American Literature Readings in the 21st Century

American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative

Mailer, Wideman, Eggers

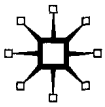
Jonathan D'Amore

American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative

Mailer, Wideman, Eggers

Jonathan D'Amore

palgrave
macmillan



AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

First published in 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN: 978–0–230–39067–6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

D'Amore, Jonathan.
American authorship and autobiographical narrative : Mailer, Wideman, Eggers / Jonathan D'Amore.
p. cm.—(American literature readings in the 21st century)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978–0–230–39067–6 (alk. paper)
1. American prose literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Autobiography—Authorship. 3. Biography as a literary form. 4. Mailer, Norman—Criticism and interpretation. 5. Wideman, John Edgar—Criticism and interpretation. 6. Eggers, Dave—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PS366.A88D36 2012
810.9'35—dc23 2011050315

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: June 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

AMERICAN LITERATURE READINGS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Series Editor: Linda Wagner-Martin

American Literature Readings in the 21st Century publishes works by contemporary critics that help shape critical opinion regarding literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States.

Published by Palgrave Macmillan:

Freak Shows in Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote
By Thomas Fahy

Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing: From Faulkner to Morrison
By Kelly Lynch Reames

American Political Poetry in the 21st Century
By Michael Dowdy

Science and Technology in the Age of Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and James: Thinking and Writing Electricity
By Sam Halliday

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Racial Angles and the Business of Literary Greatness
By Michael Nowlin

Sex, Race, and Family in Contemporary American Short Stories
By Melissa Bostrom

Democracy in Contemporary U.S. Women's Poetry
By Nicky Marsh

James Merrill and W.H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence
By Piotr K. Gwiazda

Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Literary Criticism
Edited by Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez

The Hero in Contemporary American Fiction: The Works of Saul Bellow and Don DeLillo
By Stephanie S. Halldorson

Race and Identity in Hemingway's Fiction
By Amy L. Strong

Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism
By Jennifer Haytock

The Anti-Hero in the American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut
By David Simmons

Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko
By Lindsey Claire Smith

The American Landscape in the Poetry of Frost, Bishop, and Ashbery: The House Abandoned
By Marit J. MacArthur

Narrating Class in American Fiction
By William Dow

The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative
By Heather J. Hicks

Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles
By Kenneth Lincoln

Elizabeth Spencer's Complicated Cartographies: Reimagining Home, the South, and Southern Literary Production
By Catherine Seltzer

New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut
Edited by David Simmons

Feminist Readings of Edith Wharton: From Silence to Speech
By Dianne L. Chambers

The Emergence of the American Frontier Hero 1682–1826: Gender, Action, and Emotion
By Denise Mary MacNeil

Norman Mailer's Later Fictions: Ancient Evenings through Castle in the Forest
Edited by John Whalen-Bridge

Fetishism and its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction
By Christopher Kocela

Language, Gender, and Community in Late Twentieth-Century Fiction: American Voices and American Identities
By Mary Jane Hurst

Repression and Realism in Postwar American Literature
By Erin Mercer

Writing Celebrity: Stein, Fitzgerald, and the Modern(ist) Art of Self-Fashioning
By Timothy W. Galow

Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary
By Georgina Colby

Amnesia and Redress in Contemporary American Fiction: Counterhistory
By Marni Gauthier

Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction
By Alison Graham-Bertolini

Queer Commodities: Contemporary US Fiction, Consumer Capitalism, and Gay and Lesbian Subcultures
By Guy Davidson

Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror
By Ty Hawkins

American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative: Mailer, Wildeman, Eggers
By Jonathan D'Amore

For my family

Abbreviations

Works by Norman Mailer:

The Naked and the Dead	ND
Advertisements for Myself	AFM
"Superman Comes to the Supermarket"	SCS
Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History	AON

Works by John Edgar Wideman:

Brothers and Keepers	BK
Fatheralong	FA
Hoop Roots	HR
The Island: Martinique	TIM

Works by Dave Eggers:

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius	AHWOSG
"Mistakes We Knew We Were Making"	MWKWWM
You Shall Know Our Velocity	YSKOV
What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng	WIW

Contents

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 a 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 author-autobiographers as individuals defining themselves within and against the families, communities, and societies of which they are members. Their writing about themselves illustrates the tension in autobiographical narratives that requires individuals whose public identities are inherently connected to their authorship not only 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 that 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

projects 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 question 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 are 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 participation 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; Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers, among others, 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 analysis of the reading public's pursuit and reception of such work is a significant element of this project, and I put these authors' works in the context of audiences that seem to seek demystification even as the appetite for it perpetuates the deification of authors who reveal themselves most effectively. The analysis of these texts and contexts takes place alongside the "paratexts" of autobiography—that is, the framework that 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 that 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 his or her 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 20 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 that 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 acknowledgment 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 post-structuralist 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 that 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 relegitimate their skills, insights, and ethics as authors and autobiographers.

Norman Mailer, a writer who saw himself subjected to gossipy tabloid interest in his personal life and also believed that the writer-as-artist is a special, essential cultural figure, is the foundation for this project's interest in the interplay between writers' reputations as authors and as individuals. 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 make narratives from one's own life can be seen as a retaliatory act against a system working 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 from his own textual production. But Wideman is, simply speaking, not as famous as Mailer was, nor is he as 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 comes 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.

Dave 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 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 critic Ben Yagoda describes it in his overview of the genre, *Memoir: A History*, "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.

* * *

The rise of post-structuralist 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 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 to pursue the idea that subjectivity might be further detached from self-expression than previously believed.

Autobiography—or more inclusively, autobiographical narrative—is a particularly ripe subject for investigation in light of the literary and critical paradigms of postmodernism. In fact, almost all the major critical theorists of post-structuralism and 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-François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson. With full acknowledgment 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 by and large 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 that allow an unambiguous presentation of fact—has become particularly troubled, beginning in the years after World War II. Critics following the lead of the post-structuralists 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 texts 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,[1] biography,[2] and, in great volume, autobiography. In response to 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 nonfiction writing. This response is in many ways a reflection of the increased awareness on the part 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 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 *The 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 devote textual attention to the self as well as to 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.[3] 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 4), critical readers must be mindful of both the many complicating rhetorical issues inherent in autobiographical writing and the 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 that 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" (*On Autobiography* 4). Under close scrutiny, this concept seems inadequately inclusive, precluding hosts of inventive though not explicitly fictional techniques, such as third-person narration (for example, *The Education of Henry Adams*)[4] or indirect self-biography (for example, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*)—works that may not meet the exclusive definition of the pact but that 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'" (*On Autobiography* 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 proliferation of life narrative in recent years is a function of a popular appetite for stories of how individuals "became" the people they believe themselves to be. And while the mounting discussions of the reliability of Lejeune's pact or the signal importance of truth-value in memoir have provoked critics in the past quarter century, the general American reading audience has been provoked primarily by simultaneous desires for identification and entertainment. That general audience for life is wide and diverse, and it includes many readers who are skeptical about writers' motives as well as many who are driven by unabating curiosity about the lives of others. Collectively, though, its buying power is immense; the analysis of the collective mind of American consumers to determine why life stories sell well