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# w/Sincerity, Part 2: A Theological Concept That Never Left

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## Abstract

The history of sincerity includes prominent arguments about the decline (even death) of sincerity. In this article I argue that sincerity has not declined or died in the post-modern and contemporary age. Rather this period has revived Classical Christian, Medieval, Enlightenment and Romantic modes of self-representation that focus on representational fidelity to your own feelings, experiences, and beliefs. In turn I suggest these foci have long been understood to be morally significant within Christian theological anthropologies and frameworks going back to figures like Augustine, Scotus, and Luther.

## Keywords

sincerity, authenticity, new sincerity

Critical terms come and go with the tides of literary fashion, but few can boast so Napoleonic a career as “sincerity” (Patricia Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” 1964)

A historical account of sincerity must take into its purview not only the birth and ascendancy of the concept but also its eventual decline, the sharp diminution of the authority it once exercised. (Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 1972)

In these two epigraphs Ball and Trilling, writing at the advent of Postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century, agree and then demonstrate in their respective manuscripts that in literature and literary studies, sincerity had its “Napoleonic career,” rising to its zenith of prominence and then diminishing

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into insignificance.<sup>1</sup> In her history of the concept, Ball defines sincerity as “eschewing of falsity and pretense”<sup>2</sup> and “meaning what one says.”<sup>3</sup> Trilling calls sincerity a “congruence between avowal and actual feeling,”<sup>4</sup> which he sees as related intimately to authenticity, a subsequent concept that “conceives truth as inward, personal, and hidden.”<sup>5</sup> In Trilling’s account, authenticity supplants sincerity, bringing about the “diminution of the authority [sincerity] once exercised.”<sup>6</sup> But are these histories of sincerity and authenticity right? Is sincerity now so diminished, with authenticity having assumed its place? And more importantly, what exactly is it that we have lost with sincerity’s alleged decline?

Ball and Trilling may be right that sincerity reached its apogee, falling from prominence to become a mere cultural curiosity in the latter half of the twentieth century. And yet, during the period in which I wrote this essay, I came upon a review in *The New Yorker* of the pop singer Lourde’s new album *Melodrama*, tantalizingly entitled “Approaching Authenticity.”<sup>7</sup> As I read it, I couldn’t help but note the overlaps in its author Carrie Battan’s enthusiastic analysis of Lourde with my own reading on sincerity and authenticity. Lourde emerged, Battan contends, almost “fully formed” on her first album and “stood in stark contrast to the musical landscape around her.” The young New Zealand-raised singer is most famous for her song “Royals” off her first album *Pure Heroine* (2013), with the refrain “And we’ll never be royals/It don’t run in our blood/That kind of luxe just ain’t for us/We crave a different kind of buzz.” Here and elsewhere she foregrounds her own outsiderly status, the way that she isn’t “royal,” or that she doesn’t enjoy the same “buzz” as others. Battan continues, “[it is] difficult to say whether Lourde initiated a sea change or merely foresaw one,” but, she asserts, “[f]ans now clamor for smoldering ‘authenticity.’” This nearly “fully formed” representation of herself is what Lourde “initiated” in her first album and, according to Battan, intensifies in this new one.<sup>8</sup> As such, Battan concludes that in her new album Lourde has “moved on from disillusionment to something more sincere.” Battan suggests that somehow, despite all the external pressures of the social, Lourde has managed to be wholly herself and, more impressive still, to represent her *self* as it is, which is to say, as she experiences it.

Battan’s argument that Lourde represents her “authentic” self in her work, rather than some persona or socially constructed pop singer ideal, illustrates a centuries-old dilemma about the value of accurate artistic self-representation that I want to explore in this essay. On Battan’s account, Lourde’s mode of sincerity is a kind of representational accuracy, a fidelity to what one truly is in the representation of oneself. And while it is in some sense unconditional (what Battan seems to mean by calling Lourde “fully formed”), there is another sense in which it is also developmental, which explains how Lourde can be even more sincere in her self-representation in her second album than in her first, which Battan suggests in her title’s claim that Lourde is “approaching” authenticity. If Ball and Trilling were right that sincerity was in “decline” in 1964 and 1972, what can we make of the way that this mode of representational sincerity remains present and powerful for contemporary audiences, as this review suggests? I want to suggest that this album

review demonstrates that one conception of sincerity may be in decline; it doesn't follow, however, that others are not still robust or even gaining in ascendancy.

When Ball and Trilling predicted the end of sincerity they could hardly have imagined the shift that was already overtaking literary and aesthetic culture.<sup>9</sup> Even as Ball was heralding the domination of Formalism and New Criticism in her account of sincerity's end, Derrida was writing the paper, "Structure, Sign, and Play," which ushered in the poststructuralist era.<sup>10</sup> And Trilling, writing a few years later, could see that sincerity was being replaced by authenticity, but he didn't see that both were being logically undermined by Theory. He didn't see that with the death of the author and the rise of the *Scriptor*, the birth of the interpretive community, Postmodernism, performance art, theatricality, metafiction, etc., the foundations of sincerity and authenticity would be questioned. The rise of post-structuralism would generate the critique of the "self" as a stable essence. This self was the foundation of Trilling's conception of both sincerity and authenticity—as Adam Kelly helpfully shows.<sup>11</sup> Yet, what I hope to show by the end of this essay is that Postmodernism did not lead to the end of sincerity. Just the opposite. Indeed, in many places, Postmodernism and Poststructuralism have led to new articulations of concepts of the self, sincerity, and authenticity. These articulations are evident in the next generations' weariness with critique, irony and unmasking, a weariness that would usher in the age of New Sincerity. And this New Sincerity encompasses figures as diverse and influential as Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, David Foster Wallace, Ben Lerner, and George Saunders.

But as sincerity returns, I argue in the rest of this essay that its definition changes and thereby the relationship authors and readers have to it changes. Aided by hindsight unavailable to Ball and Trilling, this special issue argues that, in key ways, sincerity has in fact not diminished, though it is less visible in some corners of contemporary scholarship. Furthermore, we want to follow the recent work of scholars like R. Jay Magill, Ernst Van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith in highlighting and encouraging a resurgence of interest in sincerity, even as we want to elucidate sincerity's relationship to Christianity.<sup>12</sup> In Part I of "w/Sincerity" Smith attempts to show that a logic akin to what would later be described as "sincerity" began much earlier than the period in which it first began to be described and catalogued. In this essay, I will try to trace the continuation and then reemergence of something like the logic of agonistic or narrative sincerity<sup>13</sup> before and after its putative decline. My goal here is to demonstrate that in the restoration of concern with a kind of representational sincerity, the twentieth century's critical consensus about sincerity's decline has proven to be mistaken. Sincerity doesn't disappear in the growth of language about authenticity in recent years; instead, this authenticity is part of the means by which the logic of sincerity continues to hold a high place in literary and aesthetic values.<sup>14</sup>

But I don't just want to trace the ways that sincerity does not disappear. I also want to show how the sincerity that remains is embedded in Christianity. When scholars historicize sincerity (and its cousin "authenticity"), they often begin with the sixteenth century, the rise of the individual, social mobility, the problems of

urbanism, and the machinations of the stage; or, alternatively, with Romanticism and the backlash against Enlightenment views of autonomous rationality, rising atheism, the Industrial Revolution and globalism, and the desire for a purer, more traditional form of life than the one offered increasingly to the middle and upper classes in nineteenth-century England and America.<sup>15</sup> In such readings, sincerity's rise to significance as a literary and moral value correlates with the rise of the secular. And the secular, in turn, is traced through shifts in selfhood and self-representation that have been called the rise and then fall of sincerity. It is this dialectical connection between a secular notion of the self and its reliance on or deviation from the theological that I want to explore.

The prehistory of sincerity, in common telling, is rooted in what Ball describes in 1964 as "implications" that are "predominantly religious,"<sup>16</sup> but the critical literature often sees the rise of the concept after the Enlightenment as rooted in the growth of the "secular."<sup>17</sup> Though not always as well established a precept as one might prefer, it has been noted by some that there is something "quasi-biblical" about the "jargon of authenticity" and that the "search for authenticity is about the search for meaning" in which humans "are looking to replace the God concept with something more acceptable,"<sup>18</sup> as philosopher and cultural historian Andrew Potter explains. I will trace one version of the story of sincerity, revealing by the end the ways that this version elides some of the key theological traces that Smith's story in "w/Sincerity, Part 1" begins to reveal.

In the end I will suggest not that the work done on sincerity and authenticity has been wrong, but that in ways it has missed the significant legacy of Christianity that comes before and through the nineteenth and twentieth century devotion to both. As such, then, part of this essay's purpose will be to highlight the central features of one mode of literary sincerity, the agonistic mode of self-representation Smith highlights in "w/Sincerity, Part 1," how it does and does not depart from the drama of the will found in the Christian theology that precedes it, how it is continued and translated by key figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I seek to then demonstrate how this mode of agonistic sincerity is understood and theorized in twentieth-century scholarship, and the relationship between that articulation of sincerity, postmodern irony, and the arrival of "new" modes of sincerity—new modes that turn out to be a lot like older ones.

For French literary specialist Henri Peyre, writing in the mid-twentieth century, France is the center of the history of sincerity. He argues in his *Literature and Sincerity* that it's with Rousseau that we should start when considering the development of sincerity since the Reformation. He claims that "[w]ith Rousseau . . . a new world begins,"<sup>19</sup> one that focuses on the "struggle for sincerity,"<sup>20</sup> which includes a self-consciousness and reflexivity that in Peyre's view makes Rousseau nearly unique in the discussions of sincerity that had gone before him. Rousseau's sincerity is defined as "close correspondence between the man and the author, an artist's biography and his creation."<sup>21</sup> In the following section I will proceed by working through significant readings of Rousseau from historians and critics of

sincerity including Peyre, R. Jay Magill and Alessandro Ferrara. For my purposes, we begin with Rousseau, because his view of the importance of representing yourself faithfully is, I want to suggest, the Enlightenment foundation for the representational mode of sincerity I am tracing in this essay. Rousseau also offers us an important early picture of the relationship between authentic selfhood, representational sincerity, and Christianity.

Peyre is not alone in seeing Rousseau as central to this story of sincerity: in his monograph *Sincerity*, in the aptly titled chapter “Natural Man Redeemed,” literary scholar R. Jay Magill points out Rousseau’s centrality by noting that Rousseau’s innovation was his rejection of Luther’s conception of sincerity’s impossibility. Magill suggests that this was made possible by his relocation of the self’s problem from Luther’s corrupt will to the corruption of the social. In a reading of Rousseau’s *First Discourse*, Magill summarizes Rousseau’s position on human insincerity, explaining that “the process of civilization had molded man into a calculating egoist” that led him to means-ends instrumental calculations, which alienate him from his fellows and ultimately hide him from his “own true self” so that all “of society[.]. . . Rousseau believed,” was finally “nothing but a soul-crushing lie.”<sup>22</sup> Misrepresenting oneself, in other words, emerges as a condition of membership in society, but is not fundamental or natural to humans.

Lionel Trilling nuances the charge of the “soul crushing lie” of society when writing of the same *First Discourse*, explaining it’s not that “civilization . . . has corrupted the elemental, essential nature of man,” but that “the practices of the sciences and the arts is a peculiarly corrupting aspect of civilization.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, “Literature,” especially theater, “embodies the principles of society,” which for Rousseau is tantamount to saying that literature is an “accomplice in the social betrayal” by encouraging “the individual’s abnegation of personal autonomy in order to win the forbearance and esteem of others.”<sup>24</sup> Trilling and Magill show that for Rousseau, literature uniquely contributes to the individual’s insincerity, first producing and then demanding a false presentation of the self, thereby engaging in a pedagogy of such falsification. They show that for Rousseau, it’s most fundamentally the social, rather than the innate disorientation and disintegration of the will (described by Christian figures for centuries), which draws individuals away from moral self-consistency and from representing themselves as they know themselves to be.

Thus, continuing the Medieval and Reformation discussion of the brokenness of the self that Smith discusses in “w/Sincerity, Part 1,” Rousseau’s diagnosis of the human person is as a kind of disintegration, an alienation from the self’s true self—a true self described by Trilling and James K. A. Smith as the “authentic” one.<sup>25</sup> But the cause is exterior to the self. In “w/Sincerity Part 1” Matthew Smith explains that Augustine saw humans as drawn away by their disordered affections from the good, but while Rousseau agrees with Augustine that we are drawn away from the good, he locates the means of that deviation in the social body which, as Trilling explains, has “corrupted the elemental, essential nature of man.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, with a different diagnosis comes a different cure: Rousseau’s cure, as it has

become almost a cliché to note, is to cast off the strictures of the social to the extent that they confine the authenticity of the individual self.<sup>27</sup> And since, as his *First Discourse* continually shows, Rousseau understands the social to have influenced the self in its development, childhood and less “civilized” societies (hence less socialized and more “natural”) become idealized because they were states in which one could be more fully oneself: that is, less fully formed by the inauthenticity and insincerity constituted and demanded by the social.

This diagnosis of the problem of insincerity as a problem of social formation of the self leads to another corresponding cure for the problem, one that takes us back to Augustine: confession. Of course, many, including Magill, have seen Rousseau’s *Confessions* as the first “secular autobiography”<sup>28</sup>—which is just to say that it is in some ways distinct from Augustine’s Christian *Confessions*, but of course the question is just how different is Rousseau’s confession, and is it different enough to think of it as a secular rather than sacred confession? It is no doubt true that Rousseau’s *Confessions* differ in marked ways from Augustine’s, and these differences might be attributed to the kind of movement away from Christianity suggested by the term “secular.” At the same time, it is also true that Rousseau’s *Confessions* are written with the aim of moving toward moral coherence in the same way as Augustine’s, even if, following his broader social theory, Rousseau locates the problem of human morality in the “soul crushing lie” of society rather than in the individually misdirected affections of the person. Magill and Trilling both suggest this movement toward coherence in their readings of Rousseau. But as we saw in Smith’s “w/Sincerity, Part 1” essay, the movement toward the self’s volitional independence in the centuries that preceded Rousseau was itself a Christian progression. Thus Rousseau’s conviction of the importance of representational sincerity and his sense that his *Confessions* will aid him in returning to a more innocent and sincere self are embedded in a conception of Christian moral formation that can and has been too easily obscured. I want to suggest that, for Rousseau, faithful self-representation is itself a Christian moral act, which means that his *Confessions* are not secular because sincere confession never is.

Thus, as Magill, Ball, and Trilling all show, central features of Rousseau’s conception of natural innocence and sincerity as a moral ideal reveal his deep concern with Christian theology and practice. After all, Rousseau begins his *Confessions* with the bold claim of the *sui generis* nature of his act, describing it as “an undertaking, hitherto without precedent.” And he claims he will set before his “fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature.” No sooner does he describe this artistic goal than he gives it a religious and moral purpose, saying: “I have unveiled my inmost self as Thou hast seen it, O Eternal Being.”<sup>29</sup> The import of his claim lies in the logic of that last sentence: he has revealed to his “fellows” what the “Eternal being” has already known—that is, his *Confessions* are not principally confessions to God who has always already been the audience of his actions, feelings, affections, etc. Instead, his confessions are for those others who might not have seen who he really was had he not so “unveiled” himself. This is a major shift from a penitential logic in which the goal of confession is to reveal to God

one's sinful acts, though they are acts of which God is already aware: it is his "fellows" who don't know who he is, and it is to them that he reveals his "unworthiness" and "imperfections," asking that "each of them in turn reveal, with the same frankness, the secrets of his heart at the foot of the Throne, and say, if he dare, 'I was better than that man.'"<sup>30</sup> Rousseau's sincerity then is directed at his fellows, not necessarily to his God, even as he understands his own representational fidelity to be a kind of "frankness" that will please God.

Like Magill, Peyre suggests that no "man before" Rousseau "and only a few since, have given such a personal slant to all their meditations or have referred everything to themselves,"<sup>31</sup> including appeals frequently to his own sincerity. Rousseau "may not have been pure in heart" (*contra* Augustine's view of sincerity) and was rarely if ever "unsullied in his intents," but his "confessing how he had become himself . . . was as unique as he claimed."<sup>32</sup> In other words, Rousseau may have been quite bad in both motive and action, but he excelled in honesty about both: like Augustine before him, he was not afraid to present himself to the world via his *Confessions* as something less than virtuous. Rousseau even went further, Peyre says, because he saw some profound virtue in the very act of telling of his unvirtuous acts, revealing his lies and misdemeanors, making of confession a kind of moral coherence not because he ceased to be immoral, but in confessing he ceased to be duplicitous—ceased, that is, to represent himself to others as something that he was not. Explicit here is the sense that, on Rousseau's model, one could be sincere in behavior while also being impure in heart and sullied in purpose so long as one was faithful in writing or speaking the reality of what one had done and how one had become oneself.<sup>33</sup> Thus Rousseau's privileging of representational fidelity as a moral norm that one builds toward rather than other modes of fidelity, including but not limited to Augustine's idea that to be sincere was to will what was Good. Rousseau imagines a kind of sincerity in which what one needs is simply to faithfully present oneself, not have oneself be faithful to the Good.

Herein we see a suggested resignification of the concepts of the true and the good that will be central to critical conceptions of Romantic sincerity: what is gone from Augustine, the Scholastics, and the Reformers, is the sense that to be sincere one must expressly compare oneself not just to the narrative of one's becoming, but to some more substantial Other—a metaphysics, a theology, or a ground of being. In the place of that Other is simply the imperative to be faithful to oneself.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Peyre hints at this substitution at the end of his introduction when he explains that

"Truth" presupposes an adequacy with some objective criterion, or at least an inner coherency among our views on an exterior reality, which sincerity does not. Veracity implies our reporting the truth (facts, dates, events, even feelings) as we know or believe it to be. Frankness is taken by most of us to be a moral virtue which impels us to report our own truth as it appears to us, or even to state to others, at times with some outspoken brutality, some truths, usually bitter, which we believe they should know. . . . The sincerity that will be repeatedly alluded to in the following pages will be towards others, but primarily towards oneself, and towards one's art.<sup>35</sup>

The key here is that sincerity doesn't include an "objective criterion" or an "inner coherency among our views and exterior reality," but instead requires consistency "towards oneself" and "towards one's art."<sup>36</sup> As such, Rousseau's model of sincerity is a departure from earlier modes that saw the goal of sincerity as not just faithfulness to the self's conception of reality ("truth as it appears to us"), but as faithfulness to *Reality* as such. There is a significant subjective epistemological shift here. In Rousseau's representational mode, one's *mimetic* construction could be completely faithful to what one experienced, believed, or felt, and yet not be faithful to what in fact was Reality. Of course, Rousseau did not seem to be aware of this possibility, but with hindsight we can begin to see how future post-Enlightenment thinkers would come to recognize this splitting of knowledge. Fidelity to one's experience, beliefs or feelings looked to Rousseau like a solution to the problem of the social and the demand to present yourself according to its dictates, but whether accurately representing your self and its experiences, beliefs, and feelings leads one closer to the truth remained to be determined. Were experience, conscience or feeling guarantors of validity, morality or truth?

Writing of these philosophical questions and their link to representation in his *Reflective Authenticity*, Alessandro Ferrara locates in Rousseau's implicit "ethic of authenticity" the starting point of a line of thinking centered on the idea that the singular requisites of the authenticity of an individual identity – what is uniquely indispensable for an individual to be himself or herself – provide a better anchoring for moral normativity than general principles or the rational nature of the moral subject.<sup>37</sup> Ferrara sees Rousseau as beginning a Copernican shift in the understanding of the self as its own ground independent of the reality outside the self, rather than some objective reality outside the self that the self either did or didn't comprehend and represent faithfully. Of course Rousseau himself did not explicitly deny such an objective reality since, after all, his *Confessions* and his *First Discourse* are both consistently addressed to God. Yet, as Ferrara shows, Rousseau comes to think that the self's authentic reality is the most sure basis of "moral normativity." And that, further, the mimetic goals of moral action are to represent the inner reality of the self in the outer world. Ferrara suggests Rousseau thinks this pure self-imitation is the goal, rather than, as in Augustine and Plato before him, to match the inner life to some outer reality and then represent that inner reality in the outer world.

Rousseau's goal of faithfully representing himself looks to contain problems for fidelity to *the* reality, not just *his* reality. Are these endemic to his project, or does something ground his conception of sincerity as imitative fidelity? According to M. H. Abrams, it's Rousseau's language theory which is the foundation of his view of the self and its truth. From Rousseau's conception of language, Abrams argues, we will be able to see how his conception of sincerity does not as easily depart from an objective criterion of truth, and thereby from the Christian absolutist mode Smith finds in Augustine in "w/Sincerity, Part 1." Thus, writing of his primitivist conception of language, Abrams explains that for Rousseau, in articulating the "primacy of instinct and feeling" in his account of language's origins, "the first

words were cries extorted by passion, and the first languages were song-like, passionate, figurative, and therefore the language of poets, not of geometers."<sup>38</sup> It follows in Abrams' account of Rousseau, that the purpose of language is first poetic (*sic* expressive), and that the poetic is understood as related more to the subjective experience of the creature than the objective realities of the "geometer."

Abrams goes on to suggest that the goal of expression is congruence not between Reality and expression, but between experience (that is, personal reality) and expression. In other words, Rousseau thought that the purpose of language was fundamentally self-expressive and only very secondarily "Reality"-expressive. Of course this did not have to be a problem for truth expression. For if the natural self was connected to reality in its nature, as we have seen Rousseau suggests throughout his *First Discourse* and in his writings on education, then to express the authentic self and to express the objective truth would be the same thing—so long as the self's fundamental nature was connected to reality. The problems would come when the self was pressured by social obligation to represent other than what it had experienced, felt or believed. Or problems would come when the self was taught by convention to express something other than what its natural language required. Rousseau's language philosophy suggests that once the self began to represent according to convention or social demand, the natural language's intimate relationship with reality could be lost. The subjectivity of language and the truth of reality would no longer be necessarily linked. R. Jay Magill insists that there were precedents in Protestant Reformation thinking for privileging the subjective experience over the objective in this way, but with Rousseau the critique of the social and its educative and cultural mechanisms, coupled with the focus upon the primacy of personal integrity "marked a milestone in the history of Western thought,"<sup>39</sup> a milestone whose effects would take a few centuries to work out.

Romantic conceptions of sincerity were deeply affected by Rousseau's view of the value of representational sincerity, the individual's natural link through language to reality, and the primacy of the individual's experience. Whether embracing or rejecting the ways that he makes absolute the requirement to say what you feel, believe or experience, Rousseau's shadow lay across the nineteenth century. It is my argument here that representational sincerity is passed along through the Romantics' debt to Rousseau. It is then raised to prominence in the Victorian age, modified and sometimes repudiated in Modernism and Postmodernism, before being recuperated by some in the last few decades. Indeed, Rousseau's understanding of the problems posed by the social formation of the self's morality was central even before the term "sincerity" had become connected to it by later critics of the Romantics.<sup>40</sup> Writing in the 1970s while marking the demise in critical authority awarded in the term sincerity as a literary value, Trilling suggests that in critical "considerations of Wordsworth, the name of Rousseau appears less frequently"<sup>41</sup> than it once did. But he asserts that critics must not lose sight of "the passionate emphasis" both Rousseau and Wordsworth "put upon the individual's

experience of his existence."<sup>42</sup> This is Trilling's way of emphasizing Wordsworth's fundamental debt to Rousseau, even as he explains Wordsworth's commitment to sincerity.

What Wordsworth borrowed from Rousseau was what Rousseau called the "sentiment of being," defined as "our conscious certitude of our personal selfhood" reached through "our knowledge of others."<sup>43</sup> This conscious selfhood, or "sentiment of being," is what Trilling later defines as "authenticity,"<sup>44</sup> and its existence is what makes sincerity, understood as adequate representation, possible: that is, in order to conceive of yourself as faithfully representing your self, you must have a fundamental conception of the existence of such a self. Or, as Hegel would say it, in order to truly be yourself you must also be *for* yourself. In the Romantic period, sincerity comes to require a self-conscious understanding of intention. Following Rousseau, Wordsworth's sense of the self's self-reflexive status is such that Trilling claims that "it is impossible to exaggerate the force that the word 'be' has for Wordsworth." Trilling intensifies this further, claiming that with Wordsworth's it is "impossible to exaggerate the force that the word 'be' has . . . He uses it as if with the consciousness that it makes the name of God."<sup>45</sup> The key connection between Rousseau and Wordsworth here is in the way that authenticity and value exist inherently in all selves, independently, by their being. That is, Rousseau and Wordsworth both work "to foster a human type whose defining characteristic is autonomy."<sup>46</sup> And Trilling seems to understand the vexed term "autonomy" as a kind of independence of self that pre-exists other selves—what increasingly contemporary people mean by the equally vexed term "identity." Wordsworth followed Rousseau in assuming that since the self exists in itself, since it has identity, the author can represent or misrepresent it. What I have been suggesting in this article so far is that this representation or misrepresentation is one important mode of sincerity. Further, this conception of the self's irreducible identity is intimately linked to a metaphysics of persons that proceeds from Christianity, as we saw in "w/Sincerity, Part 1."

Like Rousseau, the Romantics were concerned with the pernicious effects of the social body on the self's "sentiment of being." Thus the Romantics "descended in part from Rousseau's liberation fantasies" as they "harbored a desire to escape forward-moving, rational civilization" and "wished" instead to "recapture what they imagined to be man's natural innocence."<sup>47</sup> This "impetus to move inward and away from the world" was a "cultural evolution whereby an originally Protestant concern for locating the sincere [true or pure] self once undertaken for reasons of salvation, wanders outside the walls of religion."<sup>48</sup> We can therefore conclude that from Rousseau, the Romantics borrowed a Protestant emphasis on telling the truth (in art as in life) regardless of the cost to reputation, and they also borrowed the opinion that such "confession" would lead back towards a lost natural innocence.

We can further see this conception of English Romantic sincerity and its debt to Rousseau in the work of Abrams—especially in his study of Romantic aesthetic theory, *The Mirror and the Lamp*. As we have seen, sincerity for Rousseau is

concerned with questions about truthfulness to yourself hampered by the social, which demands a kind of histrionic misrepresentation. But such a concern with fidelity inevitably leads to critical questions about the nature of truth and then the relationship between truth and representation. Abrams argues that with Romanticism the representational goals of poetry shift. Whereas a previous Classical and Neoclassical aesthetic made “the demand that poetry be ‘true’ (in the sense of correspondence to ‘the known order and course of affairs’),” this aesthetic “gives way” to the Romantic “demand that poetry be ‘spontaneous,’ ‘genuine,’ and ‘sincere.’”<sup>49</sup> In other words, the purpose of Romantic poetry is mimetic, but the object of imitation has shifted from the known order to the poet’s reality in all its spontaneity, genuineness, and sincerity—an order, in fact, of the act of self-expression.<sup>50</sup> This shifting of the position of coherence repeats what Smith recounts in “w/Sincerity, Part 1” as Scotus’s transition to a structure of human volition where what is natural and what is right no longer necessarily correspond. If I may be allowed the leap, the Romantic turn to spontaneity as a safeguard against undue social influences has the effect of further opening the gap between the will’s action *in and for itself* and the will’s action toward what is right, where the latter, though commendable, is suspect.<sup>51</sup> In this conception, poetry’s purpose is, as Abrams quotes Wordsworth to explain, to “‘treat of things not as they are . . . but as they seem to exist to the senses, and to the passions.’”<sup>52</sup> The poet’s purpose is not the representation of the “Truth” as understood by the “objective description[s] characteristic of physical science,” but instead to represent the sense impressions of the poet as experienced through their affective registers. It follows for Abrams that Romanticism’s concern with truth was a concern with the relation between the truth of the poem and the truth of the poet’s experience such that to be sincere in poetry was to produce poems that depicted accurately the sense experience that the poet truly had. As Wordsworth famously put it: “Poetry is the overflow of feeling in an integral and naturally figurative language” but “simulated or conventional expression of feeling is bad poetry.”<sup>53</sup> That is, poetry that imitates “simulated” or insincere feelings (feelings that weren’t had, but were simply part of the “conventional” hardware of the poet) is bad poetry. In Abrams’ account of Wordsworth, then, the poet’s “truth” is their representation of their actual feelings, and this account of poetic truth is also congruent with poetic sincerity. That is, to be sincere in Abrams’ account is to represent what you actually feel, or, as Trilling would later put it, “congruence between avowal and actual feeling.”<sup>54</sup>

And yet, while commenting “on the disparity between imaginative and scientific perception,” Abrams explains that the greater part of the Romantic tradition continued to believe that “when properly employed,” science and poetry were “parallel and complementary ways of seeing” and, more importantly, ways for seeing “truth.”<sup>55</sup> According to Abrams, these disparate truths—the truth of science and the truth of poetry—were seen by some Romantics as incommensurable.<sup>56</sup> Tim Milnes addresses this question of truth in his essay in the collection

*Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* in his discussion of Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Here Milnes describes how

One way of describing this counterdiscourse of communicative rationality in Enlightenment and Romantic thought is as the replacement of constitutive objectivity by regulative intersubjectivity. Thus, truth and meaning cease to be viewed as determined by the correspondence between a centred subjectivity and an external world and are seen instead as governed by pragmatic preconditions for mutual understanding between persons whose subjectivity depends upon the possibility of interpreting, and being interpreted by, others. I make sense to myself, in other words, only on the condition that I make sense to others.<sup>57</sup>

Thus Romantic sincerity in this account is shown bridging the gap between Rousseau, Wordsworth and other Romantics, suggesting that what at first appears to be a kind of abandonment of conditions for truth is actually a replacement of one set of standards for another set—what had been “determined” by “correspondence between a centred subjectivity and an external world” is with the Romantics now “governed by pragmatic preconditions” such that to “make sense” to yourself is only possible if you “make sense to others.” Sincerity is not just representing yourself faithfully to others, but being in some sense understood in this representation.

Milnes's important qualification is that Romantic sincerity is not without external conditions: just the opposite. Intersubjective sincerity refers to the notion that in order to be true to yourself (that is, to be Romantically sincere) you must first be true to another—a form of reciprocity that Hegel describes as also being true *for* yourself. To use the terminology introduced in Smith's “w/Sincerity, Part 1,” this intersubjective dimension functions as the “qualification” that enables an embattled will, when it's self-consciously embattled, to achieve the kind of self-coherence that constitutes sincerity. Poetry, of course, facilitates the ideal fluctuations between present and past, observation and reflection, to express the mind's sincere transcendence above the conflicts it represents to itself. According to Trilling, Abrams and Milnes, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats saw sincerity as a noble virtue, defined as fidelity to one's own truth even as that truth was conditioned by “making sense to others”—a problem the Romantics famously bemoaned. As such these poets recognized that representing and communicating the truth faithfully became a condition of sincerity.

Of course, one of the most interesting aspects of the subjective turn in Romanticism is that it doesn't eliminate the problem of correspondence between the individual experience and expression: one could imagine that if sincerity was understood simply to mean correspondence of expression of experience and the experience itself that it would be easier to achieve than correspondence between expression and reality. Milnes explains:

However, just as the correspondence theory of truth culminates in the ‘intellectual intuition’ of German Idealism (the ideal convergence of thought and object), so the

correspondence theory of truthfulness provokes the idea of a deeper harmony of thought and behaviour: the ideal of authenticity. Thus, according to Rousseau, the more authentic (real, true) the person, the more sincere (truthful, honest) the voice, to the point where a character is so authentic (such as Wordsworth's Michael), that the question of sincerity no longer arises.<sup>58</sup>

In describing the ideal of sincerity as pure authenticity expressing itself with pure sincerity, Milnes brings us back to the teleology of sincerity we saw in Augustine: a person who progresses to "authenticity" would necessarily also be fully "sincere," and the goal of self-expression is the movement towards such purity. To be sure, the ways that Romantic writers explained the connection between morality and selfhood differed significantly from the accounts of Augustine and Scotus, Luther and Milton, but the persistence of correspondence as an essential qualification of sincerity throughout this literary history challenges how *fundamental* these differences are.<sup>59</sup> In the earlier writers, the self must cohere (ontologically for Augustine, structurally for Scotus) with reality (God, the good, the self, which for Augustine are tied); while for Wordsworth and Coleridge, building on Rousseau, the self must cohere with experience.

Perhaps for the very reasons we saw in Luther (namely, the idea that the will is fallen in such a way as to make the correspondence between it and the Real impossible), in Romanticism we find not the elimination of agonistic sincerity—that is, again, the idea of sincerity being a thing one moves toward, increasingly become more sincere, in a mode that matches the conception of sanctification in the Protestant model. Instead, with Romanticism, we find the perfection of agonistic sincerity perhaps best illustrated by the Romantic obsession with the perfection of childhood (where insincerity is least pronounced) and the desire to know oneself by knowing one's childhood so that one might be sincere by knowing one's authentic—that is, pre-social—self. Thus, one way to describe the Romantics' worry about the media of their poetry is as a concern over the socializing power of language, an effort to collapse the social intermediary through which so much insincerity was introduced. As Milnes explains:

David Perkins [writing contemporaneously to Trilling] notes that the emergence of sincerity as a premium literary value in the late eighteenth century introduces a new anxiety among authors regarding communication: language comes to be seen as inadequate, saying less (or more) than is sincerely meant. . . . In turn, still deeper doubts are sown over the possibility of truthfully communicating one's own thoughts.<sup>60</sup>

In the rest of his essay, Milnes goes on to show that there is no purer example of this pursuit than Wordsworth's massive and endlessly revised *Prelude* which, after all, was only supposed to be the introduction to a much longer book on the development of the poet by delineating the childhood of the same.<sup>61</sup>

The critical literature's story of Romantic sincerity is largely the story of the movement away from established Christianity (especially as represented by

the self-repressive theological mechanisms of the Church), toward the individual who can adequately experience and present that experience to others. But as is abundantly clear to any reader of Wordsworth, the specter of God never recedes from the sublimated secular sincerity of Romanticism; or, to put it positively, Romantic sincerity is shot through with a quasi-divine qualification, a standard, like Augustine's sanctifying logic of agonistic narrative sincerity in "w/Sincerity, Part 1," that forces Wordsworth to move towards some more complete version of himself (even if that complete version is understood temporally or philosophically as in the pure past of the poet in their childhood).

In some scholarly discussions, the Victorian era brings sincerity to its critical zenith, and "yet," as Patricia Ball explains, "also initiates its decay."<sup>62</sup> Ball shows how the conception of sincerity I have traced here—the moral and aesthetic responsibility of representing your feelings and experiences faithfully, "eschewing falsity and pretense," so as to move towards a growing purity and perfection—becomes increasingly valorized and simultaneously emptied by the Victorians. She argues that with the Victorians, "the explicit term" sincerity "succeeds the implicit Romantic idea"<sup>63</sup> which is more capacious than the term, and the idea "suffered devaluation" as a result. Ball continues, arguing that as sincerity "rose so high" it was "outstripped of its real significance, [so] later humiliation became inevitable."<sup>64</sup> In short, praising some work or author's "sincerity" became an empty critical gesture, just as pursuing it in art or literature also became an unspecified good.<sup>65</sup> That humiliation would come, both she and Trilling suggest, in the art and composition that succeeded the Victorians: Modernism and its New Critical supporters with their preference for "verbal complexity" over "exclamatory comments on feelings aroused by a work."<sup>66</sup>

Thus modernist poets and New Critics would, as Donald Davie describes it, eschew the question, "Is the poet sincere?" as an "impertinent and illegitimate question" asked only by "naïve readers."<sup>67</sup> As we have seen, Ball suggests that questions about sincerity in the midcentury seemed to be increasingly found only in "[e]xamination scripts" for "pre-undergraduate"<sup>68</sup> students. Ball claims that when "sincerity is mentioned in recent theoretical criticism, the object of the writer is almost exclusively to demolish it and expose its inadequacies as a literary standard." She then quotes Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* at length, in which they argue that a concern with sincerity is misplaced since a good poem is a "sincere expression of the poem,"<sup>69</sup> that is, a good poem is realized in the formal qualities of the poem. Davie argues that the poets following the Victorian age had abandoned sincerity and replaced it by taking "the idea of the *persona* from Ezra Pound," the "closely related idea of the *mask* from W. B. Yeats," and "from T. S. Eliot the ideas that the structure of a poem was inherently a *dramatic* structure, and that the effect of poetry was an impersonal effect."<sup>70</sup> From these conceptions of *persona*, *mask*, *drama*, and *impersonality* follow the "rule" that "the 'I' in a poem is never immediately and directly the poet," and so the question of the poet's sincerity is, as we have seen, "always an impertinent and illegitimate

question.”<sup>71</sup> The logic goes that modern poets and artists were not interested in expressing *themselves*, thus modern New Critics were not and should not be interested in asking and answering questions about the relationship between their works and their selves—asking whether or not what they were saying was true to themselves; asking whether or not they were sincere. In this history, then, Modernism is understood to be the sloughing off of the person in both art and poetry. It is then, correspondingly, a sloughing off of sincerity, understood as fidelity to your experience, feelings and beliefs.

As such, then, if Modernism includes the repudiation of sincerity, it is not surprising that one part of the emergence of “post”-modernism includes the reemergence of a concern with sincerity.<sup>72</sup> It is also not surprising, moreover, that as the New Criticism, artistic autonomy, and formalism come under increasing critique in Postmodernism, some concern with persons and authors returns. And as the author returns sincerity reemerges, but the progression is not as linear as might be expected.<sup>73</sup> We have seen so far that Rousseau developed a conception of sincerity based on a commitment to accurate self-representation and that the Romantics picked up this conception, adding to it the requirement that the poet communicate their experience felicitously in order to be sincere. We will turn now to see how postmodern concerns with representational sincerity continue the concern with fidelity and representational adequacy. After a brief overview of a few of the critical and artistic reassessments of the value of sincerity following the decline narratives of Ball, Trilling, and Davie, I will proceed by a few pertinent examples that seem to me to illustrate that sincerity and authenticity have neither died nor ever been fully detached from the Christian theological tradition from which our first essay suggested they in part emerged. In these examples my hope is that we will be able to see a sort of conceptual continuity, linking contemporary concerns with moral self-sameness and meaning what you say back to the moments in literary history I have been trying to trace. This through-line does not require us to reject entirely narratives that highlight the decline of some modes of sincerity; rather, it merely demonstrates the plurality and simultaneity of different modes of sincerity and different moral frameworks.

There is currently a strong discourse connecting Rousseau, Romanticism, and views of the resuscitation of sincerity to mid-twentieth-century American literature represented by monographs like Susan Rosenbaum’s 2007 *Professing Sincerity* and Deborah Forbes’s 2004 *Sincerity’s Shadow*. In wonderful introductions to the discourse of sincerity (re)connecting it to twentieth-century literature, Rosenbaum and Forbes each survey a continuity from Rousseau to the present that, for Rosenbaum, centers on the Rousseauian “challenge to reveal” your heart “with equal sincerity,” manifest in the “confessional culture” that surrounds us. And yet even as these authorial confessions continue to “make the essentially moral promise that the author is who she says she is and that she means what she says,” these “authorial claims to sincerity are as likely to inspire irony and skepticism as trust.”<sup>74</sup> She concludes that “‘Sincerity’ seems” to some “a naïve

term in the age of ‘spin,’”<sup>75</sup> but Rosenbaum believes that this is only part of the story because she sees at the same time a countervailing narrative going back to the Romantics that was always “suspicious” of sincerity. Similarly, Forbes claims that the “the poetry of the mid-twentieth-century” struggles with paradoxes and “contradictions” of “self-expression” that emerge forcefully in figures like Coleridge and other “British Romantic poetry”<sup>76</sup> and then continues to inform the work of the poets she discusses in the rest of her book. Taken together, Rosenbaum and Forbes reveal the reemergence of confession in American poetry—where the “I” of the work, as we saw in Donald Davie, is the same as the “I” of the author—and with that reemergence, a renewed concern with the sincerity of those authors, such that Forbes posits that her wider project is “to reconsider the claims of ‘sincerity’” even if it might seem “inauspicious” or “quixotic” to “revive a critical term [sincerity] that has long existed under the mark of its own failure.”<sup>77</sup> For my purposes, their work is an index of two things: the critical discourse’s halting return to sincerity and a sign of early literary Postmodernism’s concern with something that looks like the representational sincerity I have been here tracing.

Yet what is nascent and halting in the early postmodern confessional poets of *Professing Sincerity* and *Sincerity’s Shadow*, and in the discourse that Rosenbaum and Forbes are seeking to resuscitate around them, is explicit in both the creative work and critical discourse around a few contemporary artists, filmmakers, fiction writers, and poets that have been collectively described as the New Sincerity: that is, sincerity, reinvigorated, has returned. Sincerity has returned as a challenge to irony. In the space remaining in this article, I will show how sincerity has reemerged with force as a challenge to irony and how the sincerity that has returned shares affinity with Rousseau’s concern with faithful self-representation that, like the Romantic desire to communicate effectively, reveals a logic of agonistic self-representation parallel to Augustine’s desire for self-sameness, a desire for him which is normative and rooted in his theological ontology of the self.

Perhaps riding the popular and critical wave of sincerity’s resurgence in and with the arrival of postirony,<sup>78</sup> Adam Kelly has written extensively on this new sincerity (and the New Sincerity). In particular Kelly has focused on a group of new and increasingly canonical authors like David Foster Wallace, Colson Whitehead, George Saunders, Junot Diaz, Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Joshua Ferris, and Jonathon Safran Foer. In Wallace, Kelly finds an author especially concerned with questions about overcoming irony<sup>79</sup>—that is, with NOT saying what you mean directly, but in a kind of intentional double-speak that means something like the opposite of what it seems to mean.<sup>80</sup> Kelly is concerned to articulate how the New Sincerity authors he is analyzing both continue and depart from those who begin the rise of the concept—Rousseau and the Romantics in our discussion. One thing that becomes clear, Kelly argues, is that the stories that Trilling, Abrams, and Ball tell about sincerity’s decline “could not anticipate...that irony was in the process of taking over” from Modernism’s

aesthetic autonomy, formalism, and, even, authenticity, as, “with the rise of post-structuralism in the Academy and Postmodernism in the arts, the surface/depth model of the self—a model assumed by both sincerity and authenticity as Trilling defines them—would soon be superseded.” Kelly suggests that this supersession would lead the New Sincerity to “engage questions of irony and sincerity in complicated ways” that were not simple “affirmations of nonironic values,” not “backward looking” to old sincerity, but “a theory and practice of sincerity that is forward looking [—]. . . new rather than old.”<sup>81</sup> What is clear in the examples we will look at in my essay is that the new sincerity that Kelly describes turns out to share common features with the sincerity of Rousseau and the Romantics, but is subtly changed by the effects of theory and irony. We can begin to see these differences by looking at sincerity’s relationship to irony.

In his genealogy of this New Sincerity movement, R. Jay Magill highlights Jesse Thorn’s radio program *The Sound of Young America*, on which he announced “irony would be replaced by soft, sweet sincerity,” and then moves to the work of recent filmmakers (including Wes Anderson, Sofia Coppola, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Jonze, Zack Braff, and Lars Von Trier) as examples of a similar partial rejection of irony and a return/turn to sincerity.<sup>82</sup> In *Sincerity*, Magill similarly addresses irony and sincerity when he describes the New Sincerity movement as bringing together “both the credibility of irony and the earnest horror of 9/11” in order to “invent a shiny new sentiment” that would “encompass” both irony and earnestness.<sup>83</sup> Notably, Kelly and Magill then concur that the goal of sincerity after Trilling and Ball is a form of it that is in some ways “new.” For Kelly this newness seems to be rooted in the affirmation that “the author and reader do exist” and that in their respective “particular place and time”—that is, in their “contingent” rather than “ideal” reality—the authors “invite” an “affective response” from their readers even as the texts are “defined by their undecidability.”<sup>84</sup> Magill also highlights the role of particularity and contingency in his account of the New Sincerity and its “nervous oscillation between sincerity and irony”<sup>85</sup> combined with a desire to “find something positive to believe in.”<sup>86</sup>

Magill further explains the ways that a kind of “hyper-irony of the 1990s and hipster 2000s” was finally a means for some authors and artists to regain the “legitimacy of sincerity by attempting [to] ironize oneself out of the dead end” of irony. And he asserts that “after the proclamation of the death of the author” in post-structuralists like Barthes and Derrida, “the sincerely expressive self, the artist with the true concern (personal, political, religious, obsessive) is beginning [again] to have legitimacy.”<sup>87</sup> A key moment in this return is the 1993 essay “*E Unibus Pluram*” in which David Foster Wallace diagnosed the “irony effect” of authors like Pynchon and DeLillo along with the rise of the TV figure who models for the viewer the “self-conscious appearance of unselfconsciousness.” In the essay Wallace shows that “oversincerity” was out in the culture of the 1990s, replaced by “bad boy irreverence” which eschewed “sincerity and passion,” replacing them with an aesthetic in art that instantiates “a creative rejection of bogus values.”<sup>88</sup> Wallace recognized the power of irony, but ultimately, its limit: Magill quotes

Wallace asking, “How have irony, irreverence, and rebellion come to be not liberating but enfeebling[?]” and then hints at the return of sincerity in asserting, “How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean?”<sup>89</sup> Against the “bad boy irreverence” aesthetic of the ironist which he thought had become worn out, Wallace concludes in the essay that “the next real literary ‘rebels’” might “well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare to somehow back away from ironic watching” and instead have “the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles” by being “too sincere,” “backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic.”<sup>90</sup> These rebels would “treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions . . . with reverence and conviction.”<sup>91</sup> Wallace, of course, went from essays like “*E. Unibus Plurum*” to write short stories and his giant novel *Infinite Jest*, each of which seem to embody this kind of “rebellion”: that is, seem to be a turn to anti-rebellion, single-entendre values, and, in a word, sincerity—representing what Wallace really felt, believed, and experienced.

Wallace’s 2005 short story “Good People” displays the core features of the argument I have been driving at throughout this article. It combines an unironic interest in the Christian faithfulness of its characters with a concern about the ramifications and appearances involved in performing such faithfulness. And thus Wallace demonstrates a more forthright return to a notion of sincerity as a drama of the will, directed toward the good but performed in agony. As such, Wallace’s story is for my purposes a central and representative example of the claim that I began this essay with: the claim that sincerity as both a representational and normative moral value rooted in the Christian tradition of sincere personhood has hardly disappeared from contemporary cultural production.

“Good People” begins with two characters, Lane Dean and Sheri, sitting next to each other on a bucolic spring day in a park, staring over a pond, wrestling with whether to abort the baby that Sheri is carrying. While at first the central concern of the story seems to be over whether they should go through with “it” (the abortion is never described as such), the story quickly becomes about another moral dilemma. That drama is not centered on whether or not they will have an abortion, but on whether Lane can or will tell Sheri what he really feels—whether he will be sincere about his feelings. Thus the story’s narrative action is primarily psychological, having to do with Lane’s internal negotiations with himself as he tries to decide between competing forms of sincerity and the moral norms that they represent, even as he realizes that such forms of sincerity are in many ways determined by the antecedent question of the right moral choice.

The story unfolds around Lane’s wrestling with his own inner feelings for Sheri. He doesn’t think he loves her, “not like that,” even though she is worthy of his love. This then leads him to questions about whether or not he should speak his true feelings (that he doesn’t love her). Lane worries that to tell Sheri his true feelings would risk her having “it.” And this is a problem because, as an Evangelical Christian, Lane believes abortion is wrong. He wonders if he should falsify his feelings to prevent her from having “it,” thinking that she will not go through with “it” if he tells her that he loves her. Thus the problem of the story

seems to be about Lane's feelings for Sheri and their relationship to the question of the abortion.

But there are also questions in the story about Lane's Christian beliefs and whether his feelings about them are certain, that is, whether or not he really believes his beliefs. For at the same time that Lane knows he shouldn't want Sheri to have an abortion as a sincere Christian, he can't help acknowledging to himself that

he also knew he was also trying to say things that would get her to open up and say enough back that he could see her and read her heart and know what to say to get her to go through with it [the abortion]. He knew this without admitting to himself that this was what he wanted, for it [both the abortion and admitting to himself what he wanted] would make him a hypocrite and liar.

In short, Wallace suggests that Lane's beliefs about abortion might not really be his beliefs, but only what he has insincerely been representing to Sheri and even to himself as his beliefs. So Lane believes that he doesn't love Sheri and that he wants her to have an abortion but shouldn't, as a sincere Christian, want this. But he can't quite force himself to face his desire because that desire goes against what he says, thinks and, even hopes, he wants and believes. To want an abortion would make "him a hypocrite and a liar." Thus here in "Good People," as elsewhere in his corpus, Wallace has a special talent for presenting morally complex situations of sincerity and then revealing the hidden scaffolding of decision-making through his characters' battles with fraught choices.<sup>92</sup> Often this scaffolding includes the revelation of a character's desire to be self-identical, to be true to himself and/or sincere, even as the "self" that he is trying to be true to is fractured, splintered, or divided by different desires and ethical demands. And so Wallace continues the moral wrestling and explains:

This was the truth. All the different angles and ways they had come at the decision [about the abortion] together did not ever include it—the word—for had he once said it, avowed that he did love her, loved Sheri Fisher, then it all would have been transformed. It would not be a different stance or angle, but a difference in the very thing they were praying and deciding on together. . . . But he could not say he did: it was not true.

But neither did he ever open up and tell her straight out he did not love her. This might be his lie by omission. This might be the frozen resistance—were he to look right at her and tell her he didn't, she would keep the appointment and go. He knew this. Something in him, though, some terrible weakness or lack of values, could not tell her.

And the reason Lane can't say "it"—that he does or doesn't love her<sup>93</sup>—is, first, because he believes "it was not true," such that to say it would be an

“[in]congruence between feeling and avowal.” Second, to tell her he loved her would lead her to have “it”—referring to the baby. And, third, perhaps most importantly, he can’t tell her he loves her because Sheri “believed he was good, serious in his values,” and if he loves her then the abortion would be out of the question, unless he is insincere in his values. Yet, at the same time, Lane believes that to tell her he doesn’t love her would be tantamount to telling her she should have “it”—referring to the abortion. And this too is a problem since it would be telling her to have the abortion which would be like telling her that he wasn’t “good,” wasn’t “serious in his values,” and thereby wasn’t sincere in his self-representation when he seemed to be a Christian.

Thus Lane is confronted with a kind of double bind of sincerity in which he has two sets of competing values: acting on the basis of what he thinks he feels or practicing what he says he believes. So Lane has three options. He can tell Sheri he doesn’t love her, being faithful to what he thinks are his feelings and unfaithful to his Evangelical beliefs because it will lead her to have an abortion. He can tell her he doesn’t love her, being faithful to his feelings and unfaithful to his Evangelical beliefs and their attendant condemnation of abortion. Or he can tell her he loves her, falsifying what he thinks are his feelings, and guarantee both that she doesn’t have the abortion and that she thinks he is serious in his Evangelical faith, and by so doing, be insincere and false to his Evangelical faith’s sense of the value of sincerity.<sup>94</sup>

Lane’s love of Sheri is tied into the question of the abortion through a consequentialist moral logic, by which I mean that Wallace shows us that Lane believes he knows what will be the consequence of telling Sheri he loves her or of telling her he doesn’t love her. He wants to tell her the truth and thereby be sincere *to the truth*. But Lane also wants to lie to her and tell her he loves her so she will have the baby. Lane thinks this lie will allow them both to be sincere to their Evangelical faith’s value for human life and condemnation of abortion, but this sincerity comes at the cost of misrepresenting the truth of his feelings. The word “sincere” in this reading points to two different (perhaps irreconcilable) logics: in the first, Wallace addresses matching Lane’s words with his feelings toward her as an object of affection, while in the second Wallace is talking about matching Lane’s words with what is “good,” that is, as the story imagines it, what “good people” would do. Both are described as sincerity and both are seen by Lane as valuable, even as both are not actionable at the same time in this story: to be sincere in the first sense here is to reject sincerity in the second and vice versa. Wallace asks us to imagine this struggle and sympathetically ties us in the same knots as Lane, asking how Lane can be faithful to both of these modes of sincerity and yet be one person. How can he get what he wants—a life without a baby and where he is sincere about his feelings—and get what he also wants—a life as a serious, sincere Christian?

The scene is ironic in complex ways. Lane perceives his desire to do what is right (either telling Sheri he doesn’t love her or lying and telling her he does so she will have the baby) as a form of “terrible weakness or lack of values,” since according to his Christian morality, telling the truth about your feelings is critical but not

aborting a child is also critical. The reader can easily see why the “noble lie” of telling Sheri he loves her is attractive given Lane’s beliefs about abortion: Lane thinks that it will prevent an abortion that he believes is wrong, even as he in some senses wants her to have it. What Wallace’s scene strikingly reveals for the purpose of this essay is, first, a high value on sincerity placed in tension with other competing values (including, seemingly, itself), and second (and more importantly), that such a concern is represented as being an explicitly Christian form of moral development, and finally that a contemporary author of Wallace’s stature is still very heavily invested in problems pertaining to sincerity and authenticity—with a character representing himself accurately. Such an intense concern with the quality of self-sameness in representation, of identity, of authenticity, pervades Wallace’s body of work from his essays to his masterwork of metafiction and confession, *Infinite Jest*, which evinces my claim that sincerity has returned to contemporary literature.

Like Wallace, the poet and novelist Ben Lerner came of age in a period of irony (and post-irony) and Lerner, like Wallace, is very serious in his concern with the moral purpose of literature and of its simultaneous potential as fraud. But unlike Wallace, Lerner came of age as a writer in a world where Wallace and his critique of irony were both pillars of serious literature. It is no coincidence that some contemporary authors who have been the darling of putatively secular critics, including here David Foster Wallace and Ben Lerner, are concerned with the presentation of characters who struggle with and to sincerity even as these same characters (and their authors) struggle with religion. If what Matthew Smith says in “w/Sincerity, Part 1” about the theological nature of sincerity is true, it should come as no surprise that with the return of religion comes the return of sincerity and, conversely, that with the return of sincerity comes (almost as if by necessity) the return of religion. It is beyond the scope of the present essay to demonstrate these claims in detail, but numerous critics have pointed to Wallace’s relationship with specifically Christian spirituality.<sup>95</sup> And Ben Lerner’s work, while quite recent, has already received attention for the Jewish messianic mysticism that pervades both the major Walter Benjamin inspired conceit of *10:04* (its epigraph quotes Benjamin: “The Hasidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything will be just as it is here . . . Everything will be as it is now, just a little different”) and the presentation of the nearly sentimental, hyper-sincere poet that Adam (the protagonist) becomes by the end of *Leaving the Atocha Station*.<sup>96</sup>

For the purposes of my argument here about the continuation of representational sincerity after and through Postmodernism, Lerner’s *The Hatred of Poetry* also gets off to an auspicious, eschatological start. For when Lerner quotes Marianne Moore’s poem “Poetry,” in which she begins with “I, too, dislike it [poetry],” and ends with the recognition that, all the same, even in being disliked, poetry is a “a place for the genuine,”<sup>97</sup> he argues that poetry usually fails to represent this “genuine,” and, as such, it fails to move from the “virtual” to the “actual” in a way that preserves the authenticity of the poem. But, Lerner suggests, in drawing attention to representational failure and inauthenticity, poetry opens up

the possibility of the authentic again—that is, opens up the possibility of an agonistic movement towards the real, authentic, or sincere. By being a failure, and by being thereby rightly hated, poetry makes it possible for us to accept our partial representational sincerity and move towards something more sincere.

As such then, Lerner conceives of representational sincerity in a mode similar to the conception of narrative or agonistic sincerity and he recapitulates the demand made by the Romantics that one not just represent one's experiences faithfully for oneself, but that one communicate these experiences to others. But he does this largely negatively, by insisting that poetry never quite achieves its goal of actual representational accuracy. Lerner suggests that as a virtual reality, this perfect representational congruence won't happen, but that the actual poem can progressively move towards that ideal—toward, in other words, adequate representation of experience, toward communication of the truth as the poet or author experiences it.

In *The Hatred of Poetry* (and in some key scenes in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and *10:04*), Lerner argues that the condition of poetry's existence is its failure: "the poem is always a record of failure."<sup>98</sup> What does he mean here? He sees this failure in the first story of English poetry, the story of Caedmon, in which the "actual poem" he brings back to the world from his dream "is necessarily a mere echo of the first" song, which Lerner says was "gorgeous verses." From this Lerner derives the insight that "[p]oetry arises from the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical . . . and to reach the transcendent or divine." He explains

You're moved to write a poem, you feel called to sing, because of the transcendent impulse. But as soon as you move from the impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its term . . . Thus the poet is a tragic figure. The poem is always a record of failure.<sup>99</sup>

It is the record of the dissonance between what Lerner, "pirating" (as he describes it) Grossman, calls the "virtual poem"—the "abstract potential of the medium as felt by the poet when called upon to sing"—and the "actual poem" which necessarily betrays that impulse when it joins the world of representation.<sup>100</sup> For Lerner this does not make poetry "hard"; it makes it "impossible," even as it opens the possibility not for "a genuine poem," but for a "place for the genuine."<sup>101</sup> Lerner says the failure of poetry wouldn't be that bad, if we were not "taught at an early age that we are all poets simply by virtue of being human," so that "[o]ur ability" or inability "to write poems is therefore in some sense the measure of our humanity," or lack of humanity when we fail, as we all will, to write "Poems"—the capitalization here refers to the virtual poem, rather than the actual poem.<sup>102</sup> Lerner explains this argument: we "all have feelings inside us" and "poetry," the logic goes, "is the purest expression of this inner domain." But—and here is where the potential for failure enters in—since "language is the stuff of the social and poetry the expression in language [that is, in the 'stuff of the social'] of our irreducible individuality [our authentic selves], our personhood is

tioned up with our poethood.” And since poetry always fails, it is always an index of our failure to represent (and thereby “be”) who we are. Thus the hatred of poetry, which for Lerner is the same as poetry itself, is the hatred of the condition of our existence. But it is also the condition of possibility for a future when we can complete poems and be complete as persons. For Lerner representation itself is always the failure of representation to ourselves, or, in the terms of this essay, the failure of our “avowals” to match “our feelings.” But he says “when we experience a poem’s radical failure, we must be measuring it against some ideal, some Poem,”<sup>103</sup> and as such then the failure of the actual to match the virtual is not a cause for despair. It is a cause for hope.

Lerner suggests that poetry is predicated on the existence of a self that is being expressed. He claims that poems are manifold expressions of the self: where there is a poem, there are selves. But does the fact that poetry is always a failure, hypothetically, suggest something about the possibility of sincerity, that is, something about the possibility of adequately or faithfully representing your self? This question becomes especially pertinent in light of the eschatologically charged epigraph from Walter Benjamin that begins Lerner’s novel *10:04*. Lerner suggests in *The Hatred of Poetry* that you can’t represent the self adequately, but that this drives the continued attempts. Expression fails and because it fails there is a possibility of a futurity in which it might succeed, a futurity that Lerner connects with Benjamin’s messianic Judaism. “I, too, dislike it,” he says, referring to the demand to continue presenting yourself even as you realize that you will always fall short of adequate representation. As such, then, Lerner’s view seems to be that sincerity is impossible as an “actual” form, but that in being driven by the “virtual,” we are committing ourselves to the potential of an as-yet-unrealized “Poem.”<sup>104</sup> Poetry for Lerner is to be hated and loved. It generates an eschatological hope, a religious hope for a “place for the genuine” that it never realizes in the actual, but in so doing, poetry prepares us for a representational authenticity that we long for and haven’t yet reached.

This paradoxical reconciliation of the poet to her own as yet incomplete vocation recalls Lerner’s *roman à clef* first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, in which the protagonist Adam goes from being a fraud to recognizing “something like my voice,” which he also calls “a ghostly presence behind” the words. When he hears his own English poems translated into Spanish by another poet, he exclaims “that presence was my own.” Through Adam, Lerner explains in a characteristically paradoxical and self-referential fashion, “it was like looking down at myself looking up.”<sup>105</sup> *Leaving the Atocha Station* is in other complicated ways tied into questions of representational adequacy and sincerity by being a novel that is actually nearly a memoir. As David Shields explains in his *Reality Hunger*, Lerner constructs a fiction from his “real” experiences which he then publishes as fiction.<sup>106</sup> Given Lerner’s views of the representational failure of language that we see in *The Hatred of Poetry* and the relationship of that failure to the discourse of Theory,<sup>107</sup> it is not surprising that he would have problems with memoir as a genre. It seems that his solution to the problem of representational infelicity is the

publication of his “memoir” as a novel, a move that allows for a kind of adequate representational sincerity since it doesn’t claim to be the writer’s own experience, feelings, or beliefs, but only those of the writer’s fiction.

Lerner, Wallace, and others demonstrate that a concern with sincerity pervades recent fiction and poetry. They also suggest that at the same time that “sincerity” returns, there are significant alterations to both the definition of sincerity and the posture with which this New Sincerity is occupied. In other words, the ways that this mode of representation sincerity is both presented and held change from earlier modes, shaped as it has been by the onslaught of critical theory, with its seismic shifts in epistemology, conceptions of the self, and the embrace of irony. Post-ironic sincerity is not unchanged by Theory. This New Sincerity shares with other modes of postmodern thought a kind of chastened optimism (it is tempting to call it “hope”) about the possibility of sincerity, which is just to say that it sees sincerity as a partial reality to work towards. As such, this mode of sincerity is a state of becoming, rather like the earlier modes of Christian narrative sincerity or Existential authenticity in Heidegger and Sartre, rather than a simple matter of being or not being sincere. This version of sincerity, I suggest, follows Augustine, the Scholastics, and Luther in Matthew Smith’s “w/Sincerity, Part I” in conceiving sincerity as a narrative and agonistic reality, established by a re-centering of moral selfhood around the disposition and coherence of the will, though still connected in more or less overtly sublimated ways to an epistemic authority to which the will reports. And furthermore, I have tried to show that this structural homology between the New Sincerity and the older Christian mode is no accident but that, as we are seeing in the conversations around post-secularism,<sup>108</sup> putatively secular modes of representational sincerity are often in some important ways linked to Christianity and its narratives of human purpose, assuming a story of fall and progressive redemption, sensible only in light of the Christian event, even if it is not recognized as tropologically participating in that story. Scholars are again talking about sincerity, but truthfully, the desire to present the self as the self really is, coupled with the desire to know thyself well enough to be able to faithfully represent that self has never really left. Indeed, even when sincerity has been ridiculed, ironized, or rejected as impossible, there has remained a stable literary and aesthetic discourse that keeps revivifying it. The New Sincerity, in desiring for a post-ironic representation of what artists and authors really feel, experience and believe, is just the most recent continuation of this history. This history is importantly religious and it will continue to be so.

## Notes

1. Since this essay is a companion essay it is obviously the product of co-labor. And yet it was more collaborative than any I have written before have been. I must first acknowledge my debt and thanks to my co-author, friend and colleague Matthew J. Smith for inciting and encouraging my interest in this topic, then reading the essay more than once, and finally for the collegial discussion of sincerity over the past few years. Additionally,

*Christianity & Literature's* managing editor, Katy Wright-Bushman, read the essay in full and offered extensive suggestions for improvement for which I am enduringly grateful. My errors and infelicities are my own, but without the help of these two this essay would be much less than it is. Finally, I am grateful for the work of two former graduate students, Erich von Kloss-Dohna and Austin Sill. Each in their separate way has helped me to see more clearly the work of Ben Lerner, David Foster Wallace, and the New Sincerity.

2. Patricia Ball, "Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term," *Modern Language Review*, LIX, issue 1 (1964): 1–11. p. 1.
3. Ball, "Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term," p. 7.
4. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 2.
5. Adam Kelly "The New Sincerity," pp. 197–208. *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Warden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), p. 199.
6. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 6.
7. Carrie Battan, "Approaching Authenticity," *The New Yorker*, 26 June 2017.
8. Battan is of course hardly unique in music journalism for adapting the discourses of authenticity to analyze an artist's work. Indeed, the claim that a musician is unique and authentic is such a staple of music journalism that it's almost a generic convention to claim that a work or artist is authentic. Battan's position strikes me as important and only slightly different in that she is emphasizing the ways that Lourde represents herself more than the ways that she is in fact authentic: as such, Battan is as concerned with Lourde's sincerity as with her authenticity—and this in turn suggests a close, even dependent, relationship between sincerity and authenticity.
9. "Sincerity" of course can be used to mean many things, but not least, it can be understood as meaning what you say and saying what you mean: a kind of congruence between what you feel and what you avow, a kind of exterior representation of an interior reality (or at least an attempt at such a representation), and, if it is going away, the end of thinking this was an admirable and worthy goal for art and literature.
10. The list of attendees at this conference is staggering and the publication of the proceedings is remarkable. The list of Continental figures includes (among others) Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Rene Gerard, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes.
11. Adam Kelly "Dialect of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," Post45; <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/> (accessed 16 May 2017). Kelly explains: "From the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference on 'The Structuralist Controversy' through the next three decades, the set of intellectual movements that would come to be known as post-structuralism and eventually simply as 'theory' would shake up assumptions about language, culture, knowledge and identity that had held relatively stable over the period of the post-war boom. This shift had implications not only for irony but also for sincerity and authenticity as Trilling conceived them: the opposition he establishes between these two concepts masks the fact that both depend for him upon a surface/depth model of the self, and upon a model of language as a relatively transparent tool available to communicate that deep and pre-existing self. Neither of these assumptions about selfhood and language would emerge unscathed from the age of theory's hegemony."
12. Thus my goal will be to show a tentative "No" to answer the question that we began with in our Preface: "Have sincerity and its more recent relative authenticity divested themselves of the influences of theology, lived religion, and religiously integrated social

movements?” In part I will be providing an answer by pointing toward the conversations around the secular and post-secular which suggest, among other things, that the modes of inwardness and authenticity increasingly prevalent in our current cultural discourse are not as severed from their theological origins as are sometimes believed; that is I will suggest that post-secularism’s insights about contemporary culture’s continued embedded-ness in religion and Christianity might help us see the ways that sincerity and authenticity are both still theological.

13. In “w/Sincerity, part 1,” Matthew Smith traced two overlapping modes of sincerity from Augustine through the Scholastics to the early modern period of Luther and Shakespeare, looking at the existence of something that we called “agonistic sincerity”—a type of sincerity rooted in understandings of the nature of the will and of human persons rooted in Christian theology that we argued was present from Augustine and then remained available in the Scholastics and Luther. On the one hand, as Smith shows, Augustine shows us the possibility of a congruence between what one thinks/feels/wills and what one does. But at the same time, in various moments that have made the *Confessions* one of the foundational texts of western literature from Puritan autobiography, through Romantic lyrics, to the novel and the rise of the memoir in the late 20th century, Augustine also shows us a tension in sincerity, a space in which one wonders about one’s intents and the relationship between one’s perceived will and actual will, and thereby between one’s actions and one’s will(s). It is this second model that we are calling agonistic sincerity because it is about the struggle and drama of moving towards sincerity in a world where actions are (always) qualified.

What we are calling “dramatic sincerity” or authenticity is further complicated by the Reformation insight that one can fully “know” and fully “will” the true or the good (which is to say “believe,” have conviction, be prompted and assured by “conscience”) and be wrong about both. In Augustine we find both the absolute idea that to be sincere is to just be good and to be good is to be sincere and also the sense that somehow there is a drama, a qualification, an opening that makes this absoluteness relative—that there is a becoming and not only a being to sincerity. For Augustine the will is absolute—to will is to will the good. Yet this statement isn’t air-tight as an explanation of every episode of sin. Some sins, like the pear theft, feel “coherent” in a sense. They feel complete in that the will moves toward something that the mind judges to be desirable. Still, such mishaps of passion and understanding are accounted for by a model of agonistic or narrative sincerity that is developed and completed over time. Later Scholastic writers continued to explore this agonistic register in the narrative example of Lucifer’s original sin, ultimately formalizing an explanation of the coherence of sin. One could pursue a desired object, even with a clear-eyed view of its injustice in the eyes of God, and such a pursuit of the will can make sense with respect to the will’s natural, God-given orientation.

14. See for example Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), or Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
15. From Rousseau we find struggles with the problem of the social and its demands that we, in Nietzsche’s famous adage, “lie according to convention” (“On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense”), which is just to say that we can be insincere. In many common-sense ways Romanticism then is little more than a movement to restore the importance and possibility of sincerity. Whether in Rousseau’s proto-Romantic, convoluted defense of his own falsehoods in his *Confessions* (such as the “Marion” episode), Wordsworth’s

desire to escape the social falsity of the city and adulthood in his *Prelude* or his desire for plain words in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, or in Emerson's and Thoreau's desire to relieve themselves of the onerous burden of the social (that damned "joint stock company" ("Self Reliance")). For many critics writing in the twentieth century we will see that Romanticism is thorough-goingly a movement of sincerity. But of course the question that we want to answer is just what is meant by "sincerity"? How does the Romantic tradition pick up on, modify, discard, or re-signify the sincerity models we have been seeing in the period from Augustine to Shakespeare?

16. Ball, "Sincerity: the Rise and Fall of a Critical Term," p. 1.
17. R. Jay Magill, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion that We All Have Something to Say (No Matter How Dull)* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), p. 84. It is worth noting that Magill does not see the rise of sincerity as a move away from the religious, and specifically Christian, but as a part of the legacy of the Reformation. In his reading of Rousseau and others he is clear that sincerity is seen by Rousseau (and others) as "defending a radically subjective idea of religion" but that sincerity was critically an "idea of religion" even as it was predicated on a reversal of the Lutheran and Calvinist idea of Original Sin by insisting "that original man, beneath his socialization, was not base, but good," p. 86.
18. Andrew Potter, *The Authenticity Hoax* (New York: Harper, 2011), p. 12.
19. Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 84.
20. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 80.
21. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 11.
22. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 84.
23. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 60.
24. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 60.
25. James K. A. Smith, "'Confessions' of an Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger, Part II," *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 965/966 (2001): 335-47; see also Magill, p. 86, where he discusses Rousseau's views of original sin (note above 17).
26. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 60.
27. It is worth noting that, according to most scholars, Rousseau's practice and his speech did not align here. That is, he was often inconsistent in what he said and what he did and that, as Magill explains, "for all of Rousseau's attempts to promulgate a picture of himself" in his *Confessions* "as the least hypocritical man who ever lived, the facts of his life simply don't square" (87). That is, despite his commitment to seeming to be who you are, Rousseau, in Magill's analysis, was different than his own self-representation.
28. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 84.
29. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (London: Everyman Library, 1992), p. 3.
30. Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 3.
31. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 80.
32. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 80.
33. As such, Rousseau seems much closer to the agonistic sincerity that we discussed in our first essay. But then Rousseau, on Peyre's account, takes the first Augustinian mode of sincerity and replaces it with the second mode, making faithfulness to the narrative of one's becoming the only standard of adjudicating sincerity. As we put it in the first essay: "where old sincerity involved not only *representing* but also *being* true, new authenticity involves only whether people represent outwardly what is *true of them* inwardly."

34. Later of course will come the debates about where that “self” comes from, but that will have to wait until our discussion of Modernism and Postmodernism.
35. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 12.
36. Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity*, p. 12.
37. Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. ix. Here in the opening pages of *Reflective Authenticity*, Ferrara refers to his earlier book, *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
38. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 81–2.
39. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 82.
40. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 2.
41. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 92.
42. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 92.
43. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 92.
44. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 93.
45. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 91.
46. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 66.
47. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 95.
48. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 95.
49. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 298.
50. Or as Trilling describes Rousseau and Wordsworth’s noun-phrase, “the sentiment of being.”
51. See Matthew Smith, “w/Sincerity, Part 1.”
52. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 299.
53. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 29.
54. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 2.
55. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p. 309.
56. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 312–13.
57. Tim Milnes *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 130.
58. Milnes, *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 121.
59. Studies of Christianity and Romanticism are plentiful and readily known, but recently Colin Jager has published two excellent monographs on Romanticism and secularity in which he demonstrates the ways that Romanticism remained profoundly, if complicatedly, enmeshed in Christianity. *The Book of God* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) and *Unquiet Things* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) are each separately worth pursuing and have influenced my thinking about Romanticism and Christianity. His work is thus part of the growing narrative of post-secularism, of complicating our understanding of secularism’s relationship to religion and especially, in his case, to Christianity and arguments from philosophy about the existence of God. See also Jager’s guest edited forthcoming June 2018 issue of *Christianity & Literature* (67.3) devoted to analyzing the secular and the literary.
60. Milnes, *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 121.
61. For my purposes I am unable to go through Milnes’ argument and engage with Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in detail, but the importance of the poem inheres in the way

that Wordsworth seeks to articulate his movement away from and back to sincerity by virtue of the expression of his poetic vocation. This was what Trilling understood when he explained the commonality between Rousseau and Wordsworth on the “sentiment of being” and then describes the story of the Romantic poet’s life—*The Prelude* was an autobiographical poem like the *Confessions*—as of a “self as an entity susceptible to influences which either increased or diminished its force.” Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 122.

62. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 2.
63. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 2.
64. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 3.
65. This situation of sincerity being uncritically valorized mirrors the situation of “authenticity” in our contemporary art world in many respects: now with authenticity so as with sincerity then, nearly everyone seems to think it is a term of approbation to call a work “authentic,” and to have a work described as “inauthentic” is disheartening. Of course, there are exceptions: one thinks of the role of imitation in Pop Art and Neo Pop Art (Warhol, Koons, photographers like Richard Prince, etc.) and in literature and literary studies of David Shields’ hugely influential *Reality Hunger* (New York: Vintage, 2011) which valorizes and argues for a kind of inauthentic form of fiction that is really a kind of memoir passed off as fiction.
66. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 8.
67. Donald Davie, “Sincerity and Poetry,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 5.1 (1966): 3–8, 62.
68. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 8.
69. Ball, “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term,” p. 7.
70. Davie, p. 62. It is worth noting that while Davie suggests that Modernism was opposed to sincerity in theory, he also notes that in figures like Pound (in, for example, his *Pisan Cantos*) Modernism continued to be very invested in an “I” whose index was the poet himself—not a persona. Davie believes that Pound “came off badly” because of his commitment to the impersonality of persona and that his best poems are “confessional poems” (to some).
71. Davie, “Sincerity and Poetry,” p. 62.
72. In recent poetry and art, the “New Sincerity” has become a not insignificant movement that illustrates by name and disposition a concern with truthful self-expression and even, at times, a kind of sentimentalism, that would have certainly been anathema to previous poets and critics. One thinks of the negative status ascribed to this kind of expression in the critical response to Anne Sexton’s poetry as highlighted by Forbes in *Professing Sincerity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 3, as an illustration of the mid-century loathing of what Charles Gullan describes as Sexton’s “painful” and “embarrassing” “confessional” “neo-Romantic stereotype” or of Anne Stevenson’s critique of Sylvia Plath for her “extremism, self-indulgence, [and] narcissism,” p. 3.
73. A concern with authors emerges in at least a few different ways in the critique of New Critical Formalism. Most obviously, in the death of the death of the author positions made explicit in Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp’s intentionalism in “Against Theory” and in the later adoption of this intentionalism by critics of New Criticism like Stanley Fish (a critic who was first on the side of the reader before realizing that this necessarily required him to also be on the side of the author for the sake of ontology). The history of Theory is still being written, but its death was occasioned at least in part by the return to the author’s intention foregrounded by Knapp and Michaels.

74. Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p. 2.
75. Rosenbaum, 2.
76. Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 3.
77. Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow*, pp. 4–5.
78. “Post-irony” has been one term that critics have used to discuss issues surrounding the new sincerity. Simplifying a bit, the idea is that to be post-ironic is to be sincere. Irony on this model entails *not* saying what you really feel (or even saying the opposite), and then sincerity is characterized by saying what you really feel, believe or experience. For excellent examples of this mode of criticism see Lee Konstantiou’s *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) especially, Part II, and Lukas Hoffmann’s *Postirony: the Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
79. Of course, as I am hardly the first to note, irony is not the same as insincerity, since, after all, it works by an inherently intentionalist logic that requires you to understand that the author means something like the opposite of what they seem to literally say. But at the same time, irony works by playing the literal sense of words against the intended meaning of the speaker, so that irony also works to undercut a reader/hearer’s confidence in the sincerity of what a writer/speaker is writing/saying by highlighting the potential disjuncture between their apparent meaning and actual meaning. Irony at first blush might look like the death of sincerity, but this is misguided if we mean by sincerity “meaning what you say” or “avowing what you feel.”
80. See note 73 above: the return to intention of Knapp, Michaels, and Fish (amongst others) suggests a logic in which irony can only be understood as irony in the context of intention. That is, to understand what the author “avows” or “says” in a situation of irony requires, as with any speech act, an invocation and inference about their intention. Irony works by producing a speech act that means something like the opposite of its literal meaning, but it is only intention that makes that meaning the thing that is the opposite of the literal meaning. Irony then is a speech act that invariably insists upon intention—much like satire—because if one simply reads an ironic text literally one misses the point of what the author is saying. To claim a text is ironic is then to insist upon a meaning that is not warranted by the formal features of the language, indeed, is often the opposite of what the words seem to mean. It is unsurprising that Knapp and Michaels’ “Against Theory” was published during the cultural zenith of irony as it could just as easily be titled “For Intention” or, for that matter, “Explaining Irony.”
81. Adam Kelly, “The New Sincerity,” p. 198.
82. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 201. Adam Kelly in “The New Sincerity” also points to the rise of the New Sincerity in film, looking to Jim Collins’ “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity” as a watershed moment in the critical awareness of the transition that was happening in both popular and indie film. Thorn has since created a website on men’s fashion called putthison.com that describes itself as “A blog about dressing like a grownup.”
83. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 200.
84. Kelly, “The New Sincerity,” p. 206.
85. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 202.
86. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 200.
87. Magill, *Sincerity*, pp. 190–1.

88. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Plurum," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), p. 59.
89. Magill, *Sincerity*, p. 192.
90. Wallace, "E Unibus Plurum," p. 81.
91. Wallace, "E Unibus Plurum," p. 81.
92. As Adam Kelly notes in his "The New Sincerity in American Fiction," for Wallace "the logic of the double bind is . . . a basic structure in his work," citing a 1996 interview in *Bookworm* in which Wallace claimed "interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives but neither is acceptable," p. 139.
93. The use of "it" in the story for "love," "abortion," and "baby" is one of Wallace's best moves as it creates a relationship of identity between terms, a slippage that shows Dean's thinking and also his confusion.
94. Thus "Good People" is not just a story about sincerity and romantic love, though if it were it might still be just as interesting for this study, for in addition to being concerned that his "avowal" of "feeling" matches his actual feeling (that he means and feels what he says), Lane is also concerned with being a faithful and sincere Christian, concerned, that is, that his actions cohere with his confession of faith and that faith's morality. Lane's primary moral anguish in the story is over being sincere, not over whether to get what he wants or whether or not to encourage his girlfriend to do something he believes is wrong. But the problem he has is not that he knows that he should be sincere but that he has at least two operating logics of sincerity before him. On the one hand he has his desire to not have a baby and also his desire to be "good people," that is, an Evangelical Christian, which includes his sense of the immorality of abortion.
95. For work on David Foster Wallace and Christianity see in particular Michael J. O'Connell "'Your temple is self and sentiment': David Foster Wallace's diagnostic novels," *Christianity & Literature* 64, no 3 (2015): 266–292.
96. Lerner's novels and poetry are recent enough that articles about them are virtually nonexistent, but Anthony Domestico has an excellent piece on Lerner's *10:04* in *Boston Review* entitled "Life After Theory," which addresses Lerner's interest in Theory and his relationship to religion. Anthony Domestico, "Life After Theory," *Boston Review*, 2 September 2014 (<http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/anthony-domestico-ben-lerner-atocha-1004>) (accessed 17 September 2017).
97. Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: FSG Originals, 2016), p. 3.
98. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 8.
99. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 8.
100. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 9.
101. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 9.
102. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 10.
103. Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, p. 25.
104. I am tempted here to call it eschatological—which should remind us of the movement towards sincerity (defined as self-sameness with reality) we saw in Augustine's *Confession* in our first half of this essay. Lerner's most recent novel, *10:04* (New York: Picador, 2015), begins with a quote from Walter Benjamin describing the nature of reality in the "World to come." The rest of the novel is about the possibility of a futurity in which realizations happen, including an extended discussion of the film "Back to the Future" and a Joan of Arc painting by Bastien-Lepage in which the painter fails to "reconcile the ethereality of the angels with the realism of the future

saint's body," and Lerner's narrator says it's this "tension between metaphysical and physical worlds"—the virtual and actual of *The Hatred of Poetry*—that "makes it one of" his "favorite paintings," p. 9.

105. Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011), p. 41.
106. David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Vintage, 2010).
107. See Domestico, "Life After Theory."
108. 'Secularism and Post-secularism' will be the subject of the June 2018 (67.3) issue of *CAL*, but it is worth noting that just as sincerity and authenticity are conceptually overdetermined so too is the term post-secular. For my purposes, I am using the term to try to draw attention to the ways that various figures (Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Amy Hungerford, Tracey Fessenden, John McClure) have shown the legacy of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim practices, affections, and beliefs in areas that have been conceived as in some forceful ways as secular (where that term is understood to be the binary Other of "religious"). These post-secular arguments diverge in many respects but they converge in demonstrating the embeddedness of religious frameworks and concepts in the secular; that is, they demonstrate the ways that politics, aesthetics, psychology, ethics, and experience are deeply embedded in matrices that remain religiously inflected even when perceived as immanent or nonreligious. In the forthcoming "Secular and the Literary" Special issue of *CAL* (67.3), Kevin Seidel's essay "A Secular for Literary Studies" does an excellent job of tracing some of the embedded phenomena I am here referring to and I am indebted to Professor Seidel for some of my thoughts on this relationship.

### Author biography

**Caleb D. Spencer** teaches post-45 American and Anglophone literature and film, theory, and undergraduate Honors seminars at Azusa Pacific University where he is an Associate Professor of English. He is now completing a monograph entitled *Postsecular Postmodernism: Experience and Theology, Sincerity and Art*, a study of the Liberal Protestant conceptions of religious experience which are the foundations of much putatively "secular" postmodern art, theory, criticism and literature.