Postmodern/Postwar and After

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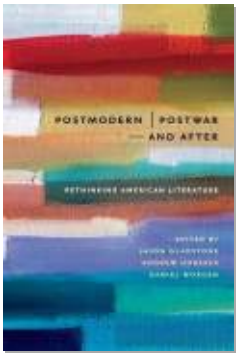

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THE NEW SINCERITY

The generation of American novelists born in and around the 1960s came to intellectual maturity during the last two decades of the twentieth century, a period that today goes under several names: postmodern, posthistorical, neoliberal, age of fracture.[1] This was a time when the radical emancipatory politics, egalitarian social hope, and experimental artistic impulses that marked the 1960s had begun, in the eyes of many, to resemble relics from an increasingly distant past. As this generation of Americans began writing and publishing, the economic and political landscape was steeped in Reaganomics, the neoconservative "end of history" consensus, and the upsurge of globalization with the rise (and rise) of multinational capitalism. The US literary academy, where virtually all budding authors now spent several years and many their entire careers, witnessed a number of significant developments: new paradigms for literary study were generated through the influence of European, particularly French, thinkers; the mainstream American canon fragmented and diversified under pressure from social change and the rise of identity politics; and the creative writing program continued its ascent from one authorship route among others to a near-obligatory professional rite of passage.[2] In the media sphere, "the late age of print" (Striphas) was heralded by the coming of the World Wide Web, a radically new

technological form that supplemented the challenges to the printed word mounted by cinema and television earlier in the century. And in the cultural sphere, something called postmodern irony came increasingly to define the spirit of the age, tying together everything from consumerism and identity to politics and art.

It has become common over recent years to describe a significant wave of cultural production that emerged from and responded to this period in American life as characterized by a "New Sincerity." The phrase has been used in discussions of film, poetry, visual art, and pop music.[3] In extending it to describe the fiction of a number of the most prominent novelists born in the generation after the US baby boom—including Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Dana Spiotta, Colson Whitehead, and David Foster Wallace—I mean both to connect their work to broader cultural trends and to highlight the special characteristics that enable literary fiction to engage those trends in an urgent, complex, and dialectical manner. In popular usage, the contemporary turn to sincerity tends to be regarded as a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words, as a post-postmodern embrace of the "single-entendre principles" invoked by Wallace in an essay now regularly cited as an early manifesto for the New Sincerity movement. But while "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993) might end with a clarion call for a new generation of sincere "*anti*-rebels" emerging to critique the tyranny of irony in American culture (1997 81), Wallace's fiction, and the fiction of his peers, engages questions of irony and sincerity in more complicated ways. Responding to the range of historical, institutional, technological, and aesthetic contexts to which my opening paragraph alludes, contemporary American fiction foregrounds a theory and practice of sincerity that is forward rather than backward looking, new rather than old.

This newness is best approached, however, by turning first to a description of what the old sincerity looked like and how it was imagined as inhering in literary texts. The classic account is offered in Lionel Trilling's 1972 study *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Trilling defines sincerity as "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" and traces the concept's emergence in "the moral life of Europe" to the early modern period (2). He cites *Hamlet* as a central text, placing particular emphasis on Polonius's famous advice to Laertes as the latter prepares to depart for Paris:

> This above all—to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day
> Thou canst not then be false to any man. (Shakespeare 1.3.78–80)

For Trilling, the otherwise corrupt Polonius here has "a moment of self-transcendence, of grace, of truth" (3). His words are to be taken seriously, and crucial to their import is that truth to one's own self should be conceived of not as an *end*, but as a *means* of ensuring truth to others. Trilling goes on to claim—via readings of Rousseau, Diderot, Wordsworth, and Jane Austen, among others—that this consequentialist conception of sincerity would become "a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years" (6). But by the twentieth century it had gone into sharp decline, superseded by the ideal of authenticity, which conceives truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means. Whereas sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others, and on what Trilling calls the "public end in view" (9), authenticity conceives truth as inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-examination rather than other-directed communication. The role playing associated with the theatrical origins of sincerity in writers like Shakespeare is repudiated in favor of a plunge into the Conradian heart of darkness; and, indeed, Trilling closely associates the cultural trumping of sincerity by authenticity with the intense but nonconfessional exploration of the self found in literary modernism.

Modernism is, on Trilling's account, the culmination of "two centuries of aesthetic theory and artistic practice which have been less and less willing to take account of the habitual preferences of the audience" (97). A new conception of the artist as aloof genius, as persona rather than person, shattered the older, traditional view, best articulated in Wordsworth's understanding of the poet as "a man speaking to men." The modernist paradigm—located in Eliot's aesthetic of impersonality, or in Joyce's artist standing above his work paring his fingernails—was then further enshrined when the New Critics denigrated intention, so inescapably central to any conception of sincerity, as a fallacy in the study of literature. And the early artistic reactions to modernism—the existentialist and absurdist literature of mid-century Europe, as well as American Beat writing and confessional poetry—only added to the privilege afforded to authenticity, in that any demonstrable

privileging of a public self, another key characteristic of sincerity, became associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty. This state of affairs leads Trilling to write of the "anachronism" and "quaintness" now involved in the notion of sincerity, how when we speak the word, "we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony" (6). Yet what Trilling could not anticipate in 1972 was that irony was in the process of taking over, and with the rise of poststructuralism in the academy, and postmodernism in the arts, the surface/depth model of the self—a model assumed by both sincerity and authenticity as Trilling defines them—would soon be superseded by the privilege afforded to capital, technology, culture, and language, which now claimed the causal power and priority previously afforded to inner life.

In a 1996 essay favorably comparing the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky to "our own lit's thematic poverty," David Foster Wallace typifies the New Sincerity reaction to this modernist legacy: "The good old modernists, among their other accomplishments, elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics—maybe even metaphysics—and Serious Novels after Joyce tend to be valued and studied mainly for their formal ingenuity" (2005 272). In an interview of the same year, Wallace went further, contending that a century-long alteration in the shared understanding of literature, the self, and communication had heralded an "intellectualization and aestheticizing of principles and values in this country," one of the things, he argued, "that's gutted our generation" (2012 60). Wallace proposed that literature, by respecting rather than disregarding the preferences of its audience, could return to a situation in which "the reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses" (61). In this way, fiction would become a conversation, the primary aim of which would be to make the reader and writer feel less lonely in the face of the contemporary world. Wallace's position, enshrined in the Alcoholics Anonymous scenes that provide the core of his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996), has become paradigmatic for his generation. A renewed concern with sincerity is conceived by these writers as an answer to problems raised by the legacy of a modernist insistence on an aesthetic view of the world, and on the priority of authentic expression, or artistic autonomy, over sincere communication.

Critics have acknowledged this antimodernist streak in contemporary fiction by identifying it with a return to the novel of the nineteenth century and earlier, "to the form of the novel in place before even the rules of realism were fully formulated," as Andrew Hoberek has put it (220).[4] Hoberek

allies this return to premodernist forms with a revival of what he calls "intentional bad form" in writers like Wallace and Eggers, remarking that "bad form in the aesthetic sense merges with bad form in the social sense to connote sincerity: in the process of speaking from one's deepest self, one cannot bother with, or is indeed actively hindered by the artificiality of, the canons of good form" (217). Yet it is equally true that the legacy of *post*-modernism—which is the context in which New Sincerity writers are most often read—substantially complicates any revival of the expression of "one's deepest self" in literary form.[5] Notions of character, selfhood, and expression came under serious pressure in the fiction of major American writers including Barth, Pynchon, and DeLillo, not to mention their postmodern compatriots elsewhere such as Borges, Beckett, Carter, and Calvino. These traditional tropes were also radically questioned in the literary theory that New Sincerity writers absorbed in college and, in filtered forms, through the culture around them. Indeed, it is the necessity of accounting for the ongoing influence of theory, and the alterations it has wrought in how linguistic communication should now be conceived, that encourages Ernst Van Alphen and Mieke Bal, editors of the essay collection *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, to call for "a new theorization of the concept" of sincerity (17). Among the things theory has taught contemporary writers is that sincerity, expressed through language, can never be pure, and must instead be conceived in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation. As Jacques Derrida, among other contemporary philosophers, has demonstrated, the promise of truth to the other that marks sincerity is always contaminated internally by the threat of manipulating the other, and this threat cannot be eliminated through appeal to intention, morality, or context. Yet this threat should not be understood as the privation of sincerity, but as its very possibility. That sincerity can always be taken for manipulation shows us that sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith: if I or the other could be certain that I am being sincere, the notion of sincerity would lose its normative charge.

One evident place where this theoretical inheritance shows up in New Sincerity writing is in the prominence given to the discourse of advertising, a sphere in which language is used to preempt and manipulate the desires of the other. "Pure Language" is the ironic title given, for instance, to the concluding chapter of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010): the chapter depicts a future present in which all bloggers are paid to "parrot" for products,

formerly expressive words have been "shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" (320), and characters are reduced to employing baby talk in failed efforts to communicate without ambiguity. Impurity and deception are endemic not only to language but to the corporate landscape of the present, epitomized by what Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) calls "that contemporary brand of establishment, the kind that dressed itself in rustic sincerity but adhered to the rapacious philosophy of the multinational" (39). Language and the corporate environment combine in this fiction to challenge the traditional understanding of sincerity as the expression of an underlying, inner self, characterized by what Trilling calls "actual feeling." The requirement to sell his words makes Egan's Alex wonder whether his actual feelings and tastes have always already been bought, while the unnamed African-American branding consultant at the center of Whitehead's novel can only conceive his interiority through the outward names he gives to products and cannot finally contradict his boss's claim that "you *are* the product" (146; emphasis in original).

While raising these concerns about language, environment, interiority, and selfhood, the prose of Egan and Whitehead nonetheless retains the kind of lyrical dazzle associated with a high literary style, thereby reaffirming (however self-consciously) the contemporary novelist as an agent of naming who can compete with the branding consultant. Yet other writers go even further, saturating their stories with technocratic jargon, as in Wallace's "Mister Squishy" in *Oblivion* (2004), or with degraded neoliberal corporate-speak, as in many of the best-known stories of George Saunders. The writer's distance from this corrupted language is no longer assumed: the old modernist recourse to a heightened lyricism, rather than offer a way out, often points in this fiction to an irresponsible aestheticism, embodied for instance by the cowardly poet character in "The Falls," the concluding story in Saunders's *Pastoralia* (2000).[6] Saunders, Egan, Whitehead, and Wallace consistently remind the reader how various forms of marketing and advertising have served to render as generic cliché the most lyrical and potentially meaningful moments of human lives. If authenticity can be defined as that which cannot be commodified, then it appears that nothing even remotely public can by now remain authentic. And language is inescapably public, as the contemporary writer knows well, a fact that presents nagging problems for a literature that wants to be original, affective, humanly and politically vital.

Allied to these issues of content and style are the ways that New Sincerity texts engage formally and structurally with their own implication in the ambit of the market. Suffusing the novels and stories of this generation is a constant awareness and regular admission that, as one reviewer of Eggers's work puts it, "all literature is a form of commodified persuasion, a sophisticated kind of advertising pitch" (Siegel n.p.). Indeed, Eggers's own oeuvre offers perhaps the clearest example. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) provocatively combines a claim to urgent truth-telling on the one hand with a canny awareness of generic convention, reader response, and market conditions on the other; in its title alone, it both parodies the language of sensationalized promotion and at the same time accepts the necessity of producing a work that actually lives up to the title. The form of the book, with its lengthy anticipatory preface and regular self-reflexive interruptions of the traumatic narrative, constantly impels the question of the author's sincerity to the center of the reading experience. A less celebrated but in some ways more striking example is Eggers's *What Is the What* (2006), a hybrid novel-memoir that offers a first-person account, based on true events, of the brutal life of a Sudanese Lost Boy who eventually winds up in America telling his story. As Eggers has admitted, the decision to publish the autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng as fiction rather than nonfiction was partly made on the basis that it would improve sales for a charitable cause, a point emphasized by the fact that the paperback edition contains no mention of Achak Deng on the cover, simply stating that the book is a novel by Dave Eggers. Some reviewers have asked the inevitable questions regarding ethical appropriation that arise due to these writing and publishing decisions; nonetheless, all seem agreed on the benevolence of Eggers's intentions. In fact Lee Siegel, while accusing Eggers of "postcolonial arrogance" and "socially acceptable Orientalism," remarks that the problem with Eggers and his followers generally is that they confuse good intentions with good art (n.p.).

Yet if an acute preemptive awareness of the prevailing norms of public reception marks Eggers's writing and publishing decisions, as it clearly has from the beginning, then the question of good intentions cannot be so easily resolved. In writing the book, and appropriating and fictionalizing the traumatic story of another in his own language and in his own name (thereby enhancing his own good reputation and sales), Eggers in fact invites difficult questions concerning his intentions. At the same time, he can never offer

a full justification of the purity of those intentions, because—as *A Heartbreaking Work* demonstrates in the most overt manner possible—acute self-awareness includes the awareness of how one will be seen by others, resulting in an infinite regress that makes full self-knowledge an endlessly deferred impossibility. In the case of *What Is the What*, this realization is made palpable in the way the question of what constitutes sincere and honest storytelling becomes a significant theme of the novel. Writing as Achak Deng, Eggers remarks on how the Lost Boys' stories have often become altered "in the interest of drama and expediency" (56), with the horrific elements reduced to a formulaic narrative as each boy becomes aware of what the Western world wants to hear and what it will reward. The struggle to tell the truth cannot therefore be separated from the ends that truth will be put to, and a foreknowledge of those ends necessarily contaminates the telling with manipulative overtones from the very beginning. In a gesture typical of writers of his generation, Eggers refuses to ignore this insight, instead making it into a prevailing structure and condition of possibility for the texts he writes.

For many American writers who deal, like Eggers, with trauma and extremity in their work, this structural conjoining of sincerity and manipulation has become a key concern, embodied in their attitude toward genre and in many of the generic forms they adopt. For instance, in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), the traumatic history of the Dominican Republic, which would be weaved into the background of a conventional historical novel, is here relegated to footnotes, where it is constantly read through paradigms drawn from fantasy and science fiction. In aiming for affect, Díaz therefore risks the accusation of trivialization, as does Chabon in a book like *The Final Solution* (2004), in which a comic plot involving a colorful parrot and an aging Sherlock Holmes is employed to provide a fresh perspective on the Holocaust. For all their respect for the conventions of genre, texts such as these read like ethical experiments, in which affective power cannot fully be separated from, and is in fact in large part constituted by, the appropriation of affect for manipulative ends. This aesthetically generative undecidability is crucial for what it means to be a New Sincerity writer. The critic Steven Connor has quipped that being a modernist writer "always meant not quite realizing that you were so," whereas being a postmodernist "always involved the awareness that you were so" (10). Put in these terms, being a post-postmodernist or New Sincerity writer means never being certain

whether you are so, and whether your struggle to transcend narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity is even undertaken in good faith. When one cannot help but take one's interpellation into various structures (whether economic, institutional, or linguistic) as causal to both inner feeling and outward avowal, then sincerity of intention—what Wallace once called "the art's heart's purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text" (2012 50)—becomes the very thing most radically in question. As Jonathan Safran Foer's narrator puts it at the conclusion of another experimental trauma text, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002): "It was impossible to remember what one meant, what, after all of the words, was intended" (261).

In summary, then, it can be said that in twenty-first-century American fiction, the guarantee of the writer's own sincerity cannot finally lie in representation. Zadie Smith pinpoints this feature in an introduction to a collection devoted to the work of this generation: their stories, she suggests, "seem to be attempting to make something happen *off* the page, *outside* words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do" (xx). What happens off the page, outside representation, depends upon the invocation and response of another; this other to whom I respond, and whose response I await, is, for many New Sincerity writers, the actual reader of their text. It is striking how many contemporary novels offer direct appeals to the reader, often at the conclusion, asking for companionship and conversation. Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), a novel that queries what it means to hold political beliefs sincerely in a culture where corporations and media have turned radical protest itself into a form of advertising, ends with Jason, the novel's representative of futurity, asking the reader to affirm his closing reflections on the passage of time: "And that will be something, don't you think?" (290). Similarly, Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), which opens with the repeated and symptomatic mantra "You Don't Know What's In My Heart," reverses direction only in its revelatory final two lines: "We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me" (385). The writer-reader relationship is being invoked and isolated in these examples, and the reader is being asked to judge the sincerity of the character's, and the writer's, words. This link between reader, character, and writer is crystallized in one of Wallace's key short stories, "Octet," from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), which features a narrator-writer demolishing the conventional fourth wall of his story in order to convince the reader of his pure aims and intentions, but which ends with the ambiguous command,

or plea, "So decide" (136). Through the mediation of literary language, the reader is called upon in these examples to acknowledge and address the writer, and vice versa. This structural co-implication is summed up by the final lines of *What Is the What*: "All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (535).

If we take seriously the outward-facing pleas and gestures that conclude these texts, then we should recognize that in New Sincerity writing, the author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time. Stated in such a manner, this might seem no more than a bland truism, a bromide, as Wallace would put it. Yet it is an insight that literary criticism has found surprisingly difficult to take fully on board. New Sincerity writing demands that we take this insight on board as an urgent matter, that we understand literature as a contingent rather than ideal process that recapitulates the struggle for communication differently and anew in each reading. Thus, if the modernist artist, as Trilling contended, "seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomousness—his goal is to be as self-defining as the art object he creates" (100), then neither contemporary authors nor the texts they write aim to be ideally self-defining in this manner. Rather, these texts are ultimately defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their readers, with questions of sincerity embedded, on a number of levels, into the reader's contingent experience of the text.

NOTES

1. On these terms see, respectively, Fredric Jameson, Michaels, Harvey, and Rodgers.

2. On these three developments see Cusset, Guillory, and McGurl.

3. On these four genres, see Collins, Morris, Magill (187–207), and Fitzgerald; for a loose historical outline of the "movement," see A. D. Jameson. Although my focus here is solely on the American context, there is a significant international dimension to the employment of the phrase "new sincerity"; for a discussion of the Russian context, and a useful bibliography of other international sources, see Rutten.

4. New Sincerity writing should not be seen, therefore, as a branch of metamodernism, the term David James and Urmila Seshagiri use to categorize contemporary fiction that aims "to move the novel forward by looking back to the

aspirational energies of modernism" (93). While metamodernist writers privilege "rupture, irony and fragmentation [. . .] dissent and defamiliarization" (93), New Sincerity writers are far less convinced by the continued value of "modernism as revolution" (87) for the contemporary moment.

5. For varying accounts of the influence of postmodernist fiction and theory on twenty-first-century American novelists, see Boswell, Burn, Dames, Kelly, and Konstantinou.

6. Just as New Sincerity fiction is not a branch of metamodernism, then, neither is it a form of what Jesse Matz dubs "pseudo-impressionism," a contemporary literary mode that mobilizes the painterly style of Conrad, James, and Woolf in the service of what Matz dismisses as "trivially subjective fantasies" (111).

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