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Sincerity and Irony in  
Contemporary North  
American Literature

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# 1 Introduction

Sincerity is a cultural revenant. Even though artists, critics and philosophers rang its death knell again and again, the concept finds a way to resurface. This discursive resilience has to do with the function sincerity fulfills in Western societies. It is a virtue that promises relationships built on trust, connection and community. Because of this, societies often turn to sincerity in times of crisis.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US was confronted with an unprecedented crisis: the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the ensuing “War on Terror”. In an effort to make meaning of this catastrophe, many cultural commentators turned to sincerity as a social ambrosia (see Gorenstein 29). One oft-cited example of this is American author Roger Rosenblatt, who wrote in *TIME* magazine that “one good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony” (n.p.). His implication was that irony had long been used as a protective shield against fear and pain in American culture, which was no longer tenable. In order to face the trauma of the nation’s largest terrorist attack, the character model of the ironist would have to be replaced by something else.

The precise nature of this “something else” had been delineated almost ten years before 9/11 in the writings of the American author David Foster Wallace. In his manifesto “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction,” Wallace diagnosed that irony was to blame for the atomization and the solipsism of everyday Americans. Trained by marketing and televisual culture, they refused to hold any belief at all. As a result, they were soul-crushingly alone. The culprit for this development, according to Wallace, was the rise of Postmodern Irony in literature and culture as a whole. While this specific irony had fulfilled its function of tearing down outdated power structures, it had also created a problematic understanding of language. If individuals feel that they cannot use language to connect with others, then they experience absolute isolation. Just like Rosenblatt, Wallace lamented that the “age of irony” created by Postmodernism had damaged every facet of American society.

The good news for Wallace was that literature could be the cure to the sickness it had created. Where Postmodern fiction resulted in solipsism, the new kind of

literature Wallace envisioned would re-establish communication, connection, and trust. He had a clear idea of the attitude that could take the place of irony in this new mode of writing:

The next real literary rebels in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels’, born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. (192)

By closing his influential essay this way, Wallace had created a fateful equation. Irony was seen destructive and therefore harmful to American society. The only cure, then, could be its ostensible opposite: sincerity. If they wanted to help people feel less alone, the literary anti-rebels Wallace had in mind needed to write sincerely.

This neat dichotomy of irony and sincerity functioned well as the initiation of a new movement. In interviews, other epitexts, and within their works themselves, many of Wallace’s contemporaries identified with his project. Mostly due to the research of Adam Kelly (2010, 2016), Wallace today is viewed as the founder and *spiritus rector* of the “New Sincerity”-movement in American literature. Like Wallace’s oeuvre, works of the New Sincerity are characterized by a skepticism towards postmodern irony, an interest in the relationship between author and reader, and a nuanced philosophical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of sincerity.

Even though other scholars extended the “New Sincerity” label to different media (see Rutten 25, Magill 2013: 202–213), it was the realm of literature which Wallace addressed with his manifesto, and there he also found most of his followers. Among the authors who took up his call to re-engage with sincerity at the turn of the millennium were Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, Colson Whitehead, Benjamin Kunkel, Dana Spiotta, Michael Chabon and Junot Diaz (see Kelly 2014: n.p.). While most of these authors eventually shifted their focus to different topics, sincerity remains a part of today’s literary discourse. The last ten years saw the publication of numerous autofictional novels that deal overtly with the blurry line between sincerity and irony, reality and fiction, author and character. In their

focus on representation and their troubled entanglement with Postmodernism, they resemble the first wave of the New Sincerity. This has led critics like Johannes Völz to expand the horizon of the movement and to include the authors of these novels, such as Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, Tao Lin and Miranda Juli (see 2016).

The crucial question at the heart of the New Sincerity has always been whether literature can move beyond Postmodernism, and how this new literature could operate. It is one of many attempts to answer this question that have surfaced in the beginning of the new millennium. Among its alternatives are Post-postmodernism<sup>1</sup>, Metamodernism<sup>2</sup>, Digimodernism<sup>3</sup>, Performatism<sup>4</sup>, Neorealism<sup>5</sup> and Postirony<sup>6</sup>. The appeal of the New Sincerity in contrast to these concepts (with the exception of Postirony, with which it is synonymous) is its apparent simplicity. It identifies one key aspect of Postmodernism that is problematic: Postmodern Irony. In order to alleviate the solipsism this kind of irony causes, authors must turn to the opposite of irony, i.e. sincerity. This was the fundamental message of Wallace in “E Unibus Pluram”.

Simple answers are often reductive, however – especially when it comes to literature. This is also true for the relation of sincerity and irony in the New Sincerity; however clear-cut Wallace might make it seem. The texts within this movement often feature meta-reflective commentary about their own attempts at sincerity. These passages convey not just doubts about the possibility of sincerity in the first place, but also the realization that sincerity and irony might be entangled. The aim of my project is to analyze the representation of this entanglement. As test cases, I chose three novels that belong to the New Sincerity and probe this entanglement within their own narratives: Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Genius* (2000),

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<sup>1</sup> see Timmer, Nicoline. *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Modern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> see Vermeulen, Timotheus, und Robin van den Akker. “Notes on Metamodernism.” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*. 2.1 (2010): 1–14.

<sup>3</sup> see Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> see Eshelman, Raoul. *Performatism, Or, the End of Postmodernism*. Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> see Versluys, Kristiaan (ed). *Neorealism in Contemporary Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> see Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), and Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be* (2014). While these texts follow the desire for communication and trust that Wallace inscribed into the New Sincerity, they also offer a complicated and often paradoxical account of the relationship between sincerity and irony. Most crucially, they probe the significant overlaps between these two concepts on an aesthetic and an ethical level. In doing so, they deliver a more nuanced picture of the New Sincerity than the appreciation of "single-entendre values" Wallace polemically called for.

The overlaps between irony and sincerity are mostly due to the paradoxes within the concept of sincerity itself. The Latin cognate 'sincerus' carries denotations of purity and genuineness. It was exactly this connection to purity that elevated 'sinceritas' into the upper echelon of virtues during the Reformation. In the theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the Christian individual was fundamentally sinful, yet it could 'cleanse' itself by openly expressing its emotions and urges to others. This act of expression has been at the core of sincerity as a concept ever since. When we use the word 'sincerity', we usually refer to the open communication of inward processes – what we truly feel, think, desire, remember, and so forth. For this reason, Trilling defines sincerity as the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2). Because it promises the absence of dissimulation, it is fundamental for the creation of trust.

This notion of "congruence" renders sincerity both fascinating and problematic. On the one hand, it speaks to the desire to fully know ourselves and makes ourselves known to others through language. On the other hand, it saddles sincerity with a number of unresolvable contradictions. The most crucial of these is the "performative contradiction" (Assmann 35) that results from sincerity's bond to authenticity. If we want to be sincere, we have to find a way to express our "true" self to others – what we really think and feel. This notion of the authentic self builds the foundation for the ideal of sincerity. Yet, as Assmann and others (see for example Trilling and Funk) have observed, authenticity by definition eludes representation. What we deem authentic in others or ourselves is authentic precisely because we cannot communicate it – it stands outside of social constructs, norms and codes. As such, a reflection about sincerity is always a reflection about language. If language does not have the capacity to capture authentic experience, then the desire of sincerity can never be fulfilled. A "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" cannot be achieved. The only thing that language can deliver is a flawed gesture at that which it cannot represent.

It is here, in this reflection about the capacity of language, where sincerity and irony meet. In the intellectual history of Western Europe and North America, irony was often seen as response to the gap between language and experience. The period of Romanticism specifically followed this understanding of irony. Romantic artists felt an intense desire to capture the totality of experience within their art. Yet, at the same time, they were convinced that their art was finite, limited and static. Total truths about humanity and its place in the universe transcended the boundaries of human understanding. As a result, art and language could only ever be an imperfect gesture at transcendence. Instead of despairing at this fact, however, the Romantics deliberately pursued this imperfect gesture. This mindset has since received the name ‘Romantic Irony’ and it still informs the project of the New Sincerity. Like the Romantics, the authors of the New Sincerity are driven by a desire they know cannot be fulfilled – to communicate their authentic experience to others. Instead of despairing at this awareness, they frame their art as a flawed gesture at communion and connection.

This is the overlap between sincerity and irony I intend to explore and analyze throughout this project. My first argument is that the “performative contradiction” I referred to earlier lies at the heart of the New Sincerity. The novels I discuss here – Eggers’ *AHWOSG*, Lerner’s *LTAS* and Heti’s *HSAPB* – demonstrate this exceptionally well. They pulsate with an awareness that sincerity is an unreachable ideal. Their autodiegetic narrators remind themselves and their readers that their quest for sincere expression is ultimately doomed to fail.

My second argument is that this admission of failure does not result in resignation or apathy. Instead, failure is welcomed, as it produces trust on both a communicative and an ethical level. On a communicative level, Eggers, Heti and Lerner emphasize that they attempt to express authentic experience *even though* language can never fully represent it. Their texts are necessarily incomplete and fragmented, yet they try to pierce the veil of fiction anyway. After Postmodernism, this is the only way left for authors and readers to connect with each other, and to trust in shared narrative experience. On an ethical level, these authors valorize the transparent disclosure of moral failings. Their texts relentlessly catalogue lies, embarrassing moments and shameful experiences. Through their characters, the authors make themselves vulnerable and show that their narratives involve an actual risk to their reputation, which is again intended to create trust.

My third argument is that this engagement with sincerity and irony has a precedent in literary history and philosophy. The desperate desire to represent that which cannot be represented has its roots in the Romantic Period. Friedrich Schlegel gave it a name that stuck, for better or worse: Romantic Irony. I propose that Romantic Irony can serve as a model for the approach of the New Sincerity. The writings of Schlegel, Fichte and Solger show exactly why the boundary between sincerity and irony is permeable. They can help to understand why neither Wallace nor his antecedents could fulfill his wish for “single-entendre principles” in their own fiction.

My research can be grouped among the large corpus of work on post-postmodern literature that has developed over the last two decades. The most important work on the New Sincerity in that period has been done by Adam Kelly and Johannes Völz, and I draw heavily on their findings. Yet my thesis contributes a new concept to the discussion of the New Sincerity: “Productive Failure”.

The logic of productive failure can be observed in all the texts I discuss here. In a general sense, they are all meditations on the nature of failure. They also view failure as an essential part of human experience. I already mentioned that this has an ethical aspect. By dwelling on their own shortcomings, these narrators suggest that the acceptance and confession of failures is necessary for the creation of trust. Yet these novels also revolve around failure on a communicative level. According to their own self-characterization, the protagonists (Dave, Sheila and Adam) are pathological liars and manipulators who have never found a way to interact sincerely with other characters. Paradoxically, this history of manipulation functions as a sincerity effect on the narrative level. By openly disclosing their dissimulation to the reader, Dave, Sheila and Adam frame the narrator-reader relationship as a privileged one. Here, they can discuss their shame and embarrassment at their own behavior openly. Yet this framing is always balanced by a skepticism in the capacity of language to communicate authentic experience. Thus, at a foundational level, these narratives revolve around the fear that sincerity is inevitably doomed to fail.

If this were true, however, then why write about sincerity and irony in the first place? Why not abandon sincerity as an old-fashioned ideal that is too contradictory to make sense? The answer to that question can be found in the Romantic heritage of the New Sincerity. Like their Romantic predecessors, the authors of the New Sincerity value the desire for transcendence despite of its inaccessibility.

Even though sincerity must necessarily fail, this failure produces a gesture at the representation of authentic experience. It is therefore a “productive failure”. It revolves not so much around the possibility of sincerity, but around the importance of the desire for it. If we feel this desire, then we will try to make ourselves understood despite of all our epistemological doubts. This is the foundation for the communion and the trust these authors, narrators and protagonists so clearly yearn for. It is the logic of productive failure.

The three novels I selected as my case studies all deal with this logic in their own way. Chronologically speaking, Dave Eggers’ memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is an outlier. It was published in 2000, at the high point of the first wave of the New Sincerity. In it, Eggers imagines himself as the literary “anti-rebel” that Wallace called for. His narration of the death of his two parents and his troubled adolescence sets the stage for a meditation on the blurry boundary between sincerity and irony. Eggers’ literary debut hit a nerve with both critics and readers and popularized these themes for future generations of writers. Unlike *AH-WOSG*, Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* is not marketed as a memoir, but as a novel. It revolves around the same themes, however. Adam Gordon, the protagonist, is a young American poet who travels to Spain on a scholarship (just as Lerner did in the past). His narrative is not just a reflection about poetry, but also about the capacity of language to capture experience in general. This reflection is also the central element of Sheila Heti’s novel *How Should a Person Be?*. Sheila, the protagonist of the novel, is a young playwright who narrates her own failure of writing a play.

While Lerner’s and Heti’s novels were published in 2011 and 2014, respectively, they read like contemporary reimaginations of Eggers’ debut. All three novels are autofictional, i.e. they simultaneously and paradoxically offer an autobiographical and a fictional pact. This contradictory approach is consistent with the ambivalence inherent to the logic of productive failure. They are also *Künstlerromane* that revolve around the lives of authors and the social scene they work in. Furthermore, they deal with the process of their own creation, which makes them intensely metafictional. Finally, they all feature a unique narrative situation. There is an overt contrast between the protagonist, who is usually manipulative and egocentric, and the narrator, who transparently discloses these manipulative and egocentric tendencies to the reader. This contrast blurs the line between reliability and unreliability. All of these elements participate in the reflection of productive failure as a literary and philosophical concept.

At the same time, my three case studies highlight different approaches within the New Sincerity. They all understand sincerity as a response to crisis, yet the precise nature of that crisis differs in each case. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* looks to sincerity as a response to a crisis of representation. Eggers, like Wallace, locates this crisis in the workings of Postmodern Irony. His writing not only probes for an alternative, it desires to become that alternative. While *Leaving the Atocha Station* displays a similar desire at times, it is a much more explicit response to a political crisis. By telling the story of the Madrid Train Bombings of 2004, it reflects on the global implications of the American “War on Terror”. *How Should a Person Be?*, on the other hand, understands sincerity as the response to a crisis of identity. Torn between the demands of authenticity and post-feminist self-optimization, Sheila yearns for a new mode of relating to herself and to others.

In addition to this, the three novels also frame the concept of failure in a different way. For Eggers, writing about failure is very much a means to an end. His memoir portrays its constant oscillation between the desire for connection and postmodern solipsism as a ground clearing. Suspended between these two poles, readers have no other choice but to place trust and blind faith into the sincerity of Dave Eggers. The fact that Eggers writes about his life *even though* he is torn apart by doubt is meant to function as a powerful sincerity effect. Lerner’s *LTAS*, by contrast, is largely skeptical about the productivity of his artistic and moral failures. Even though the autodiegetic narrator “Adam” is a thinly veiled alter ego of the author, Lerner constantly reminds readers that there is a considerable distance between his protagonist, his narrator, and himself. While the solipsism and mythomania of Adam are held up as a cautionary tale to readers, *LTAS* does not really offer a suitable alternative. The text is truly torn between doubt and hope. It is the clearest example for Romantic Irony among the three. Unlike the other two novels, *How Should A Person Be?* understands failure as a metaphysical concept. Sheila, the protagonist, takes on the character of the schlemiel, an archetype of Jewish folklore. The schlemiel has to come to terms with the fact that failure is an existential part of their life. Similarly, Sheila’s narrative revolves around the acceptance of failure and suffering on personal and creative level.

Before I analyze my case studies in detail, I will outline the evolution of sincerity as a philosophical and literary concept. The historical context of sincerity extends not just to its Christian roots, the Reformation and the Puritans, but also to thinkers of the Enlightenment such as Rousseau and Diderot. Afterwards, my



theoretical analysis will turn to irony. Specifically, I trace why Romantic Irony and Postmodern Irony are relevant for my concept of “productive failure”. I will also show how the New Sincerity developed as a literary movement in response to Romantic and Postmodern Irony.

There are also important theoretical considerations when it comes to the stylistic choices made by writers of the New Sincerity. In this context, I will explain why *parrhesia* (a complement to sincerity) helps to understand the narrative perspective of my case studies. I will also show how the autofictional framing of these novels is intimately connected to my notion of “productive failure”.

In my close reading of *AHWOSG*, *LTAS* and *HSAPB*, I will then probe their specific entanglement of sincerity and irony. I hope to demonstrate that they all pursue the logic of “productive failure” in a search for connection, communion and trust.

## 2 Theorizing Productive Failure

### 2.1 The Concept of Sincerity

#### 2.1.1 Sincerity as a Christian Ideal

Sincerity is the yearning to bridge the gap between our minds and those of others. This yearning has been a part of sincerity's allure ever since Protestant reformers used it as a rallying cry against the Catholic Church. In order to understand this yearning fully, we have to account for the context around the invention of sincerity in the time of Luther and Calvin.

Before sincerity became the defining virtue of the Reformation, Christian scholars and theologians used the ideal of *concordia* to “describe the proper interplay between self and one’s words and deeds” (Martin 1327). They strove for a harmony between what one believed and said to others. Their ethical justification for *concordia* was a spiritual one: Since the self was created in the image of God, it was the believer’s duty to discover it and communicate it to others (see Martin 1327). In their revolt against the Catholic Church, Martin Luther and John Calvin replaced the ideal of *concordia* with the ideal of *sinceritas*.

Etymologically, this concept is derived from the Latin cognate *sincerus*. Even though there are different explanations for its origin<sup>7</sup> *sincerus* is commonly understood to mean “pure, genuine” (Simpson 508). At first, *sincerus* was used to certify the purity of material goods. In the time of the Reformation, however, it morphed into a moral ideal in the form of *sinceritas*. Where *concordia* had urged Christians to discover the image of God within themselves, Luther and Calvin were convinced that humans were fundamentally different from their creator: “The human person was no longer viewed as in a (potentially) harmonious relation to God,

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<sup>7</sup> Both Trilling (see 12) and Assmann (see 27) derive the etymological origin of sincerity from *sine cera*, “without wax”. The *OED* disputes this claim (see Simpson 508).