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The Rhetoric of the Rearguard? Sincerity in Innovative American Poetics

Nicholas Manning

- 1 In the context of twentieth-century American verse, poetic sincerity has undergone a problematic literary historical evolution. Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, proponents of sincerity as an aesthetic and ethical criterion often eschewed values of polysemy and ambiguity in favour of semantic and subjective transparency. Advocates of these prior models frequently sought to use poetic language in order to attain more stable points of anchorage—whether in the self or the world—beyond the moving morass of poetic signs, with their ever expanding semiosis. In doing so, such post-Romantic conceptions often paradoxically sought to transcend, or even abolish, the agonistic tensions of poetic language itself.
- 2 Poetic sincerity can never be understood, however, as that which provides an escape from language; depending on a readerly act of deliberate credulity, its potential value may only be glimpsed if we accept that sincerity is necessarily a construction of language, as imbricated in the problems of self and sense as any other verbal artifice. In my study *Rhétorique de la sincérité* (2013), I argue that poetic sincerity functions much like a rhetorical figure, in that it never ceases to illuminate the complex web of enunciative, axiological and identarian issues at stake in modern poetic praxis. For this reason, I abstain from proposing a reductive definition of the likes that Lionel Trilling and Henri Peyre provided in the mid-twentieth century, respectively “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling,” (Trilling, 2) and the demand that a writer “conform his life to his ideas” (Peyre, 237). Such adequational models focus the question of sincerity on a mythical, and in the end futile, quest for congruence—in the case of Trilling, between avowal and actual feeling; in the case of Peyre, between life and ideas. We can never determine if such congruence has been attained for the reason that the two terms of this agreement remain impossible to define, much less theoretically equate. What, after all, is

“actual feeling”? How is actual feeling to be distinguished from a supposedly artificial affect when all poetic emotion is necessarily, in part, a construction of an ethos, and thus an artificial product of a self-reflexive interrogation? What, moreover, is it to “conform one’s life to one’s ideas”? What is “life”? Which “ideas”? Not to mention how such a congruence may manifest itself in the formal confines of a poetic.

- 3 Rather than restricting the criterion to a set definition, I thus propose expanding, or rather exploding poetic sincerity’s hermeneutic limits so that it concerns—as is the case for many modern poets—not only expression but also perception; not only affect and emotionality but also conception and intellection; not only the affirmation of a unified or authentic self but also the dramatisation of diverse lyrical identities which often enter into dialogue or conflict. Rather than applying a generalised, *a priori* definition of sincerity to specific poetics, we may rather approach the question inversely—that is, by observing that each poetic forges its own rhetorical modes of negotiating the question of sincere discourse. This approach does not lead to an absolute heterogeneity or relativism, wherein such is the multiplicity of the pluralised sincerities on offer, the theorisation of the criterion becomes unfeasible. It rather recognises that no vision of poetic sincerity may be abstracted from the semiotic and profoundly social context within which it actively takes on poetic form.
- 4 The notion of sincerity, associated at the dawn of American poetic modernism with primarily innovative or avant-garde poetics, has steadily metamorphosed—or for some critics, metastasised—into an expressivist, ideational, supposedly conservative poetic value.¹ From a notion used by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in their attacks against Romantic expressivity and ideational excess, it became a notion primarily associated with the affirmation of a unified self, and the expressive adequation of this self’s language with its inner world. In the space of a mere half-century, poetic sincerity thus transformed from a fundamental tenet of radical modernism into an incarnation of lyrical, confessional orthodoxy.
- 5 For the Black Mountain and Objectivist poets of the 1960s, and most notably for Louis Zukofsky, sincerity was far from an expressivist criterion. For such innovative post-war movements it was on the contrary a profoundly phenomenological notion, less concerned with expressive paradigms of “true speech” or with subjective quests for the inner coherency of the self than with the poem as a perceptive encounter with the world. If this is indeed the case, why did the Zukofskian model of a perceptive sincerity have so few subsequent advocates, while other aspects of Zukofsky’s poetics were readily adopted and integrated into innovative movements such as the New American Poetry or language-centred writing? Why does the term “sincerity” conspicuously fade from view in the theoretical and critical texts of innovative poetic traditions from the 1970s on? And lastly, why have the occasional efforts to reintegrate sincerity into avant-garde poetic traditions—such as the problematic *New Sincerity* of the 1990s—met with limited success?
- 6 I do not hope to provide definitive answers here to these complex questions. I intend instead to help explain this curious literary-historical evolution by tracing a more appropriate historiography of a poetic principle which cannot, in the end, be inherently associated with either so-called avant-garde or arrièrè-garde praxes. In many ways, this disconnect between innovative poetics and the criterion of sincerity may be traced back to the fundamentally wrongheaded association between sincerity and expression. This problematic heritage, reinforced by the theoretical formulations of such post-war critics as Lionel Trilling and Henri Peyre, effectively frustrated the recuperation of sincerity by

innovative traditions. Such recuperation seems possible today not through the creation of new forms of “sincere” expression, but rather by distancing sincerity from the very notion of expressivity itself.

Sincerity as Romantic or Anti-Romantic Criterion?

- 7 In order to understand this shift, we must first try to grasp the unusual historiographical functioning of poetic sincerity more generally. Crucially, sincerity, even moreso than other criteria, is a weapon used by opposing antagonists throughout literary history to defend startlingly divergent visions of literary texts. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in the opposing historical visions espoused by the two major monographs on literary sincerity of the mid-twentieth century, namely *Sincerity and Authenticity* by Lionel Trilling, and *Literature and Sincerity* by Henri Peyre.
- 8 For Lionel Trilling, the literary historical moment when sincerity was the most valued and prized corresponds to the florescence of European Romanticism. Romanticism represents, for Trilling, the high point of an aesthetic theory emphasising a coherent and reflexive ethos, which demands a new expressive congruence between poetic speech and personal identity. Sincerity is thus conceived as a profoundly Romantic principle. Concerning this era, however which Trilling sees as the veritable apotheosis of literary sincerity, Peyre observes: “a score of critics and social interpreters or reformers of literature poured insult on the Romantics [...] because they had lied to themselves or failed to see soberly and lucidly into themselves” (239). Peyre goes on to claim that “the age of sincerity” (137), which he defines as an upheaval in all the arts between 1908 and 1913, was precisely a reaction *against* the perceived falsity and emotional *copia* of Romantic art. He affirms that “for the first time, a literary and artistic revolution was not heralded by the battle cry of ‘Nature and Truth,’ but rather by the determination to be more sincere.” Peyre thus sees sincerity as “an antiromantic reaction [...] directed against what had often been sham in romantic emotions and the excessive or garish expression with which those emotions had been coloured” (239). For Trilling, in contrast,—and in accordance with a vision of Romanticism which we know well from literary encyclopedias—sincerity weakens with the Modernist questioning of the self as a stable source of subjective value:

The [modern] devaluation of sincerity is bound up in an essential although paradoxical way with the mystique of the classic literature of our century, some of whose masters took the position that, in relation to their work and their audience, they were not persons or selves, they were artists, by which they meant they were exactly not, in the phrase with which Wordsworth began his definition of the poet, men speaking to men. (10)

- 9 This vision of Romanticism, and concomitantly of Romantic sincerity, deployed by both Trilling and Peyre, is profoundly skewed and misleading, conveniently ignoring the many examples of high Romantic artifice and rhetorical self-awareness evident in the archly metatextual works of a Byron or Pushkin. As Arlette Michel rightly observes, Romanticism,

[which is] nostalgic regarding the resources of eloquence, often develops in the direction of abundance, of *copia* (this being an oft formulated reproach against Romanticism), of a limited rhetoric where hyperbole, antithesis and the image dominate. But we more often than not forget the Romantic resources of *brevitas*,

ellipsis and litotes, the unsaid and ironic distancing which accentuates both the tragic and the grotesque. (Michel, 1066)²

- 10 It is hardly necessary to underline the almost comic irony of this literary historical conundrum. To summarise: poetic sincerity is for Lionel Trilling a fundamentally Romantic notion, largely neglected by the literature of the beginning of the twentieth century which, for him, was concerned with attempts to attain a greater degree of “objectivity” and “impersonality” (with Trilling’s primary examples being Eliot and Joyce). The two dates, 1908 and 1913, which for Henri Peyre designate the apogee of sincerity as a literary criterion, correspond for Lionel Trilling with the historical moment when the expressive sincerity idolised by European Romanticism underwent its most rapid and serious decline. For Trilling, the heroes of literary sincerity are Wordsworth, Hugo, and Goethe; for Peyre, they are Gide, Bourget, Lasserre, and Rivière.
- 11 To make sense of this disconnect we must perhaps accept that poetic sincerity can never be associated with so-called “inherent” qualities of poetic texts, such as formal simplicity or complexity, unity or fragmentation of the lyrical subject, absence or presence of irony or reflexivity; it is never an autonomous, transcendent criterion existing outside the specific historical, enunciative, and rhetorical contexts in which it takes form. This initial statement is profoundly necessary given the critical tendency to link sincerity with a variety of abstract textual phenomena. According, however, to the aesthetic values being espoused, any of these contrastive textual qualities can be seen as either reinforcing or damaging a particular poem’s specific relationship to a hypothetical sincerity. We may thus say of literary sincerity what Louis Menand observes regarding the term “image,” namely that:
- [It] refers to a fiction every literary theory that uses the term tries to make real; but since what it denotes cannot be settled on to anyone’s complete satisfaction, its meaning is determined not so much by the particular set of practices it is intended to describe as by the particular set of errors its user has enlisted it in reaction against. (29)
- 12 It follows that what a poet or critic says about literary sincerity reveals to us less what sincerity truly *is*, as autonomous term or concept, than it does the general conception of literature that this particular individual is seeking to advocate or prescribe. In other words, it is not with a prior definition of poetic sincerity that we may analyse poems; it is with a prior vision of the poem that we may analyse poetic sincerity.
- 13 This brief methodological statement indicates that sincerity can never be identified as an inherent property of certain poetic works; nor can it be associated with particular formal devices or modes of address. Sincerity rather appears as a profoundly mutable, malleable criterion which, like a true rhetorical figure, can change entirely in accordance with the aesthetic, political, and ethical values with which it is enveloped. Sincerity may just as cogently be associated with supposedly Romantic or anti-Romantic visions of the work of art, and with innovative or mainstream conceptions of contemporary poetic verse—and we may of course wonder to what extent we are not speaking, in both cases, of strikingly similar aesthetic and axiological divides.

The Myth of Sincerity as a Conservative Criterion

- 14 In spite of this, I do not think it an exaggeration to state that, for many readers of contemporary poetry, and certainly for young poets well-versed in notorious innovative

versus mainstream divides, sincerity may intuitively seem one of the most reactionary poetic principles imaginable, associated with naïve visions of a transparent relationship between author and text, or with the unilateral affirmation of an authentic self. Have contemporary proponents of an expressivist sincerity thus managed to make a large majority of readers and critics forget that, for Anglo-American modernism, poetic sincerity was precisely an anti-expressive principle, in stark opposition to what was perceived as the identarian blindness of the Wordsworthian imperative that the poet must be “a man speaking to men”?

- 15 There is thus an apparent effort, on the part of a good number of innovative poets and theorists, to actively dissociate themselves from sincerity as a poetic value, for the reason that sincerity frequently seems too profoundly contaminated with notions of affective expressivity, lyrical ideation and subjective cohesion, to be integrated into the fragmented or meta-reflexive forms of modern innovative verse. This often results in an apparent absence of contemporary efforts to reform, or even to save sincerity, from its reputation as a quietist or mainstream poetic value.
- 16 An initial important idea thus lies in the literary historical observation that this association between poetic sincerity, lyrical expressivity and subjective coherency is in fact fairly recent. Such a conception bypasses the effort of modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and of such New Critics as F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards, to formulate poetic sincerity as an anti-expressive principle, grounded in the exigencies of poetic technique. Some contemporary readers are perhaps familiar with Ezra Pound’s famous “I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (9), or T.S. Eliot’s similar claim that “honesty never exists without great technical accomplishment” (119). By valuing technique, Pound, Eliot and Leavis implicitly sought to reject a particular Romantic vision of sincerity which, emerging out of the Wordsworthian model of the *Preface*, was supposedly based on the denial of technique. While contemporary poets and critics often recognise the extent to which such formulations were an explicit attack against the expressive, “everyman” conception of sincerity espoused by Wordsworth, they less often interrogate why this modernist vision of sincerity as a technical, rhetorical construct, found so few subsequent advocates.
- 17 This apparently intuitive contemporary association of sincerity, however, with mainstream, expressivist or confessionalist traditions, is certainly not confined to readers. Louise Glück’s early nineties essay entitled “Against Sincerity” provides a prime example of the failure, on behalf of a prominent poet, to integrate sincerity as an innovative poetic criterion. In this text, Glück quite cryptically feels it necessary—and this feeling is in itself revealing—to argue that poetry need not be based on lived experience, nor conform to lived experience, in order to be of value:
- We are unnerved by the thought that authenticity, in the poem, is not produced by sincerity. We incline, in our anxiety for formulas, to be literal: we scan Frost’s face compulsively for hidden kindness, having found the poems to be, by all reports, so much better than the man. This assumes our poems are our fingerprints, which they are not. And the processes by which experience is changed—heightened, distilled, made memorable—have nothing to do with sincerity. The truth, on the page, need not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned. (29)
- 18 What is curious in Glück’s formulation is firstly her restriction of poetic sincerity to the reductive confines of the adequation between life and art.³ Is Glück setting up a straw-man, an easily attackable version of poetic sincerity which few poets, even the most lyrically expressivist among them, would be willing to accept? As Peter Campion rightly

observes: “Glück argues that poetic truth stands apart from mere fact, and she takes ‘sincerity’ to stand for the ingenuous desire for a one-to-one relation between what happened and what’s written. The only problem with this is: who can imagine an intelligent person disagreeing?” (n.p.) Campion goes on to provide crucial context for Glück’s apparently unnecessary claim.

To be fair, we should see Glück’s essay in context. In several places in her book of criticism, *Proofs and Theories*, she seems compelled to make an anti-literalist argument, one that carried more force fifteen years ago, during the glut of identity politics and the poetry that drew support from it. It comes to resemble the claims of a movement that has no relation to her own practice.

- 19 Today, it may seem surprising that Glück felt it necessary to counter the simplistic and reductive vision of sincerity proposed by the dominant cultural climate. I am not suggesting, however, that her gesture was entirely unwarranted: rather, the very fact that Glück felt it necessary to write “Against Sincerity” is testament to the extent to which poetry, at least within the wider culture, was, and to many extents still is, perceived according to criteria of subjective adequation, expressive intensity, and identarian transparency. What is problematic in Glück’s essay is not her rejection of sincerity as a simplistic congruence between life and art—about which we may all agree—but rather her failure to postulate other hermeneutic possibilities within the concept. In rejecting poetic sincerity without proposing variant models, innovative poetics risks participating in—and thus reinforcing—the problematic association of sincerity with reductive notions of expressivity, lyrical identity, and a totalizing truth.
- 20 Sincerity’s failure to be fully integrated into the rhetorical and theoretical arsenal of innovative poetic praxis may be further supported by another example, this time from poet and critic Annie Finch. Indeed, the divide between the sincerity valued by what Charles Bernstein has called Mainstream Verse, and the anti-sincerity of so-called innovative poetics, is often so strongly felt that Finch identifies sincerity as *the* central tenet of what she terms anecdotal, quietist poetics: “In contemporary free-verse anecdotal poetry, that mode which Ron Silliman, following Edgar Allan Poe, has called the ‘school of quietude,’ the apparent sincerity of the individual self, or soul, becomes the central transcendent poetic criterion” (Finch, 25). Importantly, Finch is not merely taking aim here at the so-called school of quietude for its reductive concept of poetic sincerity. She is also addressing an explicit critique towards the evacuation of sincerity as a poetic question within the context of late twentieth-century avant-gardes:

Both kinds of poetry gain authenticity in the reader’s eyes to the extent that they appear to leave behind, or transcend, the “poem” as artifice, a crafted piece of language with its conventions of diction and rhythm and distinct, recognizable structural characteristics. Whether the spiritual self or its transcendent object is the center of a contemporary poem, in either case the sensual “body” of the poem, and the language that builds it, is beside the point, for both mainstream and avant-garde critics. Whether purged with Puritanical zeal of anything that disturbs the mundane linguistic flow with the reek of the “poetic” on the one hand, or “fractured,” “fragmented,” “ruptured” with tireless violence on the other, the poem’s body has come to be despised by literary culture. (Finch 26)

- 21 Though we certainly may disagree with Finch here, her critique merits attention. In Finch’s formulation, both “avant-garde” and “arrière-garde” poetries attempt to do away with sincerity as a linguistic, and profoundly rhetorical construct, only they do so for different reasons. For expressivist modes, ranging from post-war confessionalism to “quietist” or “mainstream” forms, sincerity is supposedly *outside* of language, because it

locates an idealised point of juncture between self and world, attained during the expressive energumen of the lyrical sublime. For innovative or “avant” traditions, sincerity is similarly “outside” of language for the reason that it remains a chimerical goal, a symbolic fantasy based on the utopian illusion of an authentic self, and of its transparent modes of ideal speech.

- 22 In other words, fragmentation, whether of the self or of discourse, does not “solve” the problem of poetic sincerity. It merely delays or evacuates it. This failure of sincerity to be integrated into innovative praxis is all the more surprising when one considers the pivotal role played by the term in previous innovative traditions, such as its varied and rich declensions within the poetics of Louis Zukofsky. For a poet such as Zukofsky, sincerity is not a question, as it is for Lionel Trilling, of “congruence between avowal and actual feeling,” nor, as for Henri Peyre, of congruence between lived event and poetic form. Leaving behind these problematic paradigms of adequation, Zukofsky rather identifies sincerity as a phenomenological event:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. (12)

- 23 For Zukofsky, poetic sincerity is a moment of encounter. It manifests itself as an openness to the world which takes account of objects’ inherent dynamism and ontological renewal. It is an attempt not to “think things,” but to “think things as *they exist*”—that is, in the unfolding of their ontological propensities, which imperfectly meet those of the perceptive subject. Shapes and words, objects and signs, graphisms and sonic interplays, ideally relate, in sincerity, as ontological equals. What is described is thus a primarily perceptive experience, in which a poetic relationship with the world is founded on the apprehension of the world as object, and on writing as a process which itself strives to attain the status of objecthood.

The Absence of Zukofskian Successors

- 24 Though the conceptual values of Zukofskian sincerity—ranging from affective and perceptive intensities to the ethical imperative of what Robert Creeley calls “man standing by his word”⁴—continue to be deployed in the work of such poets as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, George Oppen and Denise Levertov, the term itself comes to be colored by increasing ambivalence, with Creeley also claiming: “This issue of sincerity in itself can be a kind of refuge of fools” (Creeley, n.p.). Further tracing its decline, we may contrast the conception of poetic sincerity within post-war poetics, still positively influenced by a Zukofskian phenomenology, with what the term is generally taken to mean in contemporary poetics today. To do this, I will concentrate briefly on an essay by Seth Abramson in which he returns to the movement of the *New Sincerity* of the 1990s. Abramson begins as follows:

It’s not so often anymore that we read a book of poetry and think to ourselves, “This poet means exactly what they say.” It’s a startling realization, that we so often praise the artistry of a poem or collection for having accurately captured the artistic ambitions of the poet, but less commonly consider how and when contemporary poetry is nonfictional, a direct address from the bared poet within the poet. (n.p.)

25 *The New Sincerity* represents the desire, Abramson observes, “now common among contemporary poets, to achieve escape velocity from the self-conscious irony that marked literature at the tail end of last century, as well as the dry literary theory that has marked presumptive avant-garde poetics since the 1970s.” In Abramson’s formulation, the effort to escape irony entails an effort to escape theory. This is in reality unsurprising, given that sincerity has a long history as an ostensibly anti-theoretical concept. In truth, this apparent anti-theoretical quality of sincerity is an aspect of its enduring myth. It is precisely because sincerity is a profoundly, even intrinsically theoretical notion, that it deserves our full theoretical attention. Abramson goes on:

We see sincerity opening its eyes and accepting what it sees—including the presumptive insincerity of multiple selves and multiple realities—as ineluctable, true, and essential. Thus lines which may at first appear ironic or sincere must be read as existing outside, or above, either irony or sincerity. In this way the poet-speaker creates a new metareality, one in which all elements of constituent realities are true but by themselves terminologically insufficient.

26 In contrast to Louise Glück some twenty years before, Abramson does not see the existence of multiple selves, or the fragmentation of self-identity, as being beyond the scope of sincerity as a poetic criterion. Indeed, the concept is easily sufficiently malleable that we may imagine a poetic sincerity that takes full account of the multiplication of personas, personalities and contrasting ethos, without its being yoked, as was the case for Trilling, to the ideal of a unified self. The problem however with Abramson’s formulations resides in the fact that no speech, however multiplied or self-aware, may ever exist “outside” or “above” the identarian and rhetorical interrogations which sincerity invariably evokes. In truth, poetic sincerity never ceases to form and perform a wilfully utopian, ideational and impossible gesture: that of the escape from language, all the while demonstrating that such an escape is fundamentally unattainable. Sincerity thus dramatises the paradoxical desire to transcend language using language’s very own means; moreover, it shows that this tension is itself a linguistic and symbolic construct—that poetic sincerity, in spite of its transcendent claims, will now and always remain a rhetorical and enunciative artifice.

27 “Artifice” must not be understood, however, in a negative sense of that which is untrue, but in the sense of that which, though it remains a technical, intentional construct, may very well retain an inherently powerful truth-content. For Abramson, the poet “overleaps both the sincerity-irony spectrum and also the sort of theory-as-poetry or immanent language that might respectively define or perform it.” We must remain wary of this supposed overcoming of such a spectrum. The danger of poetic sincerity emerges when poets, critics and readers begin to believe that such a promised, idealised escape from language is indeed possible within the realm of the pragmatic sign—or even worse, that such an escape has, in a given case, actually been attained.

28 If these three visions of poetic sincerity thus seem to me in some ways misguided, why present them as examples of the failure to integrate sincerity as a workable criterion of contemporary innovative verse? In concentrating on conceptions of sincerity more amenable to innovative praxis—and most notably those explored in the work of Reznikoff, Oppen, and Zukofsky—innovative poetic traditions have displayed a marked tendency to neglect the widely held conceptions of poetic sincerity to which poets such as Glück, Finch and Abramson adhere. Though one may disagree with the formulations of these critics, this is not a reason to claim that their arguments have no place in critical

discourse. Indeed, the unwillingness on behalf of some innovative poets and critics to engage with more conservative or expressivist conceptions of poetic sincerity is itself a revealing literary-historical blindness. After all, if a vast number of readers believe sincerity to be associated with subjective affirmation and expressive transparency, we cannot simply ignore such convictions as though they did not exist, as though they were so misguided that they were not even open to debate. In refusing to engage with these conceptions, innovative poetics risks circumscribing its critiques of poetic value to a paradoxically conformist environment, where only “innovative” conceptions of key notions have *droit de cité*—and may thus be debated and, if necessary, judged.

Sincerity and the Spectre of Postmodern Irony

- 29 If poetic sincerity, for poets such as W.H. Auden or Charles Reznikoff, was explicitly contrasted with a wilful or unintentional distortion of the realities of history, sincerity, in this contemporary “innovative or conservative” divide, is contrasted not with the lie of untrue visions of the self or the world, but with the enunciative and rhetorical problem of postmodern irony. This, indeed, is a crucial shift. This spectrum, which for Auden and the generation of the 1930s was a question of the divide between “sincerity” and “insincerity,” becomes a new divide not between sincerity and manipulative lying, but between the emotional *engagement* of sincere discourse, and the affective *distancing* of ironic or disengaged speech. A prime example of this shift is provided by one of Charles Bernstein’s poems entitled “Thank You For Saying Thank You” (*Girly Man*, 8-9), a brief analysis of which may help to shed further light on what is here at stake:

Thank You for Saying Thank You

This is a totally
accessible poem.

There is nothing
in this poem
that is in any
way difficult
to understand.

All the words
are simple &
to the point.

There are no new
concepts, no
theories, no
ideas to confuse
you. This poem
has no intellectual
pretensions. It is
purely emotional.
It fully expresses
the feelings of the
author: my feelings,
the person speaking
to you now.

It is all about
communication.

Heart to heart.

This poem appreciates

& values you as
a reader. It
celebrates the
triumph of the
human imagination
amidst pitfalls &
calamities. This poem
has 90 lines,
269 words, and
more syllables than
I have time to
count. Each line,
word, & syllable
have been chosen
to convey only the
intended meaning
& nothing more.
This poem abjures
obscurity & enigma.
There is nothing
hidden. A hundred
readers would each
read the poem
in an identical
manner & derive
the same message
from it. This
poem, like all
good poems, tells
a story in a direct
style that never
leaves the reader
guessing. While
at times expressing
bitterness, anger,
resentment, xenophobia,
& hints of racism, its
ultimate mood is
affirmative. It finds
joy even in
those spiteful moments
of life that
it shares with
you. This poem
represents the hope
for a poetry
that doesn't turn
its back on
the audience, that
doesn't think it's
better than the reader,
that is committed
to poetry as a
popular form, like kite
flying and fly
fishing. This poem

belongs to no
 school, has no
 dogma. It follows
 no fashion. It
 says just what
 it says. It's
 real.

- 30 The simplest and most immediately evident reading of Bernstein's poem is as a series of claims which ironically and comically present the naïve, mainstream desire for sincerity as semantic and subjective transparency—as a type of writing which would allow the reader to glimpse the unified self or illuminated world beyond poetic, palimpsestic obscurity. But the poem itself, in its meta-reflexivity, is importantly frequently wrong about its own make-up. It is clearly not “purely emotional,” as the mere fact of affirming that one is “purely emotional” is itself a propositional, rhetorical, and thus partly extra-emotional act. In this way, the rhetorical content of the verse is countered and undone by the formal context within which these propositions are imbricated.
- 31 Though Bernstein initially seems merely to be making fun of mainstream conceptions of accessibility, transparency, or emotional truth, a deeper level is also at play. After all, if this poem were merely snickering in the corner at so-called “Quietist” or “Mainstream” models of poetic sincerity, it would hardly be so interesting. As Ron Silliman notes: “Much of what makes this poem work is that not every sentence here is a lie.” (n.p.) Indeed, many of the apparently ironic propositions of “Thank You For Saying Thank You” tap in to a deeper desire—even among those of us most sceptical of such problematic ideas as subjective transparency—to take such notions literally, to believe in language's fundamental possibility of being a transparent vessel of subjective embodiment. As Silliman says: “To expect transparency of a language object, however well intentioned, is inevitably to court disappointment if not outright disaster.” But even if we know that such transparency, such transcendent embodiment, is illusory, impossible, politically problematic and pragmatically unwise, we also want to participate in this ideational dream, like the anti-Brechtian spectator lost in a play he or she knows to be false. Though we recognise the intellectual limitation and practical impossibility of such an aim, we may also sometimes hope, on some level, that poetry contains “nothing hidden.” We may also dream of “poetry as a popular form / that doesn't turn / its back on / the audience, that / doesn't think it's / better than the reader.”
- 32 In this way, Bernstein's apparent pure irony turns back the mirror on the supposedly self-aware, theoretically conscious reader, and instead of a clear reflection of naïve mainstream principles, we find ourselves staring through the glass darkly, confronted with our own hidden desires which we may harbour in spite, or even because, of our supposed theoretical sophistication. I would argue that this conscious naïvety, this awareness of participating in the illusion of poetic sincerity, is at poetic sincerity's heart. Bernstein's text, or others such as Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, prove to us that even if the term “sincerity” is conspicuously absent from the theoretical formulations of innovative poetics, the question of sincerity is not.
- 33 For this reason, poetic sincerity never ceases to shed light on the various types of readers who reside within us. One reader, who represents the learned critics and theorists of poetics we desire to be, knows that poems are not “real,” that a poem which “purely expresses the feelings of the author” is an absurdity, that no poem “follows no fashion,” and that in all poems, as in all language, there is always something hidden. There is also,

however, another reader who dwells within us, one who in spite of this awareness, like a child reading a fable, simultaneously believes and does not, and thus seeks to knowingly participate in an imagined horizon of poetic sense where nothing is obscure, where the sign is one with its world, where the self appears garbed in the raiments of a full ontological transparency—in brief, where poems are real, or at least we pretend, even for a fleeting moment, that they are.

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NOTES

1. Even when not explicitly indicated here, categorical terms such as innovative or avant-garde, conservative or mainstream, should be taken as inherently problematic, and rife with obvious terminological limitations.
2. “Dès les premières années du [XIX^e] siècle s’instaure la recherche d’un langage qui aurait valeur ontologique. Cette recherche, souvent nostalgique des ressources de l’éloquence, se développe volontiers dans le sens de l’abondance, de la *copia* (c’est un reproche souvent formulé à l’égard du romantisme), d’une rhétorique restreinte où dominant l’hyperbole, l’antithèse, l’image. On oublie plus souvent les ressources romantiques de la *brevitas*, de l’ellipse et de la litote, du non-dit, de la mise à distance ironique qui accentue et le grotesque, et le tragique” (Michel, 1066).
3. We may note that this is much the same definition used by Henri Peyre when he speaks of poetic sincerity as the demand that the poet “conform his life to his ideas.”
4. “This issue of sincerity in itself can be a kind of refuge of fools. I am sure that Senator Goldwater was sincere in certain ways, but that shouldn’t protect him from a hostile judgment. The zealot is often sincere. But I mean sincerity in the sense that goes back to Pound, that ideogram he notes: man standing by his word. *That* kind of sincerity has always been important to me—to what I’m doing.” (Creeley, n.p.)

ABSTRACTS

How did the criterion of poetic sincerity transform, in the space of a half-century, from a fundamental tenet of radical modernism to an incarnation of lyrical and expressive orthodoxy? Why have efforts to reintegrate sincerity into experimental poetics and literary traditions—such as the problematic *New Sincerity* of the 1990s—met with limited success? Continuing a reflection begun in my study *Rhétorique de la sincérité*, I suggest that this disconnect between innovative American poetics and the criterion of sincerity may be traced back to the fundamentally wrongheaded association between sincerity and expression. Reintegrating sincerity into innovative contemporary verse seems possible not by creating a new form of “sincere” expression, but by distancing sincerity from the notion of expressivity altogether.

Comment le critère de la sincérité poétique s’est-il transformé en un demi-siècle ? Principe fondamental du modernisme radical, comment en est-il venu à incarner l’orthodoxie lyrique et expressive ? Pourquoi les efforts visant à réintégrer la sincérité dans les poétiques et traditions de l’avant-garde – tel le mouvement problématique de la *New Sincerity* des années 1990 – ont-ils rencontré un succès limité ? Poursuivant la réflexion entamée dans *Rhétorique de la sincérité*, je suggère ici que pour comprendre la rupture entre la poétique américaine innovante et le critère de la sincérité, il est bon de reconsidérer l’association, mal fondée, entre la sincérité et l’expression. Si réintégrer la sincérité dans la poétique contemporaine est possible, ce n’est pas en créant une nouvelle forme d’expression « sincère », mais en distinguant la sincérité de la notion d’expressivité elle-même.

INDEX

Keywords: contemporary poetry, expression, identity, Language Poetry, lyricism, modernism, rhetoric, Romanticism, sincerity, subjectivity

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