not exclusively so, as his history-steeped fiction, such as the story collection *Damballah* (1981) and the immensely difficult, innovative, and self-reflexive novel *Fanon* (2008) and the unconventional travel narrative, *The Island: Martinique* (2003) express similar concerns using many similar techniques. I will focus on the conflict Wideman identifies between the process of collaboration in family memoir and the cultural product that results, and I will examine Wideman’s insistence on foregrounding “process” in writing as its own subject and its own end, rather than a means which results in a book. Further, the discussion of Wideman’s demonstrated awareness of the constructed nature of narratives and the “reality” they represent, deepened by his sole and ultimate power to shape the narrative’s version of reality, serves this project’s broader goal to explore questions of control, authority and anxieties over the role of the author in self-representation by established writers. Though *Brothers and Keepers*, for example, relies on the efforts of both brothers, and though Wideman

frequently incorporates the memories, histories, and anecdotes of his family members into many of his writings, his books each enter the world, as he puts it, as just one “object,” one “performance,” and, ultimately, one “artifact”—artifacts signed and sold as the work of John Edgar Wideman (BK 199, 200).

**“An Attempt to Capture a Process”:  
Autobiographical Acts and Pacts in *Brothers and Keepers***

“Once I’d gotten the book I’d come for, would I be able to sustain the bond that had grown between us?” Wideman asks of the collaboration with his incarcerated brother Robby which both produces and is recounted in *Brothers and Keepers*. “Would I continue to listen with the same attention to his stories? Would he still possess a story?” (BK 200). Because Wideman knows that the act of collaborating with his brother on the book will change them and their relationship in a way the book itself cannot capture, his writing explicitly explores the anxieties an autobiographer navigates in creating art from the lives of others. In his analysis of the ethics of “collaborative” memoir, critic Thomas Couser highlights the anxiety over “shared” authorship that Wideman conveys: “Although the process by which the text is produced is dialogical,” Couser writes, “the product is monological; the single narrative voice—a simulation by one person of the voice of another—is always in danger of breaking, exposing conflicts not manifest in solo autobiography” (Couser 35). Wideman’s technique in *Brothers and Keepers* is to provide his brother a voice which appears authentic and unfiltered, transcribing conversational monologues and reprinting the text of letters in the pages of his own text so that they appear to be Robby’s alone. He allows his brother’s storytelling to mesh with and ultimately stand before his own. Yet Wideman undercuts his technique, intentionally,

with his own consideration of the concerns Couser articulates, including his questions about the tension between his roles as a professional author and as a loyal brother noted above and whether his own skills are sufficient to make the book's "attempt to capture a process" successful (BK xi).

Other critics (Berben-Masi, Coleman, Heather Russell Andrade, Elizabeth Bidinger, Paul John Eakin, Michel Feith, and Eugene Philip Page, in particular) have successfully argued that *Brothers and Keepers* is a "dual" or "plural" autobiography, a "plurisignant" text with at least two subjects and three narrative voices. In wrestling with his family history, his and Robby's divergent life experiences, and the way his brother's particular circumstances changed both of them, Wideman, as Feith puts it, invented "a new form of dual autobiography" that is "based on a dialogue of inalienable voices, a different narrative open to difference" (665). Bidinger's ethical analysis of *Brothers and Keepers* concludes that Wideman "uses his relationship/collaboration with Robby as a metaphorical construct through which to explore and to delineate a self in relation both to the black community and to the literary-intellectual community" and identifies *Brothers* as a "text that employs the real-life 'process' of the Wideman brothers' talking about their lives as an occasion for dramatizing Wideman's complicated relationship with his racial and class roots" (Bidinger 103). This section of the chapter extends the arguments of these critics by demonstrating that the plurality of the narrative, particularly the "dialogue" between the brothers' voices, reconfigures by multiplication Philippe Lejeune's notion of an "autobiographical pact" that bonds author and reader in the understanding that a text is an author's authentic effort to represent his or her own life. For though *Brothers and Keepers* is Wideman's signed text, and, ultimately, is governed

by one pact between John Edgar Wideman, Author, and his Reading Public, it is an amalgamation of many autobiographical acts, each with its own, often more intimate, pact between an “author” and his audience.

In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman foregrounds the “process,” setting out a postmodern vision of the question “who am I?” as a moving target, best explored and better represented in the brothers’ exchange of stories than in a “finished” document that Wideman knows a final draft of his book inevitably must be. For Lejeune, the reader plays a significant role in sealing a text’s classification as autobiography; for Wideman, in *Brothers*, the reader and the autobiographer are in a conversation—sometimes literally, but always so in his vision of the literary storytelling mode—which opens up the possibility that both writer and reader can be changed by the process, and further, that the process itself is mutable. The process of *Brothers* involves—from the moment Wideman learns of his brother’s crime to the moment of publication—five distinct relationships between an autobiographer and a reader: 1) the traditional pact, sealed by the identity between the author’s name and the narrator’s, between the writer John Edgar Wideman and readers of the finished publication, *Brothers and Keepers*; 2) a pact between Robby Wideman as an autobiographer, in his storytelling and letter-writing, with John as his reader—a pact necessary for a bond of trust to develop between the brothers and for John to acquire the information he needs to write his book; 3) a pact between Robby and the readers of *Brothers and Keepers*, regarding those same stories and letters, with John Wideman as an intermediary who intentionally diminishes his role in order to facilitate a true contract between his brother and his stories; 4) the converse of pact two, with John as autobiographer and Robby as audience, necessary for the same reasons of trust and

edification; and 5) a special pact between the John Wideman who is writing the book and the John Wideman who has written it—a pact that relies upon a sense of writing as a transformative process and challenges expectations of a static relation between autobiographical writer and subject at the same time.

Lejeune originally defined autobiography as 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” and asserted that a reader implicitly and explicitly understands the author, “I, the Undersigned,” to be the same individual described in the narrative (4, 5). Criticism from other theorists who recognized both the generic exclusivity of the definition as well as its formal limitations led Lejeune to refine his definitions. The revised conception of autobiography includes all texts “in which an author proposes to the reader a discourse on the self, but also ... a particular realization of that discourse, one in which the question ‘who am I?’ is answered by a *narrative* that tells ‘how I became who I am’” (124). This second, more inclusive definition is useful not just for clarifying questions of genre, but for understanding the intentions and processes of autobiographical writing in the contemporary period. Wideman lathers the text and subtext of *Brothers and Keepers* with its own mutability, making the book distinctly postmodern in style and troubling the very notion that a narrative can answer the question of how he became who he is, but he also retains a sense of the redemptive potential of the exercise of making a narrative from real life, choosing to accept that it is process that can help readers and autobiographers alike get *at* an understanding, if not precisely reach one.

First, though complicated by multiple narrative voices and chronologies, the traditional pact between the signed author and reader is present and fundamental to

Wideman's book. *Brothers*, of course, technically meets Lejeune's first articulation of the pact, as the story is told by and about the same John Edgar Wideman identified on the title page. I do not regard *Brothers and Keepers* as Robby Wideman's biography or autobiography. His story may be the focal point or foundation of the book, and his autobiographical acts may figure prominently in the construction of the narrative, but *Brothers* is John Edgar Wideman's narrative response to the question "Who am I?" Layered, to be sure, but the story of how John Wideman faced his brother's crime, flight, and incarceration and how the experience affected him is primary, not parallel to Robby Wideman's experience of the same. John, however, was a polished craftsman by the time he wrote *Brothers* and an insightful observer of the human psyche, and he understands that Robby's story is inseparable from his own, which accounts for the *form* of this autobiography as dual or collaborative, complicating without undermining the pact between Wideman-author and the readers of the finished, published autobiographical work.

A section in the final segment, "Doing Time," is one good illustration of John's authority as the primary autobiographer and a vivid evocation of the rich multiplicity of autobiographical acts this single text incorporates. Following a passage narrated by Robby, in which he describes his burgeoning romantic relationship with a woman he has allowed to have false hope for his imminent release from prison and the guilt he feels over misleading her, John's voice returns, internal and directed to the reader. He writes:

What can I say to my brother? Yes. I know exactly where you're coming from. Matter of fact I was in the same place recently. Dealing with the same dilemma. Living a lie. Damned if I came clean, damned if I didn't. Should I tell him I failed Judy more drastically than he's failing Leslie? Say, yes. I understand because I'm in love but I've also



tainted the waters. I've hurt my woman doubly by doing  
wrong then holding back the truth. (BK 215-216)

What Wideman accomplishes here is an impressive triple autobiographical act. First, he reasserts his role in the autobiographical pact with the reader by incorporating a personal experience in his past with a reflection on its meaning in the context of his current life. Second, he strengthens his authority via confession—an autobiographical technique frequently employed by literary autobiographers<sup>24</sup>—whereby the author engenders the reader's trust in a narrative by exposing his or her fallibilities (most interestingly, perhaps, when exposing a failing of memory). Third, he maintains his commitment to the collaborative and conversational autobiographical process he has set out to capture by demonstrating both the mental calculations he puts into his exchange with Robby and the value of the exchange for both of them. And so, we hear Robby respond to the confession John decides to make, "I needed to talk to somebody, man. Needed to hear somebody say the things I been saying to myself all along. I know you're right, Bruh. And I'm sorry you having trouble at home. I hear you talking and I know what's right" (BK 217).

It is this conversation and many others like it that constitute the unsettling of the conventional autobiographical pact and its temporary standing aside in favor of Wideman's reformulated intra-textual pacts, which truly are the "process" to which Wideman makes explicit reference in his Author's Note and describes as "my brother and I talking about our lives" (BK xi). These conversations and an exchange of letters comprise the means of writing and revising Robby's story in *Brothers*, and it is these pacts—that is, two through four in my formulation: 2) between Robby as autobiographer

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the previous chapter on Mailer's confessions in *Advertisements for Myself* and *Armies of the Night*.

and John as audience, 3) between Robby as autobiographer and John's readers as audience, and 4) between John as autobiographer and Robby as audience—which have gained the book its special attention as a formally challenging work. The pacts between the brothers are more intimate and less formal than the “official” one between Wideman-author and his readers, but they are no less essential to the primary autobiographer's answer to the question “Who am I?”

John, as audience to Robby's answer to that question, must engage in a pact as reader by accepting his brother's accounts of his days in Homewood, his criminal activity, and his time in prison as an authentic effort to represent his life. This pact is not pre-existent or perpetual; it must be created and built up, and it takes formal shape in the exchange undertaken by the brothers explicitly to gain an understanding of one another. Wideman makes clear that such a pact was not in place during their initial interaction after Rob's crime and subsequent flight, recounting their first phone conversation by expressing his inability to read his brother, to understand Robby's first basic utterances of his story to him. On the phone in Laramie, Rob greets his brother with an appellation unusual to their relationship, “Big Bruh,” and John says that the greeting—and Rob's speech—

didn't sound phony, but it didn't strike me as natural either. What I'd felt was regret, an instant, devastating sadness because the greeting possessed no magic. If there'd ever been a special language we shared, I'd forgotten it. Robby had been pretending. Making up a magic formula on the spot. *Big Bruh*. But that had been okay. I was grateful. Anything was better than dwelling on the sadness, the absence, better than allowing the distance between us to stretch further. (BK 9)

The disconnect between the brothers may be halted or elided, but neither does Robby's speech in this first encounter move them toward understanding. The pact they will establish as part of that *process* of understanding is not yet formed, and that failure in the first meeting may be the reader's—that is, John's—fault, he is quick to point out: “Perhaps Robby did volunteer a version of the crime. Perhaps I listened and buried what I heard” (BK 15).

Eventually, John does listen—and absorb rather than bury—what he hears. He learns about his brother—not just his biography, the facts of his life—but his brother's philosophy, his vision of the neighborhood and family they both shared, his version of a life almost inexorably drawn to criminal acts. When John truly enters the autobiographical pact with Robby, he truly gets his brother's own answer to the question, “Who am I?” For example, Robby acknowledges the impact of his friend Garth's life and death on his own mind and actions, and the long discourses on his friend Robby makes in *Brothers* are directly contrasted to the John's knowledge of a man who, previously, was “just a name mentioned in passing. *Garth* or *Gar*” (BK 66). This contrast replicates a series of revelations the elder Wideman receives from his brother after they reestablish—or, possibly, establish for the first time—a shared language that seals the pact and allows Robby's autobiographical acts to enlighten his brother.

In the book, Wideman makes plain his continued difficulty with that language and those revelations, for they lead not only to enlightenment about a loved one but to a self-enlightenment and self-awareness that is, in a word, discomfiting. That discomfiture is at times benign and humorous, such as learning about one's importance as an older brother visiting home. “I have to laugh at the image of myself as somebody to get a haircut for,”

Wideman reflects. “Robby must have been fit to be tied” (BK 89). But more often, and more significantly, Robby’s stories and confessions make John feel “uncomfortable” and even “hypocritical.” Wideman writes that he somewhat absently pays attention to his brother, “but I can’t trust myself. I have no desire to tell everything about myself so I resist his attempt to be up front with me” (BK 197).

Wideman’s weakness in the face of his brother’s autobiography ultimately compels him to allow Robby to speak directly to the readers of *Brothers*, instead of trying to “clean him up” for their consumption (BK 195). The connection between Robert Wideman and John’s readers is the foundation for most claims that *Brothers and Keepers* is a plural autobiography or, as John Eakin has described it, a “collaborative” one. In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin claims that the “indeterminacy of form” in a collaborative autobiography (which, he explains, consists of the autobiography of the author and the autobiographical acts of another, plus the author’s *biography* of that other) “points to the psychological ambiguity of the collaborative situation and the narratives it generates, for these texts suggest that the identity of the self who writes and signs as author includes and is included in the identity of the other whose story she presents” (176).

Reflecting on an early draft of *Brothers* in the final version of the same book, John confesses that, in creating a text from the brothers’ conversations and correspondence, he still had not, in essence, fully entered their correlated autobiographical pacts (that is, the second and fourth described above). “I knew what I wanted” he writes, “so, for fear I might not get what I needed, I didn’t listen carefully, probe deeply enough” (BK 195). To remedy this shortcoming, John allows his book to

become more truly collaborative by giving a voice to Robby and to their shared identity in the book. Eugene Philip Page identifies the “form of *Brothers and Keepers*” as an enactment not just of the process of the brothers’ coming to know one another, but also of a “shift from John’s perspective to a mutually shared perspective in which John listens as much as narrates and which makes the volume Robby’s book as well as John’s” (6).

“Borrowing narrative techniques learned from fiction,” as Wideman says in the Author’s Note, he mediates the third pact, that between his brother and his readers (BK xi). Readers of these long sections of prose in Robby’s voice must enter a pact at John Wideman’s behest, both to understand Robby’s story in a similar fashion to the way John has in pact two, and to understand John Wideman’s own autobiographical acts, to which his brother’s narrative is essential. Robby’s voice literally addresses John’s concerns over the difference between the brothers, differences that in many respects defined their lives, and begins to answer Wideman’s questions: “Why did it work out that way?”; “What was the nature of the difference?”; “Why did it haunt me?”; and, most troublingly, from the perspective of a professional writer, “Wasn’t writing about people a way of exploiting them?” (BK 77). Basically, Wideman’s authorial anxiety is the genesis for this third pact. As the author says, he had to “tame the urge to take off with Robby’s story and make it my own” (BK 77); allowing Robby to speak to the reader signals that John has not coopted Robby’s story but shared in it, reemphasizing that it is the process of hearing that story and understanding it that is part of the narrative of John’s identity. Bidinger rightly notes that Wideman’s technique gives Robby’s experiences a voice and a public audience, “an opportunity he would never have otherwise,” but she and Wideman himself are circumspect in conferring Robby true ownership of his stories in the text (104). His

stories are, of course, his own as he relates them to his brother, but John's reporting, editing, and reconfiguring of them—despite his use of Robby's "voice"—shift their authorship to John. In *Brothers*, Robby and John are storytellers, but only John is an author.

That authorship plagues Wideman's vision of the process he is recording, even as he attempts to resolve it. Talking to Robby and writing about it makes the process John's story, and despite the enabling of multiple perspectives in the text, his authorial presence—his exclusively autobiographical presence—looms over his reportorial one. Robby's voice, however authentic it appears on the page, is actually an act of ventriloquism by Wideman for his own ends—ends that still may be sympathetic, generous, and honest, but not self-less. Turning over pages upon pages of the text to Robby's voice is not the same as turning over those pages to Robby himself, and the result is, in Bakhtinian terms, neither the direct speech of, say, a transcription nor the indirect speech of a character described by a narrator, but rather "quasi-direct discourse" which turns over the narrative voice to a character's, without fully relinquishing the primary narrator's perspective.<sup>25</sup> Though described as a tool for the fiction writer, this notion relates perfectly well to autobiographical nonfiction, with the added complication of the ethics of representation. Wideman aims to do justice to his brother's stories by presenting them in Robby's language, but to do so, admittedly, with his fiction-writer's tools. This particular device allows him to maintain the spirit of storytelling and conversation that is the heart of the text. As Valentin Voloshinov writes, by composing quasi-direct speech "the author is put on a level with his character"—in this case, one

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<sup>25</sup> This notion is first articulated not in the published work of Mikhail Bakhtin but rather that of his collaborator Valentin Voloshinov.

who represents a real person — “and their relationship is dialogized” (157); in effect, a reenactment of the process Wideman claims to want to reproduce.

The reproduction invites the reader into an autobiographical pact with Robby as autobiographer, and it is essential to the understanding of the reciprocal pacts between the brothers which constitute the process Wideman is writing about. Yet the quasi-direct discourse is an authorial performance. Voloshinov and Bakhtin use the phrase “acting out” repeatedly when describing the effect of quasi-direct speech. An author “acting out” his character in quasi-direct discourse not only performs a “change in expressive intonation” but the “complete self-consistency of this voice and persona” in a “self-enclosed, individual world” without “infusion or spillover of the author’s intonations” (Voloshinov 156-57). This method borrowed from fiction allows Wideman to establish an independent autobiographical pact between Robby and the book’s readers, while he also realizes his text is a “performance,” making the contract fraught (BK 199). The pact is vital to Wideman’s efforts to be true to the brothers’ process, however, and the performance is essential to the larger project of presenting John Wideman’s fulfillment of Lejeune’s central task for the autobiographer, detailing “how I became who I am.” Bidinger sees the effect of Wideman’s acting out of Robby’s voice and then borrowing its features for himself as the trajectory of a “plot line” for *Brothers and Keepers*. Over the course of the text, “Wideman sets himself to the task of re-education himself by listening to the other by training his mind on the goal of assimilating the other’s perspective.” He marks his success “by integrating the other’s idiom and point of view into his own writing, and even into his own identity” (111).

Wideman's concerns about the interplay between his role as storyteller to his brother and as author for an audience figure significantly in his rendering the fourth pact, between John as autobiographer and Robby as audience in their conversations, in which John strives to overcome his reluctance and share the right stories with his brother, as he says, "to reveal what I thought about certain matters crucial to us both" (BK 80). This pact includes John's confession of infidelity cited above and his memories of Rob as a child, as well as their shared family history. John's relating of his autobiographical stories to Robby serve as a provocative doubling of the first pact (between Wideman and his readers), one which complicates readers' perceptions of both. The John-to-Robby pact precedes the Wideman-to-reader pact, and though it is also governed by a degree of self-interest, its original state of privacy most assuredly makes it more honest, even if John admits to his lack of "desire" to reveal himself (BK 197). Its repetition in the pages of the text is no less a reproduction than the Robby-as-autobiographer moments, however, and so it, too, is mediated by Wideman the author. We readers are meant to witness the process of John, our author, revealing himself to his brother, but our distance makes imperative an awareness that our vision of that process comes through the author's eyes.

"Since I was writing the book, one way or another I'd be on center stage," Wideman comes to realize in *Brothers'* final section, "Doing Time," and here he admits to an uneasiness about his version of "doing time"—that is, tying together the loose ends of a book—and his brother's (BK 199). The disparity in their experience will be replicated in a text, a text that is John's and not Robby's, and over which John has always had an author's complete control. Coleman sees this imbalance as part of the "overall significance of the book" which is "implied and not stated": "Robby can in a sense free



himself by projecting his story outside the prison walls with the book if he becomes an author. In turn, he will abrogate John's theft of his story" (*Writing Blackness* 7). John still retains control of both the book's language and eventual publication, but by allowing Robby a voice and an opportunity to "author" his pact, he mitigates his own feelings of guilt and his instinct toward manipulation.

Eakin emphasizes the complexity of collaborative autobiography that results from "the necessarily unequal distribution of power in situations of this kind: once the narrative has been published, whatever the terms of the collaboration may have been, an act of appropriation has occurred, and the self who signs may well be led to reflect on the ethical responsibilities involved" (176). Such reflections represent a significant portion of John's *autobiographical* writing throughout the book, including his meditations on the first draft of *Brothers* and all his persistent concerns about his ability to really "listen" to his brother. These ethical reflections, submersed in the content of the primary autobiographical acts and the pact between Wideman, the signed author, and a general readership, constitute what I believe is the fifth pact of this truly complex book, that between the Wideman writing the text and the Wideman who has written it.

The final pact sets John Wideman as author and John Wideman as subject in a complicated manifestation of the postmodern awareness of the rift between writing and experience. "The world had continued to chug along as I wrote," he acknowledges. Likewise, "the book, if there was to be a book, must end. Must become in some senses an artifact. I wanted to finish it but I didn't want to let it go. I might be losing much more than a book" (BK 199). The book represented an end to the process, and it seems, it may have failed to define for Wideman an answer to the question "Who I am?"—even if it had

provided a narrative that enlightened his brother and his readers. Bidinger identifies a division within the author himself that is representative of an irresolvable division he still feels with his brother:

In authoring this text, Wideman splits himself into two people: one expresses his desire and commitment to aligning himself with Robby and all that Robby personifies; the other allows a more honest appraisal of the “enormous gap” between them to surface in the text. If one Wideman strives to establish commonalities between himself and Robby, the other—the autobiographical voice, rather than the brother or the biographer—explores and even affirms the differences between them. (111)

Coleman also identifies a split within the author, significant to his sense of his own identity and only tangential to his relationship with his brother. He sees John Wideman the subject as a character “John” whom John Edgar Wideman, the author, constructs in his book. I also assert that the character serves as the intermediary between the author writing the book and the person who emerges after he has written it. Coleman’s analysis figures the character “John” as the embodiment of “a series of dichotomies: imagination versus reality, inside versus outside, and individual black intellectual versus the black community” (*Blackness and Modernism* 9). The character highlights the author’s “imaginative inner black intellectual self” who “often creates brilliantly,” yet does not resolve his “disengage[ment] from the problematic, rich, evasive reality of the black community, with which John is very uncomfortable” (*Blackness and Modernism* 10). Only by undergoing the process of bridging gaps between the brothers and then foregrounding that process in his work does Wideman begin to bridge the gaps he sees in himself.

In the 1988 interview with Coleman, Wideman describes the separation he felt from his brother and from his home community before he embarked on *Brothers*. “I had separated myself in lots of ways,” he said,

physically and emotionally, from the black community, the majority of black people. And here was a situation in which my own brother was beckoning me, demanding that I pay attention, that I make some sense of that enormous gap between us. And so the book was an occasion for me to try to make sense of that, the enormous gap between myself and the place where I was born, the place where I grew up. (*Blackness and Modernism* 160)

Just as the Robby who at the start of the narrative utters, “Hey, Big Bruh,” to John and the Robby who closes a letter (and the book) with the words “I SHALL FOREVER PRAY” are the same man, but changed, so are the John Wideman who sets out to write the narratives of his and his brother’s experiences and the John Wideman who has done so (BK 243). The process of trying to close the gaps he described to Coleman is what Wideman “captured” in *Brothers*, a process he explicitly intended to change his life but which, by the nature of a textual reckoning with oneself, could not be completed until the book was completed, and hence could not be fully captured in a book. By acknowledging this conundrum, Wideman demonstrates in *Brothers and Keepers* that, for him, significance and real representation lie in *answering* the question “who am I?” as much as in the answer.

**“But Is My Story Possible Without Someone Listening”:  
Writing, Reading, and Living Memories**

“For me audience is a collaborator,” Wideman says in an 2000 interview with Lisa Baker (265). The notion of the autobiographical pact as an agreement entered into both by an author and by the reader is particularly illuminating as a lens for considering Wideman’s nonfiction writing because of the very active role he requires his readers to take. He says that he “wants to get my audience slightly unsettled so that, whether or not they come to the same place where I launch my writing from, some new thing will be created between us” (Baker 265). The work he does in *Brothers and Keepers* to multiply the number of pacts that constitute an autobiographical exploration demonstrates his vision for a reader’s role in collaboration. If the author forces himself to also play a role as a reader—without ever fully relinquishing his authorship—then the primary pact is troubled by the writer’s implicit confession that he does not have full or sole authority to speak, but secured by his method of accommodating those limitations. By choosing to emphasize the process rather than the product in *Brothers*, Wideman establishes a model he will repeat and refine over the course of his future autobiographical texts. His autobiographical writing grows increasingly more experimental as Wideman progresses in his career (particularly if one considers the travel narrative *The Island: Martinique* and the very near-to-life elements of *Fanon* as an extension of this autobiographical project), but each text maintains a steady vision of a nuanced storyteller who enlists readers in a trip through his personal history.

The reader’s role on that trip is an active one: assuming multiple perspectives, relinquishing a conventional sense of chronological time and history, and following Wideman through a process that frequently fails to produce the anticipated results—or,

sometimes, any results at all. Wideman, for his part, concedes some of his authorial surety in exchange for an inclusive experience of autobiography writing and storytelling as an opportunity for connection. Critic Heather Andrade identifies this goal in her theoretical reading of Wideman's storytelling pose. She asserts that

Wideman's open invitation to the reader ... to self-reflexively participate in the production of meaning—to read actively, to 'go there' in the storytelling process—is illustrative of his commitment to liberating hermeneutic assumptions from their hierarchical configurations. By de-centering the authority of the author and the overdeterminedness of the textual enterprise, he urges readers to seize discursive agency or, at least, to share the discursive terrain as enfranchised participants. (53)

In *Brothers*, *Fatheralong*, and *Hoop Roots* alike, long stretches of text are composed in the second person, as direct addresses to an individual whom the reader must both "observe" as the intended audience and stand in for as that audience, since the readers of his books are, inevitably, his true audience. Wideman's persistently self-conscious writing about his role constructing the texts he is writing further complicates this relationship between author and readership: his awareness that he is writing a text for publication is both assumed and elided. Just as Wideman gives his voice over to others in composing his text, he implicitly turns over partial responsibility for the meaning of his texts to his reader; by focusing on the process of composition, he undermines the supposedly fixed nature of his finished drafts.

In the final section of *Brothers and Keepers*, "Doing Time," Wideman reflects upon a previous draft of that same final section, and the effect is both perhaps among the most traditionally retrospective autobiographical narrative and its most disjointed. He reports complaint of "frustration" from an "early reader" of the draft regarding Robby's "'inner self,'" and Robby too had felt "something crucial was lacking." He says that he

returned to his text—this text, which readers eventually receive—ready to refine his vision for it:

I realized no apotheosis of Robby's character could occur in the final section because none had transpired in my dealings with my brother. The first draft had failed because it attempted to impose a dramatic shape on a relationship, on events and people too close to me to see in terms of beginning, middle, and end. My brother was in prison. A thousand books would not reduce his sentence one day. And the only denouement that might make sense of his story would be his release from prison. I'd been hoping to be a catalyst for change in the world upon which the book could conceivably have no effect at all. I'd been waiting to record dramatic, external changes in Robby's circumstances when what I should have been attuned to were the inner changes, his slow, internal adjustment day by day to an unbearable situation. The book was no powerful engine being constructed to set my brother free; it was dream, wish, song. (BK 194-95)

Here, unlike in many other parts of the book, Wideman is essentially addressing the reader directly, in the voice of a professional writer, and what he presents to the reader is a record of what the final draft is not, since the reader is invited to assume that the published text is a correction of the failed first draft. So, *Brothers and Keepers* is not a “dream,” a “wish,” or a “song.” And though Wideman uses his storyteller's voice in the text, the project has shifted from the attempt to lay a traditional narrative upon those too close to the storyteller to have a “beginning, middle, and end.” Further, the idea that the application of his authorial skills to his brother's situation for a reading audience might have some sudden and measurable impact is rejected, and instead an aspiration to make something like music, which “transfigures the personal, the unique with universals of rhythm, tone, and harmony, what must always remain unspoken because words can't keep up with the flood of feeling” (BK 196).

The power of music, and the reason it seems a better comparison for what Wideman wants to do with the final draft of his text, is that it “does not unravel the mysteries, but recalls them, gives them a particular form, a specific setting” and in those established forms, the “words floating in the music are a way of eavesdropping on the mysteries, of remembering the importance of who we are but also experiencing the immensity of Great Time and Great Space, the Infinite always at play around the edges of our lives” (BK 197). Wideman’s books give him a specific setting for linguistic play (in both the sense of music and, to a degree, in the sense evoked by Barthes’s “freewheeling in language”), and his melding of his roles as author, storyteller, and audience for himself—and his multivalent engagement with his readers created by that melding—foster the spirit of mystery in his words and let the audience eavesdrop. This approach to autobiographical writing grants him the freedom to close out the long Mobius strip of “Doing Time” with openness: “maybe there will be more, but there’s nothing to say now... just wait now for what may... what must come next...” (BK 238).

Writing nonfiction then, in Wideman’s formulation, is not a purely retrospective project nor a means to a measurable outcome, but a reconfiguration of reality: narrative time is unmoored from chronology and the autobiographical subject is enlarged beyond the events of a life. Andrade sees Wideman’s philosophy of time, particularly narrative time, as a reflection of the West African notion of “Great Time” evoked in the meditation on music cited above and laced throughout *Fatheralong* and *Hoop Roots*, a concept which religious philosopher John Mbiti defines as “that ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed in a reality that is neither after, nor before” (qtd. in Andrade 48). Throughout *Brothers* (for example, in the early line “You never know

exactly when something happens” (BK 19)), Andrade hears “distinctive echoes” of Great Time. “If history... is ‘neither after nor before’ but, in fact, as Wideman writes, ‘an evocation of a truer, more complete saturated present tense,’ then the discursive form of the historical enactment must adhere to such indigenous diasporic governing principles,” she asserts in her investigation of the “intersubjectivity” of the book. “Narrative representation itself, in its attempt to *fix* time within a traditionally ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ construct—or what we familiarly call ‘textual representation’—cannot occur in a linear, teleological or ordered fashion. Hence, Wideman’s critical imagination accounts for the cyclical and ‘chaotic’ narratological structures of his oeuvre” (49-50).

In this vein, Claude Fernand Yvon Julien says that Wideman’s first sentences in *Fatheralong* “shatter the reader’s expectations of a stable linear chronology right from the start” (19). Indeed, the book’s first story, “Promised Land,” opens with the sentence, “About three years ago my father was driving me to the Greater Pittsburgh Airport” (FA 3); after that sentence, six full pages pass before Wideman finds his way to describing the day in question, and another six pages pass before he and Edgar Wideman find their way into the car. And once they do, Wideman shifts again immediately, to a different trip to the same airport in the same car a year after the first. “While one may at first make allowances for some negligence or flexibility induced by the opening adverb ‘About,’” Julien argues, “it soon become evident that a system is at work—a chronological manipulation that is repeated later” throughout the text, between and within the separate stories the comprise the memoir (19).

“Rather than a clear-cut sequential arrangement, there emerges a convoluted circularity,” Julien observes, a circularity epitomized in a sentence that Wideman uses to



highlight the process with which he resurrects memories and writes about them, rather than highlighting the memories themselves. “Some facts I recall about my father,” Wideman writes, “thinking about him, thinking about writing about him on this November afternoon three years after our trip to Promised Land” (FA 34). The list of facts Wideman then produces is just that: a list. The memories arrive without context or interpretation; they are biographical notes or personality traits, but they no more amount to a portrait of an individual than do the two meager sentences that make up the book’s “About the Author.” Instead, making a list in the effort to describe his father only forces Wideman deeper into the mystery of their relationship. “Is distance, the difference between us,” the son asks himself, “simply a matter of questions not asked? If I add items to the list of things I can recall about my father, will they answer questions or raise questions? Will they bring us close to Promised Land? Or will it always be just down the road a piece? *Fatheralong*” (FA 35).

In place of the shifting between the perspectives of John and Robby that defines the narrative voice in *Brothers*, *Fatheralong* employs a different kind of narrative fluidity, a subtle shifting entirely contained within the perspective of John Wideman. The calculus is no less complex.<sup>26</sup> Berben-Masi sees Wideman employing three different rhetorical styles, “one polemic, one discursive, one lyrical” which “reflect different purposes, moods, and content.” Those styles “also correspond to the author persona’s relationship with the implied narratees, primary and secondary, and with the figures his

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<sup>26</sup> The author relinquishes his narrative voice in only one moment of the text, a stretch of quasi-direct discourse written from Edgar’s perspective, recounting the elder Wideman’s experience in the Army. John Wideman’s voice returns abruptly and permanently at the end of his father’s story, moving on to a discussion of the World Series and other individuals (FA 117-121).

persona takes, now as father, now as son, in a series of overlapping triangles” she writes in “Prodigal and Prodigy: Fathers and Sons in Wideman’s Work” (678).

His polemical voice emerges early, in the preface titled “Common Ground,” in which he rails against a system of power, of inclusion and exclusion, that is founded on the twisted notion of race. “Race is not a set of qualities inhering in some ‘other,’” he writes, “it’s the license to ascribe such qualities allied with the power to make them stick” (FA xv). He traces a history of artificial limitations based on the perceived existence of race, in the U.S. and elsewhere, until he finds his way back to Africa, “where we all started” (FA xi). His preface is directed squarely at the reader, looking for a common ground in which we are all aware of the ugly, misshapen history that the concept of race has left in its wake and on which we can clear a space to speak to one another, to listen to each other’s stories. “The paradigm of race authors one sad story, repeated far too often, that would reduce the complexity of our cultural heritage,” Wideman writes. “Race preempts our right to situate our story where we choose” (xxi). He uses his polemic against race to give him the opportunity to *try* to place his story where he wants to: a place outside its destructive power. He closes “Common Ground” with a clarification of what is to come, clearing his space for his discursive and lyrical voices—the voices of his autobiographical project: “The pieces that follow on fathers, color, roots, time, language are about me, not my ‘race.’ They are an attempt, among other things, to break out, displace, replace the paradigm of race. Teach me who I might be, who you might be—without it” (xxv).

Wideman is poignantly aware that the narrative he constructs through the stories that follow leads him and his readers to some answers and away from others. In fact,

questions and answers in *Fatheralong*—as in all Wideman’s autobiographical work—cross one another in the same intentionally convoluted fashion as the chronologically unordered events. Progressing from *Brothers*, *Fatheralong* shifts even more of the burden for understanding to the reader, while Wideman shoulders more of the responsibility of the storyteller. Unlike his first autobiographical narrative, which reconfigured the autobiographical pact to illuminate his strengthening relationship with his brother, *Fatheralong* reinforces the distance between Edgar and John because the narrative remains exclusively in the domain of the writer. “By the end, John does not come together with his father through storytelling and writing as he does with Robby,” writes Coleman in *Writing Blackness*. He observes that, though “the structure and theme unite” in the text, casting familial connections and disconnections—as well as the specter of destructive racial paradigms that hovers over the book from its preface—against the appropriately disjointed textual order, “no overall, conclusive narrative process of storytelling and writing liberates in *Fatheralong*; although storytelling and writing, in all of their complexity, address the paradigm of race, they do not eliminate its effects” (10).

In “Father Stories,” the series of mostly pleasant memories of his son Jacob written in Wideman’s lyrical mode, which ends *Fatheralong*, Wideman’s sensibility for narrative unbound from time takes a melancholy note. “I’m remembering things in no order. With no plan,” he interjects, echoing the jumbled string of details about his father from the opening section and continuing the disordered chronology of the entire book. He gives the phrase a paragraph unto itself, emphasizing both the timelessness of his stories about himself, his son, his father, and their family and the shapelessness of his narrative, his inability to give order to stretches of time—his emotional estrangement from his

father, his son's and his brother's prison sentences—that he does not control (FA 184). But Wideman believes the shapelessness of memory is its fundamentally human quality. Reflecting that the notion of “duration” and “continuity” in time is just the mind's “hedge against chaos,” he decides that memory “isn't so much archival as it is a seeking of vitality/harmony, an evocation of a truer, more complete, saturated present tense.” He sees that pursuit of vitality and harmony as the story of one's “personality—the construction of a continuous narrative of self. Our stories. Father stories” (187).

A decade before the publication of *Fatheralong*, Wideman presented his 1981 collection of stories *Damballah* as a series of missives to Robby, and opened the volume of fiction with yet another short note to his brother that prefigures his readers' relationships to the nonfiction stories he would tell in his books over the next three decades: “Stories are letters. Letters sent to anybody or everybody. But the best kind are meant to be read by a specific somebody. When you read that kind you know you are eavesdropping. You know a real person somewhere will read the same words you are reading and the story is that person's business and you are a ghost listening in” (DB 5). The technique is echoed at the end of “Father Stories,” which reveals itself not just as a story or series of memories about Jacob Wideman but as letter from the author to his imprisoned son. Wideman ends this section and thus the book with the single word, the closing “Love,” which remains, in the words of critic Eric Sundquist, “hanging alone, with no signature, in the emptiness of the page” (FA 197; Sundquist 28). The word “love” becomes a sign of intimacy and a mark of the distance the book implies. The reader “eavesdrops” on an intimate exchange, though the request in the letter is, if not fiction, a projection of hope and the work of invention in the realm of literature.

Unfortunately, as Coleman writes, “one cannot clearly say that ‘Father Stories’ changes the book’s thematic trajectory” of loss and separation. “Even with the story’s relative optimism, John never tells/writes it face-to-face with the son, and the son does not speak for himself” (*Writing Blackness* 14-15). Wideman’s letter to his son, unsigned and signed, both delivered and never sent, reaches him only in the act of writing itself; because these fathers and sons cannot be physically present together, they must share a space created by memories and words, uncontained by time and bodies.

By the publication of *Hoop Roots* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Wideman had embraced the idea of Great Time he had introduced in *Brothers* and begun to employ in *Fatheralong* to such an extent that not only does he remember and write without regard for chronological sequence, he shapes the structure of his narrative around the notion entirely. The music of the text takes primacy. Play and writing are equated. Wideman works not to record a process, as he set out to in *Brothers*, but to expand the process beyond books and readers, to erase all boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, to escape time.

In *Hoop Roots*, the reader must follow the ball of Wideman’s prose from corner to corner of the book’s court, as the author takes us from his dying grandmother’s bedroom in one decade to the playground of Westinghouse Park in another to the Mayan ruins of Mexico in yet another, and from player to player, be they his teammates, his family, or his lovers. All get drawn into the game Wideman plays out of necessity, confessing of both basketball and storytelling/writing, which he quickly compares and contrasts, “I need the game more than it needs me... You play for yourself, but the game’s never for you or about you” (HR 4). The reader, as a spectator, is drawn in as a participant and

forced to ask the same question: is this text for or about me? The play that occurs in Wideman's nonfiction takes place in front of readers, rather than toward us, and as in a game of basketball, the text's meaning is most present and most exhilarating when the outcome is in doubt, when the game is in progress, rather than when its meaning is fixed, the score final. Wideman seeks from his writing the spark of hoop: "Want to share the immediate excitement of process, of invention, of play" (HR 13).

Throughout the text, the connections between writing, storytelling, and play are tested and exercised. In the same way that conversations became content in *Brothers and Keepers*, personal exchanges become games and then become text in the latter book. In "Of Basketball and Beads: Following the Threads of One's Origins," Berben-Masi discusses one of *Hoop Roots*'s particularly provocative moments, in which Wideman presents a game of storytelling one-upmanship between John and his lover that escalates from an exchange of tantalizing sexual exploits to a crude, racially charged moment. Berben-Masi unites the notions of autobiography and play in Wideman's work in her critique of the reconstructed conversation, in which the "true stories exchanged, like all nonfiction, involve the listener and invite contradiction" (36). This scene reflects the alluring and fraught relationship between storyteller and audience that exists when the story is a fluid, living one rather than a crafted, complete text, and Wideman's goal and achievement is translating that fluidity to what is indisputably otherwise a crafted, completed text. "Both teller and listener reveal secrets that invite analysis and unveil deep feelings" in the scene, Berben-Masi reports, connecting the specific moment to Wideman's larger project. "Again, here is the indirect approach to the autobiography: we readers observe the subject interacting with others while reflecting upon his behavior and

struggling to drop the mask even as he must retain a certain author persona—for the essence of truth cannot be unfiltered or unshaped, lest it lose its unity and impact” (36).

The audience’s unfixed position furthers the text’s fluidity, making it an intentionally changeable product that draws the reader closer to the autobiographical subject.

“Deliberately or not,” Berben-Masi says, “the reader unwittingly dons the garments of ‘the other’ and gradually slips into the ‘you’ of the text” (37). The “you” in *Hoop Roots*, is, at various points, his lover, his grandmother, an abstract basketball player, and Wideman’s youthful self; it is also, implicitly at those moments and explicitly in some others, the anonymous, book-buying reader.

An italicized interpolation in *Hoop Roots* abruptly dropped into his deconstruction and reassembling of a “representative day” from his youth is ostensibly directed to a woman Wideman has re-encountered after thirty years. Like the free-floating narrative order of his recollections of his father and his son in *Fatheralong*, Wideman’s insertion of an individual whom was a part of his life, left it, and suddenly entered it again into a memory of a moment well before he knew her at all collapses time, bringing everything into the present tense of the act of thinking, remembering, and writing. This time-traveling demonstrates Wideman’s belief that his writing must inhabit a plane that encompasses words, stories, conversations, and moments without deference to chronology or an adherence to fixed identities. Using the second person, he tells his rediscovered friend

One reason I’m telling all this old stuff, the hard stuff and silly kid stuff took, is because it ain’t over yet. Meeting you again after so many years of making do without you and finding you were my sister, brother, love, a lost limb recovered, I realized that nothing begins or ends as long as we have breath in our bodies, except, except perhaps our

wishes and the power we relinquish when we stop wishing.  
(HR 102)

This woman becomes not just a friend or lover in this address, but an disembodied, shape-shifting, unfixed relation. The repeated use of the second person in the section further troubles the antecedent of the pronoun “you” and makes readers fill the role themselves. Finally, the uncertainty about whom Wideman is addressing also drives the reader to consider that, perhaps, the intended addressee is Wideman himself, acting as writer and audience, trying to reshape the story of this representative day from his past and define its significance for his present self.

His long reconstruction of the months he spent as a youth at his grandmother’s deathbed is the emotional center of the text. Wideman admits that he had previously internalized a private “version of that summer,” which helped him keep his less-than-pleasant memories orderly and at bay. In carrying this part of his past with him, he has protected himself with the techniques of fiction, his “memory whitening out what it doesn’t require to construct a representative day” that lets him keep what he want to remember and forget what he feels he needs to. He has built “a fictional day serving to give the summer a shape and meaning I haven’t bothered to question until now” (102). When he feels spurred to dig back into that time, he needs a new version, also structured like fiction, in order to “enter the room, then begin to find my way safely out” (103). The difference in his new version, however, is that his desire to understand forces him to reverse the “smoothing” memory has done to the months he spent in his grandmother’s room, and undo the comfortable notions that “those days feel long gone” and that “I’m a different person now in the fullness of time” (HR 104). Because “all time’s always



present,” he has to embrace his belief that “one story never end[s] before another begins. It is always the same story. Everything always at stake” (HR 104, 132).

“But is my story possible without someone listening,” Wideman asks in an authorially self-reflexive moment of the text, though tellingly this question is printed, as most of his literally rhetorical questions are, without a question mark (HR 84). Such questions are directed at an audience outside the text that cannot respond, and so they become as much statement as query, deepening the original conundrum by undermining the notion of the reader as a listener. Unlike the reported exchange between lovers or the recreation of letters and conversations between John and Robby in *Brothers*, many of the stories told in *Hoop Roots*, like the “father stories” in *Fatheralong*, are directed at a listener who cannot be present to hear them. The reader is privy to a message sent to someone else; we seem to intercept those letters.

Julien categorizes the works by John Edgar Wideman that I have discussed in this chapter as “autofiction,” which he defines as the narrative not “of a life but of a self, which accounts for the mingling of the fiction and the nonfictions” (27). Because Wideman frequently acknowledges his use of fiction, invention, and play in his memoirs, Julien thinks of the author’s relationship with his narrated self as one necessarily divorced from lived reality. He asserts, “Reality is an abstraction for which there is little room when writing about oneself, as Wideman does, with full awareness of one’s reader as the ballpoint pen slides across the copybook” (18). The abstraction of reality, however, is a topic Wideman is not only mindful of, but fully invested in shaping for his readers. Because, as he claims in *Hoop Roots*, “writing describes ball games the reader can never

be sure anybody has ever played” (HR 10), there is both a power and an opportunity in the author’s inability to effectively capture reality.

In his interview with Baker, he confesses, “Well, writers tell lies—in a sense. Or if a good artist doesn’t tell a lie, he changes something; he or she transforms something.” At the same time that he insists that “recording the story accurately” is “life and death,” he claims the need to be “in the business of inventing reality” (Baker 265). Though the author cannot remake his own reality, Wideman aims to use his writing to shape viable, meaningful alternatives. Bonnie TuSmith believes Wideman respects the responsibility that comes with creating those alternatives, because though he might doubt the capacity of a storyteller to capture reality, he understands his ability to affect it. “No matter how unreliable or easily distorted the medium of language might be, words are potentially transformative,” TuSmith says of the ethical aspects of Wideman’s storytelling. “Getting the story right is important because, since ‘all stories are true’—an enigmatic proverb Wideman learned from African storytellers—then the *right* story can save lives.” (“Optical Tricksterism” 244).

Even when the subject is his own life, as has now been the case almost as often as not in his career, Wideman is both accidentally and intentionally manipulating his reality. He tells another interviewer, *Salon* book critic Laura Miller: “When I write, I don’t open up my life for people to see; I open up what I *want* people to see. Writing is both revealing and an act of concealment. It is deciding to construct a public persona. It is often a preemptive strike. One might write because one doesn’t want people to know one’s life” (2). This is a provocative formulation of intent for a writer who so persistently practices that duo of revelation and concealment. The subject of so much of his writing,

whether explicitly or implicitly about his own life, is the impact of writing on that life. The process of writing and, more importantly, writing about his relation to his family define John Edgar Wideman—or, at the least, his public self—and hence these two acts are fundamental to his autobiographical project. Coleman summarizes the relation: “He is always writing the story of his own life, which is inseparable from the story of family and community in the past and present” (*Writing Blackness* 1).

### Chapter Three

“But Self-Awareness *Is* Sincerity”:  
Authorship and Exposure, Irony and Earnestness,  
Dave Eggers and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

In 1996, the mostly unknown magazine editor Dave Eggers and his colleagues at *Might*, a publication with a peak circulation of approximately 30,000 that he had helped to found, produced a satirical “tribute” issue commemorating the death of former child actor Adam Rich, who was (and is) still alive. The hoax caused a stir among the Hollywood tabloid press and brought attention both to *Might* and to Rich. In the aftermath, Eggers wrote a short essay for the nascent online magazine *Salon* about the experience, “He’s Hot, He’s Sexy, But He Isn’t Dead,” and provided Rich’s explanation for why he agreed to go along with the macabre project: “‘No offense to *Might*,’ Rich said, ‘but I didn’t really think anyone would see it.’”

Less than five years later, Eggers was a bestselling memoirist. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, his idiosyncratic account of the deaths of his parents when he was twenty-one years old and his transition to parenting his then eight-year-old brother, reached the top position of the *New York Times* nonfiction bestsellers list and Vintage Books paid a reported \$1.4 million for the rights to publish the paperback edition. In an addendum essay attached to that paperback edition called “Mistakes We Knew We Were Making,” Eggers explains that some of his friends who had “readily agreed” to have their

real names included in the memoir changed their minds after the original publication. He shares a “typical conversation” on the topic, in which one of these individuals asks, “Would it be possible to remove my name?” Eggers consents, and asks why. The “typical” response: “Well, no offense, but I really didn’t think anyone would see the damn book” (MWKWW 9).

In *Armies of the Night*, Norman Mailer faithfully reported Robert Lowell’s praise of Mailer’s writing in a clever technique that allowed Mailer to toy with his own reputation for narcissism and to practice that narcissism at the same time. Here, Eggers has allowed the words of others to speak his own self-assessment for him as well. They just happen to say that he seems to be a man unlikely to reach a large audience. From nearly the very beginning of his recognition as a national literary figure, Eggers has been carefully constructing a narrative that positions him and, significantly, those who know him, as being unprepared for the attention and success that he achieves, as he achieves it. In his public statements about *A Heartbreaking Work*, which was an instant sensation bolstered by glowing reviews, he carefully maintained a position of bewildered hesitancy about his popularity. In a typically hyperbolic display of modesty from the time, he told the Boston *Globe*’s Fred Kaplan, in response to a question about why his memoir was launched so successfully, “I’m the last guy to ask. I’ve never been one to write things that appeal to a lot of people. If I have 10 to 12 people paying attention, then I’m happy as a clam” (F1).

Whether he believes his own public self-skepticism is immaterial to its effect: an aura of diminished expectations that preempts charges of profiteering or fame-seeking via his written work or his personal story—intertwined, profitable, and fame-making as they

are. Eggers's life story, by his own estimation, had 400,000 readers in the hardcover edition alone, and in the decade following the initial publication of *A Heartbreaking Work*, easily one million more. Unlike Mailer, who publicly fretted that he was wasting his talent, that his personal reputation interfered with his work's reception, and that the good work he did produce was being actively misinterpreted by critics, Eggers sets out, in *A Heartbreaking Work* and the bits of writing that preceded it, advertising himself as a modest nobody and a writer of uncertain talent and then, by appending dozens of pages of notes, guides, explanations, clarifications, corrections, apologies, self-appraisal, and transparently ironic self-promotion to his memoir, goes out of his way to ensure that any possible critical misinterpretations or objections are mitigated or preempted altogether.

The combination of self-deprecation and winking manipulation of the conventions of publishing and paratexts counter-intuitively makes a strong case that the content of *A Heartbreaking Work*, a nonfiction story about the author's own life, is a work of literature that stands on its own. In the peritextual elements of the book, Eggers presents himself as so explicitly conscious about a) himself, b) the text, and c) that he's getting in its way, that he effectively enshrines the text as something to be cherished and savored, a work unfortunately sullied by its attachment to its author and to the author's life but redeemable if properly insulated from the author's touch. And yet, the text itself seems to repeat such concerns about its relation to its source: Eggers is writing to share his experience, but in that writing, he cannot help calling attention to its artificial nature, often cynically self-aware of the limitations of memoir. For example, when a long account of the interview he underwent to become a cast-member of the MTV program "The Real World" veers into odd and personally probing questions, his "interviewer"

asks, “This isn’t really a transcript of the interview, is it?” She proceeds to state, “This is a device, this interview style. Manufactured and fake...Kind of a catchall for a bunch of anecdotes that would be too awkward to force together otherwise” (AHWOSG 196-97). At frequent intervals in *A Heartbreaking Work*, the narrative account of Eggers’s life grinds to a halt to take note that it is a construction, a façade, a vehicle for presenting Eggers and his story to readers without actually delivering the real thing. The relationship between text and paratext in *A Heartbreaking Work* is a true paradox: the paratext seems designed to answer questions, alleviate doubts, and absorb the author’s own anxieties attached to writing something so revealing so that the text can function as the author wishes it to, and then the text insists that questions, doubts, and anxiety are the logical response to reading.

“I think that if you care about your writing, you care about how it makes its way into the world,” Eggers told an interviewer in 2002, and the extreme measures he takes crafting the paratext for *A Heartbreaking Work* indicate that he does care (“Around the World in a Week” 3). In fact, beginning with *A Heartbreaking Work* and extending throughout his still developing career, Eggers has shown that he believes how writing makes its way into the world is nearly coeval to the writing itself, without diminishing the significance of the writing. By positioning himself as a writer who never expected to reach a large audience, he heightens the perceived importance of presentation, so that those whom he never imagined reading his work might be guided helpfully toward what he feels is really important: the writing. This attention to detail combined with Eggers’s popularity has spawned a public image of the author as a writing, breathing paradox. Critics and fans can identify in Eggers a peculiar talent and devotion that seems to be

mixed from equal parts marketing savvy and holistic craftsmanship, literary gamesmanship and artistic purity, naked, self-interested ambition and an earnest, unalloyed charitable good will toward others.

Eggers, unlike Mailer or Wideman or frankly very many prominent writers who work seriously in multiple genres, earned his prominence and his wealth through his memoir, his first published book. And unlike many of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries who gained public notice for widely read literary memoir (for example, Mary Karr, Augustine Burroughs, Kathryn Harrison), he has not returned to the form since publishing *A Heartbreaking Work*. Once Eggers achieved the prominence he claims not to be prepared for and moved past his obvious discomfort with the formal attention associated with his success, he uses his fame and wealth to proceed in three directions. In his writing, he switches first to fiction and then, more recently, back to a space between fact and invention in relating the stories of two remarkable individuals who represent communities of real suffering and real need: a Sudanese Lost Boy in *What is the What* (2006) and a Hurricane Katrina survivor in *Zeitoun* (2009). He acts as a paratextual shepherd to the writing of others as he expands his quarterly journal, *McSweeney's*, into a wide-ranging publishing concern that emphasizes the material presence of its publications as significantly as their textual ones. And third, he directs a significant amount of his energy and his money toward his 826 Valencia project, which “is dedicated to supporting students ages 6-18 with their writing skills, and to helping teachers get their students excited about the literary arts,” a charitable endeavor that does good deeds for the community by capitalizing on Eggers’s gifts working *around* writing as much as in it. He has built a small empire of text and paratext, almost all directed away from actually



knowing the author, and in doing so, has enhanced an authorial reputation that began with the memoir.

Using the framework set out by Gerard Genette in *Paratexts*, this chapter explores Eggers's innovative and boundary-transgressing method for presenting an autobiographical narrative to readers. I will first discuss the way that Eggers adorns the threshold of his memoir—its peritexts of title, copyright page, Preface, Acknowledgements, and other front matter—with his own ambitions as an author and self-consciousness as a memoirist. Then, in the text itself, I will show how Eggers uses that peritextual material and a range of self-aware narrative gimmicks and devices not to undermine the authenticity of his story but rather to reinforce it. As life writing critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write of Eggers's technique, "In this gaming with the self-referentiality of memoir, Eggers reproduces *and* violates its conventions of sincerity" ("Rumpled Bed" 7). Finally, because Eggers achieves an uncommon degree of fame and a somewhat controversial reputation as an author as a result of publishing an autobiographical narrative as his first book, I will explore the aftermath of *A Heartbreaking Work*'s publication and Eggers's contradictory, self-serving, and self-abnegating participation in the work's epitext, a tactic that expanded the attention he claimed to want to curtail and turned that attention into a tool he has used to promote literature, writing, and self-expression not as an author's self-interested end goal but as a means to other, more charitable and communal ends.

**“I am True of Heart!”/ “You are True of Heart!”:  
Paratexts and the Autobiographical Pact**

In “Mistakes,” Eggers recounts that the Acknowledgements section of *A Heartbreaking Work* was “written before the rest of the book, as both an organizational device and a stalling mechanism” (MWKWWM 16). The Acknowledgements, twenty-five pages of filibustering and philosophizing, confessions and non sequiturs, are the last pages of the preposterously overstuffed front matter of the memoir and are positioned as the last glimpse a reader will get of the mischievous author outside his text before they dive together (author and reader, that is) into the chilling depths of his tragic past.

Eggers opens the Acknowledgements with silliness and ends it with nonsense. He begins with plain and shallow jokiness: “The author wishes first and foremost to acknowledge his friends at NASA and the United States Marine Corps, for their great support and unquantifiable help with the technical aspects of this story. ¡*Les saludo, muchachos!*” (xi). However, this acknowledgement, along with several other similarly silly asides sprinkled throughout the front matter, serves mostly as a deflection from the section’s serious and, in places, movingly sincere further reflections on the personal tragedies and literary challenges his text is ultimately meant to confront. Again, though, at the very conclusion of the section—which is also the end of the prefatory material and so the transition from paratext to text, the launching point from idling preamble to autobiographical narrative—is a piece of intentionally mundane nonsense: a drawing of a stapler, captioned, “Here is a drawing of a stapler” (AHWOSG xlv). Explaining why he spent so long building out this peritextual aspect of his book, Eggers says, “I was not looking forward to writing the first chapter, and wasn’t sure if I could write those thereafter, so I had a nice time fiddling with the front matter, which came easily, and

helped me to shape the book in my head before starting into it” (MWKWWM 16). This confession from “Mistakes,” presented in the likewise bulky portion of the peritext attached to the back of early paperback editions, solidifies for readers a sense of Eggers and his project that the Acknowledgements and other front matter attempt to convey: that the author is not only reluctant to present his story to the public without the proper qualifications and preparations, but reluctant to even compose the narrative at all.

The publishers of *A Heartbreaking Work* (Simon and Schuster for the hardcover original, Random House’s Vintage Books for paperback editions) gave Eggers control over practically every centimeter of material space of his book. Eggers’s mark is apparent from the cover material to the copyright page to the author photo and bio (items conventionally controlled by a publisher’s marketing team). This expansive authorial control, requested by Eggers rather than volunteered by his publishers, would seem to mitigate the writer’s reluctance to share the authority for presenting his work with, in his words, a publisher which is “a division of a larger and more powerful company called Viacom Inc., which is wealthier and more populous than eighteen of the fifty states of America, all of Central America, and all of the former Soviet Republics combined and tripled” (AHWOSG, 1st ed. iv).<sup>27</sup> In many respects, it does so for Eggers, as it both allows him to dither, as described above, with material connected to but not necessarily related to his very personal text, and invites him to work as a quasi-publisher of his own

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<sup>27</sup> Selling the paperback rights to a rival publisher required a shift in the reference, of course, and the unpleasant assessment of the parent company’s size is scaled back somewhat (one might speculate by publisher’s request): “Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc. Random House is owned *in toto* by an absolutely huge German company called Bertelsmann A.G. which owns too many things to count or track” (iv). All references in this chapter are to the first paperback edition, published by Vintage, unless otherwise noted.

work, a formal role he had practiced at *Might* and in his literary journal *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Tendency* (a publication launched in 1998 that, to that point at least, shared *A Heartbreaking Work's* peritextual logorrhea). His knowingness about the book's form, as evidenced by the depth with which he manipulates the publisher's standard conventions, suggests an awareness that not only is he creating a narrative about his and his family's experience, he is creating a product from it, a commodity. The weight of that responsibility is underscored, not absolved, by the nonsense, wryness, and frivolity with which he dresses his work.

The mass media's proliferation of interest in Eggers himself that surrounded publication of *A Heartbreaking Work* is remarkable, and his changeable and unsteady relationship with much of the epitextual production connected to the book is discussed below. In his manipulation of the peritext, however—even in light of the ill-preparedness for fame he tries to demonstrate—Eggers implicitly understands that an author's books become, in some regards, the public face of his image, particularly so with those who write autobiography. Building out the packaging of his autobiographical narrative expands the range of characteristics with which his name will be identified. Eggers's assured stance on autobiographical writing is that writing the narrative is essential to him as an individual, and that, in line with the dominant postmodern skepticism of pure mimesis, doing so involves fictionalizing and hence some degree of distance from his real, lived experience. He notes, at the start of his preface, "For all the author's bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction" (AHWOSG xi). Yet his self-consciousness about the nature of memoir indicates that he is also aware that he will be publicly connected with his version of his life's events, regardless of that version's

success as true representation. The charisma and playfulness with which Eggers manipulates his book's textual and material content that surround the primary text, therefore, is partially his effort to characterize his authorial persona, which he knows will circulate in the epitext of this work and, contingent upon the successful reception of his work, in the broader literary establishment of serious magazines and journals. Despite the care with which he underplays it, Eggers's attention to his image—especially those aspects of it not directly related to the events of his memoir—betrays a fairly substantial literary ambition.

Though he plainly believes they are connected, Eggers's author/quasi-publisher's persona is established in the prefatory material as distinctly subsequent to the persona of the individual whose life will be described in the text proper. Though chronologically subsequent to the protagonist of the narrative, the authorial persona presents himself first to the reader who logically begins at the first pages of a book. In the "Rules and Suggestions for the Enjoyment of this Book," which precedes the Preface and the Acknowledgements, Eggers suggests that there are no "overwhelming" or "overarching" needs to read those two sections of the book, respectively, and somewhat disingenuously allows that some readers might have already done so (presumably having skipped and then returned to the "Rules and Suggestions") and apologizes for not "hav[ing] said something"—impossibly—"sooner" (vii). These rules are an indirect invitation to "meet" the author responsible for the text, to draw the reader to the Preface and Acknowledgements by a humorously transparent reverse psychology. Likewise, for readers of the early paperback editions (what one might call the "Million Dollar Edition"), "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making," subtitled "Notes, Corrections,

Clarifications, Apologies, Addenda,” suggests that those who “did not like the Acknowledgements section ... will not like this,” and vice versa, “unless your tastes have changed,” and, under a rubric “Points to Keep in Mind,” informs them that the appendix is not essential to understanding the text, but instead “only for: 1) the author; 2) those with extra time; 3) those with interest disproportionate to what is warranted” (6, 7).

In one regard, Eggers is presenting his readers with an interpretive truth: the Preface, Acknowledgements, “Mistakes,” and all the peritextual material he controls are not necessary to understanding the text as a “memoir-y kind of thing” (AHWOSG xx) as he calls his book, but they serve the two purposes of a preface that Gerard Genette identifies in *Paratexts*: “to get the book read and to get the book read properly.” These two objectives imply, Genette continues, “despite all the customary disavowals, that the reader begins by reading the preface” (197)—or in the case of Eggers, with the copyright page, which functions as an early start to the authorial preface. In *A Heartbreaking Work*, the front matter fulfills both purposes in unconventional ways: first, it entices people to read the book, though perhaps it does so in the fashion of B-movie director William Castle’s extraordinary gimmickry to draw people to his theaters; and second, it provides them with exhaustive directions for how Eggers wants readers to approach his narrative. Further, the peritextual apparatus is essential to understanding the image of Eggers *as an author*—particularly as the author of this “thing” about his life—which he endeavors to present, and hence important to getting “the text read properly,” as Genette put it. For most conventional readers of memoir, those two people, the author and the subject of an autobiography, are to be understood *together* as one. Readers who take Eggers’s bait and

explore his authorial peritext are explicitly challenged to understand the personae's distinctions but also to embrace their connections.

The presentation Eggers makes of himself as an author, connected to but distinct from his narrative presence in the primary text, fits two divergent formulae for autobiography laid out by a pair of the seminal theorists of the mode, Philippe Lejeune and Paul de Man. Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact, discussed in depth in the Introduction and Chapter Two of this project, requires a form of contract between writer, publisher, and reader about the indivisible relation between the author, narrator, and subject of an autobiography. de Man respectfully objected to Lejeune's perspective on the self-revelatory nature of autobiography, arguing instead that the figure identified with the author in autobiography achieved an existence entirely its own through the composition of the text. In his essay "Autobiography as De-Facement," de Man explains autobiography as stripping away the reality of one's experience by attempting to convey it in language, asserting that language constructs a mask or a public face that obscures rather than reveals. Though there is little evidence that Eggers was conscious of the work of Lejeune or de Man at the time he was writing, the prefatory material of *A Heartbreaking Work* does strive to create conditions under which both theorists' visions of autobiographical narrative are operating and must be implicitly contended with.

To take up the application of de Man's perspective first, the enthusiastic and wide-ranging front matter of *A Heartbreaking Work* can be read as Eggers's embrace of the process which will disconnect his memoir-persona from his authorial one and his attempt to construct his authorial figure as the image he would like his readers to absorb and connect to the name on the front of the book. In this respect, it is significant that he

do this work thoroughly and influentially in the material that surrounds the primary narrative. In expressing both the necessity of repeating his tragic story and his awareness of its inevitably constructed and manipulated character, not “pure” nonfiction, Eggers encourages his readers to join him, the author, as an observer, external to the life his text represents, and the front matter and “Mistakes” allow readers insight into that author’s perspective. In his essay, de Man discusses the paradoxically self-effacing effect of autobiography. He insists that autobiography is, at its core, ineluctably an act of prosopopoeia: giving voice and hence presence and even physicality to an imaginary, absent, or fictional character. “Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography,” de Man argues, “by which one’s name... is made as intelligible and memorable as a face” (926). The name of the subject, despite its identity with that of the author, the narrator, the real person who experienced the events described, takes on a character in autobiography that is separate from those other manifestations of the individual and, in fact, more real to the reader. Eggers anticipates this effect in the front matter of *AHWOSG*, and with his gift for simultaneous humility and self-promotion, aims to make the authorial face of his public image as memorable and as significant as the tragic “orphan raising an orphan” his narrative will present (*AHWOSG* 236-37).

Eggers uses the opportunity he has claimed by constructing his elaborate paratextual apparatus to carefully fashion an authorial identity as both gifted artist, a laboring craftsman, and a regular guy. There are moments in the “Preface to This Edition”<sup>28</sup> which appear to demonstrate the process of creation, providing long excerpts

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<sup>28</sup> Curiously, the “Preface to This Edition” appeared under that heading in the first (and at that time) only edition, and again, unchanged and under the same title, in subsequent paperback editions.



of material omitted from the “this” (and every) edition. In these pieces, readers receive an early glimpse of Eggers’s skill with narrative, yet are also reminded that not every incident he set out to share could be incorporated into the final version of his text. Further, at the end of the Preface, Eggers humorously notes that “Finally, this edition reflects the author’s request that all previous epigraphs ... be removed, as he never really saw himself as the type of person who would use epigraphs” (xvii). Of course, there are no “previous epigraphs” or previous editions, and so nothing to be removed, yet he manages to be the “type of person” who chooses to eschew epigraphs and still be the clever author who chooses them, by including the *six* quotations that still function as (buried) epigraphs. He cites Henry Van Dyke, Anne Sexton, John Barth, Milan Kundera, Robert Lowell, and his younger brother (“Ooh, look at me, I’m Dave, I’m writing a book! With all my thoughts in it! La la la!”) (AHWOSG xvii).

The author who doesn’t see himself as a user of epigraphs but still manages to cite five serious literary figures in his preface also takes an opportunity to highlight, less explicitly, another contradiction in his authorial persona, that of the under-read youth critiquing and imitating established writers. In “Mistakes,” Eggers confesses that he had not read Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, despite the fact that he claims he briefly considered naming his book *Memories of a Catholic Boyhood* and practices much of the same self-awareness about invention in memoir that McCarthy employs. Early in the Acknowledgements, he confesses that he had only recently learned the true genders of Evelyn Waugh and George Eliot. And again in “Mistakes,” he crafts an ambiguous rejoinder to readers and critics who (in my opinion, correctly, but impossible to say authoritatively without better evidence) point out that the conclusion of

*AHWOSG* is a nuanced imitation of Molly Bloom's soliloquy that closes Joyce's *Ulysses*, albeit with several more "motherfuckers" than the original. He complains that there "have been a few readers assumed that the passage, which he describes only as "the long messy run-on of the book's end," was meant ironically. "Which is so disturbing," he claims. "A parody of *Ulysses*? What is wrong with you people?" (MWKWWM 35). In this statement of outrage over misinterpretation, he leaves open the possibility of the allusion while objecting to its classification as irony and parody. The writer of *AHWOSG*, elevated by such associations with great authors, also can inhabit the less rarified air of a college dropout who majored in journalism with no formal training in literature.

Alternatively, Eggers's protracted work in the prefatory material and "Mistakes" to emphasize his authorial persona can also contribute to a more affirmative vision of the relation between author, narrator, and protagonist of an autobiography. Rather than envisioning the Preface, Acknowledgements, etc. as an advertisement for Eggers as author, it is also productive to read such material as a constituent element of the postmodern version of the autobiographical pact. de Man's critique of Lejeune centers, correctly, around the limitations of the latter's conception of the connection between author and subject, one which begins, in the (impossible) perfect or ideal autobiography, as a matter of "ontological identity," but which de Man sees as necessarily reduced in Lejeune's autobiographical pact to a mere "contractual promise" (923). This contract requires the active participation of the reader, and so, if Eggers wishes to claim an identity with his protagonist—a connection fundamentally troubled for a self-aware postmodern writer of his generation—he must make a sophisticated appeal to his reader. Interpreting the complicating conditions for the application of Lejeune's pact, de Man

traces the shift in the reader that must happen, from “specular figure of the author,” the second side of the pact *creating* a consensus that decides a work as autobiographical and imbues the writer with the “transcendental authority” to claim a shared identity with the protagonist with the author’s name, to “judge”: the “policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the [authorial] signature and the consistency of the signer’s behavior, the extent to which he respects or fails to honor the contractual agreement he has signed” (923).

In many respects, Eggers quite profoundly understands his readers as judge of his authenticity and hence of his authority. His exhaustive prefatory writing and his expansive manipulation of the publisher’s peritext act as a literalization of his autobiographical contract with the reader. This contractual material is no less an act of self-promotion than the model described above in relation to de Man’s conception of prosopopoeia, but in this formulation, the purpose is not so much to establish a separate authorial persona as it is to establish the authorial bona fides that reinforce his “transcendental authority” and legitimate his autobiographical enterprise.

The author’s encroachment onto the copyright page of *A Heartbreaking Work* is one feature of the book most frequently commented upon by reviewers as an example of Eggers’s literary mischief (or, in the words of Julian Loose, book critic for the London *Guardian* “merry-making”). Seizing the copyright page as the domain of the author, however, is not a simply frivolous exercise in play. As I noted above, it allows Eggers to claim some share of the responsibility for publishing and presenting his work to his readers, and in terms of an autobiographical contract, it allows him to expand the traditional authorial signature into the space conventionally reserved for rote, functional

legal and taxonomic information dictated by the standards of the country of publication. The information is typically so immaterial to the reading of a text that Genette, in his otherwise meticulous survey of related material aspects of books, devotes less than two full pages of consideration to “the title page and its appendages,” briefly notes that most books published in the U.S. have “some legal information” printed in this area, expresses a wish that more books included a note about typesetting, and moves on to more relevant matters (32-33). That Eggers lingers in this space and then returns to repeat the exercise in the same manner for “Mistakes” forces the attentive reader to engage him in territory where author and reader seldom meet and join him, almost explicitly agreeing to enter a contract with Eggers as author to read *A Heartbreaking Work* on terms favorable to both parties.

Lejeune emphasizes that the name of the author printed on the cover, the title page, and the legal information is the “only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person, which requires that we thus attribute to him, in the final analysis, the responsibility for the production of the whole written text” (11). The reader rarely has means to verify this assessment, but Lejeune insists that “exceptions and breaches of trust serve only to emphasize the general credence accorded this type of social contract.” However, because an author is not, strictly speaking, “a person” but rather a connection between “the world-beyond-the-text and the text,” for the reader, the “author is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse,” despite the fact that the reader “does not know the real person” yet “all the while believ[es] in his existence.” To bridge the gap, the reader must “imagine what [the author] is like from what he produces” (Lejeune 11).

In his extended contract with the reader that begins in the copyright material, Eggers embraces and manipulates this convention. His name, printed on the cover and title page as “Dave Eggers,” is appropriately though playfully formalized for his legal claim to copyright, “David (‘Dave’) K. Eggers.” Below, as if to rebut the notion that a reader gets no access to the real person attached to the author’s name but in effect reinforcing that by demonstrating the difficulty of overcoming such a distance with more information, he includes precise details for his height, weight, eyes, hair, hands, allergies, and “place on the sexual-orientation scale with 1 being perfectly straight, and 10 being perfectly gay” (AHWOSG vi). For the latter measure, he places himself without explanation at 3,<sup>29</sup> confirming by exaggeration how unverifiable and hence pointless such sharing is, yet also offering up to his reader something ostensibly intimate and self-reflective, purportedly enlarging the reader’s information about the author to something more than a name.

The meticulous yet empty detail on the copyright page coincides with the brief author bio and photo that Eggers also toys with a couple pages earlier, which does provide clear, seemingly relevant biographical information about his professional history, including *Might* and *McSweeney’s*, and confirms for readers that he lives with his brother

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<sup>29</sup> On the copyright page of “Mistakes,” Eggers provides more information but not more explanation in a “funny story about the chart used at the beginning of the book’s other side.” He says that the scale was, “for whatever reason taken much, much more seriously than had been intended,” drawing letters of concern and suggestion from AIDS educators responding to the chart and Eggers’s confession in the body of *AHWOSG* to having had unprotected sex on a few occasions. “One AIDS educator posited,” Eggers reflects, “that because a 3 was cited, it followed that 30 percent of the author’s sexual encounters were with men.” Without providing any further illumination, he states flatly, “Romantic, but untrue” (MWKWWM 2). Eggers persists in leaving it to his reader to determine what such a scale might mean, why it would matter for the text, and how Eggers intended the information to be received at all, other than not nearly as seriously as it was.

in California, yet features a fairly obviously doctored photo of the author with two dogs at his feet and a bird on his shoulder contrasted to the last line of the bio, which states that he and his brother “have no pets.” In its minor way, the contradiction nudges readers to trust the printed words by and about the author in the book, and the manipulated photo can be read as Eggers’s reclaiming control over his image, reversing the “loss of control over the body’s image” which Linda Haverty Rugg argues is inherent in portraits and which “stikes a respondent chord in the autobiographer’s consciousness of the loss of control inherent in writing and (more importantly) publishing an autobiography” (Rugg 4).

Later, in the Acknowledgements, Eggers says that “he feels obligated to acknowledge that yes, the success of a memoir—of any book, really—has a lot to do with how appealing its narrator is.” He continues on to provide a list of nine personal details, the first of which is “that he is like you.” Others include the fact that he never finished college and “that he expects to die young.” He sums up the list with “one word: appealing. And that’s just the beginning!” That Eggers feels the need to reach out in the front matter of a deeply personal text with details both personal and, frankly, irrelevant reveals his interest in connecting with readers authentically and exposing the inauthentic claims for authority writers make and readers grant based on personal appeal. Such an exercise might seem contradictory for autobiography, the practice of which implies that the reader will (or should) know much, much more about the author than his name, yet in the conceptions of both Lejeune and de Man, the potential purpose Eggers might have for introducing his authorial persona in detail (relevant to the text or otherwise) from the very first opportunity is necessary as a contingent element of a sound autobiographical pact or

as a separate but essential and authoritative presence constructing an identity for the author's name.

*A Heartbreaking Work's* copyright material, in conjunction with the Preface and the Acknowledgements, also serves the autobiographical contract by allowing Eggers to elucidate the conditions under which readers might more freely accept his work as an act made in good faith. First, he works to mitigate concerns that might arise from the depersonalizing aspect of cooperating with a major multi-national corporation to share a very personal story. Whether commenting on his association with Simon & Schuster (a division of Viacom, Inc.) in the first edition or with Vintage Books (and hence Random House and Bertelsmann A.G.) in the paperback, his notices for reserving "all rights" on the copyright page set out to diminish readers expectations that such companies would affect the work or any individual, for that matter. "No matter how big such companies are, and how many things they own, or how much money they have or make or control" he says, "their effect on the short, fraught lives of human beings who limp around and sleep and dream of flying through bloodstreams, who love the smell of rubber cement and think of space travel while having intercourse, is very very small, and so hardly worth worrying about" (AHWOSG vi). In this statement, Eggers successfully completes two related maneuvers: he shrugs off the looming influence of a profit-minded corporation in front of his readers, and makes an intimate connection with them on the level of their common participation in the nasty, brutish, and short but also sweet, idiosyncratic, and imaginative experience of human life.

Potential objections to the mere participation of a massive corporate interest are not the only element of the publishing arrangement Eggers aims to dispel in his appeal to

readers, however. He is also aware that his readers will be aware that he has been paid for his writing. He notes that readers will conclude that “the author either exploits or exalts his parents, depending on your point of view” (AHWOSG xxxii) and he acknowledges that “no, he is not the only person to ever lose his parents, and that he is also not the only person ever to lose his parents and inherit a youngster. But he would also like to point out that he is currently the only such person with a book contract” (AHWOSG xliii). That book contract, insofar as it provides the opportunity for the autobiographical pact to exist, Eggers sees as benefit to both author and reader. However, as it represents the ambiguous reward of being paid for recounting one’s suffering, he attempts to mitigate the indecorousness of that reward in the reader’s eyes in order to move past the financial aspects of memoir to the textual ones together.

At the end of the Acknowledgements, as if to act as a bookend of the front matter with the copyright page’s similar project, Eggers asserts that “the author would also like to acknowledge what he was paid to write this book,” which was \$100,000. To emphasize that he is not, in fact, \$100,000 richer than he was before writing, he details the deductions for his agent and taxes as well as his expenses for producing the book, a list which is both serious (research trips, postage, and computer trouble, for example) and not (“Copy of *Xanadu* Original Movie Soundtrack...\$14.32”). He estimates that he has netted \$39,567.68 for the book, “which still isn’t so bad, come to think of it—more than the author, who is not a pet owner, can spend” (AHWOSG xxxix). Smith and Watson commend this gesture as exceedingly rare (naturally), but rewardingly revelatory regarding “that most mystified, yet essential, aspect of autobiographical writing in our postmodern times, the material specifics of... financial arrangements with his publisher”



(9). In a further appeal to the reader—a naked appeal for connection expressed in contractual terms, in fact—he “pledges some of [his payment] to you, or at least some of you,” offering five dollars to every reader who mails him a copy of their receipt for purchasing the book and a picture of themselves reading it (with an additional offer of “special consideration” for pictures featuring babies or in exotic locales and an admonition to “keep your clothes on, please”) (AHWOSG xl-xli). The arrangement is one determined to document a connection between reader and text, and Smith and Watson see a “provocative” engagement in Eggers’s offer: an invitation for “the reader to participate in profiting from the pain of his memoir” (“Rumpled Bed” 9).

Another significant function of *A Heartbreaking Work*’s peritexts that both supports an image of the author as an *artiste* and reinforces his commitment to an autobiographical pact is the persistent if not consistent confessions that Eggers is not fully confident in the accuracy and purity of his allegedly nonfiction account. For readers who are wary of the possibility of a strict accounting of past events and emotions, Eggers acknowledges that he, too, believes writing an indisputably factually accurate memoir is hopeless. The original dust jacket declared that the book is “based on a true story,” and the Preface opens by noting that “many parts” of the work “have been fictionalized in varying degrees, for varying reasons,” then launches into concessions of the inventions and manipulations of dialogue, “characters, and their characteristics,” locations, and time, and provides explanations of those varying reasons. Some fictional aspects are intentional, Eggers says, though others “reflect both the author’s memory limitations and his imagination’s nudgings” (AHWOSG ix).

For another type of reader, who may fervently wish that the writer is sharing his most honest and most accurate version of events and depend upon the author's effort as fundamental to his own commitment to the text, Eggers actually makes several claims of truth that are presumably very sincere, despite the outward appearances of his format and tone which seem to indicate a commitment to invention over accuracy. He begins this effort to reassure readers of his truthfulness on the copyright page as well, in the space that frequently contains the customary disclaimer that "any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely accidental." Instead, Eggers begins with the conventional "This is a work of fiction," then diverts from the norm, continuing,

only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could. Otherwise, all characters and incidents and dialogue are real, and not products of the author's imagination, because at the time of this writing, the author had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things, and could not conceive of *making up* a story or characters—it felt like driving a car in a clown suit—especially when there was so much to say about his own, true, sorry and inspirational story, the actual people that he has know, and of course the many twists and turns of his own thrilling and complex mind. Any resemblance to persons living or dead should be plainly apparent to them and those who know them, especially if the author has been kind enough to have provided their real names and, in some cases, their phone numbers. All events described herein actually happened, though on occasion the author has taken certain, very small, liberties with chronology, because that is his right as an American. (AHWOSG iv)

This statement, written in the conventional style of such disclaimers and acting as Eggers's summation of his contractual obligations as an autobiographer, congeals the otherwise disparate assertions of sincerity and claims of authenticity that he scatters throughout the paratext and text itself. Smith and Watson sharply observe the intent of his

clarifications in the Preface and the implicit criticism of memoir's conventions buried in those clarifications. "By highlighting its rearrangements and masking of experiential history," they write, Eggers "asserts the 'truth' of his tale. The apparent lack of contrivance in most memoirs, by contrast, is implied to be a deeper kind of contrivance" (7). In "Mistakes," Eggers actually makes those implicit criticisms explicit (though he does so in nearly illegibly small print). Answering critics of his work who find his self-awareness distracting or insincere, he insists, "Yes, but self-awareness *is* sincerity." He continues emphatically, arguing that "lack of self-awareness is either ridiculous (is it possible to be *unaware* of one's... *self*?) or feigned, and feigned lack of self-awareness is lying, which is insincere, yes?" He seems to earnestly believe that his exhaustive exposure of his manipulations, all products of necessity for various, legitimate reasons in his estimation, serves to dispel any and all complaints about Eggers's commitment to the truth, and though he states elsewhere that this front matter is not essential to the text's meaning, its existence likely served to compound his frustration that critics actually doubted his commitment to sincerity over irony.

Those critiques, which began with a host of reviews that failed to resist the impulse for mimicry (e.g., "Very Clever Headline Goes Here" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 2, 2000), took Eggers to task for his '90s "slacker-generation" tone even as they acknowledged the appeal of his story and the effect of his style. Most distilled Eggers's affect down to one word: ironic. Irony, in turn, becomes a dirty word of sorts for Eggers. He calls it "the i word" on one version of the back cover of the paperback edition and in "Mistakes" devotes over two pages of text printed in 6-point and 4-point font to the word, "the one beginning with *i* and ending with *y*," saying that he does not like to

even see the word “anywhere, much less typed with my own hands” (MWKWWM 33). The mis-application of the word “irony” to portions of *A Heartbreaking Work* which he insists are meant to be funny, humorous, playful, or hyperbolic, but *not* ironic or to aspects which were intended as sincere but instead received by some as disingenuous or artificial appears to be a most grave insult to Eggers.

His tiny-print, interpolated essay on irony in “Mistakes” is positioned as a clarification of a few pages of the original text which cover a heartfelt plea that his story be heard (e.g., a representative selection: “I am bursting with the hopes of a generation, their hopes surge through me, threaten to burst my hardened heart! Can you not see this?” (AHWOSG 236)). In his “clarification,” Eggers makes his argument that “[i]rony is a very specific and not all that interesting thing.” He is agitated to the point of fury over the inexactness and casual dismissiveness of the use of “the word/concept to blanket half of all contemporary cultural production—which some aged arbiters seem to be doing (particularly with regard to work made by those under a certain age)” (MWKWWM 33). He goes on (at some length), eventually taunting critics, explaining in a direct address, “Generally, if a joke *is* told [in an otherwise serious work], or a humorous anecdote relayed, and by chance you do not understand that joke or humorous anecdote, it does not mean it is *ironic*. Or ‘*neo-ironic*.’ It simply means that you do not understand that joke. And that is okay” (MWKWWM 34).

The heart of Eggers’s complaint is that too many readers “felt that the front matter was (and is) *pomo garbage*, and that as a result, the entire story is being told with a tongue in its author’s cheek” (MWKWWM 34). The complaint is justified in light of the lengths a close reading of the peritext reveals Eggers going to for his readers’ trust and

acceptance, and the general disdain he demonstrates here and elsewhere for the label “postmodern.” He makes an earnest plea at this point in his diatribe, one that illuminates his intention if not his accomplishment in *A Heartbreaking Work* and which reverberates and swells in his career following this early success, adjusting the typesetting again for emphasis: “PEOPLE, PLEASE: TRUST THE MOTIVES AND HEARTS OF YOUR MAKERS OF THINGS” (MWKWW 34). In this direct appeal to readers, Eggers implements what Genette defines as the final, special function of “later prefaces” (which is practically speaking what “Mistakes” is), the author’s assertion that “the critics are overwhelmingly against me, but the public is on my side” (Genette 242).

Of course, the critics were not by any measure overwhelmingly against Eggers, as positive reviews were plentiful (including a glowing assessment from the final authority in contemporary book reviewing, the *New York Times*’s Michiko Kakutani), and the public had already mostly embraced his complicated motives.<sup>30</sup> But, as a white, upper-middle-class, Midwestern, Generation X, American male, Eggers displays repeated concerns in the peritextual material and in the text proper that he is incapable of making his connection with all readers in an authentic way. Indeed, his offer of token payments to readers might be viewed as arbitrary, impersonal, and by virtue of its pecuniary nature,

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<sup>30</sup> Critics writing in the *New York Times* seemed especially to like and “get” the connection Eggers was making between playful self-awareness and sincere self-expression. Six months after the initial publication of *AHWOSG*, in an essay for the *Times* headlined “Just Kidding: Does Irony Illuminate or Corrupt?,” Charles McGrath credits Eggers with combining textual play with real emotion. He writes that *A Heartbreaking Work* “succeeds not in spite of its antics—all the authorial winking and nudging—but to a large degree because of them. The ultimate irony, you could say, is that Mr. Eggers’s wiseguy approach allows him to invest his book with insight and genuine feeling” (B9). The *Times*’s generally appreciative tone is, one might say, *ironic* in light of the feud Eggers takes up with reporter David Kirkpatrick the next year over similar issues (discussed below).

inauthentic rather than intimate, despite the implicit role that offer plays in supporting the ostensible autobiographical contract he is establishing in the front matter. Eggers suggests that, despite the obvious assumptions to be made about those who write memoirs, he is reserved and reluctant to share, not just in the manner of writer's block, but out of a desire for privacy. As a result, he is concerned both that his sharing will seem inauthentic and that it will be merely transactional, an exchange with psychological benefits that redound to the author but do little for readers. He expresses his sense that the text lapses into an "easy and unconvincing nihilistic poseurism re: full disclosure of one's secrets and pain" as he attempts to "pass off" his self-exposure "under a semi-high-minded guise when in fact the author is himself very private about many or most matters, though he sees the use in making certain facts and happenings public" (AHWOSG xxxv).

That "use," he worries, is purely self-indulgent, and so he further expresses concern that his narrative will betray an "enforced" solipsism. He worries aloud that his writing will contain a thematic thread entrenched in such solipsism which is a "likely result of economic, historical and geopolitical privilege"—that, "due to environmental factors in [his] upbringing," he has been conditioned with "an innate sense that ideas of 'community' are silly and soft" (AHWOSG xxxvi-xxxviii). In light of these worries (perhaps paradoxically shared with the reader), it is easy to see Eggers shielding himself from intimacy with his readers and undermining the contractual obligation of a conventional autobiographer that so much of the front matter strives to reinforce. He appears to build walls around his inner self via the elaborateness of his diversionary devices, such as the cold and perversely unhelpful "Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors" he includes (in which six items are identified as symbols or metaphors for

“mother” and, in turn, “mother” is symbol or metaphor for four other items), his non sequiturs (such as the image of the stapler or his acknowledgement of NASA and the Marines or the “implicit logic of the instant replay rule” (xliii)), and, of course, the intentionally overwrought title of the book.

His discussion of the title in the Acknowledgements, however, and again in “Mistakes” is an example of the extent to which Eggers is concerned that his ironic pose as author in such aspects of the book divides him from his readers and diminishes the authentic emotional project he does wish to present. “The author wishes to acknowledge your problems with the title,” he announces. “He too has reservations” (AHWOSG xxv). His account of how he settled on a title does a great deal to deflate the title’s suggestion of authorial vanity but little to close the gap between author and reader generated by the title’s glibness. He shares a few alternatives, including one which is a lame, tone-deaf attempt at humorous irony, *Old and Black in America*, and the effect of his attempt at an explanation is precisely the interpretation he projects for a reader: we conclude that “only logical interpretation of the title’s intent is as a) a cheap kind of joke, b) buttressed by an interest in lamely executed titular innovation (employed, one suspects, only to shock) which is c) undermined of course by the cheap joke aspect, and d) confused by the creeping feeling one gets that the author is dead serious in his feeling that the title is an accurate description of the content, intent, and quality of the book” (AHWOSG xxvi). Despite the wedge of inauthentic expression the title seems to place between author and reader, Eggers’s sums up the ultimate intended effect of title as a attraction for reader, and deems it successful: after all, he says, “You’re here, you’re in, we’re having a party!” (xxvi).

Though it comes in very small print at the end of an otherwise agitated and didactic section of “Mistakes,” Eggers makes another, more revealing confession regarding his mindset about the book when he undertook the project. His confession is unverifiable, as are all Eggers’s statements regarding his state of mind, but revealing. “This book was seen by its author as a stupid risk,” he says, and “an ugly thing, and a betrayal, and overall, as a mistake he would regret for the rest of his life but a mistake which nevertheless he could not refrain from making, and worse, as a mistake he would encourage everyone to make, because everyone should make big, huge mistakes” (MWKWW 35). For “all his bluster elsewhere,” Eggers wants to confess and to share, and yet feels pangs of regret and shivers of guilt for both the desires and their execution. He wants, above all, the sense of community he claims also to resist. Or at least he wants it in print, as the actual publication of his text and the demands of interacting with journalists, publicists, and business people provokes a withdrawal from participation in the epitext of this work that is, at least initially, as dramatic and thorough as his construction of its peritext. In the book, however, his reach outward toward the reader, as an example on the page facing his copyright manipulations demonstrates, takes shape in a language self-aware and sincere, ironic and earnest. Alone on that page, some of the first words any reader would see when opening the book, are six lines: “First of all:/ I am tired./ I am true of heart!/ And also:/ You are tired./ You are true of heart!” (v).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Still, of course, it’s worth remembering that not all addresses to his readers are earnest pleas for mercy and tenderness. This same front matter also speaks to future readers in a decidedly less sincere direct address: “Come to think of it, you may be reading this far, far in the future,” Eggers ponders. “It’s probably being taught in all the schools! Do tell: What’s it like in the future? Is everyone wearing robes? Are the cars rounder, or less round? Is there a women’s soccer league yet?” (AHWOSG xl)



### **Behind the Scaffolding: Eggers's Architecture of Autobiographical Narrative**

One of the passages that Eggers claims was “omitted” for the main text and prints instead in the Preface underscores the preoccupation the author has with the material presence of his book and the supporting textual apparatus that surrounds the narrative of his life.

Ostensibly deleted from the fictional interview for *The Real World* in the middle of the text, the excerpt is a response to a question about the peritext (which, paradoxically, now exists in the peritext). “Why the scaffolding?” his interlocutor asks. “See, I like the scaffolding,” he replies. “I like the scaffolding as much as I like the building. Especially if the scaffolding is beautiful, in its way” (AHWOSG xii). Scaffolding, of course, is a necessary component of large construction projects, and presumably when removed, reveals something grand and finished. By refusing to remove the scaffolding from the “building” of his narrative, Eggers forces readers to consider the value of the scaffolding itself and, if they wish to move on to the narrative, to peer behind the scaffolding that remains intact.

He is obviously ambivalent about the structure behind the paratext's façade. In the Acknowledgements, Eggers undertakes a long explication of the themes of his text (or, rather, he “wishes to acknowledge the major themes of the book” (AHWOSG xxvii)). Theme C.2), “The Knowingness about the Book's Self-Consciousness Aspect,” is, simply put, Eggers's most precise condensation of his style and the (seemingly) true emotional state underlying the text. “While the author is self-conscious about being self-referential,” he begins, “he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality,” and goes to forestall reader's potential complaints about the “gimmickry inherent in all of this” (xxx). Eggers diminishes the significance of his exaggerated knowingness and embraces its

function simultaneously as he “preempt[s]” his reader’s potential “claim of the books irrelevance due to said gimmickry.” First he explains that it is all “simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and blinding to look at.” However, he insists, writing his story is “nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling as many people possible about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate the flushing sincerity from his soul” (xxx-xxxi). Eggers endorses the cathartic value of sharing one’s story at the same time that he professes a belief that straightforward narrative purporting to represent one’s own experience is necessarily fraught with complication, thus wedding gimmickry and the non sequiturs with confession and testimony. As a seal, just a few pages before, he encourages the reader who might struggle with his unconventional approach to writing about real events to “do what the author should have done”: “PRETEND IT’S FICTION” (xxiii-xxiv).

Eggers instructs readers in the “Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Book” that some might only “want to bother with” the first “three or four chapters,” which he says make a “nice novella sort of length” and “stick to one general subject” (vii). In some respects, he is correct, and this advice combined with the admonition to pretend the work is fiction if the reader desires certainly leads to a reading of the signal year of his life story as a relatively straightforward, conventional narrative of unconventional circumstances. These pages describe the deaths of Eggers’s parents only

thirty-two days apart, both from cancer, and the aftermath, in which he and his sister Beth move from Chicago to California and care for their eight-year-old brother, Christopher.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, though this dark aspect of Eggers's experience is what makes the years of his life before the publication of his memoir exceptional, though this relatively unusual circumstance is largely the reason he earned a book contract with a major publisher at all, the section of his book that directly relates this experience has been largely ignored by both book reviewers and academic critics alike. For example, Michiko Kakutani's frequently cited original review of the book breezes through her mention of this section of the narrative with a few sentences on its black humor and half a paragraph summarizing the story. Two other paragraphs recounting the events of the first section actually refer to later portions of the text which look back at the earlier moments.

Likewise, Smith and Watson's article, "The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions,"—still the only piece of criticism published in a scholarly journal to give sustained attention to *AHWOSG*—makes no citations to the body of the text whatsoever. They comment upon the narrative and its implications for the genre, its reconfiguration of gender roles, and the nature of Eggers's style. Their textual analysis, such as it is, concerns only the work's paratextual material.

The reason for this is twofold: 1) Eggers's memoir, particularly in the early pages, is, as a matter of subjective taste, an engaging and at turns charming personal narrative,

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<sup>32</sup> Eggers calls his brother "Toph," in the memoir and in life, though that nickname is a subtle way of claiming *AHWOSG* as Eggers's version of events and of demonstrating his responsibility for the narrative (especially his brother's representation in it). In comments outside the book, Eggers's sister Beth refers to their brother as "Chris," and likewise, in a letter from his mother Eggers reproduces in "Mistakes," she, too, calls her youngest son, "Chris." "Toph," therefore, is a reinforcement of the brothers' bond and Eggers's construction of his brother as a character for readers whose name corresponds to a real person but may not, in fact, correspond to the name that person publicly "claims" in life.

well-written but frankly unremarkable; and 2) as a matter of analysis, the front matter of the book has done most of the work. Eggers has so thoroughly decorated the scaffolding of his structure and plastered it over with his blueprints, that critics feel compelled to address his self-criticism as a memoirist rather than his memoir itself.

Genette describes the role of a preface as neither very “subtle” nor “equivocal,” but rather as the author’s opportunity to “forc[e] on the reader an indigenous theory defined by the author’s *intention*, which is presented as the most reliable interpretive key; and in this respect the preface clearly constitutes one of the instruments of authorial control” (222). Eggers wants to control his readers’ experience of the text, and uses the preface not just to present an account of his intent while writing the text, but a comprehensive vision of its possible meanings as a whole. The more than twenty themes and sub-themes that he spells out for readers in the Acknowledgements virtually challenge critics to find something more or different in the text. His “Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors” initiates a game with readers with the simple inclusion of the word “incomplete.”

A critic can play easily; though in doing so, despite the challenge Eggers’s peritext appears to issue us, one seems to violate the intimate bond with readers he worked to establish in that same paratext. For example, at the very end of the four chapter “novella,” Eggers surveys the battered furniture, rugs (some missing), and the boxes full of broken picture frames and mildewed books. His guide had identified the “furniture, rugs” as a metaphor for the past. Here he meditates on whether “preservation or decay” is “more romantic,” and briefly ponders, “Wouldn’t it be something just to burn it all” (AHWOSG 122). He decides that preservation is the best route, so that Toph can have a

reminder of a family's past he could not otherwise really know. In this scene, Eggers highlights the value of memoir as a practice of preservation, but undermines it by showing that what is preserved is already in a state of decay: moldy, mildewed, broken, missing and a reduced shell of its former state.

Speaking of the text in general, Smith and Watson observe that Eggers's thorough engagement with the limitations of memoir deepen his and his readers' awareness of what writing the memoir helps him achieve. They write, "As he summarizes the range of autobiographical excesses that have haunted the genre's practitioners—a propensity for exaggeration and lying, a lack of unique experience—we are reminded that he also has the good fortune to be under contract for what others must suffer silently" ("Rumpled Bed" 9). For the most part, Eggers wears that good fortune like chain mail: flexible and protective, but heavy and burdensome. In the scene describing his family's possessions noted above, he confesses that "I resent having to be the one...who has to lug all this stuff from place to place," and a similar resentment pervades the memoir at times (AHWOSG 122). He wonders, after dismissing the idea of burning everything, if he should just "sell it and start over"—which, in writing his memoir and moving on to the other literary projects the book contract affords him, is in many ways what he has done. Later, recounting the aftermath of the *Might* magazine "death issue" project discussed at the beginning of this chapter, he asks if Adam Rich, who enjoyed a new burst of attention after the minor scandal or his fake death, might be "milking his own past to solicit sympathy from a too-long indifferent public?" Eggers determines that no, Rich is simply not cynical enough to do so. Instead, he implicitly but obviously turns his self-aware critical eye on his own project, which he has already cynically described as appeal for

sympathy in the front matter. “It would take some kind of monster, malformed and needy” to do something so “sad” and “freakish.” “Really,” he asks, “what sort of person would do that kind of thing?” (AHWOSG 351).

The most affecting portions of the book are those in which Eggers employs his cynical perspective on the capabilities of memoir to engage readers in a sincere expression of his pain, loss, and confusion. In these passages, readers need not “pretend” that we are reading fiction, because Eggers transforms his nonfiction narrative into a form of fiction himself. At the end of a meditation on the many contradictory considerations involved in his attempts to date women as both a typical young man in his early twenties and as a parent to a eight-year-old, Eggers recreates a conversation with Toph at his bedtime (at which they morbidly read John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* together, as a counterbalance to the “fun and hilarity in the house” (113)). The conversation is intimate and revelatory, demonstrating the close bond of the brothers, but it is also the first moment in the text where Eggers allows his long advertised authorial self-awareness to dominate the narrative.

Toph, suddenly and fluidly, breaks character and comments upon the structure of the story, noting that the day that ends with the conversation seems “as if a number of days had been spliced together to quickly paint a picture of... how we are living, without having to stoop (or rise) to actually pacing out the story” (AHWOSG 114). The brothers then converse about the book in which they are characters, one of whom, of course, is also its author. Eggers tells Toph that “it’s maddening, actually, when you sit down, as I will once I put you to bed, to try to render something like this,” with a result that is “only this kind of feebleness—one, two dimensions of twenty” (115). Toph observes that

instead of really writing, his brother will do “little tricks, out of frustration,” and then makes an explicit, boundary-breaking reference to the peritext in naming those tricks, “the gimmicks, bells, whistles. Diagrams. *Here is a picture of a stapler*, all that” (115). In this moment, the stapler, which readers could only interpret as a trifle or non sequitur in the Acknowledgements, becomes a literary tool. It fastens together text and the paratext, the narrative and reality, by exposing not its author’s jocularly, but his struggle to share. The moment is so affecting because he allows Toph to diagnose his brother’s pain and expose the contradiction at the heart of the narrative memorializing their parents and helping the family move on without them. Toph says that Eggers has “less a problem with form, all that garbage, and more a problem of conscience.” Both brothers inside the text, and Dave Eggers the author outside it are aware of one overwhelming hurdle: “Mom and Dad would *hate* it, would crucify you” (115).

“If Eggers’s narrative both revises gender stereotypes and, in its assault on readers, revives a Maileresque territory of autobiographical machismo,” Smith and Watson write, “he also invites readers to collaborate in reconstructing the authority of autobiography as a site of ‘keeping it real’ precisely by exposing its contrivances” (“Rumpled Bed” 12-13). To the extent that Eggers is keeping something real in his text that embraces the contrivances of memoir and maintains its sincerity, he is constructing a model for himself and for Toph of the limitless possibilities of their unusual situation, overcoming the “murderous rage and sorrow” by embracing both “the unspoken magic of parental disappearance” and “the unmistakable feeling one gets, after something truly weird or extraordinary, or extraordinarily weird, or weirdly terrible, happens to them, that in a way they have been *chosen*” (AHWOSG xxviii, xxxii). The narrative itself

demonstrates the manner with which Eggers embraces the multiple roles he plays as in his life, and his awareness that he is *responsible* for the many roles in which he finds himself as a result of circumstance and his own desires is the root of the sincerity underlying his public presentation of his story. The paratext of *AHWOSG* engages readers in an autobiographical contract with Eggers by exposing the simultaneous relish and reluctance with which he operates outside his text, playing author and publisher, artist and publicist, confessor and critic. The body of the text, operating under that pact, allows Eggers to explore the “complexity of roles that Dave must take up” in his life—the life preserved *inside* the text—“as brother and son, parent and child, lusty young male and moral arbiter, would-be artist and postmodern cynic,” as Smith and Watson write (“Rumpled Bed” 6).

Eggers’s guilt and cynicism about what he is doing sidles to the foreground of the narrative again as he reproduces the interview process he went through in an attempt to land a role on the MTV program *The Real World*. That Eggers wanted to participate in the show is itself an interesting demonstration of his conflicted perspective on privacy and exposure. *The Real World*, one of the first successful “reality shows,” cast the form for the many imitators that followed it, purporting to present real people in real situations, though doing so in one of the most empty and artificial settings possible: a television program. Eggers turns the interview, which would naturally have been an opportunity for him to argue why the producers should make him a character in their show, into an opportunity for him to explore why he is making himself a character in his own “show,” and a separate “show” unto itself. The interview takes up over fifty pages in the middle of the text, and is its own version of Eggers’s autobiography, stretching back to recount



moments from his days in elementary school, recreating again for readers the months surrounding his parents' deaths, and re-rehearsing the black humor and macabre fatalism that he finds in himself when thinking about his own life. It is one of the only moments in the text where Eggers explores the grief he carries with him over his parents, and the more he increases the artificiality of the interview format, the deeper his "responses" probe his own emotions and expose the complicated sense of himself as an individual mostly divorced from his sense of himself as an author.

He ends the section with a pages-long confession of his vulnerable condition, expressed as a need to give witness to and be witnessed in his fragile and fearful state. "I have nothing but my friends and what's left of my little family," he says. "I need community, I need feedback, I need love, connection give-and-take." He exclaims that he needs to reach out to an audience (MTV's, his book's) and "grab this while I can, because I could go at any minute... Oh please let me show this to millions." His interview asks, "And that will heal you?" To which he responds: "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" (AHWOSG 237).

That Eggers makes his plea for therapeutic attention in a form which both recreates a scenario built around self-exposure for mere entertainment, the television program, and displays the artificiality of self-exposure in memoir calls the authenticity of his plea into doubt, yet the force with he makes it underscores its sincerity. This is the contradiction of the entire book, text and paratext, in microcosm, and Eggers's earnest appeal outward in both sections leaves his readers to resolve the contradiction for themselves. The finale of his narrative is an embodiment of the contradiction. It reverses the welcome he extended to the world in the book's first pages, inscribing the "truth" in

the heart of author and reader, by issuing a challenge to the his readers to make up their own minds about what he has done with his life, his story, his book. He thrusts the responsibility for connection away from himself and toward his audience. “When you’re all sleeping so many sleeping I am somewhere on some stupid rickety scaffolding and I’m trying to get your stupid fucking attention I’ve been trying to show you this, just been trying to show you this,” he writes, closing the text. “I am willing and I’ll stand before you and I’ll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait, and I’ve been old for so long, for you, for you, I want it fast and right through me — Oh do it, do it, you motherfuckers, do it do it you fuckers finally, finally, finally” (AHWOST 437).

### **The Ubiquitous Recluse**

If attention is really what Eggers wanted, it is certainly what he got. There was widespread reporting in the cultural press about the book itself—as the mostly positive reviews and vast word-of-mouth buzz amongst twenty-somethings and older literary readers alike combined with approximately three months on various bestseller lists to beget more positive reviews and a readership in hundreds of thousands—but also considerable reporting about the curly-haired, t-shirt-clad engineer of an elaborate, uncommon memoir about a tragic, uncommon life.

In his initial round of the conventional popular press interviews and profiles arranged by his publisher’s publicity department in early 2000, Eggers put forward a decidedly ambivalent position on the manner in which he had to participate in selling his own story and expressed open disenchantment with the nature of his new fame. In a

typical popular press report, Fred Kaplan tried to take him at his word about this disenchantment, opening his Boston *Globe* profile of the author by asserting that “Dave Eggers never had it in his head to become a hot-new-thing literary-star, and now that he is one, he shows no interest in taking to the role” (F1). Like many other older book reviewers or cultural journalists, Kaplan cannot resist a categorizing image of Eggers’s customary dishabille. “He seems perpetually lackadaisical,” Kaplan reports, “except when he’s wryly bemused. He dresses shabbily, his Brooklyn apartment is beyond unkempt. He wears a baseball cap to mash down his Eraserhead hair.”<sup>33</sup> Most credulously of all—though perhaps an example of Eggers’s willful resistance to his own project—Kaplan shares with his readers Eggers’s claim “not even to own a copy of the book that has made him suddenly famous” (F1).

The bizarre assertion probably was true, as Eggers saw fit to mention his conspicuous distance from the finished product of his own labor to at least two other profilers. With *Time*’s James Poniewozic, he at least betrayed his interest in how his writing entered the world, confessing to not having seen a copy of *AHWOSG* but asking, wryly, “Does it look good?” (72). In Mark Horowitz’s profile in *New York*, on the other hand, he pushed in an opposite direction. Horowitz, describing Eggers as “the Andy Kaufman of New York letters,” quotes the author exclaiming about the memoir, “I don’t want anyone to read it.” Horowitz is fittingly skeptical: “Sure, he doesn’t. He has a handsome Irish face—the kind you expect to see in a Bowery Boys film from the

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<sup>33</sup> Washington *Post* profile writer Nadine Ekrek chose instead to highlight the bookish, boyish mess in which he lived: “His apartment is like a fraternity run by a library” (C1).

thirties—and when it crinkles up into his devilish smile, you know he’s pulling your leg, but you’re not sure why” (1).

For someone who felt he had revealed too much about himself, the public attention he received for that exposure seems to have legitimately unsettled him, and the “why” of his leg-pulling seemed either to be a calculated pose of a clever self-promoter or a defense mechanism of an overwhelmed new celebrity. Reviewing the media phenomenon of Eggers’s popularity in the aftermath of *A Heartbreaking Work*’s publication and reflecting on his background with *Might*, *Esquire*, *Salon*, and the still freshly launched *McSweeney’s*, Deirdre Dolan wrote in the Canadian *National Post*, that the “man who made his career through the deconstruction of magazine clichés, now finds himself a magazine-profile subject, and a particularly ubiquitous one.” Eggers’s participation in the epitext of *A Heartbreaking Work* was calculated both by his publisher, who arranged scores of interviews and profiles, with the goal of selling books, and by Eggers, who, with his reluctance, re-emphasized for these journalists and their audiences the self-aware, uncertain participant in his own project that the book’s peritext introduces. He tells Horowitz that he’s “not looking forward to being around” for the publication of *AHWOSG* and the publicity tour; the only reason he is “even going to be in the country” (at this time, he was frequently traveling to Iceland to supervise the printing of *McSweeney’s* he had chosen to do there), he says, is because of Simon & Schuster’s scheduling (1). In a February 2000 interview with Amy Benfer for his former employer *Salon*, he explains that he very nearly gave up on interviews altogether. “I thought I reached a point where I could never do it again, maybe a month ago,” he says. “I’ve had a

couple of ridiculous interviews. People who just want to ask me about ‘The Real World,’ stuff like that.”

He suffered through the interviews and the profiles, willingly or unwillingly, depending on the observer’s point of view, for several more months, but intentionally receded in the background of his book’s success for some time. Horowitz cites a few individuals who were skeptical of Eggers’s nonchalant pose, including an unnamed source in magazine publishing who insists that “Nothing *just* happens with him. He thinks about everything and plans it. All his self-critiques are part of that” (Horowitz 1). The charge that he was essentially using Simon & Schuster’s publicity dollars to promote *McSweeney’s* also began to circulate. In fact, his book readings became three-ring circus literary events constructed to deflect attention away from both Eggers and his book, and toward his lesser-known collaborators. A May 2000 article in the Montreal *Gazette* detailing a reading Eggers gave in that city is nearly fifteen hundred words long, features descriptions of men on stage wearing tuxedos and superhero costumes, and includes fewer than twenty words spoken by Eggers and no more than one hundred about him at all, mostly centered around his “playing the diffident character” (Goedhart J3).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> I attended an Eggers reading at the Bull’s Head Bookshop on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus in early 2001. Eggers arrived nearly thirty minutes late, then engaged in a long, transparent, and elaborately put-on exchange with a man in the front row, who was wearing a bandanna, in which Eggers repeatedly claimed the man was David Foster Wallace. He would not read from *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, ostensibly the reason for his appearance, instead sharing part of *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, at that time a work-in-progress. He also humorously but steadfastly refused to answer questions about his brother in any but the vaguest terms. (Eggers’s persistent guardedness about Christopher Eggers’s privacy is discussed below.) Another account of an Eggers reading—this one at A Clean, Well-Lighted Place for Books in San Francisco—describes him ceding the floor to a fire marshal, who then speaks for nearly thirty minutes about fire safety.

For a time, Eggers stopped speaking in public about *A Heartbreaking Work* altogether, though he occasionally consented to interviews conducted via email. His withdrawal did little to slow the slew of stories about him, as a subculture of devoted fans developed from his widespread readership and the increasing popularity of *McSweeney's* and its coterie of young literary types, and reports of his continued and escalating remuneration for *A Heartbreaking Work* drew more and more attention to him, his family, and his literary endeavors. Some journalists continued to treat Eggers like a friendly everyman, one who “treats his celebrity like a gold lame suit: It’s amusing, absurd and, in his mind, not quite appropriate” (Sullivan D1). Others, however, were less willing to accept that an author whose earnings dwarfed that \$100,000 advance he had deconstructed in the Acknowledgements of *AHWOSG* was not actively and enthusiastically embracing his fame and wealth behind his façade of detached bemusement and cloistered unavailability. Peter Conrad of the London *Observer* pithily dismissed Eggers’s public image as “the J.D. Salinger of Generation X,” who would not meet journalists in person because “you never know what you might catch from personal contact” (2).

As Eggers’s engagement with the press diminished, he committed himself to three related but distinct goals: 1) vigorously protecting his family’s privacy, 2) defending his reputation from charges of self-indulgence and “selling out,” and 3) promoting *McSweeney's* rapidly expanding but still modest range of endeavors and the other authors he was publishing through the company. To these ends, he threw himself into three relatively famous feuds that illuminate the personal investment Eggers was making in his transitions from quietly unknown writer and publisher to celebrity author and from

celebrity author to literary institution. In each transition, the degree to which Eggers exposed details of his private life and sought out public attention decreased sharply and the degree to which he devoted his new and significant stores of financial and cultural capital to literary projects designed to benefit others escalated, and has continued to escalate since.

In another author profile, this one solicited by Penguin, Egger's U.K. publisher, to support sales of *You Shall Know Our Velocity* in 2002, journalist Stephanie Merritt asks about Toph, then sixteen-years-old, and after Eggers answers with a gruesome fib, he tells her plainly, "My talking about him ended, in the book and in public, when he was 13" (3). Eggers meant it. He closes "Mistakes" with a wistful farewell to his brother as a literary character, catching readers up on Toph's height. "At 6'3" and rising," Eggers writes, "He is the tallest man our family line has yet produced. Do not mess with him" (48). If anyone did wish to mess with Toph, Eggers worked hard not to give them a chance, working as steadfastly as possible to allow his brother to live his life out of the public eye.<sup>35</sup>

His sister Beth, on the other hand, was the source of one of Eggers's first serious rebukes of a publication for what he felt was a gross invasion of his family's privacy. A then seventeen-year-old fan of Eggers named Gary Baum started a website devoted to tracking the various public appearances and comments of the author and exploring some of the details of *A Heartbreaking Work's* accounts of real people and places. Baum wrote a column called "My Manifesto" about all Eggers-related subjects on his

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<sup>35</sup> The brothers did eventually publish a couple off-beat children's books together under the pseudonyms "Dr. and Mrs. Haggis-on-Whey" through McSweeney's Books, but Christopher Eggers's public involvement in his brother's literary enterprises and publicity events has been successfully minimal.

aphrodigitaliac.com and coined the term “FoE” (Friend of Eggers) to describe Eggers’s fans. Beth Eggers found this site and communicated with Baum, sending him emails complaining that her brother had intentionally diminished her role in raising Toph, unjustly skipped over the detail that she had cared for their parents (and Toph) mostly alone in the last year of their lives, and unfairly relied upon her diaries to write his book without properly crediting her. Baum published their exchange (along with news gleaned from *Publishers Weekly* about Vintage’s purchase of the *AHWOSG* paperback rights for \$1.4 million) under the headline, “FoE Log #6: The Beth Eggers Exclusive (and Some Other Stuff).”

Lewis Lapham and his staff at *Harper’s* found the exchange, received Baum’s permission to republish it, and verified its authenticity with Beth Eggers. The emails were published in the “Readings” section of their August 2000 issue under a headline, “Et tu, Beth?” alongside another email exchange, this one between Dave Eggers and the editor of the *Harvard Advocate*, in which the author takes a particularly hostile stance toward the editor’s questions. Though neither correspondence was reprinted with Eggers’s knowledge, he was especially angry that *Harper’s* had run Beth’s emails at all. On the McSweeney’s website, in “A Very Special Episode of: Ask the McSweeney’s Representative,” the column in which Eggers regularly answered reader emails anonymously though obviously as “the M.R.,” Eggers, writing for “my family and I” briefly attacked Baum’s “creepy” website and claimed Baum had ignored Beth’s request that he remove her emails from “My Manifesto.” Eggers quickly moved on to the real source of his ire, the much more widely read and respected *Harper’s*. He includes a statement from Beth, in which she says she was having “a really terrible LaToya Jackson



moment” and was going through a bad divorce when she wrote the emails, expresses consternation that she wrote to a sixteen-year-old website proprietor about her anger at her brother, and repeats that she does love *A Heartbreaking Work* and believes Dave “deserves” his success—claims which Baum did publish originally but *Harper’s* did not reprint. Eggers finishes with a plea that *Harper’s* and others “think twice before publishing such things” and wonders “why they, or anyone, would want to act in a way that would hurt our family, which, we feel, has already had our share of difficulties.” “We are begging for less malice,” he concludes, and initials his letter “D.E.,” one of the only times he claims something under his own name on his website.<sup>36</sup>

The other set of emails reprinted by *Harper’s* was first initiated by the *Harvard Advocate’s* editor Saadi Soudavar in March 2000. Soudavar sent a list of ten questions to Eggers that were slightly irreverent and also probing in a vaguely accusatory tone. The questions ranged from which actor Eggers would like to portray him in a film adaptation of *A Heartbreaking Work* to the evolving format of *McSweeney’s*. Soudavar also asked, in two different ways, what Eggers thought about the notion of “selling out” and what he was doing to “keep it real.” These questions in particular struck a nerve with the author, who answered the others in a slightly combative but thoughtful tone, and then provided a 3,400-word response that might generously be called a “screed.” He himself calls it a “rant,” one he says is “directed to myself, age 20, as much as it is to you,” and proceeds to dismiss the interview questions that prompted his response as motivated by a mere

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<sup>36</sup> Beth committed suicide in November 2001. The letter about her emails, which he subsequently had removed from the website, is the only time he would speak publicly about her, other than his brief acknowledgement in a 2002 *McSweeney’s* reader interview that “my sister died last year.” He dedicated *You Shall Know Our Velocity* to Beth.

interest in “fashion,” “and I don’t like fashion, because fashion does not matter” (Soudavar).

He asks rhetorically, “You want to know how big a sellout I am?” and then launches into a matter-of-fact accounting of the opportunities and reward his success has brought him:

A few months ago I wrote an article for Time magazine and was paid \$12,000 for it. I am about to write something, 1,000 words, 3 pages or so, for something called Forbes ASAP, and for that I will be paid \$6,000. For two years, until five months ago, I was on the payroll of ESPN magazine, as a consultant and sometime contributor. I was paid handsomely for doing very little. Same with my stint at Esquire. One year I spent there, with little to no duties. I wore khakis every day. Another Might editor and I, for almost a year, contributed to Details magazine, under pseudonyms, and were paid \$2000 each for what never amounted to more than 10 minutes work - honestly never more than that. People from Hollywood want to make my book into a movie, and I am probably going to let them do so, and they will likely pay me a great deal of money for the privilege. (Soudavi, all punctuation *sic*)

He continues by explaining that, yes, he cares about the money, but claims he will keep “very little of it.” By the end of 2000, he says, “I will have given away almost a million dollars to about 100 charities and individuals, benefiting everything from hospice care to an artist who makes sculptures from Burger King bags” and “a guy named Joe Plevy, who wants to write a book about the effects of radiator noise on children in New England.”

He relates his own history as the 20-year-old who cared about the music and the books that he loves being undermined by their own popularity, and he also includes a list of the experiences in his publishing and writing life that have already provoked fans who feel he has pursued money over the substance of something they cannot define,

culminating in the fact that “my goddamn picture has been in just about every fucking magazine and newspaper printed in America.” He says that he has realized, looking at it from a more mature perspective and with the fresh experience of having been accused of selling out by scores of observers from many different perspectives, that the artists he respects, such as musician Wayne Coyne of the Flaming Lips, who face similar criticism, are accused of selling out only because they act on an instinct he shares, that they like to “say yes,” and if that makes us the enemy, then good, good, good. We are evil people because we want to live and do things.” He says yes because he is “curious,” he says, and he circles back to his philanthropic impulse when he explains that he’ll “say yes when Hollywood says they’ll give me enough money to publish a hundred different books, or send twenty kids through college.” The alternative, “saying no,” is unthinkable because it “is so fucking boring.” His conclusion is a surprising one, and one that suggests he thought there was good reason his rant would reach the *Harvard Advocate*’s reader. He almost pointedly taunts the early critics of *A Heartbreaking Work* who, in positive reviews, identified the end of that book as a parody of the last pages of *Ulysses*. Molly Bloom’s long stream of consciousness, of course, ends with an emphatic “yes I said yes I will Yes.” In Eggers’s email, he connects his own emphatic Yeses to Molly’s and back to the end of his memoir: “And if anyone wants to hurt me for that, or dismiss me for that, for saying yes,” he closes, “I say Oh do it, do it you motherfuckers, finally, finally, finally.”

They did it; or rather, David Kirkpatrick of the *New York Times* did, from Eggers’s point of view. When the paperback edition of *AHWOSG* was published in February 2001, Kirkpatrick convinced Eggers to conduct another email interview, notable

because the author had not spoken to members of the press about *A Heartbreaking Work*, in person or via email, since the *Harper's* incident. In fact, when agreeing to the interview in an email, Eggers told Kirkpatrick that he would not “say I'm all that enthusiastic about anyone doing a story about the paperback, or me. I know Vintage would kill me if they knew, but I'm really hoping to keep a low profile for a (long) while, letting the work speak for itself” (“Clarification Page”). He did consent to the interview, however, originally under the condition that the *Times* print his responses in full and unedited. In the course of negotiating these terms, Kirkpatrick told Eggers that “in my defense...I got into this at Vintage's behest.” Seizing an opportunity to escape and to defy his publisher's control over his work's presentation, Eggers quickly responded, “Well, I had no idea this was Vintage's idea. Given that neither you nor I conceived of the notion, maybe we should just skip it” (“Clarification Page”).

Vintage, of course, had invested millions of dollars in the paperback publication, and though they rightly could have expected a handsome return on their investment based solely on the book's pre-existing popularity, their efforts to enlist the author of the work in their marketing and publicity were standard. Eggers's reluctance and outright resistance to participating in the production of the epitext for the paperback became itself a kind of epitext—and though he complained (to Kirkpatrick, in fact) that it “seems like any time anyone wants to do something different it's called a ploy—as if to punish anyone who wants to deviate from custom,” his deviation from the customs of publicity successfully drew more attention back to the book Vintage was trying to sell. Nonetheless, his final consent to Kirkpatrick was under strict terms and still conveyed an openly hostile position on his need to participate at all.

Kirkpatrick's article ran under the headline, "Ambivalent Writer Turns His Memoir Upside Down; Denouncing Profits and Publishers While Profiting From Publication." Eggers was furious. He published a response on a "Clarification Page" on McSweeneys.net, also under his own name, that began, "This article, by Mr. Kirkpatrick, will be made an example of, for many reasons," critiquing the "icky, almost angry tone" of Kirkpatrick's piece. Eggers highlights passages he finds factually or tonally incorrect, attempts to correct the record from his point of view, and publishes their entire correspondence to demonstrate that Kirkpatrick had violated several conditions he had offered Eggers in exchange for the interview, in particular printing statements that Eggers believed were explicitly "off the record." Eggers also takes the space to offer a condescending if accurate demonstration of how a reporter can reposition his subject's statements to "cast doubt on the words' sincerity," a technique he is especially sensitive about.

Kirkpatrick centers his article around the publication of the paperback and the public's appetite for all things Eggers, but Eggers's belief that Kirkpatrick was attempting to expose him as a hypocrite is not baseless. While Kirkpatrick does not parrot the *Harvard Advocate's* inquiries regarding "selling out," he does present an image of the author as a clever self-promoter and salesman who positions himself as a free-spirit devoted to innovation, whose windfall compensation is a merely fortuitous outcome. Near the beginning of the piece, Kirkpatrick quotes Eggers's portrayal of himself as indifferent to or at odds with Vintage's interests. "Does Vintage want to sell books?" he quotes Eggers asking rhetorically. "Of course. Do I care? Not in the least." Kirkpatrick goes on to note a \$2 million sale of the film rights to *A Heartbreaking Work*, Eggers's

legal fight with his former agent, and then describes the financial details of Vintage's acquisition of the paperback rights and the threshold of "a million copies" that would need to be sold before Eggers received additional royalty payments. He does all of this in immediate proximity to a paragraph reporting that Eggers plans to self-publish his next book through *McSweeney's* and the new book division he was starting, "under a declaration of principles providing for the payment of all proceeds after costs to the author." The picture he paints is one of a sudden wealth growing more suddenly.<sup>37</sup>

Toward the end of his article, Kirkpatrick notes that the Vintage paperback would be published with three different back covers (for the "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making" section), and reports that Eggers originally proposed six. He quotes Eggers's email stating that the intent was not to have readers "feel obligated to buy more than one" but simply "just to do as many covers as we could" because "it relieves the monotony." Immediately after this quotation, Kirkpatrick cites Vintage editor-in-chief Marty Asher, who "said he expected Mr. Eggers's ardent fans to buy all three" (1). The accusation that Eggers is complicit in a marketing scheme is implicit but clear.

Kirkpatrick sounds a final, intentionally ambiguous note for *Times* readers and for those interested in the Eggers's complicated position on the interconnection between literature and life, between work and compensation, between grabbing attention and what an author does once he gets it. The article closes with a quote from Vintage's publisher Anne Messitte, who articulates a viewpoint that follows Eggers into the present day as

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<sup>37</sup> Eggers was particularly angry with Kirkpatrick's focus on his finances, claiming the reporter had a special bias in the matter because he was friends with Eggers's former literary agent, Elyse Cheney, who was suing Eggers at the time.

both a critique of his motives and a tribute to his multivalent literary skill: “Dave’s artistic ideas also happen to be brilliant marketing” (Kirkpatrick 1).

### **Coda: Author as Activist**

*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* made Dave Eggers rich, and it made him famous. For all the criticism and attention leveled at him in the years immediately following the publication of his memoir, there is no doubt that he has made a career of directing both his wealth and his fame outward, away from him, aiming to benefit first other writers whom he felt needed and deserved exposure for their writing, then, shortly thereafter, to young people whom he felt needed and deserved support and guidance related to writing, and most recently to individuals whom he feels need and deserve the financial and social benefits that can come from sharing their experiences in writing, enabled and supported by an author whose cultural capital has expanded along with the literary and charitable empire that he built upon the success of his memoir.

In his (non-contentious) email interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle* that followed the Kirkpatrick article by a few months, Eggers told James Sullivan that the best thing about *A Heartbreaking Work*’s success was that “my family’s been able to give away money. That’s nice—to be able to redirect money that you don’t deserve or need” (D1). Variety reported that between the contract for *AHWOSG*’s film rights and other unspecified bonuses related to their acquisition, Eggers received nearly \$3 million. He has credited that large windfall for the capital needed to start his 826 Valencia project, which currently has eight centers in cities across the U.S. that provide tutoring, events, community projects, and college scholarships to young people and adults interested in

improving their writing skills as a means of creative expression and personal advancement. His email to the *Harvard Advocate* likewise emphasized his charitable impulse, and beyond the huge sum he said he would give away, he told Soudavi that anything he had left “will be going into publishing books through McSweeney’s.” He committed both his money and his energy into what is now a relatively vast publishing outfit, with the journal, the website, the very successful and author-oriented books division, and a literature- and culture-focused magazine, *The Believer*.

The success of McSweeney’s has, in fact, been his stated goal since shortly after the publication of *A Heartbreaking Work*. Nadine Ekrek’s profile of him in the *Washington Post* emphasized that Eggers was, at the time, “much more excited to talk about his deeply personal magazine” than his own projects. “McSweeney’s is just easier to be wholeheartedly enthusiastic about chiefly because my own past and thoughts are not represented within its pages,” Ekrek quotes Eggers saying. “I am a much better, and more willing, promoter of other people’s work than my own, though I suppose it seems like I’ve been promoting the living [bleep] out of my own book. But talking about stories that I like is more fun than talking about my own stuff, about which I’m always ambivalent” (C1). The success of the McSweeney’s enterprise is certainly a function of the care that goes into its productions and the quality of the writers who enlist to publish with Eggers’s company. The journal, the books division, and the *Believer* have published a number of established authors successful on their own merits, including David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, Rick Moody, Jonathan Lethem, and many others, but the presence of Eggers as a sometimes distant and sometimes present aspect of every issue and book’s epitext has been an especially important part of the attention, sales, and support the



project as a whole has received. In the years after he earned his fame, Eggers manipulated his presence in the press toward McSweeney's at every opportunity. He told an interested reader that, "For McSweeney's, we have never issued a press release. We have never made one publicity-related phone call. We do not send the journal to any media people unless they pay for it. What press we are lucky to get just happens—people like the journal, write something about it, and ideally get our address right" ("Ask the McSweeney's Representative"). The attention—though it was sustained through the material quality of the publications, its innovations in format and in narrative, and its particular tenor which matched the *weltanschauung* of a large contingent of twenty- and thirty-something Americans in the first decade of the century—ultimately derived from Eggers's reputation as a widely read author and literary *provocateur*.

His own writing in the years since *AHWOSG* has employed that reputation indirectly and conscientiously positioned Eggers as an author who treats his literary efforts as an extension of his philanthropic work. His first major work after the memoir was *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, which he published first through McSweeney's and then in greater quantity with Vintage; it is the story of a young man from Chicago who earns a windfall of nearly forty thousand dollars by when a silhouette of him changing a light bulb becomes the logo for a light bulb manufacturer. He proceeds on a plan to travel the world and give the money away bit by bit to people they meet and feel are deserving in one way or another. It does not take a graduate education in literature to determine that the inspiration for the unnamed main character's circumstance is semi-autobiographical.

His philanthropic, activist vision of the need to distribute literary-gotten if not fully ill-gotten gains has coalesced into the active practice of writing as a direct means of

activism and philanthropy as Eggers has “contributed” his name, access to publishing, and talent for narrative to two individuals whose stories he has written to bring attention and funds to their causes. Eggers has written his two most recent books, *What is the What* and *Zeitoun*, without compensation, instead donating all proceeds to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation and the Zeitoun Foundation, respectively, charities he established with the subjects of the books and to which he encourages readers to donate more than merely the cost of their books. Both books have been bestsellers.

The belief that narrative—even and especially narrative structured as fiction—can provide clarification and some access to the truth of one’s experience is implicit in many of the works that have been discussed in this project, but is brought to the foreground in Eggers’s “autobiography” of his collaborator Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee who is the narrator but not the “author” of *What is the What* (subtitled “The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel”).<sup>38</sup> Eggers’s devotion to representing

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<sup>38</sup> Notably, the Vintage Books edition of *What is the What* includes, on its copyright page, the standard legal disclaimer that “This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.” Even aside from the deep consciousness of the significance of such a statement which Eggers had long before demonstrated, the disclaimer is obviously and troublingly false on its face. Though the “real” aspects of the text may have been used “fictitiously,” the resemblance to them is anything but “coincidental”—and it seems unlikely that Eggers or Deng would disagree. The emphasis on the word “fiction” in the Library of Congress material is also conspicuous, and it might be argued that Eggers had a hand in such strenuous assertions as a way to make a statement about his craft and representation. “The responsibility you have to real people when you write nonfiction is crippling, if you let yourself really think about it,” he had told *The New Yorker* in 2002, and exclusively labeled all his work since *AHWOSG* as fiction. It is possible that he intended never to burden one of his texts with the label “nonfiction” again, though *Zeitoun* is published with a long disclaimer that the book is a work of nonfiction, with a special emphasis that facts “have been confirmed by independent sources and the historical record” (xv).

Deng's story fairly, thoroughly, and yet still inventively is exemplary of the kind of writing and the kind of literary philanthropy to which he has committed the major portion of his career after *AHWOSG*. That evidence of that devotion in *What is the What* led writer Francine Prose to gush in a *New York Times* review that "Eggers's generous spirit and seemingly inexhaustible energy—some of the qualities that made his memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, so popular—transform Valentino and the people he met on his journey into characters in a book with the imaginative sweep, the scope and, above all, the emotional power of an epic." The work is surrounded with self-awareness of its fictional-experiential hybridity but is steadfastly unwilling to concede that either element of the hybrid detracts from the narrative or its authenticity. Critic Jared Gardner sees, "in this seemingly impossible hybrid form," that "the competing demands" of autobiography and fiction coexist and actually amplify each other. "[T]he claims of truth and authenticity (and the demands of those claims on the reader's faith and respectful distance)," that are central to autobiography "exist equally and collaborate productively with the invitations of fiction to enter into the life and mind of another (suspending disbelief but never erasing it, and collapsing all respectful distances)" (22).

Eggers and Deng collaborate in a space between fiction and nonfiction to construct a text that is compelling and productive. Further, just as autobiography and fiction act as complements to one another in this text, those characteristics of information and entertainment must likewise be interwoven for the project to achieve its intended results. Eggers knows as well as any author the benefits of attention and capital that come with writing an engaging, thoughtful, and readable narrative, and Deng knows that attention and capital are a part—still a small part—of what his native country and his

fellow refugees need to move ahead from the wounds of their past. Together, Eggers and Deng reach out toward readers with a nakedly explicit plea for connection and for help.

If the end of *A Heartbreaking Work* was a young man's demand for the reader to play a role in a personal catharsis that he was also reluctant to let others participate in, the end of *What is the What* is a demand that readers acknowledge that personal stories are a vital part of activism and a necessity for a change that is greater than individuals. In the voice of Deng, Eggers writes, "Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories." The audience is explicitly and sincerely conscripted into Deng's tale of survival and Egger's project of support, a project to which he lends his name and reputation (and skill with narrative), but contributes nothing explicitly of his personal experience. His writing, in this text, is a means to make readers aware of Deng and his life, and he "allows" Deng to finish the text meditating on the connection he has made with the readers. "How blessed are we to have each other?" he asks.

I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow, every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would almost be as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (WIW 535).

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