“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 to both *Might* and 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 21 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 was “Well, no
offense, but I really didn’t think anyone would see the damn book” (MWKWWMM 9).

In *The 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 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-approbation, 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 counterintuitively 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