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Sincerity

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Relatively close to the beginning of David Foster Wallace’s 2001 short story, ‘Good Old Neon’, the narrator’s psychoanalyst, Dr. Gustafson, outlines the basic problem of ‘sincerity’ faced by the piece’s protagonist:

‘If I understand you right’, he says, ‘you’re saying that you’re basically a calculating, manipulating person who always says what you think will get somebody to approve of you or form some impression of you you think you want’.

(Wallace 2005: 145)

While Neal, the story’s narrator, notes that this is an overly simplistic representation of his mental state, he confirms its basic accuracy in the story and goes on to give his theory of a ‘fraudulence paradox’:

The fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud. And the more of a fraud you felt like, the harder you tried to convey an impressive or likable image of yourself so that other people wouldn’t find out what a hollow, fraudulent person you really were.

(Wallace 2005: 147)

In this chapter, following the cue of Adam Kelly, I will argue that the problem of ‘sincerity’ raised here sits at the thematic heart of a body of post-boomer authors, including David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, Rachel Kushner and Jonathan Franzen (Kelly 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). As I will show, this is no accident but, instead, a calculated, reactionary response against a perceived fraudulence paradox within a specific style of mid-to-late twentieth-century writing: ironic postmodern metafiction, to which I will turn later. Finally, however, I will also complicate the straight narrative of a turn to ‘sincerity’ as overly simplistic; it is never just a case of sincerity or irony and the two can co-exist.

To explore these claims and the historical lineage within which they sit, this chapter will consist of three sections. The first section will set out the traits and definitions of ‘sincerity’, ‘authenticity’ and the ‘postmodern metafiction’ against which the (New) Sincerity movement must be
framed. The second section will turn to the manifesto documents of the ‘group’, a significant portion of which will examine specific statements of David Foster Wallace, the acknowledged progenitor of this ‘movement’. The final section will detail the ways in which these statements manifest themselves within several contemporary works, while also bringing attention to a range of authors who continue to consciously rebel against this turn. Ultimately, while providing a broad narrative of the historical emergence of this trend, I also want to re-think some of the assertions made about secrecy and performance that have surrounded its description to-date.

**Sincerity, authenticity and postmodern irony**

The brief excerpts above from ‘Good Old Neon’ illustrate one of the core problems of writing about sincerity: the term is clearly closely linked to, but separate from, ‘authenticity’. So what is the difference? Is there a difference? Elizabeth Markovits and others deny that such a divide exists, or at least claim that it is of little use for many discussions (Markovits 2008: 21). However, in a distinction first taken seriously in the contemporary era by Lionel Trilling, authenticity is usually thought of as an exact correlation between one’s hidden inner ‘self’ and one’s outer assertion and behaviour; a mode in which ‘there is no within and without’ (Trilling 1972: 93). Unfortunately, if authenticity is about the erasure of a divide between an individual’s inner essence and its outer expression, a number of difficulties emerge. For one, this authenticity can only be seen as true if one knows one’s own inner essence. However, does this ‘inner essence’ even exist and what is it? Such questions show that authenticity is actually embroiled in the difficulties of knowing oneself that are inherent in any age after psychoanalysis, although these queries also reach back to the slogan of the Delphic oracle. After all, how can you be true to your ‘inner self’ or ‘essence’ if you don’t wholly know yourself? That said, most people have a belief that they do know how they feel and also possess an internal representation of themselves – a self-image – that could be said to constitute their authentic self.

Sincerity, on the other hand, is seen in antiquity as a ‘moral excellence’ deriving from Book Four of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* wherein a person is deemed sincere if he or she is ‘truthful in both speech and conduct when no considerations of honesty come in’ (Aristotle 2009: 102–103). Sincerity is, in the interpretation that I will advance here, a type of honesty that is not merely concerned with an accuracy in one’s statements to others but is rather based on checking future actions against previous speech and behaviour. Although this differs somewhat from Trilling’s definition of sincerity as ‘a congruence between avowal and actual feeling’ (Trilling 1972: 2), this is unavoidable: the only way in which ‘actual feeling’ can be seen is through action that is verified in a social situation. If you say you will do something, do you make every effort to follow through on it truthfully? If you state a belief, do you truly mean it and can this be publicly seen in your subsequent actions?

Of course, it is possible and frequently necessary to believe someone else is speaking sincerely before one has seen the public proof that he or she will follow through on his or her words – it would be a grim world were it otherwise. We have all developed strategies for dealing with this unknowable future and lack of proof, using, for example, a person’s past record for truthfulness and the persuasiveness of his or her avowal as signifiers; ‘I love you’, s/he said. However, any future betrayal of this sincerity will mean that such a belief was misplaced. Sincerity is, therefore, a social phenomenon pertaining to trust that unfolds between a faith in the present performance of avowal (a belief in a person’s words and intentions) and the empirical verification of future action (the proof that they have made good on their words). Sincerity is an ongoing negotiation between trust, public performance and proof, between the rhetoric of the present and the action of the future.
As ideas of sincerity and authenticity are not unchanging but differ from culture to culture, a few examples will serve to demonstrate the differentiation between sincerity and authenticity as they currently exist before we return to literature. Firstly, assuming that authenticity really exists, it is possible to behave authentically, but insincerely. If your authentic self is a liar and you make a promise on which you subsequently renege, you were insincere but authentic. Secondly, in an example that I owe to Orlando Patterson, one can be sincere but inauthentic. Patterson notes that people may be authentically prejudiced but that this does not prohibit them from behaving according to negotiated standards of society, decency and self-consistency (sincerity):

I couldn’t care less whether my neighbors and co-workers are authentically sexist, racist or ageist. What matters is that they behave with civility and tolerance, obey the rules of social interaction and are sincere about it. The criteria of sincerity are unambiguous: Will they keep their promises? Will they honor the meanings and understandings we tacitly negotiate? Are their gestures of cordiality offered in conscious good faith? (Patterson 2006)

This is an instance of sincere inauthenticity. The other permutations (insincere inauthenticity and authentic sincerity) are also possible but I will refrain from laying these out in detail here (for a full analysis of these, see Eve 2016: 123). The take-away point, however, is that the terms ‘authenticity’ and ‘sincerity’ are linked as they both focus on a truth to oneself, but they are also fundamentally distinct in the interpretation I am advancing here: only an individual can tell whether they are being authentic (if they even can) but sincerity is a societal, public virtue that can be verified and judged by others.

As a final note, Trilling’s thesis is that, when he was writing in the 1970s, contemporary society had become fixated on notions of authenticity at the expense of sincerity. Since that time, however, there seems to have been another reversal back to sincerity (although critics might question whether these shifts are true movements or simply different priorities of classification). This shift back to sincerity from the late-1980s, as Markovits reads it, finds its clearest articulation in Jürgen Habermas’s project of communicative action. Under such a theory, sincerity forms a new cornerstone in the field of so-called discourse ethics. In other words, as I intimated earlier, ‘mutual trust’, fostered through sincerity, is a crucial prerequisite to any kind of societal cooperation, in Habermas’s formulation (Habermas 1990: 136; Markovits 2008: 20).

This shift back towards a focus on sincerity can also be seen in various art-forms. Consider, for example, the 1993 film Groundhog Day, in which Bill Murray is doomed to repeat the same twenty-four hours over and over until he comes to a more ethical existence. In the film, Murray at first behaves insincerely in his attempts to win over Andie MacDowell’s character; he tries to learn her desires and to feign a set of false coincidences in their interests so that she will sleep with him. As the film progresses and it becomes clear that this will not work – and also that Murray’s character cannot die – he decides to spend his energies ensuring that, for one day, he does nothing but help other people, thereby improving himself. As a result of this, his authentic self is changed and MacDowell’s character falls in love with Murray’s. Once more, this demonstrates Trilling’s thesis that authenticity is privileged. However, Murray’s character is also no longer insincere; he avows, feels and acts without irony. His inner self has been changed so that he has no desire to be insincere any longer. He is a straight-talking, sincere (and now loveable) character. In this way, he becomes authentically sincere and the two are once more linked. What this means for contemporary fiction, however, requires some unpacking.
To understand the literary turn towards sincerity in the last twenty-five years, it is crucial to trawl back through the history of a certain mode of literary fiction that came to prominence circa 1960s America: postmodern metafiction. As we will see shortly, when I turn to David Foster Wallace’s ‘manifesto’ documents, the primary targets against which the sincerity group act – at least in the sphere of literary fiction, rather than poetry – are a series of, for the most part white, male writers whose writings were the subject of intense academic critical scrutiny from the 1970s onwards, namely: John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Jorge Luis Borges, Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelemy, William H. Gass, William Gaddis, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Powers; and, on the other side of the Pond: Umberto Eco and John Fowles. While the stylistic traits that these writers share can also be seen in, for instance, the novels of Toni Morrison or Ishmael Reed, the status of these latter authors as ‘African American writers’ has led to a privileging of the sociological and historical aspects of their work over its aesthetic qualities and thus the similarities between these writers and their white postmodern counterparts has received less attention (Jablon 1997: 21).

For the discussion at hand, the predominant stylistic and thematic characteristics of this subset of postmodern literature can easily be summarised as: irony; reflexivity and metafiction (fiction about fiction or the act of writing itself); reworkings of history; a playful mode that teases the reader; paranoia; and non-linearity (both of narrative and of the chronologies represented). These authors embrace and extend the project of high modernist experiment with often-lengthy and fragmented works that seek new modes of representation to counter the perceived failings of literary realism, namely that the supposedly objective and linear aspects of the nineteenth-century realist novel are not commensurate with lived experience. The undoing of the linear chronology and categorical moral certitude of the nineteenth-century realist novel finds its climax in the representations of a fragmented, complex and overlapping body of literature that the postmodernists claim more accurately represents life.

To understand sincerity in literature, as we shall see shortly with a return to David Foster Wallace, one of the core components that needs to be analysed is the supposition that the irony of postmodern literature ‘is parasitic on sincerity’, a claim that Markovits complicates (Markovits 2008: 36). Indeed, those contemporary authors seeking new ways of engaging with sincerity in their fiction are not rejecting all aspects of postmodern literature; the complexity, fragmentation and even the historical subject matter often remains (see, for instance Letzler 2017: 87). Instead, the core facet that these authors of the (New) Sincerity reject in their aesthetic is postmodern irony while in their philosophy they retain a postmodern incredulity at the idea of an authentic self. Interestingly, this complicates any narrative of a swing from authenticity to sincerity but is rather focused on the way in which irony, framed as an incongruity, is antithetical to a sincere public ethic (Gordon 1996: 134; Markovits 2008: 90). While I will deal with the ‘why?’ aspect of this in the next section, it is worth taking a few moments to consider how this might appear in a literary sense; after all, from my above examples, it seems clear what it could mean for a person to behave with differing degrees of sincerity, but it is less obvious what the literary equivalent of this might be. In order to understand this transcription of a behavioural description to the literary realm, it is important to think about two different spheres of ‘action’, both within narrative and without: authorship and intra-textual voice.

To begin with the author’s position with regard to sincerity, I can think of no better example than the one already furnished by Kelly who notes of Wallace’s short-story ‘Octet’ that it is extremely difficult – or even impossible – for a work of fiction to truly (or sincerely) interrogate the truth of its own performance (Kelly 2010: 143). This is because for an author of fiction to be sincere, they should communicate in some way within a text that they are aware of the falsehood inherent to literary representation; fiction should be, at least to some extent,
self-aware metafiction. However, as Mark Currie sees it, this is not truly possible: ‘[i]t is not enough that metafiction knows that it is fiction; it must also know that it is metafiction if its self-knowledge is adequate’, thus prompting an infinite regress (Currie 1995: 1). This leads Kelly to conclude that ‘in Wallace’s fiction the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation – sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation’ (Kelly 2010: 143). The first half of this statement – that fiction cannot represent the writer’s sincere intentions – seems uncontentious and forms the basis of the many reading methods that disregard authorial intent, such as those of Roland Barthes that have their roots in the New Critical movement. The second half, though, is more difficult. In the definition of sincerity that I outlined above, sincerity is always only about a trade-off between belief and representation and its future self-consistency; whether or not the hidden inner state of an ‘authentic’ self is truly represented in that consistency can be seen, as does Patterson, as irrelevant. Like Wittgenstein’s ‘private object’, it ‘drops out of consideration’ (Wittgenstein 2001, sec. 293).

These limitations of fictional representation are well laid out by David Shields who, in Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, appears sceptical of the novel’s future (and instead seems to champion a type of literary journalism, a form to which Wallace was much accustomed). Instead, Shields signals the interlinked problems of authenticity and sincerity that the novel will never wholly master (and that literary journalism should instead honestly face): ‘What does it mean to set another person before the camera, trying to extract something of his or her soul? [. . .] Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?’ (Shields 2011: 79–80). The novel never can.

In this sense, then, a sincere author can never be represented within the text and this is not the point of the New Sincerity. As Kelly puts it, ‘it is difficult to imagine why one would write fiction if convincing the reader of one’s own sincerity was the prime motivation’ (Kelly 2017a: 21). This does not mean, however, that nothing can be done because, in at least my reading, the consistency of a text’s ‘truth to itself’ can stand in for this function. This is distinctly not to mean that a text cannot contradict itself; to contain Walt Whitman’s famous multitudes is the prerogative of literature. It is instead to say that fiction must drop any claim to the representation of an author’s inner truth: literature is always an outward performance, a representation. Instead, to be sincere, in my reading (and departing from Kelly’s) literature must make good on its function to represent well (to engender belief in the reason for its avowals – even when metaphorical and implausible) and to represent in a manner consistent with its subject (which stands in for future verification of the avowal, even when contested through varying interpretation). Literature that persuades the reader of the necessity of its aesthetic composition is analogous to the individual who convincingly says: ‘I promise’. Whether the promise is borne out is deferred, perhaps indefinitely, into the future.

There are many instances in literary history that do not hold up to this standard of sincerity or occasions where the understanding of a text’s sincerity has changed. Consider, for instance, the failure of Jane Eyre through the disjunct between Brontë’s statement that ‘conventionality is not morality’ and the subsequent need for the death of Bertha Mason in the novel that allows Jane to marry, as is made clear in the many postcolonial readings of this text. Likewise, in a very different epoch of the novel, the sincerity of Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five is cast into doubt when his deeply sardonic text can only write its counter-narrative of the Dresden bombing through denigration of the Holocaust and the use of the research work of a Holocaust-denier, David Irving (see Watts 1994). Of course, there are problems here of interpretation, ambiguity, reader reception, authorial intention (or otherwise). That said, sincerity in literature, decoupled from authenticity, is – at least in part – about appropriateness and consistency of representation.
The sincerity manifesto

As I have previously outlined in an article on ‘metamodernism’ (Eve 2012), David Foster Wallace’s 1995 novel, *Infinite Jest*, was, in part, an attempt to evade the problems of postmodern irony, problems that he had previously described in an interview as ‘sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, [and a] suspicion of all constraints on conduct’ (McCaffery 1993: 147). It is, however, in DFW’s 1993 article ‘E Unibus Pluram’ (an inversion of the usual motto of the United States that in this case reads: ‘from one, many’) that he most clearly outlines the problems that he saw emerging from postmodern fiction and from the attempts that were already under steam to resolve them. It is this document, above all others, that could be called ‘the sincerity manifesto’.

Given this claim – that this is a manifesto for fiction – you might find it strange to learn that ‘E Unibus Pluram’ is an essay primarily concerned with television. More specifically, it is an essay that details the ways in which various televisual tropes of irony directly informed specific writers’ approaches. To comprehend this, it is first of all important to understand the specific definition of irony with which Wallace’s essay is playing. In his view, the reason that ‘television was practically made for irony’ is that ‘TV is a bisensuous medium’ (Wallace 1993: 161). In this setup it becomes possible for the visual to undermine the aural, for the presentation of ‘sights that undercut what’s said’ (Wallace 1993: 161). Although Wallace doesn’t make the explicit connection, despite not being ‘bisensuous’, writing is also capable of (at least) two simultaneously different presentations: form and content. While this distinction is somewhat false – after all, form is a type of content – it is possible to signal one set of values in writing through what is represented and to undermine them through the way in which it is represented. For the most trivial visual instance, a poem that described a circle while being laid out in a square would achieve this. More frequently in fiction, however, this ironic conflict is played out in sarcastic humour being used to describe events that are beyond laughter; Thomas Pynchon’s ironic quip in *V.* that ‘[t]his is only 1 per cent of six million, but still pretty good’ deploys black humour in its representation of both the Herero genocide in the German Südwest and the later systematic extermination of the Jewish people, homosexuals, Roma, Slavs, the disabled, communists, socialists and others in the Holocaust (Pynchon 1995: 245).

The area where Wallace does signal two conflicting modes in postmodern fiction is in its frequent combination of ‘high’ (difficult) and ‘low’ (popular) cultural components. Just two of the examples that Wallace gives of this are Pynchon’s character Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow* meeting Mickey Rooney while on a secret drugs run known as the ‘Potsdam Pickup’ and DeLillo’s characters’ discussion of Elvis Presley in *White Noise* in obscenely analytical/academic terms (Wallace 1993: 166). Of this phenomenon, as well as noting that DeLillo and Pynchon were ahead of their time (not necessarily in a good way), Wallace diagnoses the reason why this can work: ‘Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images: what binds us became what we stood witness to. No one did or does see this as a good change’ (Wallace 1993: 166). Furthermore, in contrast to Modernism’s similar techniques, the way in which these ‘low’ cultural images are used in contemporary literary fiction, for Wallace, are: ‘(1) to help create a mood of irony and irreverence, (2) to make us uneasy and so ‘comment’ on the vapidity of U.S. culture, and (3) most important, these days, to be just plain realistic’ (Wallace 1993: 167).

Before moving on from Wallace, who must by rights occupy a prominent place in any discussion of a turn towards sincerity, it is worth closing the second part of this chapter by examining the state of affairs as they stood in 1993 and also by framing Wallace’s prescription remedy for such problems. Mid-way through ‘E Unibus Pluram’, Wallace sets out his core statements that set sincerity in motion:
I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat.

[. . . ]

My two big premises are that a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young Americans, has lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television; and that, on the other hand, televised culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault.

(Wallace 1993: 171)

From Wallace’s essay – which I would recommend that readers consult in its entirety – we see a lineage traced that points the way to a clear future trajectory. From the founding fathers of postmodernism, we move to ‘image-fiction’, which is the next stage (the ‘subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction’ to which Wallace refers). Examples of image fiction are found in Coover’s The Public Burning, Max Apple, William T. Vollman’s You Bright and Risen Angels and The Rainbow Stories, Mark Leyner’s My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist and the later fictions of both Pynchon and, especially, Don DeLillo. But image fiction is not the be-all and end-all. Namely, for Wallace, it shares too much in common with postmodern fiction’s tendency to represent pop-cultural phenomena with a vaguely condescending tone of irony and self-consciousness, rather than truly breaking down the distinction between high and low culture. ‘And make no mistake’, Wallace writes, ‘irony tyrannizes us’ (Wallace 1993: 183). If we must always refer to our cultural landscape in a tone that undercuts belief, it becomes impossible be sincere. Wallace, the physician, attempts to heal himself in his later works Infinite Jest and The Pale King (with some success) but for the rest of this chapter, I will look at the authors influenced by this statement, he prescribes two potential routes: 1.) the fiction writer can become reactionary and turn to conservatism, as I will argue is sometimes the case for Jonathan Franzen; or, 2.) the fiction writer can risk being deemed ‘sentimental’ – they can risk affect, or feeling, in their work (Wallace 1993: 193).

Contemporary writers exploring sincerity

Since Wallace wrote, the literary field has changed considerably; after all, this is only to be expected when gazing more than a decade into the future. In the remainder of this chapter I will attempt to give a ‘map’ of some current American writers who have followed in Wallace’s wake specifically in terms of their relationship to this school of sincerity – Jonathan Franzen, Jennifer Egan and Rachel Kushner – and I will also present the dissenters, framed through the continuing outputs in the twenty-first century of Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed.

Of the writers who sit in a lineage from David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen has a particular claim to the inheritance. An early pen-pal of Wallace (who was somewhat inexplicably in awe of Franzen’s muddy novel The Twenty-Seventh City (1988)) they remained friends until the end of Wallace’s life. This was a complex friendship, both marred by a rivalry in which Wallace wrote of being ‘so jealous, so sickly searingly envious of you’ (Max 2012) and subsequently contaminated by the understandable expression of pain that Franzen felt in the wake of his grief at Wallace’s suicide, a grief that led him to condemn the popular beatification of Wallace and even to write that ‘I will pass over the question of diagnosis (it’s possible he was not simply depressive) and the
question of how such a beautiful human being had come by such vividly intimate knowledge of the thoughts of hideous men’ (Franzen 2011).

While, of course, as here and below, more comprehensive guides to these writers can be found elsewhere in this volume, Franzen’s relationship to a new-found school of sincerity is most clearly played out in the movement from The Corrections (2006) to Freedom (2010). Eschewing the density of his previous works (The Twenty-Seventh City and Strong Motion (1992)), The Corrections is a nonetheless lengthy novel that demonstrates a ‘continued affinit[y] to postmodernism’, as Stephen J. Burn puts it (Burn 2008: 128). This is most clearly demonstrated in Franzen’s choice both to feature an academic as a protagonist (Chip Lambert) and in his reconfiguration of a single phrase (‘the corrections’) to hold multiple meanings at different points in the text (as seen in Pynchon’s V. (1963)). This latter aspect carries with it a sense of irony. This is because, with any new encounter of the term ‘the corrections’, the reader disregards his or her old understanding of the term as naïve and incongruous; an insufficiently experienced reading. So, for example, Chip’s ‘major, quick set of corrections’ (Franzen 2006: 34) to his script gives way to an italicised discussion of the world’s first modern prison, ‘still the basic model for corrections in the United States today’ (Franzen 2006: 239), which then yields to Alfred’s belief that ‘a last child was a last opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and make corrections’ (Franzen 2006: 323) until we encounter the final meaning of the term with regard to the technological boom: ‘[t]he correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor’ (Franzen 2006: 647). If the text’s purported core ethic pertains to self-reflection and change (making corrections to oneself), then The Corrections represents that phenomenon, but does so through cynicism and ironic awareness of one’s past self.

Franzen’s later novel, Freedom (2010), takes a very different tack. While this text represents a return to the ecological themes that had first surfaced in Strong Motion, the narrative is chronologically linear (except at one key point which I will discuss shortly), uncomplicated and depersonalised. The text contains far fewer nods to its postmodern forebears but seems to want to show the problems of moral action. Indeed, every single character in Freedom is compromised in one way or another: from Joey, the young Republican who nonetheless enters into a business deal that endangers the lives of American soldiers, through to Walter, the all-round nice-guy and environmentalist who is willing to sell out to a mining company so long as they protect just one single species of (not even currently endangered) bird. In some senses, then, Freedom represents its subject well, in the ethical sense. In at least one reading, however, Franzen blows it. While open, ambiguous endings are the hallmark of postmodern fiction, in Franzen’s choice to close Freedom with the definitive reunion of Walter and Patty, the novel retreats into the conservatism of which Wallace warned. This is because the reunion is only made possible through the death of Lalitha, a character who seems little more than a plot device and who is consistently sexualised and referred to as ‘dark-skinned’, an awful stereotyping that finds its locus in her need ‘to do the Downward Dog and be whammed from behind’ (Franzen 2010: 466).

Despite this potential problem in Franzen’s later output, there is a portion of the text (and the way in which it specifically narrates Lalitha’s death) that is worth quoting:

The woman he loved loved him. He knew this for certain, but it was all he knew for certain, then or ever; the other vital facts remained unknown. Whether she did, in fact, drive carefully. [. . .] Whether a coal truck had come flying around one of the curves and done what a coal truck did somewhere in West Virginia every week. Or whether
somebody in a high-clearance 4x4 [. . .] veered into her lane or tailgated her or passed her too narrowly or even deliberately forced her off the shoulderless road.  

(Franzen 2010: 500)  

This moment of intense emotional anguish for Walter and the reader is framed through a temporal anomaly in which, suddenly, everything is once more speculative and unknown. While, as I have noted, this death of a woman of Indian descent is problematically ‘used’ in Freedom to allow the white American reunion at the end, it does signal a particular affective (i.e. ‘emotional’) strategy in contemporary fiction. For, by abruptly jutting between time periods within the narrative it becomes possible for the novelist to achieve the poignancy of the knowledge of future hindsight; a type of anticipated retrospection. At the same time, this is coupled with a naivety in the moment; a presentness that doesn’t resort to any kind of disdainful dramatic irony. In other words, this narrative is not authentic because the authorial perspective at this point does not know the authentic truth. In doing so, it brings sincerity to the fore.

A superb example of this technique is also found in Jennifer Egan’s acclaimed novel, A Visit from the Goon Squad (2010). In a gut-wrenching moment in this text, two young teenagers – a brother and sister – are dancing with one another. At this point, the action suddenly jumps forward, within a single sentence, to reveal that this moment, the two children dancing, will be a memory that Charlie ‘will return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father’s house at twenty-eight’ (Egan 2011: 87). This type of time-distortion is common in both postmodern and ‘post-postmodern’ fiction. Indeed, one can think also of Froebischer in David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas, who writes in his own diary of how he ‘Shot [himself] through the roof of [his] mouth at [the upcoming] 5 a.m.’ (Mitchell 2008: 487). While Mitchell’s use is cynical and ironic, and while both of these examples focus on death, the way in which Egan deploys this technique is in the service of pathos. As I have already noted, this pathos is the function of two different moments of knowledge, at three different locations. The two types of knowledge, and their three places are: 1.) Charlie’s naivety (or lack of knowledge) at the current moment in the text; 2.) Charlie’s knowledge in the future of her brother’s death and the memory of the moment when he was alive and they were dancing; and 3.) the reader’s knowledge, outside the text, of both of these aspects. While, strictly speaking, characters in a book do not have ‘knowledge’ in the same way as a reader, the depiction of these human situations in fiction allows us to think of them as though they are real because we can empathise with the position. This conjunction of pathos, empathy and naivety fused with knowledge is not used, in Egan’s worlds, to cynically deplore the naivety of the present, but to value it more highly and to create affect. Wallace accurately noted the danger of this mode for the writer: it can cross over into being branded as ‘sentimental’. Whether or not this is the case will depend, of course, upon how cynical you yourself are as a reader. Egan’s framework, though, is ethically consistent in its vision to present a world where there is irony and cynicism, but to do so without cynicism.

Finally, this acceptance, but progression, from tropes of irony is also well-reflected in Rachel Kushner’s strange text, The Flamethrowers (2013). Clearly a historical novel, to at least some degree, the text explores a genealogy of Italian art, from the Futurists through to the motorcycle/photographic landscape art of the narrative’s 1970’s protagonist. One of the core aspects of this novel is the linkage of the various depictions of misogyny, violence, sexuality and aggression to the art-forms of speed, which are historically backed by fascism. However, the generic placement of this text is far from straightforward. The novel contains so many metatextual elements, historical ironies and aspects of time-distortion (via the trope of ‘speed’) that it would be easy to situate it within a postmodern framework. That it does so, however, in a mode that seems not only unsentimental...
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but also, as noted in many reviews, ‘hyper-masculine’, brings us back to thinking about sincerity and ‘straight-talking’ once more.

To give just a few instances in this novel that examine this trope, one could think of the fact that Ronnie’s art, in the novel, is deemed ‘too flatly ironic’ (Kushner 2013: 144) or the metatextual moment wherein the story of the core motorcycle accident that Sandro relates is framed as ‘far-fetched, outlandish’ (Kushner 2013: 179), evoking the mode of the texts that James Wood has dubbed ‘hysterical realism’. Aspects of sincerity are also seen, however, in the way in which the novel makes knowledge/naivety subjective and time-rooted. So, for example, in the discussion of whether it is now passé to attempt to shock through transparent dresses, Gloria is cynical, noting that the phenomenon dates back to 1971. The narrator, however, outside of Gloria’s cynical, critical and insincere speech, simply states: ‘But it’s new to her, I should have said but didn’t. She’s on her timeline, Gloria, not yours or anyone else’s’ (Kushner 2013: 306).

However, and to conclude, it is in Kushner’s novel that we find, to date, one of the strongest expressions of what it means to write about sincerity in contemporary literature. It is not, as has been proposed, a simple matter of transcribing statements about sincerity into the mouths of characters and/or narrators, as seen above. It seems, rather, to be about exploring the histories of irony’s dominance and the need for sincerity within fiction and reality. It is, therefore, apt that, when Reno confronts Ronnie about his brother, he retorts:

Let me introduce you to a concept. Two concepts, actually. Important tools for surviving the human condition. One is called irony. Say it with me. Eye-ron-ee. Now, the next is harder to pronounce, but let’s try. Diss-sim-you-lay-shon. Giving the false appearance that you are not something.

(Kushner 2013: 315)

As Ronnie (‘I, Ronnie’/’Eye-ron-ee’/irony) sees it, irony is not the truth but it is an important rhetorical tool for surviving one’s own timeline; it is a mode of self-preservation, an aspect overlooked by those who seek only pure conformity to the ideals of sincere speech. What is clear from all of the above is that a delicate balance is always maintained in fiction between the use of irony and the desire to speak the truth about reality – and to speak it plainly. Much contemporary fiction, particularly American, has taken this as one of its preoccupations in a reaction against the privileging of authenticity but also in a move against postmodern irony.

As a final remark, it is worth noting that several writers of the postmodern school evidently frame the assault on irony and swing towards sincerity as an over-reaction. Thomas Pynchon’s 2013 novel, Bleeding Edge, for instance, swipes at Wallace’s counter-ironic stance, scathingly noting of Heidi’s article in that text that it ‘argues that irony, assumed to be a key element of urban gay humor and popular through the nineties, has now become another collateral casualty of 11 September because somehow it did not keep the tragedy from happening’ (Pynchon 2013: 335; Eve 2014: 27).

Likewise, in 2011, after an 18 year hiatus from writing novels, Ishmael Reed published Juice! with the Dalkey Archive Press. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Paul (‘Bear’) Blessings, a cartoonist who is obsessed with the OJ Simpson trials and who rigorously protests the innocence of the former NFL star and actor. Indeed, at every instance possible, Bear reads OJ’s troubles as enhanced, or more frequently entirely produced, by structural racism; after all, ‘The men who run the networks prefer blondes’ (Reed 2011: 75). Were this simply a tool of communication, though, a polemic rant on the continued deplorable state of US race-relations, Juice! could hardly be said to merit its sub-title, ‘a novel’. Instead, often through an ironic parody of academic discourse, Reed seeks to complicate his protagonist’s distorted narrator in order to
extend the traditional postmodernist deconstruction of binaries (Reed 2011: 193). Indeed, Bear alternates between poles of paranoia and viable critique, the one continually undercutting the plausibility of the latter in order to show, at one remove, how it is that cultural reading practices of paranoia and truth degrade the efficacy of radical critique. Such an act of extreme ironic complication in recent contemporary fiction shows that, regardless of how much we would like to impose taxonomies, the battles of the sincerity wars are far from over.

Notes

1 Note, though, that Plato’s concept of parhēsia, later explored extensively by Michel Foucault, could also be seen as intimately related to notions of ‘sincerity’ (see Markovits 2008).

2 One also has to be careful that this appraisal of consistency is local and specific, though; a type of appraisal that Markovits calls ‘trustworthiness’ (204).

3 The latter portions of this definition evolved from a conversation with Ruth Charnock, to whom I am extremely grateful.

Works cited


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