OPENING THE SARCOPHAGUS: SEARCHING FOR THE AUTHOR IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative: Mailer, Wideman, and Eggers.
Jonathan D'Amore.
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IN *AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE,* Jonathan D'Amore investigates the array of factors that come together to shape autobiographical writing. Specifically, he examines three elements that he deems to comprise an "autobiographical triptych": 1) the lives of the authors themselves, 2) the manner in which these authors choose to represent those lives, and 3) the role played by the publishing industry and reader public who market and consume these texts, respectively. By analyzing these elements, D'Amore hopes to illuminate the difficulties authors face as they endeavor to represent the "reality" of their lives amidst an awareness that they are not simply representing a life, but creating a life as they write. Additionally, they must contend with the fact that this process is influenced not only by the actual events of their lives, but by what D'Amore (drawing from the work of Gerard Genette) calls "paratexts," the content offered not only of the writer's own volition, but also at the behest of the publisher, with audience demand and interest in mind (34).

By investigating this network of influences on the genre of autobiography, D'Amore sets out to "answer the significant questions of how, why, and if au-

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tobiographical narratives contend with lived experience and the competing narratives that public discourse and other private individuals construct about a writer's life" (41). D'Amore centers his analysis on selected autobiographical works by Norman Mailer, John Edgar Wideman, and Dave Eggers, not only because the respective celebrity of these authors has been advanced (or, in Eggers' case, created) by autobiographical publications, but because these writers also "demonstrate a heightened awareness of their roles as authors inside and outside their texts" and as a result "take measure of the relative authority they have as public figures in American society to engage and attempt to influence that society" (2).

D'Amore's first chapter is dedicated to what he himself calls a "hefty critical and theoretical apparatus": an extensive overview of the history and criticism surrounding autobiography and authorship, as well as an examination of the contemporary publishing industry and the interests of the reading public (13). He traces the development of the autobiographical genre from its Enlightenment origins to the twentieth-century influence of Barthes, Bakhtin, and Foucault, whose interrogations of authorship transformed the way we understand the notion of authorship, and therefore autobiography. As part of his theoretical framework for the paratexts created by the publishing industry, D'Amore also addresses the commodification of the author that has become inextricably connected to the publication of autobiographical works. That is, as D'Amore rightly observes, it has become increasingly clear in recent years that in order to sell literary works, publishers are required not only to sell the book, but the author. Thus, fully aware that the success of their autobiographical works is a byproduct of public interest in their personas, the authors in question must come to terms with the fact that the autobiographical work they produce is both "a lived experience and a literary one" (58).

D'Amore sees Mailer as a kind of "founding father" of this fraught autobiographical style as it exists today, arguing that "Mailer is probably without peer in both his sensitivity to his public image and its effect on both his texts' reception and his engagement with it" (37). One of the particular merits of D'Amore's chapter on Mailer is his astute analysis of Mailer's ultimate goals in crafting narratives that, if not classic autobiographies, are nevertheless deliberately infused with characteristics of the genre. For instance, D'Amore notes that Mailer, famously critical of "cancerous" corporate culture, uses his autobiographical writing "as a retaliatory act against a system working to

co-opt and consume public lives" (4). In addition to this larger public struggle exhibited in Mailer's work, D'Amore also pays close attention to the internal struggle revealed in works such as *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) and *Armies of the Night* (1968), and in doing so is ultimately able to reveal Mailer's oft-unrecognized humility in the face of his vocation. D'Amore observes, for instance, that Mailer's attempts to negotiate the complicated and overlapping grounds of his private self and his authorial persona "demonstrate his heightened sense of the fractured identity that accompanied public life" (62). In one of his most salient analyses, D'Amore unpacks Mailer's comment in *Armies of the Night* that he is living inside "the sarcophagus of his own image," a remark that speaks directly to the division of self that occurs during the construction of an autobiography—particularly one penned by an author already in the throes of literary celebrity, as Mailer was at the time *Armies* was published. As D'Amore explains, "Implicit in [Mailer's] 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" (41). Such an observation exemplifies both Mailer's and D'Amore's acute awareness of the "fractured identity" that result from making any aspect of one's life a commodity for public consumption.

D'Amore's ensuing chapters illuminate the echoes of Mailer's work in autobiographical narratives by John Edgar Wideman and Dave Eggers, while also revealing the unique ways these authors navigate the blurred lines between individual identity and authorial persona. D'Amore's assessment of John Edgar Wideman, for instance, revolves around what he sees as Wideman's distinctive ability to navigate the roles of "author" and "storyteller" in such a fashion that he seems to speak in both voices at once (97). In D'Amore's view, Wideman's achievement is his ability to use autobiographical narrative to "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" (98). In *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), for instance, Wideman fashions a type of "collaborative" autobiography in which he reveals aspects of his own life and authorial persona by simultaneously exploring the life of his brother, thus accomplishing "an impressive triple autobiographical act" wherein he establishes autobiographical "pacts" between himself and his readers, himself and his brother, and his brother

and his readers (104). D'Amore contends that Wideman's attention to the process of composition in this text, as well as in his later autobiographical works *Fatheralong* (1994) and *Hoop Roots* (2001), also demonstrates his awareness of his work as a cultural commodity, meaning he must grant "partial responsibility for the meaning of his texts to the reader" (112).

D'Amore sees Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001) as a postmodern manifestation of the influence of both Mailer and Wideman. He views Eggers as particularly akin to Mailer in his similarly intense need to control his public image and autobiographical persona as a way to shield vulnerabilities and deflect criticism. Yet D'Amore also sees echoes of Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* within Eggers' tendency to "[thrust] the responsibility for connection away from himself and toward his audience" by "issuing a challenge to his readers to make up their own minds about what he has done with his life, his story, his book" (149). This chapter, in its informative comparisons across these autobiographical texts, its attention to Eggers' hyper-self-awareness, and its in-depth analysis of the various ways Eggers goes about constructing his authorial persona on the page, is arguably the best and most engaging in the book.

On the whole, in fact, D'Amore's analyses and close examinations of the parallels among these texts offer valuable contributions not only to the study of autobiography but to individual studies of each author. At times, however, D'Amore's assessments of Mailer in particular lean toward the kind of exaggeration that often contributes to misunderstandings of his work. For example, D'Amore claims that Mailer's strategy in *Advertisements* exhibits both "a shameless abuse of his fame and an act of hubristic self-promotion" as well as "an admission to, or at least a concession of, weakness and failure" (71). While this assessment begins to get at the paradox that is at the heart of many of Mailer's works, neither of the extremes D'Amore offers here seems quite accurate. Mailer's strategy, for instance is not so much an abuse as a calculated *use* of his fame, not a concession of weakness but a careful consideration of his flaws both as a man and a writer.

Some of D'Amore's comparisons between Mailer and his successors also suggest certain misunderstandings of Mailer's literary aims. For instance, D'Amore seconds an argument proffered by autobiographical scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who claim that while Eggers "revives a Maileresque territory of autobiographical machismo, he also invites readers to collaborate in reconstructing the authority of autobiography as a site of

'keeping it real' precisely by exposing its contrivances" (147). As D'Amore goes on to emphasize, Eggers is unique in that he "is aware that he is *responsible* for the many roles" he inhabits in his own autobiographical work (147, italics D'Amore's). Similarly, D'Amore also argues that Wideman, since he is less narcissistic than Mailer about his image, "instead presents a sense in both his writing that he must be mindful of his image because of the responsibility that attends such an image" (4). The problem with the phrasing and emphasis of D'Amore's comparisons here is that they suggest that Mailer does not maintain the same sense of ethical responsibility in his role as literary celebrity as either Wideman or Eggers. While Mailer's ego and occasional narcissism might be undeniable (at least so far as his authorial persona goes), so too is his commitment to thoughtful, probing, interrogative reporting, not only in the Pulitzer winning *Armies*, but in a number of nonfictional works in which he grapples with his own role as author and character. Consider *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), for example, wherein Mailer worries not only about his personal image and beliefs but about his ability to responsibly and accurately report the conventions he is covering. It is precisely because Mailer believed that the writer was endowed with certain special, mystical qualities that he felt it was also that writer's specific ethical responsibility to pursue truth and defy the negative consequences of complacency and conformity. He expresses as much in a 2007 interview with Andrew O'Hagan in *The Paris Review,* in which he speaks of writing as a vocation that can often deplete rather than augment the ego: *w*hen O'Hagan asks Mailer whether he believes writing "is a sort of self-annihilation," Mailer promptly responds in the affirmative, claiming, "there's simply less of you after you finish a book."

D'Amore's somewhat misleading comparative comments are particularly puzzling as later in his study, he does, in fact, allude to Mailer's sense of accountability as a writer. He observes, for instance, that Mailer's need for control (perhaps a significant contributing factor to the narcissistic authorial persona he projects, though D'Amore does not state this outright) arises from his need to reject the mass media's tendency "to construct and circulate his image in a manner that made it flat, empty, enervated, and hence dead;" in other words, he feels he must control this image so that he might "stay alive in order to be able to speak" (82). Furthermore, D'Amore ultimately acknowledges that Mailer's work is not, as he previously mentioned, necessarily defined by a "shameless abuse of his fame," but rather by his sense

of responsibility to the unearthing of political, religious, and cultural corruptions in America. As D'Amore nicely surmises, "understanding Mailer's autobiographical project of dividing himself [. . .] as a method for painting a unified portrait of himself is fundamental to his simultaneous project of dividing and analyzing American culture [. . .] in order to synthesize it" (86).

Some of the confusion and contradiction surrounding his discussion of authorial responsibility may arise from the paradoxical nature of autobiography itself. That is, the very nature of autobiography seems inherently self-regarding, yet, as D'Amore notes throughout, an autobiography is never just about its author, hence his sustained examination of an autobiographer's obligation not only to tell the "truths" of his own life, but to use his literary celebrity and attendant public interest in his memoir as 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" (8).

This notion that an autobiography can provide a voice for the underrepresented is particularly applicable to Eggers' controversial 2006 novel *What is the What,* which D'Amore, somewhat surprisingly, addresses only briefly at the end of his book. In this work, Eggers adopts the voice of Sudanese refugee Valentine Achak Deng, effectively capitalizing on his own literary celebrity in order to provide Deng with a "means of access to an audience" for his own memoir. Eggers' act of merging his authorial persona with that of another, though well-intentioned, is not without its consequences; in a review of the book for *The New Republic,* for instance, Lee Siegel argued that "the eerie, slightly sickening quality about *What Is the What* is that Deng's personhood has been displaced by someone else's style and sensibility," remarking on how odd it was "for one man to think that he could write the story of another man, a real living man who is perfectly capable of telling his story himself—and then call it an autobiography."

Yet for all its problematic implications, *What is the What* is, as D'Amore notes, largely "selfless" in intention (4). More importantly, it asks readers to "acknowledge that individual, personal stories are in fact a vital part of activism and a necessity for achieving change on a scale that exceeds the personal and individual" (161). In this sense, Eggers' work harkens back to Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, a work which sought to use the personal in order to "exceed" it; Eggers' controversial novel, then, might be seen as forwarding Mailer's stylistic legacy while manipulating the paratexts of autobi-

ography even further, as though to prove the genre's incessant mutability. Fittingly, in this light, the voice Eggers creates in *What is the What* might also be described in the same terms D'Amore uses to describe Mailer, for it too exemplifies "a writer raging against circumstance and profoundly humbled by it," one who might be representative of "a new model of necessarily apprehensive and uncertain writers, nodes on a electronic landscape seemingly without horizons" (64).

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