EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Reconstructing Realism in Post–Postmodern Narrative: Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

Jesús Bolaño Quintero[1]

Abstract. By analysing Dave Eggers's autofictional work *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, this article attempts to reveal the role of this author in the post–postmodern narrative of the turn of the millennium. Following in the wake of David Foster Wallace, Eggers's solution to overcome the problems created by postmodernism is a kind of writing based on honesty. Through a rebirth of the author, the objective of Eggers's New Sincerity is the democratization of narrative in order to create a sensibility network aimed at ending the solipsism brought about by postmodern linguistic relativism. However, this new sensibility is reminiscent of pre–postmodern fundamentalism. The use of meta–metafiction based on the use of neo–Romantic irony enables Eggers to create an escape valve that allows for the creation of a metamodern oscillation–as described by Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker.
Keywords: Dave Eggers; *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*; post–postmodern fiction; irony; New Sincerity; metamodernism.

[en] La reconstrucción del realismo en la narrativa postpostmoderna: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* de Dave Eggers

Resumen. A través del análisis de la obra de autoficción de Dave Eggers *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, este artículo intenta aclarar el papel de este autor en la narrativa postpostmoderna del cambio de milenio. Emulando a David Foster Wallace, la solución de Eggers para superar los problemas creados por la posmodernidad es un tipo de escritura basada en la honestidad. A través de un renacimiento del autor, el objetivo de la Nueva Sinceridad de Eggers es una democratización de la narrativa para crear una red de sensibilidad destinada a terminar con el solipsismo provocado por el relativismo lingüístico posmoderno. Sin embargo, esta nueva sensibilidad recuerda al fundamentalismo pre–postmoderno. Para solucionar este defecto, Eggers hace uso de una meta–metaficción basada en ironía neorromántica. Esto posibilita la creación de una válvula de escape que permite una oscilación metamoderna entre un entusiasmo moderno y una indiferencia postmoderna –tal y como la describen Tim Vermeulen y Robin van den Akker–.
Palabras clave: Dave Eggers; *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*; ficción post–postmoderna; New Sincerity; metamodernismo.

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Eggers's post–postmodernity. 3. Recovering the project of modernity through referentialism and univocity. 3.1. Post–postmodern literary experimentation. 4. Eggers as post–postmodern messiah. 5. Conclusion.

1. Introduction

Considered early in his career as a postmodern author, Dave Eggers tried to distance himself from this epithet since the publication of his first book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).[2] Nowadays, there is no doubt that, even if there is disagreement about the fact that postmodernism is over, Eggers is one of the major representatives of a change of sensibility in U.S. narrative at the turn of the millennium. As Wolfgang Funk points out in *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (2015), after decades of postmodern deconstruction, there comes a period of reconstruction. The generation of young writers to which Eggers belongs–with authors like Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, Michael Chabon or Nicole Krauss–, made it their objective to reconstruct the realism that literature had lost. Adam Kelly–the coiner of the phrase New Sincerity, which defines the sensibility of the new intended cultural phase–calls them the "peers and inheritors" of David Foster Wallace. Certainly, Wallace, and his

[1]   University of Cádiz. English and French Philology Department.
       ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000–0002–2635–7812
       jesus.bolano@uca.es

[2]   Henceforth, *Heartbreaking*.

new writing based on total honesty, is the cornerstone of this paradigm shift in literature, whose aim was to end the reign of postmodern irony.

Heartbreaking is Eggers's first attempt at reconstruction. Through an effort to democratize literature, in a Whitmanian transcendentalist way–i.e. presuming that what he feels the readers of his book shall assume–, Eggers resurrects the figure of the author through a new writing that seeks to have a univocal and referential character. Our position is that, to achieve this, Eggers needs to create a dangerous new metanarrative based on faith, which can lead to fundamentalism. We argue that Eggers's solution to this problem is an implementation of a kind of metamodern oscillation that is based on the recovery of pre–postmodern values and balanced by humor in the form of neo–Romantic irony, which acts as an escape valve.

2. Eggers's post–postmodernism

In "A staggeringly post–modern work of literary trickery" (2000), Stephen Moss gave an account of the critical reception of *Heartbreaking*. The majority of the critics he quoted labelled Dave Eggers's 2000 debut as postmodern. "Ironic" was one of the most used adjectives to describe it. Indeed, after the success of the novel, although Eggers was one of the young authors who followed in the wake of the New Sincerity fundamental writer, David Foster Wallace, many saw him as an essentially postmodern figure. Moss quotes Graham Caveney's stance on the novel: "a post–modern elegy that ironizes its song even as it sings it." John Crace asked himself,

> [w]hat do you do when both your parents die within 32 days, and you've just become the guardian of your eight–year–old brother, Toph? Play frisbee? Write a book? A cliche, I know, but at least it's not a screenplay. And check out that title. Post–modern or what? (Crace 2000: np).

In an article published in 2000, Peter Conrad related the book to postmodernism and the use of irony: "Dave Eggers had to raise his small brother alone, with only a sense of irony to see them through." Conrad makes the following statements: "[a]t times, AHWOSG reads like a preview of a world which is not only post modern [*sic*] but post–human"; "[i]t comes armored with ironic self–disqualifications, of which the most obvious is its title"; "[i]rony is a reflex of his case–hardened weariness, a style appropriate to a generation of young people who suffer from a desolating self–consciousness"; "[f]or all his shifty irony, he offers himself to us as a martyr." In 2000, Michiko Kakutani, in a review article for *The New York Times*, branded the book as postmodern collage and highlighted Eggers's use of irony.

However, while some critics and theorists drew attention to Eggers's use of irony and postmodern resources, others realized that, although the author makes use of both strategies in this novel, he does not do it in the same way as those of the generation of Paul Auster, Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo. In the same article, Moss quotes voices that call attention to the post–postmodern nature of the work. David Crace, for example, affirms: "[f]orget post–modernism; we're talking post–post–modernism here" (qtd. in Moss 2000). Erica Wagner points out that "the book carries an endorsement by David Foster Wallace, and owes much to his post–post–modern, footnoted style" (qtd. in Moss 2000). Anthony Quinn asserts that "Eggers has […] pitched his tone at an uncommon sort of irony, using it not as a device to keep us at arm's length but to involve us–to make the story of his life tellable, and thus, somehow, survivable" (qtd. in Moss 2000).

Eggers's own answer came in the form of an appendix to the 2001 edition of his novel, *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making*.[3] This appendix is a supplement, printed face down and separated from the text of the novel by a thicker cardboard page, which gives it the appearance of being a different work by itself. In addition to making clarifications regarding the text and correcting some mistakes made in the previous edition, on pages 33–35 and in extremely small print, he gives his point of view towards the labels endorsed to the book in reviews such as those exposed above referring to the ironic and postmodern aspects of his novel.

Recent approaches to *Heartbreaking* go along these lines. In *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*, Lukas Hoffmann aptly brands Eggers's novel as postironic autobiography (2016: 198). Hoffmann indicates his use of "a postmodern style that embraces the metafictional and ironic, but only in order to put emphasis on the bygone self's hypocrisy" (2016: 198). In *Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect*, Alison gibbons includes the novel in a list of autofictional works with a metamodern affect, differentiated from postmodern memoirs (2017: 122). In 2015, Wolfgang Funk indicates that Eggers's use of meta–metafiction in *Heartbreaking* responds to a desire for reconstruction–versus postmodern deconstruction. *In Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer* (2015), Allard Den Dulk offers a thorough analysis of the efforts that Eggers makes in his autobiography to get rid of postmodern destructive irony.

---

3   Henceforth, *Mistakes*.

3. Recovering the project of modernity through referentialism and univocity

In 2006, Eggers wrote a foreword for the tenth–anniversary edition of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. In it, he described Wallace as a normal person capable of doing something extraordinary:

> He is from the Midwest–east–central Illinois, to be specific, which is an intensely normal part of the country (not far, in fact, from a city, no joke, named Normal). So he is normal, and regular, and ordinary, and this is his extraordinary, and irregular, and not–normal achievement, a thing that will outlast him and you and me, but will help future people understand us–how we felt, how we lived, what we gave to each other and why (xvi).

Eggers's books are full of such normal, yet extraordinary, characters. In *Mistakes*, he appeals to a certain type of reader who fits that Emersonian frame. We must pay close attention to this section of the book in which the author presents his way of seeing these aspects.

> You can't know how much it pains me to even have that word, the one beginning with i and ending in y, in this book. It is not a word I like to see, anywhere, much less type on to my own pages. It is beyond a doubt the most overused and under–understood word we currently have. I have that i–word here only to make clear what was clear to, by my estimations, about 99.9% of original hardcover readers of this book: that there is almost no irony, whatsoever, within its covers. But to hear a few people tell it, this entire book, or most of it, was/is ironic. Well. Well. Ahem. Well. Let's define irony as the dictionary does (2001: 33).

This passage is followed by the promised definition of the term and even some instances of what should and should not be classified as ironic. Critics and academics who label his novel ironic are compared to ancient kings who criticized the works of court composers for the simple fact that they had many notes. These people, who, for Eggers, are the opposite of the normal representative individual, come directly from–and are anchored in–postmodernism. Eggers's ironic twist is similar to the one Wallace gives in his work when he uses postmodern resources that cannot be avoided. For writers attempting to write realist literature there was no other way to represent reality as it was. The contribution of these novelists is to take these resources one step further in order to recreate an essentialist and referential causality capable of bringing together author and public. This creates confusion:

> This book, however, has been in a strange position: many readers […] have felt that the book was too naked, too raw, and much too sentimental: in sum, too earnest […] At the very same time, there were those who 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 (Eggers 2001: 34; emphasis in the original).

The literary scene leaves very little freedom for authors to innovate: if they make use of postmodern resources, they are considered unoriginal and if they write earnestly, they are criticized for their sentimentality. Hence, in his seminal essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace suggested that the writers who dared to approach "old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" would be rebels (1993: 192–193). As Wallace pointed out, it seemed impossible to escape postmodernism. In "Perchance to Dream" (1996), an article published in *Harper's Magazine*, Jonathan Franzen also warned of this circumstance. Writers are unable to produce a realistic or social novel in a context in which relativism reigns. In that same article, Franzen mentions the words of Philip Roth published in "Writing American Fiction" (1961), where Roth performed the autopsy on an already deceased social novel:

> the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist (Roth 1961: np).

In *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post–Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*, Nicoline Timmer discusses the success of Eggers's narrative in reaching the intended goal of connecting with the reader. According to Timmer, "this narrator continuously tries to be 'way ahead of you.' But being 'way ahead of you' is not really helpful when one actually desires feedback from this other, this 'you'" (2010: 241). Timmer does not believe that this narrator can achieve his purpose of ending solipsism, since Eggers has full control over his own narrative: "[b]eing the sole author of one's own life story will not facilitate a break out of the solipsistic cage" (2010: 241). This is an example of how the recovery of the project of modernity, advocated by Jürgen Habermas, as an alternative to postmodernism, always goes hand in hand with the fear of totalitarianism. In this case, fear is caused by logical reasoning: if one wants to end ironic *double entendres*, if one wants to recover pre–postmodern referentiality and essentialism, the interpretations that Eggers describes

in his appendix–everything is either too serious or too ironic, and neither of the two options is acceptable–should not be taken into account. The reception of *Heartbreaking* by unfavourable reviews was based on one of those two alternatives. This encourages the author to impose on the reader a unique direction for the interpretation of his work. After all, this "rebirth of the author," whose death had been certified by Roland Barthes in 1967, leads inevitably to the limitation of the reader's freedom, i.e. to a metaphorical "death of the reader."

Following the transcendentalist path opened by Wallace, the tool Eggers uses to get rid of *double entendres* and multiple interpretations is intuition:

> Oh, we should free ourselves from these terms, used only to make confusing something that we already understand. Because honestly: everyone who actually reads this book, or any book, will understand it. So I beg of you:
> PEOPLE, FRIENDS, PLEASE: TRUST YOUR EYES, TRUST YOUR EARS, TRUST YOUR ART (Eggers 2001: 34).

The problem is, Timmer points out, that Eggers tells the reader where his intuition should lead them. However, the writer is providing a solution to the existential crisis of the new millennium. Eggers's aims at the elimination of postmodern solipsism and existentialism through a kind of human connection based on trust and honesty, which is reached by way of a referentialist intuition. In Eggers's scheme, admitting new interpretations of his work would be to fall back into the arbitrariness of language games. The author tries to get rid of the riddling effects of metafiction through the construction of a kind of "meta–metafiction,"[4] a technique previously used by Wallace. By making his interpretation a dogma, the reader is forced to accept it and continue reading or reject it and disavow the author. This covenant is reflected on page v of the book:

> First of all:
> I am tired.
> I am true of heart!
> And also:
> You are tired.
> You are true of heart!

He assumes that his truth is the same as that of the reader. The reader can take it or leave it. If they accept Eggers's truth as their own, they are constructing together a structure of reality in which they can believe. Hence, the fear of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, post–postmodern writers make use of another tool to try to rid themselves of this fear, the metamodern oscillation offered by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in "Notes on Metamodernism." They "argue that this modernism is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment" (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: np), that is, whenever this post–postmodern recovery of the unfinished project of modernity gets too earnest, it is counteracted by the knowledge acquired during postmodernism.

In his short story "Octet" (2009), Wallace is incapable of escaping metafiction and attempts to regain realism through honesty by symbolically describing himself as naked and unarmed. Wallace wanted to recover that sincerity at the expense of the institutionalized irony of the postmodern era. It was impossible to return to a pre–modern literary moment to recover realism for the simple reason that the writer's reality was constructed on irony. Eggers's first novel gathers the philosophy that Wallace's work distils and makes use of his resources. Like his admired everyman capable of extraordinary feats, Eggers wrote a memoir of sorts in which he stripped naked–in some excerpts from the novel, literally–and exposed himself completely. However, although Eggers and Wallace shared a common aim, the former's narrative differs from the latter's in one fundamental respect: their understanding of language.

Wittgenstein is one of the foundation stones in Wallace's fiction, and his relationship with the thought of the Austrian philosopher is somewhat volatile. If we can only know the world through language, and this only allows us to do so through representations of parts of reality, that is, mediated, then it follows that we are trapped within language. For this reason, says Wallace, the fact that Wittgenstein proposed in *Philosophical Investigations* that language is only possible in a system of relations with other people, constitutes an attempt to end solipsism. Wallace himself develops these ideas in his aforementioned interview with Larry McCaffery:

> You can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot, or you let it become the world–the exterior and everything in it. The former banishes you from the Garden. The latter seems more promising. If the world

---

4   Larry McCaffery uses this term in "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace" to refer to this kind of literary game in which the meta-fictional artifice is taken one step further. The purpose is to neutralize the disconcerting effect produced by metafiction in the first place: "[a]nd 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' seems to be your own meta–metafictional attempt to deal with these large areas in ways that are not merely metafiction" (136).

is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing 'outside' language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism, but it leads right to the postmodern, post–structural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language (McCaffery 2012: 45).

In any case, if for us there is only language as a way of knowing the world and we cannot be sure of a reality outside it, what language represents does not have an endorsement of existence either. All this makes sense for Wallace; however, the novelist fails to find a solution to the problem, since he cannot develop an objective knowledge of the language with which to operate satisfactorily:

> If I were separate from language, if I could somehow detach from it and climb up and look down on it, get the lay of the land so to speak, I could study it 'objectively,' take it apart, deconstruct it, know its operations and boundaries and deficiencies. But that's not how things are. I'm in it. We're in language […] Wittgenstein's conclusions seem completely sound to me, always have. And if there's one thing that consistently bugs me writing–wise, it's that I don't feel I really do know my way around inside language–I never seem to get the kind of clarity and concision I want (McCaffery 2012: 45).

Eggers, on the other hand, instead of trying to perfect language to expose its limitations, tries to recover a univocal use for it. Wallace's characters are aware that they cannot escape the language that shapes the borders of their reality. In *Heartbreaking*, Egger's solution is in line with Vermeulen and Van den Akker's proposal of a Kantian "as–if thinking":

> Kant's philosophy of history after all, can also be most appropriately summarized as "as–if" thinking. As Curtis Peters explains, according to Kant, "we may view human history as if mankind had a life narrative which describes its self–movement toward its full rational/social potential […] to view history as if it were the story of mankind's development." […] humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: np).

Dave,[5] the protagonist of *Heartbreaking*, chooses to get rid of solipsism by establishing links with other people–with the readers–extralinguistically. He tries to make sense of reality by means of a univocal sincerity based on absolute truths. To achieve this, Eggers tries to go beyond the boundaries of language. He becomes the new naive rebel advocated by Wallace in "E Unibus Pluram," transforming himself into a kind of messiah of the recently released cultural phase by undressing and disarming, in a kind of religious liturgy, before the readers of his work.

Thus, as a result, Eggers is tacitly appealing to a resurrection of the author. He tells readers how to read his work–the preface to the book is titled "Rules and Suggestions for the Enjoyment of this Book." In *Mistakes*, Eggers gives guidelines for the interpretation of his work and corrects those who, according to him, have done it wrong. By putting this appendix at the end of the book, the novel is framed between two metafictional excerpts that correct the work and instruct the reader on how to approach it. All this indicates the author's desire for univocity.

In *Mistakes* he addresses those who have branded his work as ironic, and instructs them on the reasons why it is not. "Careful and open–hearted readers" (Eggers 2001: 35) understood the book perfectly. Those who did not read it that way, simply, misinterpreted it; they read it incorrectly. The author appeals to the use of intuition, to following one's instinct "with an open heart." According to Eggers, those who misinterpreted the episode did so because they continued to conceive the narrative in postmodern terms.

A paradigm shift required this new mix of seriousness and irony. The revolution demanded, as Wallace predicted, new writers brave enough to deal with topics such as those addressed by Eggers. This is expressed in his appendix to the book: "When I was done, I was ashamed, because I had written what I saw as a much too revealing and maudlin thing, overflowing with blood and sentiment" (Eggers 2001: 35). That quote fits Wallace's assertion:

> Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "How banal." Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity (1993: 193).

Eggers positions himself with that rebel who has bravely risked something very intimate:

---

5   Even though the book is an autobiographical account and, in theory, they are the same person, from now on we will refer to the protagonist of the book as Dave and to the author as Eggers.

> The book was seen by its author as a stupid risk, and an ugly thing, 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 […] a book that was really a letter to them, a messy fucking letter that you could barely keep a grip on, but a letter you meant, and a letter you sometimes wish you had not mailed, but a letter you are happy that made it from you to them (2001: 35).

According to Eggers, sharing secrets with others can serve as a "tool for simple connectivity for its own sake, a testing of waters, a stab at engagement with a mass of strangers" (2001: 10). The philosophy of the paradigm shift represented by Eggers is based on concepts that had been banished by postmodernism and its aversion to universal notions, such as truth, honesty, trust, sincerity, etc. They make those who brand reality with them vulnerable. Nonetheless, Eggers perceives that the moment a trust network is created, they make those who employ them stronger.

In *Heartbreaking*, Eggers presents the main character as a normal person. In an interview, Dave describes himself as follows:

> I realize I seem much too average, at first. I'm White, not even Jewish, my hair is horrible and I'm poorly dressed and everything–I know how blah that seems, suburban, upper–middle–class, two parents […] I represent tens of millions, I represent everyone who grew up suburban and white (2000: 179).

Timmer also introduces him as a normal individual–"Dave is indeed a quite average guy" (2010: 181). Dave wants to offer himself as a sacrifice to achieve the transcendence to which he aspires. However, he knows that this can only be achieved in a Whitmanian way, following the transcendental precepts distilled by Wallace. Only a new "representative person"–a normal person–is capable of succeeding: "I will be the conduit. I will be the beating heart. Please see this! I am the perfect amalgam!" (2000: 207).

This normal person knows that reality can only be regained through the recovering of causality: "Can you not see that we're extraordinary? That we were meant for something else, something more?" (2000: 207). Dave needs to have faith in a superior structure, in predestination: "[a]ll this did not happen to us for naught, I can assure you–there is no logic to that, there is logic only in assuming that we suffered for a reason" (2000: 207). At the end of the book, he seems to have achieved this purpose: "finally, finally, finally" (2000: 375). Dave constitutes the perfect literary representation of the metamodern oscillation: "Can you not see what I represent? I am both a) martyred moralizer and b) amoral omnivore born of the suburban vacuum + idleness + television + Catholicism + alcoholism + violence" (2000: 207).

The following passage is representative of Eggers's style and, in general, of the new cultural phase. It mixes earnest sincerity with humour:

> I need community, I need feedback, I need love, connection, give–and–take–I will live if they will love. Let me try. Let me prove. I will pluck my hair, will remove my skin, I will stand before you feeble and shivering. I will open a vein, an artery. Pass over me at your peril! I could die soon. I probably have AIDS. Or cancer. Something bad will happen to me, I know, I know this because I have seen it so many times. I will be shot in an elevator, I will be swallowed in a sinkhole, will drown (2000: 207).

This fragment represents that oscillation in which there is, on the one hand, the honest desire to sacrifice himself and, on the other, the escape valve of postmodernism, which puts the counterpoint to the drama of the situation. Through his sacrifice, he intends to create his "redeeming" lattice:

> Oh please let me show this to millions. Let me be the lattice, the center of the lattice. Let me be the conduit. There are all these hearts, and mine is strong, and if there are–there are!–capillaries that bring blood to millions, that we are all of one body and that I am–Oh, I want to be the heart pumping blood to everyone, blood is what I know, I feel so warm in blood, can swim in blood, oh let me be the strong–beating heart that brings blood to everyone! (2000: 208).

In this pseudo–messianic sacrifice, he indirectly appeals to the recovery of realism and interpersonal communion.

The metafictional game is present throughout the work, but even though there is textual self–referentiality, Eggers shares that game directly with the reader by referring to–and addressing–him/her during the creation of the narrative. Eggers needs the involvement of the readers because the narrative can only be of value through its extra–textuality; it does not make sense without the collaboration of the reader. Metafiction is linked in this novel to reality. Eggers wants the reader to be aware of the use of metafiction in order to draw attention to the sincerity that the story exudes. Once the postmodern games are out of the way, he can speak about what he considers important matters. At all times, the writer informs the reader about the metafictional nature of the narrative. Whereas the metafiction in postmodern literature leads the reader to a maze of confusion that

makes reality appear in hyperreal layers, Eggers's use of that resource leads to a reality that has a referential relationship with the text. For example, the names of the people that appear in the text are real as well as their phone numbers or their postal addresses. As Peter Boxall points out in *Twenty–First–Century Fiction*, the fact that Eggers makes use of narrative experimentation does not mean that he is, in Eggers's own words, "pomo or meta or cute" (Eggers 2001: copyright page). Instead, he is looking for "forms of shared cultural experience– forms, perhaps, of global democracy, which would allow for a meeting of different peoples of the world in freedom and equality–which is also a sharp critique of the means available with which to craft such forms" (Boxall 2013: 179).

Whitman adopted the transcendentalist thought when conceiving nature as a symbol of the spirit and the idea that absolutely everything is represented in nature: "[a] leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (Emerson [1836] 1998: 22). Like Emerson, Whitman assures that the whole universe is replicated in every atom and, therefore, when he sings to himself, he is singing to all humanity. "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman [1855] 1998: 2096). Eggers takes up this transcendental baton and assumes that, by speaking about himself, he is also speaking about the reader, that he is speaking about everyone. It is the only way to build a lattice. This constitutes an aporia, as it is both democratic and exactly the opposite. However, that is precisely the fundamental characteristic of Romanticism, to which the post–post–postmodern Eggers aspires. It is democratic because when writing about his own truth he is describing everyone's truth. However, if one wants to be part of lattice, one must accept that truth as univocal, without seeking rational explanation. No disagreements or discrepancies are allowed and this, of course, is dangerous.

From the beginning of the book, Eggers tries to create referentiality. Obviously, if one of the causes of solipsism is linguistic relativism, having the ability to establish a one–to–one relationship between things and language can re–create a connection with the world. According to Ihab Hassan, after postmodernism there is a need to recover the concept of "truth." Hassan, like Eggers, turns to Emerson to illustrate the need for referentiality:

> An aesthetic of trust is, ultimately, a stance toward Reality, not toward objects. At the far limit, such a stance demands identification with Reality itself, dissolution of the distinction between the I and not–I. Emerson said it famously in "Nature:" "…all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing, I see all." That is the horizon, infinitely far, attainable only by the elect, toward which fiduciary realism tends (2003: 211).

At the end of the piece that precedes the main body of *Heartbreaking*, there is a drawing of a stapler. It is a simple drawing that reads the following: "Here is a drawing of a stapler" (2000: xxxix). The drawing is strongly reminiscent of René Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), in which, under the painted image of a pipe, one can read "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe). Eggers transgresses a logical assumption by using language unambiguously to achieve the opposite effect to that of the work of the Belgian painter. Instead of confusion, the choice of words leads to referentiality. The reader is made aware of the literary manoeuvres that will be used in the book, establishing a kind of covenant that places the reader in an informed and comfortable situation.

3.1. Post–postmodern literary experimentation

In the middle of *Heartbreaking*, there is a transcription of an interview for an audition in which Dave answers the questions of the producer of an MTV show. During the interview, Dave yields to the author in a fragment in which the two literary personae are present at the same time.

> [S]queezing all these things into the Q&A makes complete the transition from the book's first half, which is slightly less self–conscious, to the second half, which is increasingly self–devouring. Because, see, I think what my town, and your show, reflect so wonderfully is that the main byproduct of the comfort and prosperity that I'm describing is a sort of pure, insinuating solipsism, that in the absence of struggle against anything in the way of a common enemy–whether that's poverty, Communists, whatever–all we can do, or rather, all those of us with a bit of self–obsession can do (2000: 175–176).

Eggers makes a meta–fictional comment on the novel's format and style in what should be the answer to an interviewer question. The writer speaks through his character and describes the cause of his solipsism, the absence of an external stimulus preventing the individual's self–obsession. Baskin draws attention to the fact that some critics punished Wallace for making use of the irony, cynicism and postmodern self–referential literary resources he criticized in "E Unibus Pluram." However, Baskin also argues that, even though Wallace viewed irony as a potentially destructive device,

since American literature "tends to be about U.S. culture and the people who inhabit it," the contemporary writer had to acknowledge those norms in and through his fiction. Wallace might have wanted to tackle the fundamental questions head–on, like Dostoevsky–he even expressed such a desire in a late essay. The cultured postmodern reader, however, was programmed to tune out forms of address that did not rise to a certain level of self–consciousness or sophistication. It was neither possible nor desirable for contemporary fiction to eschew the ironic entirely, although there might, Wallace hinted, emerge a writer who recognized it as a means rather than an end (Baskin 2009: np).

Along these lines, Bran Nicol discusses the metafictional implications of the previous interview in Eggers's book. The novelist is appealing to the reader's postmodern literary–and cultural–baggage through artifice. Nevertheless, at the same time, he is reporting on the problems produced by that cultural phase. According to Nicol, the passage makes us see that one's identity is not something concrete that has a correlate in reality, but a construction made through representations. The use of metafiction makes us doubt the authenticity of what we are told, since this literary device leads us to think that narration is a hypothetical entity manufactured by representation–exactly as the identity of the individual. This collides with the genre of memoirs to which the book belongs, "which is conventionally taken to be the literary mirror–image of an individual's true self" (Nicol 2006: 105). According to Nicol, this does not make *Heartbreaking* directly one of the postmodern pieces that Wallace criticizes in "E Unibus Pluram." Due to its own condition of autobiography, it relates real events, which means that there is a sincere correlation with reality and not a construction through representations. Eggers makes use of similar resources throughout the book, merging the personae of the character and the author. The construction of the identity of both the author and the character are supported by real correlates, such as the postal addresses or the authentic telephone numbers that appear in the book.

Eggers uses Dave's voice to express the idea of having some kind of inspiration that does not lead to solipsism. Timmer draws attention to the need that this generation has to do something extraordinary: "The result is a bulging frustration, an anger that is directed mostly at the self, for being 'a disappointment to itself'" (2010: 192). Timmer mentions Slavoj Žižek, who describes this fact as "absence of destination." She places it in the following context: "There is a kernel of truth in the conservative assertion that the freedom of the modern subject is 'false'" (2010: 194). According to Timmer, Žižek attributes this fact to the absence of a stable social identity based on tradition (2010: 194). This last thought is obviously related to Lyotard's idea of the loss of faith towards metanarratives (1979). Žižek's thought, expressed by Timmer, likens the idea of narrative knowledge and its pragmatics as Lyotard theorises it in *The Postmodern Condition* ([1979] 1984).

4. Eggers as post–postmodern Messiah

In the last pages of the book, Eggers makes the final sacrifice of giving himself to his lattice in a kind of liturgical homily in which he invites those who want to be part of his project to a symbolic cannibalistic ritual, reminiscent of the Christian Eucharist: "I eat you to save you. I drink you to make you new. I gorge myself on all of you, and I stand, dripping, with fists, with heaving shoulders–I will look stupid, I will crawl, drenched in blood and shit" (2000: 374). The writer seems to want to sacrifice himself as a kind of post–postmodern messiah restoring the validity of the pre–postmodern covenant with metanarratives. He intends to be the first new Wallacean rebel, the first to risk being condemned, yawned, parodied, accused of sentimentality and melodrama. In the acknowledgements section that precedes the novel, Eggers states the following:

> [the author] could not help but think, in much the same way someone who had been struck by lightning might, that he had somehow been singled out, and that his life was thereafter charged with purpose, with the gravest importance, that he could not be wasting time, that he must act in accordance with his destiny, that it was so plainly obvious that… that… *he had been chosen… to lead!* (2000: xxix; emphasis in the original).

At the end of the book, Eggers plays the role of Wallace's herald by composing an apology for the mediated experience of reality. Timmer explains that the fact that Eggers admits that the identity of the individual–in this case his own–is composed of multiple layers demonstrates the honesty of the author, who recognizes his postmodern nature. According to Timmer, the originality of the novel does not come from the recognition of those layers:

> [h]e feels he would be taking a next step by not mourning the loss of unmediated experience any longer, but instead 'celebrate it, revel in the simultaneous living an experience and its dozen or so echoes in art and media, the echoes making the experience not cheaper but richer, aha! being [*sic*] that much more layered' (2010: 238).

According to Timmer, this makes the representation of experience in literature more realistic, since the individual who comes from postmodernism conforms to these parameters. However, the acceptance that self–

awareness in terms of the late cultural phase is common in today's society does not imply a celebration of the terms of the postmodern contract as the basis of the next cultural phase. The use of convoluted language goes against what Eggers's characters yearn for throughout his work as a writer: referentiality and inspiration through intuition.

The above quote in which Timmer uses Dave's words should not be taken literally for two reasons: first, because he is indeed using postmodern techniques, but humour, as he explains in *Mistakes*, is the tool in the writer's work to dispel conceptions that, he believes, can perpetuate a fallacy. According to Isaiah Berlin, that is the main purpose of Romantic irony. Eggers's use of humour resembles Romantic irony as explained by Berlin in *The Roots of Romanticism* ([1999] 2013). It is the exhaust valve necessary for the metamodern oscillation, the indispensable tool to compensate for the excess of earnestness:

> [i]t is an obscure concept but the general notion is that, corresponding to any propositions that anyone may utter, there must be at least three other propositions, each of which is contrary to it, and each of which is equally true, all of which must be believed, particularly because they are contradictory–because that is the only way of escaping from the hideous straightjacket which he is frightened of, whether in the form of physical causality, or of State–created laws, or of aesthetic rules about how to compose poems, or of rules of perspective … This must be escaped from. It cannot be escaped by simply denying the rules, because a denial will simply bring about another orthodoxy, another set of rules contradictory of the original rules. Rules must be blown up as such (Berlin [1999] 2013: 136).

In addition, when Dave says the words quoted by Timmer, he finds himself lost and he knows that he has to do something. However, he uses postmodern conventions directly to criticize the society from which they come:

> While the author is self–conscious about being self–referential, he is also knowing about that self–conscious self–referentiality. Further, and if you're one of those people who can tell what's going to happen before it actually happens, you've predicted the next element here: he also plans to be clearly, obviously aware of his knowingness about his self–consciousness of self–referentiality. Further, he is fully cognizant […] and will preempt your claim of the book's irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is 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–*avert…your…eyes*! (2000: xxvi).

The use of this kind of self-conscious and anti-postmodern metalanguage–in which he is even warning the reader–is reminiscent of a fragment from Wallace's short story "The Depressed Person," quoted in Baskin's article:

> The depressed person's therapist, whose school of therapy rejected the transference relation as a therapeutic resource and thus deliberately eschewed confrontation and "should"–statements and all normative, judging, "authority"–based theory in favor of a more value–neutral bioexperiential model and the creative use of analogy and narrative […] had deployed the following medications in an attempt to help the depressed person find some relief from her acute affective discomfort and progress in her (i.e., the depressed person's) journey toward enjoying some semblance of a normal adult life: Paxil, Zoloft, Prozac, Tofranil, Welbutrin, Elavil, Metrazol in combination with unilateral ECT … None had delivered any significant relief from the pain and feelings of emotional isolation that rendered the depressed person's every waking hour an indescribable hell on earth (Baskin 2009: np).

Wallace is ironizing the atomization of postmodern knowledge that makes science an esoteric field for the common individual–and, ultimately, does not relieve him or her from postmodern solipsism. Baskin's reading of the above excerpt goes in that direction:

> A close reading of any passage in his mature fiction reveals a concentrated attack on the plague of irresponsible intellect–and especially the kind of irresponsible intellect he associated with the generation of American artists that had preceded him. It is no coincidence that the therapist, in the passage above, rejects methods relying on "normative" authority in favor of a "value–neutral" approach. Nor that the list of meta–narrative games and drugs she offers the depressed person do nothing to salve her "pain and emotional isolation." The therapist is a caricature of the morally noncommittal fiction writers Wallace would align himself against (Baskin 2009: np).

Likewise, Eggers uses language deviously to show its flaws. Our interpretation of the ending of the novel is, then, different from that of Timmer.

As a last argument, it should be noted that the author, after analysing the end of the book in that line, appeals to what she classifies as an incongruity: "Dave, with this narrative, reaches out to 'you,' but how to reach back

is already prescribed in the book" (Timmer 2010: 241). This, we have argued, is not really an inconsistency. Univocity leads only to one path. In other words, Eggers does not celebrate the multiplicity of representations of identity; instead, he uses humour in the form of Romantic irony to get rid of them. In the end, therefore, he proposes a univocal truth, which creates an enthusiasm that might result in fanaticism. These are separated by a very fine line. According to Timmer, "when this 'you' fails to comply, shows signs of having a mind of his her own instead of sharing the 'open mind' of Dave, this 'you' is said to have misunderstood and is disciplined even" (2010: 241). Postmodern relativism regarding any subject gives way to an unanswerable and unambiguous–as well as dangerous if not compensated with moderate postmodern scepticism–truth based on a narrative knowledge as Lyotard describes it in *The Postmodern Condition*.

In *Heartbreaking*, Eggers portrays the futile attempt to subvert the order of things through postmodern means alone. The action needed can only take place founded on the new logic of sincerity heralded by Wallace. One of the central episodes of the novel is the creation of the postmodern *Might* magazine. A project based on irony and sarcasm aimed at countering capitalist postmodern society. *Might* magazine stops in 1997. The projects seems futile, as the use of sarcasm and irony leads the magazine to attract the attention of the establishment. One of the articles featured in the publication catches interest of a PBS program that makes them an offer to appear on a trivial television show. A year after closing *Might*, Eggers begins his new project, McSweeney's Publishing, with the publications *The Believer* and *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, which make use of transcendentalist innocence and sincerity. It is the step to the new sincerity in real life, to post–postmodernism.

In this context of transition from postmodern solipsistic introspection to the attempt to open up through a lattice, Eggers updated transcendentalism is seen as a real alternative to obtain something similar to what Terry Eagleton expresses when he reflects about the notion of truth in *After Theory*. Eagleton declares the need to provide a foundation for civilization itself at a time when "the philosophers are arriving hot–foot with the news that there are no such foundations in the first place" (2003: 73). The grand narrative of capitalist globalization, says Eagleton, spreads across the planet and calls for a revival of the discipline of universal–focused cultural studies:

> Today's cultural theory is somewhat more modest. It dislikes the idea of depth, and is embarrassed by fundamentals. It shudders at the notion of the universal, and disapproves of ambitious overviews. By and large, it can see such overviews only as oppressive. It believes in the local, the pragmatic, the particular. And in this devotion, ironically, it scarcely differs from the conservative scholarship it detests, which likewise believes only in what it can see and handle (2003: 72).

Eagleton posits the idea of truth as an absent concept in the landscape of theory, and maintains that the legacy of postmodernism has bequeathed to us a distorted vision of an absolute truth that "smacks of dogmatism, authoritarianism, a belief in the timeless and universal" (2003: 103). However, like Wallace and his followers, Eagleton is an advocate of restoring the previous status to this notion. Postmodern theorists and historicists, he claims, do not believe there is a universal truth that is not relative. However, the author argues that this is so because these people tend to identify this concept with dogmatism: "[T]hey have identified truth with dogmatism, and in rejecting dogmatism have thrown out truth along with it. This is a peculiarly pointless manoeuvre" (2003: 103). Dogmatism consists of simply resorting to authority rather than reasonable arguments to establish what should be taken for granted. On the other hand, the absolute truth of which the author speaks is far from that notion and is constructed through "argument, evidence, experiment, investigation" (2003: 109). What he advocates is for a return of this concept to the mind of the rational human being with a speculative spirit. He wants to return to the spirit of the Enlightenment or, in other words, to the Habermasian concept of the unfinished project of modernity.

Restoring the lost dignity of truth, however, is not an easy task. Wittgenstein was right: language makes discrete representations of the world only accepted by the members of discrete communities, which makes a connection between individuals from different communities not possible through linguistic communication. However, filling the existential void with materialism disguised as transcendentalism can lead to totalitarianism, as we are observing nowadays with the notions of post–truth and political populism. Just like Eagleton, Eggers warns of the danger of confusing dogmatism with truth.

Eggers was trying to create a project–in literature and in real life–to provide a future to work towards and a past to cling to. In the words of Vermeulen and van den Akker, "history is moving beyond its much proclaimed end" (2010: np). They name Hegel and his idea of history "progressing toward some predetermined Telos" (2010: np). They also argue that postmodernism abandons that idea for one of these two reasons, either because "humankind had realized that this Telos had been achieved (with the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy')" (2010: np), or because individuals realized that the purpose for which it was directed could never be achieved, simply because it does not exist.

5. Conclusion

Post-postmodern experimentation in the form of meta–metafiction has been at the centre of Dave Eggers's fiction since his successful debut in 2000 with *Heartbreaking*. This memoir is paradigmatic of the New Sincerity writing of the beginning of the twenty-first century. Considering Eggers's use of humour in the form of neo-Romantic irony, this article analyses how, in order to end postmodern solipsism and in a transcendentalist fashion, in *Heartbreaking,* Eggers' characters are always searching for referentiality. They choose to live in the present, but always taking into account what lies ahead, recovering the idea of project, and considering historical mistakes. Eggers wanted to change his reality, preserving certain issues of the old paradigm, even though it was not comfortable. He–and his characters–make personal sacrifices so that his readers, with whom he tries to establish a direct relationship of total honesty, can perceive that there is a plausible alternative to postmodern relativism: a new Kantian "as-if" way of seeing the world that gathers what can be saved from the old paradigm and makes sense of reality by taking up the unfinished critical project of modernity through intuitive action.

Eggers's convoluted literary experimentation highlights that the attempt to escape the reign of irony to build a realistic literature, capable of capturing the zeitgeist of his generation, can only be realised through the unavoidable filter of postmodernism. However, the author manages, following Wallace's footsteps, to transform the complicated metafictional game into a map to guide the reader through a narrative that can no longer be classified as postmodern. Eggers's memoir, which implies a dangerous covenant based on faith, tries to recover a collective tradition that can break with postmodern presentism. The debatable way in which he carries it out–proclaiming himself messiah of the New Sincerity–fits the objective of the generation of writers to which Eggers belongs, the reconstruction of a referential reality through a naive kind of faith.

References

Baskin, Jon (2009). Death is Not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and His Critics. *The Point* 1, March. thepointmag.com/criticism/death–is–not–the–end/. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Baym, Nina, et al., eds. (1998). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 1. New York, NY: Norton

Berlin, Isaiah. ([1999] 2013). *The Roots of Romanticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

Boxall, Peter (2013). *Twenty–First–Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Burn, Stephen, ed. (2012). *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi

Conrad, Peter (2000). To Lose One Parent... *The Guardian*, 11 June. www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jun/11/biography.peterconrad. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Crace, John (2000). *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers. *The Guardian*, 11 August. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/aug/11/digestedread. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Den Dulk, Allard (2015). *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*. London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Eagleton, Terry (2004). *After Theory*. London: Penguin.

Eggers, Dave (2000). *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. London: Picador.

Eggers, Dave (2006). Foreword. *Infinite Jest*. David Foster Wallace. Boston, MA: Back Bay Books.

Eggers, Dave (2001). *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making: Notes, Corrections, Clarifications, Apologies, Addenda.* London: Picador.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo ([1836] 1998). *Nature*. In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. In Nina Baym et al., eds., 1073–1101.

Franzen, Jonathan (1996). Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels. *Harper's Magazine*, April: 35–54.

Funk, Wolfgang (2015). *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium*. London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Gibbons, Alison (2017). Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect. In Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, eds., 117–130.

Gill, Jo, ed. (2006). *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. London: Routledge

Hassan, Ihab (2003). Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust. In Klaus Stierstorfer, ed., 199–212.

Hoffmann, Lukas (2016). *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Kakutani, Michiko (2000). 'A Heartbreaking Work…': Clever Young Man Raises Sweet Little Brother. *The New York Times*, 1 February. archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/books/020100eggers–book–review.html. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Kelly, Adam (2017). David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel–Nicholson–Roberts. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5.2. orbit.openlibhums.org/article/id/454/. Accessed 12 Mar. 2020. doi: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.224

Lyotard, Jean–François. ([1979] 1984): *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by G. Bennington & B. Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Magritte, René (1929). *The Treachery of Images*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

McCaffery, Larry (2012). An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace. In Stephen Burn, ed., 21–52.

Moss, Stephen (2000). A Staggeringly Post–Modern Work of Literary Trickery. *The Guardian*, 9 August. www.theguardian.com/books/2000/aug/09/1. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Nicol, Bran (2006). 'The Memoir as Self–Destruction': *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. In Jo Gill, ed., 100–114.

Roth, Philip (1961). Writing American Fiction. *Commentary* 31.3. www.commentary.org/articles/philip–roth/writing–american–fiction/. Accessed 11 April 2020.

Sendak, Maurice (1963). *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Stierstorfer, Klaus, ed. (2003). *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*. New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter

Timmer, Nicoline (2010). *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post–Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Van den Akker, Robin, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (2017). *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*. London & New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin van den Akker (2010). Notes on Metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2.0. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677. Accessed 12 March 2020. doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677

Wallace, David Foster (1993). E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13: 151–194.

Wallace, David Foster (2006). *Infinite Jest*. Boston, MA: Back Bay Books.

Wallace, David Foster (2009). Octet. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. London: Abacus, 111–136.

Whitman, Walt ([1855] 1998). Song of Myself. In Nina Baim et al., eds., 2095–2138.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig ([1953] 2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell–Wiley.