“MY TONGUE SWARE TO, BUT MY HEART DID NOT”: RESPONDING TO THE CALL OF SINCERITY
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TITLE: “My Tongue Swore To, But My Heart Did Not”: Responding to the Call of Sincerity

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ABSTRACT

My thesis examines the “New Sincerity,” a recent movement in contemporary fiction, which relies upon and reclaims the ethical concept of sincerity. Rather than accept sincerity at face value, however, I outline a historical trajectory of the concept in order to understand the reasons for its decline and the current attempts to resituate it. Contrasting sincerity with its ancient Grecian root of *parrhēsia*, I argue that sincerity has been historically mobilized as a mechanism of oppression. Since the traditional conception of sincerity was founded upon the depth model of subjectivity, certain individuals were denied the possibility of professing sincerity; rather, their outward appearances marked them *a priori* as being deceitful, hypocritical and insincere. Despite the recent theoretical decline of the depth model of subjectivity, I claim that the model has persisted in an afterlife that continues to govern who is given the license and freedom to speak. As such, sincerity has had a significant role in how marginalized subjects, who are often denigrated for being overly emotional, have been categorized as insincere and sentimental.

For this reason, my thesis rejects the alleged return of sincerity in favor of a reconceptualization of it. Drawing from the “performative turn,” I claim that sincerity must be continually at risk for it to draw its affective potential. If sincerity with intention is insincere, sincerity is an impossible event that cannot be claimed in advance. Rather, we must bind ourselves to the truth similar to the *parrhēsiates* of Ancient Greek and take care to question the other. In doing so, sincerity becomes a truth-telling based on actions instead of judgments.
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Introduction

Sincere Times

What is sincerity? What does it mean to be sincere? Or, perhaps more precisely, what does it mean to be called a sincere person? In accordance with Sara Ahmed’s claim in Queer Phenomenology that the most difficult theoretical encounters occur when we are forced to consider how our orientation aligns with the horizon of possibility, what objects can be reached and what not, “Responding to the Call of Sincerity” attempts to map out the conceptual force of sincerity in contemporary culture (5,14). We have been told, lately, that authenticity is staging a return (Haselstein et al. 19). On some level, it seems peculiar that such a claim would need to be made at all, given that “society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere” (Trilling 11). But the uneasiness here, that sincerity has been devalued as of late and spoken only with “either discomfort or irony,” (6) is altogether unsurprising when we consider how a character like Iago exists in our cultural imaginary. Motivated by Machiavellian intentions to rise above his Venetian social status, Iago reminds us that the decision to “wear [one’s] heart upon [one’s] sleeve” (I.I.64) will always be susceptible to manipulation and abuse when the demarcation of an inner self and outer projection makes friend and foe indistinguishable. And yet, we frequently request and occasionally demand that our politicians uphold the ideal of sincerity; in doing so, we risk suggesting that hypocrisy is not only possible but also

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1 The editors of The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real, taking note of Lionel Trilling’s work Sincerity and Authenticity, suggest that the distinction between authenticity and sincerity is not as pronounced as claimed. Citing the moral philosopher Bernard Williams as an example, they note how Truth and Truthfulness is invested in exploring the relation between the two terms as opposed to choosing one or the other. Indeed, Haselstein et al. suggest that the New Sincerity is one guise of authenticity’s so-called return.
assumed to dominate the political field. To the extent that sincerity is situated at the limits of expression – unable to be claimed – as the self-conscious admission of “sincerity” questions its verity, how might it be possible to embody a sincere speaking position, which is always at risk of being characterized as insincere? More important, what is at stake in recovering such a position and would it be a project worth attending to?

“Responding to the Call of Sincerity,” then, is about how sincerity is returning today, the form sincerity is taking, and the consequences of such an alleged event. What is more, it asks whether there is something fundamentally different about such an alleged return of sincerity, for instance, as the “New Sincerity” purports to be. In a recent essay by scholar Adam Kelly, the “New Sincerity” appears as a theoretical revitalization of sincerity in the literary works of David Foster Wallace, and those of his generation. In recent years, Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” has been read as a declarative manifesto for a new “postpostmodern” aesthetic that moves beyond the heavy reliance on irony and cynicism in American literature. Rather, Wallace claimed that the next group of literary anti-rebels would “risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama, [overcredulity and softness]” by being “too sincere” in their treatment of “old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life” (81). Sincerity, here, is figured as an emerging characteristic in the formation of a new contemporary canon. For Kelly, what is “new” about sincerity is how it is dialogically structured to involve the other, the reader. Drawing a correlation between Derrida and Wallace, Kelly claims that the affinity for paradox in both writers is a deliberate gesture:

sincerity has the same structure as a gift: it can always be taken for manipulation, and this risk is fundamental – it cannot be reduced by appeal to intention, or
morality, or context – because true sincerity, if there is such a thing, must take place in the aphoria between the conditional and the unconditional (138).

To put it another way, despite the disavowal of sincerity by consciousness, the “new sincerity” in literature values the reader’s reception more than the author’s intention. This notion of sincerity aligns closely with Dorothy Hale’s call for a project of “new ethical theory” which would “retool the old ethical sense of the novel as the genre of alterity and social diversity for our post-structuralist, post-marxist, post-Foucauldian, post-deconstructive age” (190). In a sense, then, the “new sincerity” is a peculiar sentiment as it relies on a self-conscious skepticism of its very possibility. And yet, for these writers this epistemological uncertainty is not altogether a case for despair; rather, as Zadie Smith claims, in an introduction to a contemporary collection of short stories, these new texts signal a return to a conversation between the reader and writer that “attempt[s] to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do” (qtd. in Kelly 145).

Although Kelly’s reading of Wallace and the New Sincerity is a compelling work of scholarship that informs my thinking about how sincerity is being figured in contemporary literature, I am interested in further tracking the historical trajectory that has led to the urgent return of sincerity. In particular, I am interested in asking, perhaps skeptically, what factors condition the arrival of sincerity and reconsider what might be ideologically behind sincerity. Sara Ahmed writes that to think “what is behind” is to consider “the conditions of emergence [that allow the] arrival of something as the thing it appears to be in the present” (*Queer Phenomenology* 38). In a sense, I want to suggest, like Ahmed, that to “simply ‘look at’ the object that [one] faces, [we] would be erasing the
‘signs of history’ (41). To take the alleged return of sincerity at face value ignores the ways that sincerity, as the “congruence of avowal and actual feeling,” (Trilling 2) has been bound up with forms of ideological education. To invoke Adorno’s cautionary attitude towards moral norms, there is a need to question the purported return of sincerity since “moral questions have always arisen when moral norms of behavior have ceased to be self-evident and unquestioned in the life of a community” (The Problem of Moral Philosophy 16). Adorno’s refusal to accept the continued afterlife of collective ideas is linked to how ideals, once weakened, acquire “repressive and violent qualities” in order to propagate an illusion of commonality (19). Given that sincerity, as traditionally conceptualized – the externalization of an inner state for others to witness and pass judgment upon – is already a concept waning in its effect, it is critical to ask if the efforts to continually reconstitute it have been misplaced, or worse, instrumental to certain repressive discourses. As Ahmed has eloquently argued in Queer Phenomenology, our habitual practices prevent us from noticing how our orientation towards certain objects direct our line of thought and “even think[ing] ‘to think’ about this point (5). What happens to sincerity if we “orient” ourselves to not consider it as an inherently ethical presupposition but to inquire into its actual historical usage in contradiction to claims of its necessity? Or, perhaps put another way, what if sincerity, the ostensibly non-ideological ideal of expressing one’s interiority, was itself a mask intended to obstruct certain normative practices? To return to the instance of the “New Sincerity” more rigorously then, it is necessary to question why the alleged “return” to sincerity by predominantly white, middle class authors is occurring in tandem with the continual
deprecation of minority writers of “telling it as it is.” And indeed, there exists another paradox here insofar as the proliferation of “culturally ‘othered’ goods” (Huggan 6) by postcoloniality, a market-driven regime of value, has also worked to regulate the cultural capital of certain “ethnic novels.”² It would seem that “sincerity” might very well be returning but what this entails exactly is not altogether clear.

In this sense, my project aims to be “untimely” by questioning the crisis of sincerity from a different theoretical centre that is interested not necessarily in the concept of sincerity for itself but also the unstated cultural mobilizations that have, whether correctly or incorrectly, informed celebration and denigration of the concept.³ And yet, I do not mean to say that sincerity is always an impossible endeavor ironically riddled with inconsistencies and concealed ulterior intentions. Indeed, despite the cluster of difficulties surrounding sincerity, it would be difficult to dispose of sincerity as it is an “indispensable affective (hence, social) process between subjects” (Alphen and Bal 5). Rather, I find it useful to distinguish sincerity in its micro and macro deployments (or, in other words, individual and collective usages, respectively). What I mean here, as will be elaborated on shortly, is that it is possible to think of sincerity as an ethos that operates on different scales: a “micro” relation between individuals and a “macro” imposition of

² Huggan notes how the ‘exotic’ is not an inherent quality that can be found in certain persons, objects or places; rather, it is “a particular mode of aesthetic perception” (emphasis in original 13) that renders the quality of unfamiliarity as it simultaneously domesticates them. In this sense, Huggan warns us that ‘otherness’ can be manufactured and has been for different kinds of projects.

³ See Wendy Brown, “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times” in Edgework. In particular, how untimeliness is part of thinking through the “out of jointness” of dark times and against the age.
sincerity. Through an extended critical reading of contemporary transatlantic literature, my project launches a simultaneous investigation of the “micro” and “macro” matrixes of sincerity by thinking with genealogical and performative methodologies in mind. For Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, literature has been a vital mode to confront questions of sincerity since “the devaluation of sincerity [has been] bound up in an essential although paradoxical way with the mystique of the classical literature of [the 20th] century” (6). For Susan B. Rosenbaum, the professionalization of literary criticism reveals this point aptly when a trajectory is traced from the overtly moral tenor of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century criticism is contrasted with the current poststructural and ideological approaches (216). That is, sincerity, in earlier texts of criticism, was conflated as both an elevated morality and aesthetic stance until the emergence of T.S. Eliot and the New Critics. For this reason, “Responding to the Call of Sincerity” examines the novel as a vehicle for sincerity; however, rather than reading (and judging) the “sincerity effect” of the text, I intend to approach sincerity as a thematic concern. And yet, as I will go on to suggest, it is a difficult task of separating what characteristics define sincerity within fictional narratives from how sincerity is transmitted in the realm of cultural production between author and reader.

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4 I realize here that there is a difficult slippage when we consider that individuals are not isolated from the discourses that interpellate them. But, if we consider that sincerity, as a cultural ethos, must also be performed, I would argue that the misfires reveal aspects of the norm that are difficult, if not impossible, to recreate in the subject perfectly.

5 See Rosenbaum (2007:222-223) for a brief history on the professionalization of the critic. Interestingly, the call for “impersonality” by the modernists has been related to the denigration of women’s writing and modernist anti-sentimentalism. This is an issue that I briefly acknowledge in this chapter and explore more rigorously in chapter 3.
Following Foucault, I want to consider what “must have happened to have made [sincerity] uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it (“Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations” 23). If as Foucault claims that every “one set of difficulties [has] several responses,” (24) then it is necessary to think through how and why sincerity became a cultural problem. A genealogy of sincerity reminds us that there is behind the object of inquiry “not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that [there is] no essence, or that [any purported] essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 353). To critique sincerity, then, would be to refute its crystallization from the synthesis of ‘meanings’ into meaning and “imagined consistency with itself” (356) as a historical mask that obfuscates its heterogeneity. In particular, as I will go on to argue, there is a need to determine whether sincerity declined independently or through causal relationalities which had a stake in disavowing the self as an epistemological ground for truth claims. Given that sincerity is enacted through performance, that is to say a performative action, it necessarily requires the recognition by an other. Since, as Judith Butler tells us, “certain breakdowns in the practice of recognition mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity” (Giving an Account of Oneself 24), the ideological gesture to restrict and embarrass sincerity, by different modalities of power, is deeply related to the regulation of who is sanctioned to speak and the limits or conditions of such an act. How else would it be possible to explain, as Sonia Kurtzer has it, the frequent charge against racialized subjects that their stories are too authentic and threatening? And, indeed, threatening to what? This is a peculiar historical development: why is it that
emotion which was once deployed extensively to enable national belonging has recently come to be deployed as a different kind of marker altogether? Since the genesis of sincerity expresses itself most intimately through interpersonal relations, sincerity has recently become a double-bind predicated on a risk of being dismissed for being too forthright and open about how one feels; in other words, it is a fear of being marked as a sentimentalist and kitsch by association. And yet, what if the very fear of emotionality speaks not to the failures of sincerity but to the ways that certain discourses of power are invested in diminishing the potential of experiencing alterity – to be affected and moved into movement?

For scholars like Deborah Gould, Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, emotion has had a long history with political possibility. In the introduction to *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS*, Deborah Gould employs the “emotional turn” in academia to rethink how social and political movements can be collectivized through emotions. Gould tracks a history of scholarship that prior to the 1970s depicted “protest as the result of a cultural strain […] that was said to produce abnormal psychological conditions in individuals” (12). In these earlier sociological studies, protestors were typecast as individuals who were “alienated from society and unfulfilled in their personal lives” (14). Strategically, such a rhetorical gesture worked to dismiss crowd-based mobilizations of feeling and emotion as a natural impulse that was largely irrational and devoid of thought. Through hegemonic conditioning, protestors became, in the eyes of civil society, an intellectually unsound group of misfits who were

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6 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. 
readily dismissed for their alleged hysteria. In a similar move, according to Goodwin et al., political claims made by women have historically been dismissed on the grounds of being emotionally driven (9). It is from this propensity to dismiss emotion as antithetical to reason that the “emotional turn” in academia resituates itself as “a response to the excesses of the rationalist paradigms” (Gould 16) which fail to “understand [that] all human beings [can] be both rational and emotional, having the ability to reason, to think strategically, to assess and pursue their interests, to feel, to emote” (17). Given that emotions have political valency, Gould borrows habitus, a term by Pierre Bourdieu, to illuminate the processes by which individuals are brought into the social order through emotional dispositions. An emotional habitus provides members of a social group with “what and how to feel, with labels for their feelings, with schemas about what feelings are and what they mean, with ways of figuring out and understanding what they are feeling” (34). Since each emotional habitus reproduces “[certain] feelings and modes of expression [as] an axiomatic, natural quality and [makes] other feelings and modes of expression unintelligible within its term and thus in a sense unfeelable and inexpressible, (34) the term allows us to think through the relationship between power and emotion. In this sense, power is a force which delimits the potentialities of the subject by generating “a sense of what is possible and probable, and thus of what to do and what not to do” (39).

What the emotional habitus tells us about the relationship of emotion with sincerity might not immediately be clear. We might consider, however, how difficult it is to distinguish between the “sentimental” and “sincere person.” Although sentimentality
has had a separate genesis from emotionality, Robert Solomon suggests that the label “sentimental” has become a denigrated term that connotes more in contemporary culture than it was once historically employed for. While critiques of sentimentality were once used to authenticate emotions by emphasizing sincerity, Solomon argues that attacks on on sentimentality have culturally shifted the object of criticism from “neither an excess of emotion nor a lack of hardheaded rationality, but the very evidence of emotion as such” (ix). Emotion as a sign is frequently condemned as an exaggerated self-indulgence, suggesting to spectators a “weakness of character” within individuals that marks hypocrisy and embarrassment (Solomon 3). Since hypocrisy, “the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one’s behavior does not conform” (OED), is the perverse antonym of sincerity, emotion becomes implicated in the process to determine whether one is dissimulating or being truthful in their claims. While sincerity can involve a judgment upon emotion to determine whether an individual is being excessive and sentimental, one can also be “sincere” through emotions and be labeled a sentimentalist. Take, for instance, Audre Lorde, who writes of an experience that captures the difficulty relationship between sincerity and emotionality:

When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are ‘creating a mood of helplessness,’ ‘preventing white women from getting past guilt,’ or ‘standing in the way of trusting communication and action.’ (qtd. in The Cultural Politics of Emotion 40)

In Lord’s example, the racialized subject, who in trying to open the pathways of “trusting communication and action,” is scolded for being too sincere and unreasonably angry in her relationship with white women who are attempting to understand without, according
to Lorde, engaging with the very real “mood of helplessness.” This misrecognition demonstrates how our conceptions of sincerity have been refracted through critiques of sentimentality. Moreover, it demonstrates how the normative aspects of the emotional habitus have a tendency to shift the rules of speech when marginalized subjects are given the opportunity to speak. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed writes that emotions have had a particular history, and notes how the Darwinian model of emotion has consistently perceived emotion as a sign of how “the primitive persists in the present” (3). Such an ideological gesture is meant to, as Ahmed argues, make a “claim about a subject or collective [through different] relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with meaning and value” (4). While Ahmed demonstrates that emotionality can affect all subjects, she also suggests that the etymological root of *passio* (Latin word for ‘suffering’) has much to do with the particular tendency for subaltern groups to be policed through emotions. Janet Todd, writing on sentimentalism and hysteria, notes how the female body was thought to be particularly susceptible to emotional influence allegedly making women “express emotions with their bodies more sincerely and spontaneously than men” (19). Similarly, as Sianne Ngai reminds us in her chapter on “Animatedness” in *Ugly Feeling*, the “historically tenacious construction of racialized subjects as excessively emotional [and] bodily subjects” (125) has served to elide emotional qualities into corporeal qualities that “[reinforce] the notion of races as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body” (95). Indeed, we can say that to be called or marked as emotional is a relinquishment of autonomy and agency whereby one becomes “reactive rather than active [by having] one’s judgment affected” (Ahmed 3).
What the recent scholarship on emotions tell us then, is that it matters who speaks and how. In addition, perhaps just as importantly, emotions reveal the problems associated with sincerity when individuals attempt to evaluate or measure the “verity” or “truthfulness” of another being.

Rather than tracing an exhaustive genealogy of sincerity and its associations, I will explore the construction and problematization of a “depth” model of subjectivity through examining, Michel Foucault’s extensive thinking on truth-telling. As Ernest van Alphen and Mieke Bal highlight in the introduction to *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, the traditional sense of sincerity as a “performance of an inner state on one’s outer surface” (3) is dependent upon a particular notion of subjectivity that claims that there is a hidden depth or “‘inner self’ responsible for our conduct, performances, and speeches” (3). Bound up with a dichotomy between the mind and body, this conceptualization of subjectivity has declined with recent theoretical work. And yet, despite the proclamation that the depth model has been disavowed, I claim that cultural representations of sincerity still rely upon the residual remainder of this notion of subjectivity. What is “behind” sincerity is a fundamental problem related to the traditional depth model of subjectivity – where the congruence of avowal and feeling relies upon and “inner” and “outer” division – that continues to haunt, in a kind of “afterlife,” our contemporary attempts to reconceptualize sincerity. Understood this way, sincerity has been intricately bound up with the conditioning, repression, and delimitation of subjectivity. And yet, if this conception of sincerity has been problematic, how then, might it be possible to be sincere today?
Beginning with Foucault, I draw predominantly from his series of lectures at the Collège de France to situate the Greek notion of *parrhēsia* – translated in English as “free” or “true” speech – as an early historical antecedent to sincerity. By developing *parrhēsia* alongside the Christian tradition, with particular attention to the Reformation, I track an inversion of morality that will transform *parrhēsia* closer to the emergence of sincerity as it is understood today. After outlining a brief trajectory of the depth model over the past five centuries, I shift focus by positing a post-Cartesian conceptualization of sincerity that is grounded upon recent scholarship on performativity. Reframing sincerity in such a manner would remove the depth model of subjectivity and the imposition of moral judgment. Rather than being inscribed by a signifier of character (“sincere” or “insincere”), performatives allow for a “profession of faith” that would “declare out loud what one is, what one believes, what one wants to be, while asking another to take one’s word and believe this declaration” (*Without Alibi* 214).

“The Soul is the Prison of the Body”: Ancient Antecedents

In a series of lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault returned to the Ancients to consider the relation between the subject and truth. Explaining his project as “alethurgic,” Foucault was interested in understanding “the act by which truth is manifested” (*The Courage of Truth* 3). Whereas previously, Foucault tells us that he was interested in exploring “the practices [and] types of discourse [used] to tell the truth about the subject,” he became interested in understanding “the discourse of truth which the subject is likely and able to speak about himself” (3). In what follows, I trace his so-called
“ethical turn” through his late texts in order to propose how sincerity has been disavowed in relation to what Foucault has called the “Cartesian moment.” Moreover, I claim that the “Cartesian moment” is a vital moment to rethink and reconceptualize our understanding of sincerity.

Inscribed in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi (repeated elsewhere in Greek dialogues and texts), there is an Ancient Grecian aphorism γνῶθι σεαυτόν (“Know Thyself”). When Foucault lectures on The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1981-1982), he is interested in investigating the different relations between the subject and truth by examining the ancient philosophy of gnōthi seauton (“know thyself”) and epimelia heautou (“care of the self”). In particular, his specific concern in the lecture series was to ask why the question of the subject (“the question of knowledge of the subject, of the subject’s knowledge of himself”) is continually posed under the Delphic inscription of gnōthi seauton, which has taken a special status in Western thought, and not under the terms of epimeleia heautou. Foucault tells us that the rational end of the maxim “know thyself” would be a knowledge system that would help one understand, interpellate and universalize subjectivity so much so that it would be possible to understand a continuous history of subjecthood. But, for Foucault, this is a peculiar historical occurrence, a moment to reflect upon, insofar that gnōthi seauton had been for some time considered by the Greeks to be a subordinate clause of the ethical principle epimeleia heautou: “You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself” (The Hermeneutics of the Subject 5). In this sense, gnōthi seauton is at the forefront of what it means to take care of oneself and “a sort of concrete, precise and particular application of
the general rule” (5). However, it is importantly a subordinate clause and not the central ethos to which the Ancient Greeks ascribed to. Instead, Foucault tells us that gnōthi seauton was an implication of epimeleia heautou which gave rise to a “culture of the self” in which a whole set of practices of self are worked out. In this sense, the principle of epimeleia heautou was “an attitude towards the self, others and the world” (10) whereby the epimeleia involved a set of practices and actions that were “exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself” (11).

In another definition, Foucault says that the care of the self is the set of “conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are the necessary conditions for having access to the truth” (17). Distinguishing between “philosophy” and “spirituality,” Foucault writes that “spirituality” is the “price to be paid for access to the truth” while “philosophy” is the form of thought that “determines the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth” (15). For Foucault, the care of the self illustrates a particular relation between subject and truth by withholding the possibility of truth “without a conversion or transformation of the subject” (15). It is here that he locates what he calls the “Cartesian moment” where the relation between subject and truth is rewritten.7 Foucault writes that Descartes’s Meditations on First Philosophy “requalif[ied] gnōthi seauton and discredit[ed] the epimeleia heautou” (14) by placing the subject’s own existence at the very source of access to being, as the self-evidence or

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7 By arbitrary, Foucault means to say that the disassociation had begun significantly earlier in history. What is more, Foucault argues that there continues to be in psychoanalysis and Marxism the same “questions, interrogations, and requirements” (The Hermeneutics of the Subject 29) that were once posed in relation to the care of the self.
origin of thought (cogito: I think therefore I am). In other words, Descartes made it so that philosophy was sufficient in itself for knowledge and disconnected “the spiritual necessity of the subject’s work on himself” (26). The result, as Foucault claims, is our modern relation between the subject and truth:

[T]he modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject. (17)

Indeed, there is a fundamental problem that emerges when “the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject” (19); rather, knowledge becomes an “indefinite dimension of progress, the end of which is unknown and the advantage of which will only ever be realized in the course of history by the institutional accumulation of bodies of knowledge” (19). In other words, if a subject, in Ancient Greece, worked to find the relation to his or her relation to the truth – that is, they took care of themselves – they would be rewarded with sense of completion, enlightenment and fulfillment. This will have significant consequences for how one comes to understand “self-mastery” as the modern subject will work ad infinitum to collect knowledge without ever being able to transfigure oneself.

In the following year, once again at the Collège de France, Foucault returns to the Greek notion of “care of the self” but under the guise of a practice called parrhēsia to deal with “the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity” (Fearless
speech” while the parrhēsiaste, the one who uses parrhēsia, tends to mean “the one who freely speaks the truth.” Foucault tells us that in studying the practices of the self, he saw a figure emerge, the other to self, who was “the almost necessary helper in this obligation to tell the truth about oneself (The Courage of Truth 5). Indeed, he argues that there existed “the presence of the other person” (5) before the institutionalization of confession in Christianity. For Foucault, this figure did not require the qualification or sanctification by institutional authority; instead, what one required was the ability to use the practice of positive parrhēsia. To be a parrhēsiaste, there are two essential requirements: (1) the parrhēsiaste must manifest a fundamental relation between truth and person where “he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it”; and, (2) the parrhēsiaste, when speaking the truth, must “open up, establish and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent” (11). In this sense, parrhēsia is not merely a skill or technique but also “a stance, a way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action” (14). Different from a rhetorician, one can locate “a kind of ‘proof’ of the sincerity of the parrhēsiastes” (Fearless Speech 15) in his courage to speak and risk saying something different from what the body politic. Indeed, as Butler says of Foucault, “[i]f one is speaking in giving an account of oneself, then one is also exhibiting, in the

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8 The Courage of Truth was delivered at the Collège de France while Fearless Speech was a lecture series that occurred at the University of California, Berkley in 2001.
9 Foucault makes a distinction of positive and negative parrhēsia by explaining its political connotations. Turning to Book VIII of The Republic by Plato, Foucault notes how parrhēsia can result in a bad democratic city when anyone can say anything. It is this sense of parrhēsia as “someone who cannot restrain himself [or] cannot index-link his discourse to a principle of rationality and truth” (10) that is considered pejorative.
very speech that one uses, the logos by which one lives” (126). Thus, speaking can be an act of doing, “one that is already a moral practice and a way of life” (126). That is to say, the parrhēsiastes is a person who embodies the test of truth in order to appear to other individuals as a transgression of norms – an other who would risk death in order to transform thinking to show alternative ways of being.

Parrhēsia, in ancient Athens, then, was a means of confront power—it was the courage to tell. And yet, Foucault suggests, there is a radical deterritorialization of the term parrhēsia when it is transported into the Christian tradition – one that is revealingly close to sincerity genealogically. There emerges a conception of parrhēsia that is concerned not with facing other individuals, but a positive modality of the relation to God that involves “something like openness of heart [and] the transparency of the soul which offers itself to God’s sight” (The Courage of Truth 326). No longer a horizontal relation to others, it becomes a vertical axis that allows a subject to rise up to God. In this sense, parrhēsia is still “a truth-telling, but it is not even a ‘telling’ any more: it is the openness of heart which manifests itself in its truth to God and lifts up this truth to Him” (327).

Through the institutionalization of Christianity, the requirement of obedience in Christian life through the “entrust[ing] of souls to pastors, priests, or bishops” (333) the “courageousness” or “boldness” of parrhēsia undergoes a stark inversion, becoming legible instead as a kind of arrogance or presumption about oneself. The development of structural authority works to make it so that the individual can no longer find himself face to face with God. Instead, Foucault writes, “the intermediary [nature] of these structures of authority [becomes] the sign that he must mistrust himself” (334). Confidence
becomes, then, “a fault, a danger, a vice,” (334) the antithesis of what parrhēsia once was; and, if God bestows anything, it is a fear that disobedience will ruin the chances of one’s salvation. Henceforth, according to Foucault, under the negative modality of fearing God, the subject will forget how to take care of oneself:

> We chase away from the fear of the Lord by the fact that [...] we do not keep before us the thought of death, or punishment, nor do we attend to our own condition, or examine how we spend our time, but we live differently and are occupied with different things, pandering to our liberty, giving way to ourselves, self-indulgence – this is worst of all, this is perfect ruin. (Dorotheos of Gaza, qtd. in Foucault 342n22)

The consequences, to state Foucault’s claim made a year prior, is that the “truth cannot save the subject” (The Hermeneutics of the Subject 19). Henceforth, the Christian life will not be what Foucault calls the “true life of truth,” instead, it will be an endless cycle of gnōthi seauton and renunciation of self as the very condition necessary to have the soul purified – life becomes a test.

In turning to Foucault’s genealogy of “know thyself” and “the care of the self,” my intention was to highlight the role of the other in “truth-telling.” What is interesting about Foucault’s project, more broadly, is how power becomes figured in the relation of truth-telling. When a subject is asked to tell the truth about themselves, self-reflection is constituted by power since the subject can only speak through certain discourses that will always delimit what can be said. What is at stake is whether one can tell the truth about oneself given that speaking is always conditioned and constrained by power. To be constituted as a self-reflecting subject, then, requires this “spirituality” or price paid for access to truth. However, expanding on Foucault, Butler tells us that there is always a risk when one gives an account of themselves:
if [these discourses of rationality] become naturalized, taken for granted, considered as foundational and required, if they become the terms by which we do and must live, then our very living depends upon a denial of their historicity, a disavowal of the price we pay (121).

It is precisely for this reason that the *parrhēsiastes* emerges for Foucault as a challenge and transgression of normativity. The *parrhēsiastes*, who is brave and courageous, contests the speaking person to reconsider and reflect again:

> And the main effect of this parrhesiastic struggle with power is not to bring the interlocutor to a new truth, or to a new level of self-awareness; it is to lead the interlocutor to *internalize* this parrhesiastic struggle – to fight within himself against his own faults (*Fearless Speech* 133)

More important, however, is the relation between speaking and action; if one is trying to constitute their speaking subjectivity, they are *performing* themselves and bringing to light the way one lives – one is bound to their word.

> It is unsurprising, then, that these issues return around the beginning of the sixteenth century, a time of profound religious and economic changes when sincerity first emerges in both the English language and European culture (Alphen and Bal 2). To pose a particular question: what is the distinction between *parrhēsia* and sincerity? If *parrhēsia* was linked to a sense of *speaking as moral action*, the actualizations of the *logos* in the person, sincerity is not altogether a genealogically separate entity; rather, the separation should be considered as one by degree. Indeed, the self-questioning that appears in the period Foucault analyzed (from the fourth century to the fifth and sixth centuries) is similar to the religious writings that emerge about sincerity. In light of the Reformation, there is a fundamental shift in the fabric of Christian morality where boldness is disavowed in favour of meekness. Whereas one engaged in *parrhēsia* for the sake of
challenging the subject, the historical usage of sincerity was a judgment or inscription imposed to differentiate between “good” and “bad subjects.” Indeed, as Nietzsche once wrote, it was with the transvaluation of values in the Christian tradition that the priestly caste emerges to define what “pure” and “impure”:

For with the priests everything becomes more dangerous, not only curse and remedies, but also arrogance, revenge, acuteness, profligacy, love, lust to rule, virtue disease—but it is only fair to add that it was on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil. (On The Genealogy of Morals 468-469)

Henceforth, what is considered to be bold is also rendered dangerous not only to the self but to society. As a consequence of this, parrhēsia is disassociated from “free speech”; instead, sincerity, a call to present yourself as true and faithful to God, is imposed on the population as a means of inscribing morality. To put it another way, whereas parrhēsia could be said to challenge normativity, sincerity becomes a technique of governance imposed as the grounds for salvation by the Christian Church – a condition that the subject speak without question.

One way to map out the contours of this shift would be to return to Shakespeare’s theatrical work where representation becomes emblematic of a wider concern with social representation. In his play As You Like It, Shakespeare famously wrote, “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (II.IV.139-140). For scholars of sincerity like Susan B. Rosenbaum, Jacque’s monologue has a particular importance in complicating the relationship between performance and representation. It is for this reason that Rosenbaum claims that the emergence of sincerity is inseparable from its constitution against “a theatricality of representation with acting, [and] the theater” (11).
As a result, sincerity comes to mean an absence of artifice. At the same time, however, according to Jean-Christophe Agnew in *Worlds Apart*, the theatre was not merely a site for acting or representation but also “a laboratory of and for the new social relations of agricultural and commercial capitalism” (xi). This critical juncture between theatre and emerging forms of capitalism created an etymological slippage that conflated the definition of “performance” as both: (1) the action of performing a play, piece of music, etc. in front of an audience; and, (2) the quality of execution of such an action, operation, or process (OED). Within the cultural imaginary of the theatre, for instance, the emergence of the villain is a clear inflection of capitalism. Deriving etymologically from Latin (*villa*), Anglo-French and Old French (*villain*), the term originally referred to a “farmhand,” “base or low-born rustic” or “peasant.” The disparity between the etymological origin and our contemporary definition of the villain is not an accident. The rise of capitalism created an ideological crisis in England where it was uncertain who would be allowed to climb the emerging social ladder; through a repressive mechanism, economic and religious characteristics were linked together in the villain who became codified as “the person who seeks to rise above the station to which he was born” (Trilling 16). However, in his attempt to do so, the villain becomes a new problematization of the relation between truth and identity that had previously been unacknowledged:

Embedded within the idiomatic analogy between legal and social forms of identity was a new and somewhat sinister implication that the human face, like the “skin of parchment,” was an autonomous, even alien, instrument of misrepresentation. For those disposed to put such thoughts in writing, it seemed as if the personal properties of self were becoming as ambiguous as the “real” properties to which that self, as a “freeborn Englishman,” might lay claim. (Agnew 58)
The villain, who comes from an agricultural and feudal background, “denies and violates his social identity through the usage of covert acts and guile” (Trilling 16). In other words, the villain opposes sincerity insofar he is a hypocrite, “the one who plays a part” (16). As the outward signs of social identity became susceptible, “truth,” in the sense of intentionality, was retrenched inward as a double movement that allowed both the emergence of a new Protestant conscience to scrutinize others and oneself. More than being constituted by the depth model, sincerity helped to reinforce and rewrite the ethical norms. Whereas being a parrhēsiaste was a life in and for itself, sincerity became figured as one of the corporeal signs that qualified and allowed for claims of the Christian soul and heaven, as it is understood today.

Christianity, as a life test, utilized the dichotomy of good and evil to evaluate and categorize subjects. One of the first written accounts of the word sincere arose in a text by John Frith entitled An Answer to Thomas More. Within the text, Frith utilized the term to note that John Wycliffe, who had been involved in the translation of the Bible into English had lived “a very sincere life” (qtd. Taylor 23). On the face of it, the statement seems rather inconsequential; however, on further inspection, the statement is a rather uneasy juxtaposition between sincerity and the once heretical act of scriptural translation. Indeed, sincerity appears in opposition to the perceived dogmatic paradigm of Catholicism, which Protestants argued interfered with the communion of God.10 Under

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10 Indeed, to cite Foucault once more, the major conflict running through Christianity from the end of the fifth century up to the seventeenth century was “the opposition between theological thought and the requirement of spirituality” (The Hermeneutics of the Subject 27). In an early lecture, Foucault interprets the schema of Christian subjectivation and notes how the production of the truth of the self is linked to self-renunciation: I only produce the truth of myself in order to renounce myself (267n9).
John Calvin and Martin Luther, the rising Protestant tide would utilize the translated Bible, in conjunction with the increasing literacy, to create a culture that focused on inward reflection and self-examination; it is a culture where an art of living emerges in which a moment of avowal or confession is seen as an exercise of oneself on oneself (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject* 333). Tangential to Agnew’s claim that the mechanics of misrepresentation and representation were becoming codified in theatre, the vernacular translation of the sacred text created new relationalities between self, other and God. Here, the emergence of a cultural schism begins, or, as Jane Taylor puts it “the translation of sacred text into multiple, destabilizing vernacular versions, which furthermore are made available for individual interpretations, threaten[ed] to overthrow the world” (23).

By opening up the Bible to the vernacular, the new Christian subject moved from being externally judged by the institution of Christianity to faithfully communing with God once more.

Perhaps, in the end, it is not peculiar that sincerity becomes associated with the birth of the self-questioning dissident. Rather, sincerity, as it is today, has much in common with the conscious doubting that the sincere convert went through. If to be sincere it was necessary to present “the terrain within, that which is unseen,” (Taylor 25) how else could one stage “an inner universe […] against external signification” (25) other than a continual renunciation of self? Paradoxically then, the sincere self was both “a solitary creature, inward looking [and] self-reflexive,” while also a performance for “an external authority” (27). Concerned with proving the true substantiation of *self to self*, the

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For Foucault, the fundamental principle of Christian asceticism is that “renunciation of the self is the essential moment of what enables [one] to gain access to the other life” (250).
Puritan autobiography materializes to discern and record events of religious experience during this crisis. For Trilling and other scholars, like Georges Gusdorf and Paul Delany, the emergence of the autobiographical genre signaled the emergence of the individual, who was “bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity” (25). And yet, it is precisely because of the freedom afforded by sola scriptura – the doctrine that positioned the Bible as the container of all requisite knowledge for salvation – that an additional spiritual crisis for patrons of Christianity emerged. Here, the distinction between “know thyself” and “care of the self” is clearly pronounced when Catholicism is displaced by the need to perform, in the sense of doing, good deeds. But, if this usage of perform is slippery, it is intentional insofar that the confessional texts reveal the self-crippling doubt and impossibility of discerning whether one is truly sincere or not. In his treatise The Saints’ Everlasting Rest published in 1654, Richard Baxter wrote against and reiterated this fear:

We shall hear that language no more, “What shall I do to know my state? How shall I know that God is my Father? that my heart is upright? that my conversion is true? that faith is sincere? I am afraid my sins are unpardoned; that all I do is hypocrisy, that God will reject me; that he does not hear my prayers. All this is there turned into praise. (emphasis added 33)

The sincere convert is penitent for his dark night of the soul; in the written act of expression, one hopes to atone for their sins and renounce themselves, thus, in a sense becoming sincere through self-scrutiny and humility. In a sense, Christianity demanded that subjects doubt their faith in order to renounce the self (thus performing sincerity) as it simultaneously enforced doubt as the very sign of infidelity. In this discursive practice, it almost matters not whether one is sincere or not rather, to return to the example of the
villain, it matters only that one does not present oneself with *hypocrisy*. It is unsurprising then, that the role of the hypocrite is bestowed upon the type of subject who will lose the most from the economic shift into commercial capitalism. Read in this manner, the insincere farmhand who sought to rise above his station is stifled and repressed by a moral mechanism that presupposes his indecency.

Consider a juridical encounter where recognition and absolution depends upon an enactment of a sincere confession. Since, as Yasco Horsman tells us, a confession depends on “the confessor to publicize the veracity of [their] apology,” (146) there is a need to “supplement” sincerity with the enactment, demonstration or appeal of the soul. To quote Judith Butler, “[t]he scene of moral judgment, when it is a judgment of persons for being as they are, invariably establishes a clear moral distance between the one who judges and the one who is judged” (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 45). That is to say, there can be a kind of ethical violence within the act of judgment that “presupposes a prior relation between those who judge and those who are judged” (45). But, in the case of sincerity, what is being judged *exactly*? To cite Foucault:

> Western man has become a confessing animal. Whence a metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard, centering on the heroic or marvelous narration of “trials” of bravery or sainthood, to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of expression holds out like a shimmering mirage. (*History of Sexuality*, vol 1, 59)

Confession reconfigures truth as a substance “lodged in our most secret nature,” which, if we are not constrained by power, only requires that we “demand” it to surface (60). On the contrary, Foucault asks how the institution of Christianity, as moral inspection, can be anything other than a subjection of one’s freedom. Rather, the *internalization* of identity
as a *substance* or *essence* is the perversion of power employed in the service of
normativity. What is more, Butler writers that the false coherency of the subject is reified
by an “inner” and “outer” binary distinction whose very fluidity allows it to continually
displace the terms of subjectivity when challenged (134). Foucault, in *Discipline and
Punish*, writes that:

> It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On
the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around on,
within, the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those that are
punished. (29)

Referring to imprisoned criminals, Foucault subverts the traditional representation of the
soul by Christian theology by suggesting that the soul is “born rather out of methods of
punishment, supervision and constraint” (29). What he means to say is that far from being
“within” the body, the soul is not a “substance” but rather it is *already* a signification on
the body, an inscription that acts a continual deference of that which is invisible. What is
judged then, is not the interior self; rather it is a continual deferral of signification where
interiority does not surface but is *inscribed* on the surface through its very absence, lack,
or invisibility – “the soul is the prison on the surface of the body” (*Discipline and Punish*
30). In this sense, Butler tells us that “the essence or identity that [these acts] purport to
express are *fabrications* manufactured through corporeal signs and other discursive
means” (emphasis in original 136). In this sense, the demand for sincerity was a *recursive*
movement that threatened to continue *ad infinitum* since intention could never be named.
Conversely, the almost *predestined* bourgeois subject (who may or may not have actually
been a sincere convert) is proffered the opportunity to maintain (and in some cases rise
above) their social standing where his wealth and affluence would become reconfigured
as a sign not of voice, but of his moral conviction. During this historical juncture, sincerity was often an impossible normative horizon that revealed the unsettling desire to locate and inscribe a discourse of truth upon the visible body.

A Disassociation of Sensibility: New Criticism and the Scene of Irony

Upon closer inspection, Foucault’s focus on the Protestant reformer and sincerity scholars’ focus on theatrical representation in the Early Modern period is not altogether incompatible; rather, the immense social, economic, and religious turmoil was linked through the notion of sincerity and anxieties about the false confession of the soul. For Agnew, the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was inflected by moral and social instructions, which sought to respond to this crisis of representation. Conservative genres, such as the literature of estates, worked against social mobility by being antipathetic towards those the so-called “villains.” But, more than this, Agnew notes how the audiences of these dramas “used the idiom of the theater to frame the problem for themselves” (97). This conflation between the economic and theatrical sense of “performance” created a crisis of representation that mixed affluence with morality; for example, consider John Hall, a poet, who wrote “Man in business is but a Theatricall person, and in a manner but personates himself […] in his retired and hid actions, he pulls off his disguise, and acts openly” (qtd. in Agnew 97). For Susan B. Rosenbaum, the Industrial Revolution further changed the relationship between poets, like Wordsworth, with the consumer. In particular, Rosenbaum points out:

The commercial mediation of texts, the increasing anonymity of market exchange, and the specter of self-interest all threatened to compromise the ideal of a shared
moral trust that could ground social relations and guarantee the stability and readability of an author’s identity, intentions and values. (5)

For my purpose here, what is notable about sincerity during the Romantic period is its reconfiguration as a secular and aesthetic component or category. The etymology of “profession,” once again, tells a revealing story about the dialectical fissure between the literary marketplace and sincerity. On the one hand, to profess meant “to declare openly, announce; to avow, acknowledge, confess” (qtd. in Rosenbaum 13). At the same time, a contradictory definition emerges where to profess was often imbued with an insincerity that tried “to claim or pretend (to be or to do something)” (OED). And yet, as M.H. Abrams has argued in Natural Supernaturalism, the Romantic artists from England to Germany “conceived of themselves as elected spokesmen for the Western tradition at a time of profound cultural crisis” (12). By calling themselves poet-prophets, they set out to “save traditional concepts, schemes and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation” (13). And in doing so, the great project of the Romantics was an attempt to “[develop] new modes of organizing experience, new ways of seeing the outer world, and a new set of relations of the individual to himself, to nature, to history, and to his fellow men” (14). To quote Wordsworth scholar David Perkins:

‘Wordsworth would have a poet speak from the tradition of a craft, but from his full experience and concern as a man. Compared with the classical and neoclassical verse—which offer a clearer contrast than any other—the poetry of sincerity will seem personal rather than typical, intimate rather than public, spontaneous or natural rather than heightened and planned.’ (13)

Indeed, in the Romantic tradition, there are two central doctrines which relate back to the care of the self: defamiliarization and the advocacy for usage of “the real language of men” (“Preface to Lyrical Ballads” 251). Both of these tenets are reconceptualizations of
parrhēsia in the care of the self. Inspired by Rousseau’s Confessions and life work, perhaps, the Romantics similarly saw institutional civilization as a corruption of self. For this reason, within the works of Wordsworth and Blake, there is a pressing call to arms to remove the “mind-forg’d manacles” (“London” line 8) and consider “what man has made of man” (“Lines Written in Early Spring” line 8). In Songs of Innocence and Experience, for example, “The Little Black Boy” or “The Chimney Sweeper” are different attempts to consider what Foucault called une vie autre. What is found in defamiliarization is quite similar to the parrhēsia notion of “speaking everything”; likewise, the spirit of the French Revolution can also be considered the very risk of death. To make a claim that literature had the potential to transform and enlighten the masses, however, necessarily supposed and demanded that the author prove their purported moral superiority. Consequently, the author became site of conflict in the conflation of the literary and economic spheres. As Rosenbaum tells us, authors began to make claims for sincerity in their works as an “essentially moral promise that the author is who she says she is and that she means what she says” (2). In other words, sincerity becomes a crisis of legitimacy when literature is professionalized; as the literary marketplace began to reorganize itself away from a system of patronage, audiences were forced to make a fraught distinction between the calculated performances of honesty from true claims—without ever being able to objectively gauge intention.

Under the constraints of the market, then, sincerity becomes “a paradoxical desire for and deep skepticism of sincerity’s rhetorical form” (5). This is important, as Rosenbaum reminds us, because critics would draw conclusions about literature from the
moral standing of the writer. For instance, Rosenbaum examines the critical reception of Mary Robinson, a popular poet and actress who becomes a figure of public scrutiny as the mistress of the Prince of Wales. “Stanzas to a Friend, Who Desired to Have My Portrait,” in particular, was written as a “frank confession” (line 36) to present herself as “always speak[ing] what [she] believe” (line 46). Despite her attempts to profess herself to the public, one review claimed that the work could not be autonomously evaluated without considering whether or not “the private character of an author […] proceed[ed] from the pen of vice or virtue” (qtd. in Rosenbaum 4). But, more than this, Robinson is a particularly telling case as her gender comes to dictate how her feelings are read by the critic:

From the numerous odes of our author we extract one, in which, if in any, we might expect to be gratified by the genuine expression of feeling, but which affords in fact only that kind of unmeaning exaggeration and decorated inanity which are the miserable resource of a cold heart, a vitiated taste, and a defective genius. (in Robinson, Selected Poems 390).

Robinson’s attempt to be sincere is presented as hypocritical; that is, Robinson is framed as a sentimental woman whose excess is morally reprehensible. What happens in the case of Mary Robinson, then, is that her public persona (crafted by the marketplace) overtakes her attempts to attest otherwise. Instead, as Rosenbaum notes, Robinson is unable to defend herself against a set of cartoons that portrayed her as a prostitute (3). Despite the attempt by the Romantics to ground literature on “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (“Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” 237), emotion will begin its radical decline in favor of irony and skepticism as the “mark of the educated” (Solomon 246). Since, as Michael Bell tells us, the reactionary revision of the nineteenth century “effected a
downward transposition of feeling into the unconscious” (166), becoming modern, becoming self-conscious, made life seem “intrinsically insincere [as] there [was] no access to unconscious feeling” (166).

If sincerity became an evaluative criterion during the Romantic period, the devaluation of the concept is also closely related to the professionalization of literary criticism in the early twentieth century. Although I focus in depth on the relation between literary criticism, the university and sincerity in the next chapter, I intend to briefly outline the elevation of irony in the Modernist and Postmodernist movements. As with most terms examined thus far, the etymological history of irony is a revealing one; originally derived from the ancient Greek (εἰρωνεία), irony was a “dissimulation” or “pretended ignorance” (OED). Rhetorically, the device has been associated with a distance between what one happens or is said and what is actually the case. However, in the advent of New Criticism, irony becomes a criterion of literary value that displaces sincerity. In two separate but related works, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argued that literary criticism should be instigated through the reading of the text as a closed and stable system. “The Intentional Fallacy,” published in 1946, critiqued the prevalent act of basing criticism on the author’s intended meaning; instead, Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (468). As a response to so-called moral and biographical criticism, Wimsatt and Beardsley take particular care in focusing on Romantic expression as an agent of the problem. Rather, Wimsatt and Beardsley disavow expression in favour of objectivity:
The day may arrive when the psychology of composition is unified with the science of objective evaluation, but so far they are separate. It would be convenient if the passwords of the intentional school, “sincerity,” “fidelity,” “spontaneity,” “authenticity,” “genuineness,” “originality,” could be equated with terms of analysis such as “integrity,” “relevance,” “unity,” “function”; with “maturity,” “subtlety,” and “adequacy,” and other more precise axiological terms – in short, if “expression” always meant aesthetic communication. But this is not so. (476)

On one hand, the alleged turn to judge literature as a closed system has an intention of freeing Mary Robinson from influencing readings of her work. On the other hand, however, the disparaging of expression has had an unstated effect on emotion as well. In contrast to the intentional fallacy, “The Affective Fallacy” examines “[the] confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does) (31). In Wimsatt and Beardsley’s description of emotion, a hierarchy emerges between reason and emotion – as Gould has critiqued:

> Emotion, it is true, has a well-known capacity to fortify opinion, to inflame cognition, and to grow upon itself in surprising proportions to grains of reason. We have mob-psychology, psychosis, and neurosis. We have “free floating anxiety” and all the vaguely understood and inchoate states of apprehension, depression or elation, the prevailing complexions of melancholy or cheer. But it is well to remember that these states are indeed inchoate or vague and by that fact may even verge upon the unconscious. (emphasis mine 38)

What the affective fallacy is attempting to “correct” is the impressionistic and relativistic responses by readers on the basis of emotion. Rather, citing examples of aesthetic distance, detachment, and disinterestedness, Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that affective criticism should be conducted with “the subtle quality of patterned emotions which play at the subdued level of disposition or attitude” (emphasis mine 46). Ultimately, criticism renders poetry by “fixing emotions or making them more permanently perceptible” (52).
Rather than accepting the Romantic tradition of genius and expression then, T.S. Eliot writes, “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 18). Eliot concludes that “the emotion of art is impersonal” and that it is not personality but the depersonalization of emotion that is necessary to create great art. For Eliot and the New Critics, the transvaluation of literary criticism transformed poetry from being “emotion recollected in tranquility” (“Preface to Lyrical Ballads” 251); instead, poetry is “not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from these things” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 21). By turning the site of the text into a set of “‘organic’ relationships of literary elements” (18), the “best” literature operated through ambiguity, paradox, and irony. For Eliot, the poet must above all else be difficult in order to respond to the increasing complexity and variety of civilization (“The Metaphysical Poets” 289). Rather than directness in language, Eliot advocated for the poet to “become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (289).

What was perhaps unforeseen in the rise of irony, however, was the similar slippage of irony from being a criterion of literature to being a moral attitude. Irony, as Linda Hutcheon tells us, can put people on “edge” because it is a “‘weighted’ mode of discourse in the sense that it is asymmetrical, unbalanced in favor of the silent and the unsaid” (Irony’s Edge 35). Despite claims that irony is an objective or distanced rhetorical strategy, it ends up producing, through its disinterestedness and distance –
inherited traits from Eliot – a hierarchy of power between the ironist and the interpreter.

For Wallace, writing in the early 1990s, this kind of irony, as a sort of cynicism and skepticism has come to be a cultural discourse:

The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit “I don’t mean what I’m saying.” So what does irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it’s impossible to mean what you say? […] Most likely, I think, today’s irony ends up saying: “How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean.” […] And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its subject is, when exercised, tyranny. (“E. Unibus Pluram” 68)

And, indeed, irony always has an intention even if it is indirect about it. In the end, what the history of sincerity tells us is fundamentally ironic: the proliferation and rise of irony have led to the same problem – if everyone is ironic about what they mean, who is being sincere?

**Rethinking Performance as Performativities:**

I have attempted to describe through separate particular historical junctures the relationship between sincerity, truth and subjectivity. Of course, there is an unquestionably larger archive than it is possible to manage here and for “Responding to the Call of Sincerity” in particular. What I have tried to show, however, is that a conception of sincerity that depends upon a depth model of subjectivity is an impossible endeavor – at worst, repressive. And yet, despite a genealogical history that is less than impressive, is it misplaced to desire truthfulness from another person? Perhaps. When Foucault began his research at the Collège de France, he undertook his trip with the Ancients with the realization that modern reflexivity would be a difficult task. To say that
parrhēsia would be a useful model in contrast to sincerity, then, seems not only impossible but also inaccurate. For Foucault, to think through the problem of “truth-telling” in relation to the ancients required an acknowledgment that modern institutions have radically entrenched discourses of power that are seldom recognized. More than this, however, parrhēsia was problematically linked with a question of who should be granted the right to employ it. Whereas Plato and other ancients would claim, for example, that the philosopher-king would be best suited to rule the polity, such a claim would be incomprehensible in our contemporary moment. Given that parrhēsia was originally motivated by political interests, it would be problematic in terms of implementation as such. What is needed instead, I argue is a reconceptualization of sincerity that is inspired by the “spirit” of parrhēsia. Indeed, what is interesting about parrhēsia as a concept for “truth-telling” seems to be located in the right to challenge another since, as Foucault concludes his seminar, “there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; the truth can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life” (The Courage of Truth 340). What seems valuable to Foucault is the ability for the other to challenge the speaking subject to think further on their subjectivity. In other words, it is not so much that parrhēsia as a term itself motivates Foucault (something he suggests when he brings up negative parrhēsia), rather it is about the game of “truth-telling” and learning to care for the self by constantly asking (by being asked) who one is. To return to the question I posed at the start of the introduction, of what sincerity today could look like, I propose that we relinquish or rearticulate the outer/inner distinction by returning to the relationship between speaking
as a kind of *doing*, that brings the self into being. Since *doing* brings into being a sense of self, that is to say the “I,” it is only within “a crucible of social relations” (*Giving An Account of Oneself* 132) that one constitutes oneself. However, this entails a similar risk as the *parrhēsiaste*, “to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (136). What would it mean to accept this risk and give an account of oneself here? Would it not be a sincere confession that “I” cannot be “I” without you, and, therefore, I will always do my best for you?

True sincerity might be impossible – there is no sincere self hidden in the depths, waiting to be summoned. But this is not altogether a reason to despair. If irony is a natural inclination or response to sincerity today, it speaks to a peculiar fear that bold speech has the affective potential to move and be moved by the other. Indeed, in contradistinction to calls for the return of sincerity, it is precisely insofar as sincerity has been devalued and hard to come by that it finds utility in being *unpredictable* as a *performative* action or utterance. When J.L. Austin lectured on *How to Do Things with Words*, he made the unsettling argument that philosophers had assumed for too long that “the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact,’ which it must do either truly or falsely” (1). However, Austin argues that besides this constative statement – a phrase that says what is – there is a type of *performative utterance* where “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action” (6). Citing the play *Hippolytus* as an expression of a gap between of a gap between the outward utterance and the occurrence of the inward performance, (“My tongue swore to, but my heart did not”),
Austin argues the act should not be considered “false” but instead as “void, or given in bad faith, or not implemented, or the like” (10-11). That is to say, performative utterances should be assessed based on the action alone as opposed to the intention; it is a kind of promise or commitment to something that is yet to come. Butler, writing in *Gender Trouble*, builds upon this tradition of performativity through her theoretically radical suggestion that gender is not what one is but what one does. And, indeed, in her revision of this claim in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler makes it clear that while gender performativity is not a choice, it contains a discursive possibility for resistance:

> The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language. (176)

What is useful about conceiving of sincerity as a performative is the connection between statement, action and thinking. Perhaps, it is not possible to be a parrhēsiaste as such in our contemporary moment, but the threat of sincerity to reveal the normative formations of speech and action is not, in the end, without utility. Rather than think of sincerity as an inherent ethical value that one has, performativity allows, if not requires, the continual repetition of sincerity ad infinitum where one cannot simply be sincere – it is a constant challenge of becoming that is located between the other and self. It is precisely that all performances require a profession of faith, are judged as either sincere or insincere, that the slippage or approximation of norms occur. What would it mean to be sincere in opposition to the emotional habitus that dictate what emotions to feel? If the project of
emotionality has been to claim how one should feel, then, emotion, when sincere, is an anomaly. Derrida, writing on the nature of the gift, claims that “for giving to be possible, for a giving event to be impossible, it has to look impossible” (448). Because the admission of sincerity would announce its arrival prior to the event, the actual enactment of sincerity, it would paradoxically negate itself. Consider, at length, an example of the gifting:

If I’m expecting the other to thank me, to recognize my gift, and to give me something in return, in some way or another, symbolically, materially, or physically, there is no giving either. Even if the thanks are purely symbolic, they annul the giving. Giving has to overreach gratitude. To be able to receive the gift, in a certain way the other must not even know that I’m giving it, because once the person knows, then he or she enters the circle of thanks and gratitude and annuls the gift. (“A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event” 449)

And yet, the impossible does happen – it has happened. For Foucault, Socrates was the exemplar of parrhēsia, a philosopher willing to bind themselves to the truth and accept death in trying to express it. What sincerity requires today is not altogether different from the parrhēsia of past, it is the courage, boldness and fearless nature of truth.

Trajectories:

In what remains of my introduction, I am interested in extending the claims that I have made here in two chapters that take on different but interrelated issues in the crisis of sincerity. To repeat my earlier division between micro and macro, my intention is to read the different levels upon which sincerity has been deployed in recent contemporary fiction, rather than to designate whether a text, as a literary utterance, possesses or can be said to be sincere. Instead, I utilize The Marriage Plot and The Corrections to tell
particular stories about how sincerity, in recent years, has continued to shift in its ‘meanings.’ Each chapter returns to the fundamental concerns surrounding the claim of sincerity that I have outlined. Each observes how sincerity continues to resurrect the depth model of subjectivity to violently maintain an “afterlife” of the collective ethos at the cost of alternative and productive forms of sincerity. Sara Ahmed, writing on orientations, reminds us that “‘getting lost’ still takes us somewhere” (7) and it seems that this is a vital point to consider in relation to sincerity. To get lost, to find the unfamiliar, to be reminded of enchantment: wonder and surprise are ways to begin (again) with sincerity that reworks (while attending to) how it has been co-opted against its intentions. For this reason, I believe my texts, as representative of the “New Sincerity,” require further qualifications as they contribute to the residual ethical problems in sincerity. Rather than accept them as sincere, what would it mean to question the profession of a “new” sincere literature? Would it not counteract, as Derrida suggests, the very notion of sincerity? Bound to particular historical contexts, these texts extend the narrative that I have been tracking thus far.

The ascendancy of Theory’s empire is the subject of chapter 1. Reading Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot* as a conversation between fiction and theory, between the *bilsdungroman* and *bilsdungtheorie*, I track down the institutional *decontextualization* of Theory across the Atlantic in the 1980s. By examining how the university is, according to Derrida, a place that should be *unconditional* in its freedom to speak the truth, I argue that the university depends on a disposition of sincerity and trustworthiness. Moreover, I claim that Derrida’s central focus on the university, as requiring a “profession of faith,”
situates it as a horizon of possibility based upon the promise of the performative to think the impossible possible. That is to say, the university functions in the cultural symbolic as a promise; more than this, however, I claim that Theory, once configured as a revelation to radically change the world, has in some ways failed its promise. For Madeleine, her education in the form of the bilsdungtheorie, this has a disastrous consequence for her subsequent marriage, another form of the promise. In this way, chapter 1 works through the “micro” issues of sincerity by investigating slippages, utterances and the “promise” of sincerity.

In chapter 2, I return to Goulding’s notion of the emotional habitus to reflect on the post-9/11 affective sphere as one in which subjects are made to produce emotion or risk being “othered” and ostracized as an alien in the United States. In the post-9/11 landscape, I argue that the American cultural symbolic undergoes a conservative and nostalgic retrenchment into national narratives that have been deployed to maintain U.S. imperialism. In particular, I read the peculiar reception history of The Corrections as an alleged Great American Novel to delineate how a sentimental cultural imaginary has reemerged in recent years. In the renewed emphasis on family, the post-9/11 sphere demonstrates how sentimentality and sympathy have been employed as mechanisms that produce an imagined national coherence. What is crucial in this moment of crisis, is that sincerity, as an intensifier of emotion, is rendered paradoxically inconsequential as the spectacle of 9/11 made it so that “the emotions that we [felt were] no longer our own feelings anymore but someone else’s, and indeed, if we [were] to believe the media, everybody else’s (Jameson 299). Although The Corrections does not explicitly engage
with the question of race, there is a subterranean anxiety within the text that addresses the history of American racial politics through the figure of Khellye Withers, the only African-American character in the novel. What the post-9/11 affective sphere tells us then, is that the depth model of subjectivity remains and is reconfigured as an imposition upon certain subjects. These marginalized subjects are unable to speak sincerely or participate in the national affective economy because they are, in the end, not considered wholly American.
Chapter 1: Life After Theory: Reason and Emotion in The Marriage Plot

In Plato’s dialogue Theaetetus, Socrates tells an anecdote about how Thales, a Greek philosopher, falls into a well while studying the stars above him. Tormented by a Thracian servant-girl who cleverly notes that Thale’s curiosity had left him unable to “see what was in front of him and under his feet,” (193) Thale’s story is a cautionary narrative for every philosopher’s life, according to Socrates. Theaetetus relates the peculiar ways in which the philosopher’s mind “having come to the conclusion that all the [city’s issues] are of little or no account” ceases to notice “what lies near at hand” (193). Over time, this representation of the philosopher as absent-minded has become a cultural mythos: the one who critically thinks is in a disengaged state of contemplation. Critique, however, has a decidedly more complex history than the narrative suggested. According to Wendy Brown, the Grecian term krisis was originally employed jurisprudentially as an act of deliberation to solve an objective crisis in Athenian democracy (5). Krisis, then, was a project of renewal that aimed to “set the times right again by discerning and repairing a tear in justice through practices that [were] themselves exemplary of justice” (6). In light of the Peloponnesian War and corruption of the Athenian democracy, Socrates believed that critique, in the sense of krisis, was no longer possible within the political-juridical domain. Rather, Socrates reconstituted the function of critique as a philosophical activity that would henceforth require a certain remove or distance from the political life to retain its viability (6). Recently, however, this recurring debate about the utility of abstract knowledge has been displaced and relocated at the critical site of the university. As of late, the university, a privileged site of critique, has been increasingly asked to respond to
a problem like the one to which Socrates responded to centuries ago. Examining how the humanities came under pressure during the 1970s, cultural historian François Cusset has noted the increasing drive to orient research toward utility:

All the statistics from the 1970s show that the liberal arts colleges saw their enrollments decrease in favor of specialized colleges, that courses in philosophy, history, and literature were being chosen less and less, except when they “technicalized” their program, and that both public and private financial aid was drastically reduced in these disciplines, leading to a more precarious professoriat and even the closing of some research institutions. (46).

Perhaps as a response to the crisis of the humanities, Derrida wrote two essays about the purpose and conditions of intellectual work in the university: “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eye of Its Pupil” and “The University Without Condition.” In an effort to reconstitute the university, Derrida privileges reason as the fundamental principle of the institution. As will become clear from my brief exegesis of these essays, this movement to ground reason as the discourse of truth in reason has played a role in the disavowal of emotion, sentimentality and sincerity. What would attempting to locate and track sincerity within the university, both as a physical and symbolic site, accomplish?

While it is common to speak of academic integrity, no doubt, how would it be possible to think of the university as sincere, even if, according to Frans-Willem Korsten, “it is hard to speak of a structural or systematic sincerity, whereas one can speak of structural or systematic hypocrisy” (69)? These are strange questions to ask, certainly; and yet, if as Derrida suggests, the university is a place where “nothing is beyond question” (“The University Without Condition” 205), then it is pertinent to ask how sincerity is figured in the university since intellectual or academic freedom necessarily requires the right to
speak freely. In the end, I claim that sincerity is still deeply implicated in the conditions of truth-telling despite the erasure of that recognition.

In “The Principle of Reason,” a speech originally delivered in Cornell University, Derrida urgently asks, “how can we not speak of the university?” (3) For Derrida, it is impossible to not think of this question since academic work is becoming increasingly difficult to disassociate from a “reflection on the political and institutional conditions of that work” (3). To begin his interrogation, Derrida questions what the raison d’être of the university has been up until now; since reflection, along with “norms, procedures and aims,” shapes the objects produced, it is crucial to ask why the university exists but also to what end (3). That is, what are the university’s views and where does it intend to proceed from these views? Seeing that the fundamental justification for the university’s being “has always been reason itself, and the connection of reason to being” (7), what is crucial about this alleged “view” is its alignment against the dissimulation of falsity to function. Under the principle of reason, it was once possible to engage in “fundamental” or “basic” research in disciplines disinterested in the advancement of utility (12). However, Derrida worries that contemporary research has signaled the denigration of institutional autonomy to the extent that it has been “programmed, focused, organized in an authoritarian fashion in view of its utilization” (11). With the boundaries becoming increasingly difficult to track, the university is in a precarious position where any attempt “to remove the university from ‘useful’ programs and from professional ends” (18) could inadvertently reinforce the “powers of caste, class, [and] corporation[s]” (18). What becomes important in the face of an unprecedented danger to the institution is “a new
“responsibility” that would “interrogate the essence of reason and of the principle of reason” while also being infinitely invested in “unmack[ing] […] the ruses of end-oriented reason” (16). Although Derrida does not, in the end, clearly “define a politics, nor even [the exact] responsibility outright, he suggests that the work of the university must carry on in caution without “erect[ing] a barricade against the future” (19).

On the surface, Derrida’s essay has very little to do with sincerity, yet it is possible to conceive of the university’s “new responsibility” in another light. What Derrida importantly stakes out in his text is how the university is grounded upon reason and truth even if reason is on occasion unreasonable. That is to say, the production of knowledge and truth reiterates its cultural authorization and reason for being. That emotion has been figured as irrational historically as well speaks to the endurance of reason to maintain its foothold (for what would a university based on emotion look like?). More important, however, is a slight distinction worth addressing. Prior to sincerity, truth was used in Middle English to describe “a character of being, or disposition to be, true to a person, principle, cause” (OED). In this now rare usage of truth, the definition is also associated with qualities such as “faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, [and] constancy” (OED). To claim that the university is founded upon the “rendering of reason,” I suggest, also requires a disposition of trustworthiness or, in other words, proof of sincerity: work done within the university has always had a responsibility of being associated with the truth lest it lose its authority.

When Derrida returns to the site of the university over a decade later, his investigation has shifted to consider a problem that Socrates had previously encountered
in Ancient Greece. In “The University Without Condition,” Derrida claims that the university as an institution has historically been conceived of as unconditional to the extent that it has been granted “the principle right to say everything” (205). However, as Derrida claims, the principle of unconditionality, by its abstract impossibility, has never been implemented in effect. Rather, the alleged principle has continually exposed the weakness of the university as “an exposed, tendered citadel, to be taken, often destined to capitulate without condition” (206). Thus, the university occupies a paradoxical position: although the institution allegedly derives its power from being independent and unrestricted, it is precisely this disassociation that makes it lack political power on its own. Given this peculiar impossibility, Derrida asks what would be required to transform the Humanities and allow for the university to assume, in reality, the freedom “to question and to assert, or even going still further, right to say publically all that is required by research, knowledge and thought concerning the truth” (emphasis original 202). Since the “university professes truth [and] promises an unlimited commitment to the truth,” (202) Derrida believes that the problematic of the university without condition is connected to a “profession of faith” (both a faith to knowledge and in knowledge). What interests Derrida in his chosen lexicon of words, it would seem, is that a profession is a performative act: to profess is “to declare out loud what one is, what one believes, what one wants to be, while asking another to take one’s word and believe this declaration” (214). Tracing “profession” back to the ancients, Derrida argues that the philosopher was bound to his knowledge
Philosophiam profiteri is to profess philosophy: not simply to be a philosopher, to practice or teach philosophy in some pertinent fashion, but to pledge oneself, with a public promise, to devote oneself publicly, to give oneself over to philosophy, to bear witness, or even to fight for it. And what matters here is this promise, this pledge of responsibility, which is reducible to neither theory nor practice.

(emphasis mine 215)

What is at stake in Derrida’s reconstitution of the profession is an attempt to reinstate in the university’s proliferation of knowledge, “a testimonial commitment, a freedom, a responsibility under oath, [and] a sworn faith” (222). To claim that the university stands for truth then, also requires that it must maintain a disposition of itself as sincere and trustworthy despite the constant risk that it might “[become] a branch office of conglomerates and corporations” (206). It is with this notion in mind that Derrida’s text performs itself as a “profession of faith”; the university without condition has not yet come to pass but to think critically and even interrogate the “meaning [of] theoretical critique” (205) is to show commitment towards the institution. Crucially, to think in terms of the profession, the performative of as if, and not the constative statement of what is allows Derrida to commit himself to the unconditional university and to think the impossible possible. In the case of the university, the repeated performance of reason and truth within the institution work to produce its authority under the condition that the institution is and remains externally uninfluenced (thus invoking trust and sincerity).

More than this, however, the profession of faith in the university aligns it not as a place of stagnancy as the crisis of the humanities would claim; rather, the institution acts as a
horizon of possibility that promises to align subjects with truth under the condition that they too commit themselves in a similar “profession.”

This chapter builds upon this consideration by thinking through the performative “to profess” as a promise that demonstrates how sincerity functions. By focusing on the site of the university as a place where one learns to profess, I examine the historical ascendancy of Theory which was once conceived as the ultimate promise of change.11 Despite Derrida’s own profession that Theory would be a significant discipline in the “new concept of the Humanities” (208), recent retrospective work has attempted to destabilize the monolithic nature of Theory by historicizing the esoteric body of work alongside social and cultural issues. As the story goes, Theory emerged in America during the 1980s with an unyielding promise to not only “add to but to fundamentally reconfigure knowledge as we had (always “until now” known it)” (Potts and Stout 2). For Cusset, the proliferation of Theory as a kind of critical education displaced the previous Germany formation and education novels, the bilsdungroman, in favor of the bilsdungtheorie. Since poststructuralism and deconstruction worked to question the didacticism of earlier humanist teachings as a strategic tool of power, the bilsdungtheorie operated to reveal how literature had been “an agent of regulation, discipline, instrumentality and ideological delusions” (Hale 897). And yet, as a novel such as The Marriage Plot demonstrates, Theory has long since declined in its cultural hegemony. Prompted, perhaps by a critical reevaluation of the Grecian root of theoria (θεωρία),

11 In what follows, I capitalize Theory to both highlight the hegemonic force of the heterogeneous field while also referring to a particular set of writers during and around the pinnacle of Theory. They will be named shortly as “oracular figures.”
which meant, “a looking at,” “contemplation,” “speculation,” “a sight,” or “a spectacle,” (OED) the same arguments made against Thales have been recalibrated to portray Theory as disengaged and apolitical. Peculiarly, however, despite the continued attempts in recent years to move “beyond,” “after,” or “aside,” French Theory, Theory continues to paradoxically orient itself as the decentered center in intellectual thinking. According to Jonathan Culler, we need only to consider the continued framing of dissertations as “theoretical investigations, speculations and arguments” (Culler 2) to see that we are still in theory even if Theory is no longer “the cutting edge.” While Theory has not lived up to all its aspirations, solved all our intellectual and political problems or been without issues itself, it has also made it incredibly difficult to imagine a return to a time prior to Theory. For better or worse, Theory and its legacy remains. Central to this chapter then, is an investigation into what happens when Theory, and by association the university, fail to deliver on their prospective promises.

By focusing on Jeffrey Eugenides’s The Marriage Plot, a contemporary campus novel that follows three young adults during the 1980s, this chapter thinks through Theory and the role it plays in their education. Situated at the height of High Theory, The Marriage Plot belongs to a growing corpus of fiction, according to Judith Ryan, that seeks “to think theory through and identify parts of it that need to be adjusted, overhauled or outright abandoned” (4). While the incorporation of Theory into the novel is not altogether new, TMP as a middlebrow realist novel, contrasts with the avant-garde texts

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12 A quick survey of anthologies or book length works written about life after theory include (but are not limited to): Theory Aside (2014), After Theory (2003), another After Theory (1990), Theory after Theory (2011), a different Theory after Theory (2011), After Poststructuralism (2010), and Reading after Theory (2002). Taken together, we can see the ways in which the resistance, extension, or denial of Theory continues to reproduce it.
that sought to apply the poststructural theories of language at the formal level. While Derrida would have the university interrogate itself, TMP works to demystify Theory’s purported esoteric aura by turning Theory into an object that can be represented in the very genre that Theory worked to critique as an ideological tool. Thus, this chapter traces the residual narrative of sincerity hidden within Theory’s ascension. If sincerity was traditionally conceived of through the “congruence between feeling and avowal,” (Trilling 7) or the projection of an inner state onto an exteriority, then, the subsequent critiques by the university that the “self” was an illusionary concept, crafted through power, discipline, ideology, capital, language, etc. implicate the university in the decline in sincerity. And yet, as I have suggested, there is potentially another model hidden in the profession of the university – one that would not have at its center a depth model of subjectivity but the performative promise. Indeed, if Theory is any indication of what is at stake with the alleged “afterlife” of concepts then a reconceptualization of sincerity is needed to escape the paralysis of tradition. Since making a “profession” does not necessarily grant trustworthiness or sincerity, it helps to redefine sincerity not as an expression of interiority but rather the actions produced that enact the initial declaration or promise. Moreover, what is particularly powerful about Derrida’s thinking of the promise is that the outcome is not known in advance. This “perhapness” of sincerity ends up being affectively powerful to the extent that one does not expect sincerity; it is thought of as impossible, since “to announce itself as possible or necessary” (“University Without Condition” 235) would neutralize its occurrence in advance. In what follows, I take care to elucidate how The Marriage Plot navigates three promises that involve sincerity to self
and others: the university, the marriage plot, and spiritual salvation. Within *The Marriage Plot*, these events highlight how a “profession” can also become insincere if one does not follow through with actions or fully commit to oneself.

**The University in Theory**

Theory, it is traditionally said, emerged as a response to an international conference held at John Hopkins University in 1966. Organized by Richard A. Macksey, “The Language of Criticism and the Science of Man” was intended to incite excitement in structuralism across the transatlantic. Structuralism proposed that it was possible to understand human culture and behavior by interrogating the system of relations between various signs. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* as an influence, structuralists claimed that language produced the world through the very conventions that had purported to represent it. Derrida, in his seminar “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” critiqued Saussure’s argument by claiming that philosophy had hitherto been stabilized through a “center” and that an ‘event’ was happening. For Derrida, it was possible rethink the center and consider the opening of structure. And, indeed, an ‘event’ occurred when the conference became a story of the emergence of post-structuralism, ironically undermining the original intentions of the organizers. If as Derrida tells us that “the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about […] by a rupture with its past, its origin and its cause,” (263) what unifies the otherwise heterogeneous field of Theory lies outside the *texts* themselves and rather in the radical belief that they were part of a discontinuity
where “old lines of thought [were] disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, [were] regrouped around a different set of promises and themes” (Hall 57). Indeed, an examination of the so-called “oracular figures” reveals that Theory eclipsed any clear definition of itself. Rather, the esotericism and heterogeneity of theory were frequently displayed in various ways: the denial of being a structuralist, poststructuralist, or deconstructionist; disagreement and public feuds with one another (“Cogito and the History of Madness”); and, disparate topics of interest (and within varying disciplines and methodologies, no less) such as linguistics, sexuality, power, love, capital, etc. The often contradictory positions taken by the “oracular figures” has led to a profound difficulty of defining Theory and allowed anti-theorists to rhetorically characterize what Theory is while critiquing it (Culler 3). Problematically, however, Culler also occludes the fact that Theory has consistently presented itself as a mysterious entity outside the cultural institutions that it critiqued.

Decontextualized from France and translated into small and portable volumes of Theory, Semiotext(e) and similar journals were marketed as texts that would “[appeal] to punks, artists, and eggheads alike (Cusset 74). Such a conflation of the counterculture and

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13 Derrida, in an interview titled “I am at war with myself,” notes how Hélène Cixous has called this “generation” of thinkers “the incorruptibles.” He goes on to say that they are “without compromise even with regard to philosophy, which does not retreat despite the prospect that public opinion, the media, or the fantasies of an intimidating readership might effectively demand that we simplify, or shrink back.”

14 In Theory after ‘Theory,’ Jane Eliott and Derek Attridge note how the “tendency to draw obsessively on the work of certain oracular figures” (3) has lead to a stagnation of the “once vital object that was ‘Theory’” (1). Such figures commonly cited include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. While Eliott and Attridge suggest that a decentralization of the canon and theorists employed would lead to work that “exceeds the terms of the present in a way that allows us to think something hitherto unthinkable,” (4) Jason Potts and Daniel Stout have criticized such an ideal in theory aside as reproducing the necessity of Theory (or, now, ‘theory’) to be radical or revolutionary.
academia was a deliberate attempt by publishers to “insert their production of a new genre in between the [mainstream and the university presses] that bordered it” (74). Indeed, this aura of mystique allowed “French theory [to delimit] a zone in which artistic experimentation and innovative courses on theory began to resonate with one another” (70). Consider the double movement of Theory in Cusset’s description of its porousness:

Theory: the most valuable commodity on the academic market, or the only approach that breaks down the walls of the humanities; recruitment strategy or science of the text; sectarian seal worn on the lapel or critical force without equal; or all of this at once. (106)

Tracking the historical emergence of Theory as a transdisciplinary object, Cusset locates its ascendancy “first in French departments and then in English and comparative literature departments” (77). Emerging through interdepartmental research institutes and “theory camps,” philosophy was made literary at the same time that literary texts became framed and justified through theoretical discourses. According to Cusset, this mysterious intransitivity made theory “above all a discourse on itself, and on the conditions of its production – and therefore on the university” (99). Situated against an economic downswing and a crisis in the humanities, Theory created a vacuum that “ceaselessly interrogate[d] its own legitimacy” (99) and worked to prove the knowledge as “relevant” or “ends-oriented.”

Peculiarly, then, Theory did not require an object of investigation; rather, it situated itself as a pedagogical practice or method of inquiring about the truth:

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15 The early recession of the 1980s (which plays out in Mitchel’s narrative in The Marriage Plot) and the crisis of the humanities are two informative edges to the moment of Theory’s ascension. For instance, Cusset notes how statistics from the 1970s show enrollment in “liberal arts colleges decrease in favor of specialized colleges, that courses in philosophy, history, and literature were being chosen less and less, except when they ‘technicalized’ their program, and that both public and private financial aid was drastically reduced in these disciplines” (46).
It is precisely because it poses a problem to American higher education, and a fortiori to the age of utilitarianism, that French theory will claim to be useful – or all the more stimulating for being embarrassing – and will declare itself best suited to reflect it, to interrogate it, to hold a faithful mirror to it. (100)

By fundamentally challenging “the subject of knowledge, the autonomy of reason, and the logic of representation” (102), Theory was able to usurp the claims that “[Theory] [took] students away from reading literature and literary values” (Culler 4) by fundamentally rewriting what was necessary for one’s education. Theory became an education predicated on the utility of conceptual tools to critique and rethink numerous discourses of truth; and yet, as Christopher Ricks tells us, the intransitive nature of theory made it “an empire zealously inquisitorial about every form of empire but its own” (qtd. in Patai and Corral 1). As a consequence of this, Theory became an education in acquiring conceptual tools to rethink every discourse except itself. But, as Derrida would ask, with a view to what? What kind of education did Theory propose instead? Since Theory worked to reveal how values were ideological constructs, there emerged a vacuum on precisely what should be taught instead.16 And, indeed, the first lesson that Theory taught subjects was the need to be constantly vigilant against the unseen ideological mobilizations of power.

16 According to Dorothy Hale in “Fiction as Restriction,” (2007) the past twenty-five years have privileged theoretical schools that “have sought to unveil the ideological operations taking place under the sign of ‘literature’” (188). Hale asks whether it might be possible to return to an engagement of ethics to “recuperate the agency of the individual reader or author [in addition to] the positive social value of literature and literary study” (188). Hale is interested, along with other new ethicists, in exploring the conditions that would allow humanist values to exist after post-structuralism. Rather than resituating the autonomous liberal subject, Hale argues that that the new ethical subject will account for post-structural’s skepticism about knowledge as a tool of hegemony (190).
Within *The Marriage Plot*, however, Theory is relentlessly satirized as a rebellious ritual of adolescence – a phase one grows out of after university and only nostalgically remembers. Since universities and colleges have long been positioned within the cultural imaginary as an interstice between the family and the professional world (an “ideological crossroads”), it has historically operated on the basis of exclusivity, despite its recent gestures of inclusivity and diversity. In this way, as Janice Rossen, tells us, the university can also function as an illusionary institution insofar that the power used to exclude individuals also works to reify and idealize the cultural capital of the institution (11). But this is also the case within the institution where Theory becomes ideologically projected as an exclusive collective:

Going to college in the moneymaking eighties lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution. It drew a line; it created an elect; it was sophisticated and Continental; it dealt with provocative subjects, with torture, sadism, hermaphroditism – with sex and power. Madeleine had always been popular at school. Years of being popular had left her with the reflexive ability to separate the cool from the uncool even within subgroups, like the English department, where the concept of cool didn’t appear to obtain. (Eugenides 24-25)

Brown University, by becoming the site of the avant-garde, speaks to the proliferation and force of Theory as other, simultaneously outside the institution and within. It is no coincidence that our protagonist, Madeleine, early in the novel, is seen tormenting her parents with “a nihilistic, post-punk sensibility that [she] herself didn’t understand but was perfectly happy to [pretend] she did” (Eugenides 8). Rather, if Theory is presented with a similar zeal in *The Marriage Plot*, it is deliberately ironic and juxtaposed alongside countercultural movements. Consider how Madeleine first encounters Theory. Madeleine, in her kitchen, asks Whitney, her roommate’s boyfriend, what *Of Grammatology* is
“about” and receives the defensive answer that “the idea of a book ‘about’ something was exactly what this book was against, and that, if it was ‘about’ anything, then it was about the need to stop thinking of book as being about things” (23). Eventually, the whispers of the “oracular figures” by “upper-middle-class kids who wore Doc Martens and anarchist symbols” persuade Madeleine to enroll in a course with Professor Zipperstein.

What Madeleine finds out is that a subject indoctrinated by Theory is not the elite vesting she had originally hoped for. Rather, she enters Semiotics 211 only to find that the class was comprised of “eight people in black T-shirts and ripped black jeans” (25). These so-called “radical” students are unable to consider that Theory, purportedly countercultural and avant-garde, has been coopted by the system insofar as Brown University is an Ivy League institution rich in symbolic and economic capital. That Zipperstein himself, once a stoic New Critic for thirty-two years, was converted to “the new faith,” over a cassoulet dinner, on his sabbatical where he met Roland Barthes, speaks to the cultural hegemony of Theory (20). Despite the alleged promise of Theory to be an unprecedented upheaval, “sign[ing] up for Semiotics 211 [to] find out what everyone else was talking about” (25) ends up being a disappointment; it is not the bastion of knowledge that it purported to be nor the radical counterculture that is expected. While Madeleine had initially joined the class to learn a critically informed way of speaking about literature, in contrast to her “fuzzy, unsystemic way of talking about books,” (24) she is ultimately unable to grasp the syllabus and intended lessons of the class. Within the classroom itself, Thurston Meems, who is “finding it hard to introduce [himself], actually, because the whole idea of social introductions is so problematized,”
(25) cleverly attempts to win over his fellow students by presenting himself as a disciple of Derrida after reading. However, his subsequent comments on Peter Handke’s *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, an autobiography that touches on suicide, is a troubling recycled postmodern response that fails to ask *what the consequences of Theory are*. For instance, Thurston claims that “[book’s] aren’t about ‘real life’ [but] about other books” and that suicide in the autobiography was a literary trope. Madeleine, as the ambivalent learner of Theory, finds what Thurston is saying to be “both insightful and horribly wrong” (28) and subsequently, by week five, flees to “the Rockerfeller library, down to B-level, where the stacks exuded a vivifying smell of mold” (47) to find a nineteenth century that would grant her the illusion of realism.

Madeleine’s desire for “a place resembling the world” (47) reveals the central dialogical confrontation between the *bildungsroman* and the *bildungstheorie* that is produced through the intertextual qualities of *The Marriage Plot*. Despite insistence by critics that the female *bildungsroman* does not exist, Elizabeth Hoffman Baruch argues that “if the central theme of the *bildungsgroman* is the education of a hero who is brought to a high level of consciousness [then the] feminine *bildung* takes place in or on the periphery of marriage” (335). Tellingly, then, *The Marriage Plot* then, begins with the *bildungsroman* to scrutinize Madeleine’s preconceptions of what love should be and do.

Set against the iconoclastic presentation of Theory, Madeleine is portrayed as a naive undergraduate who had majored in English as a declaration of her love for literature:

To start with, look at all the books. There were her Edith Wharton novels, arranged not by title but by date of publication; there was a complete Modern Library set of Henry James, a gift from her father on her twenty-first birthday; there were the dog-eared paperbacks assigned in her college courses, a lot of
Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë sisters. [...] There was, in short, this mid-size but still portable library representing pretty much everything Madeleine had read in college, a collection of texts, seemingly chosen at random, whose focus slowly narrowed, like a personality test, a sophisticated one you couldn’t trick by anticipating the implications of its questions and finally got so lost that in your only recourse was to answer the simple truth. (3)

Bound together by their affinity with the titular genre, from Austen to Eliot, the predominance of the marriage tradition in English and American fiction has profoundly shaped how romantic relationships and marriages have been culturally imagined. Indeed, as Joseph Allen Boone claims, romantic love has frequently been conceptualized “in marriage not only as an achievable goal, but as a practical and an imaginative necessity for the fully experienced life” (Boone 6). Undoubtedly, the allusion to François de La Rochefoucauld’s statement that “[p]eople would never fall in love if they hadn’t heard love talked about” (1) is, in a sense, an attempt to deconstruct the genre. And, certainly, Theory has contributed to the scrutinizing of how “the sexual-marital economy of English and American culture [has] served an equally public function as part of the ideological apparatus insuring social stability” (7). However, for the “[i]ncurably romantic” (3) Madeleine, Theory is unable to discourage her from falling in love with her classmate Leonard despite demonstrating how love is culturally constructed; instead, Madeleine’s ironic misreading of A Lover’s Discourse inadvertently causes her problems “at a time when the French theory she was reading deconstructed the very notion of love” (19). Despite Madeleine’s acknowledgment that A Lover’s Discourse was “a repair manual for the heart” and “the perfect cure for lovesickness,” she is unable to liberate herself from the cultural construction of love (79). Perhaps, as David Kaufman writes, to hope that a
“course of study [can] change a life” is an odd delusion that forgets how “the deep structures of social reproduction are already operative by the time students get to college” (529n4). For Cusset, however, it is not expected altogether that students should fully master theory; rather, the bilsdungtheorie is an appropriation of these theoretical texts “as a form of opposition to the prior world of the family, and to the external world of professionalization, or to fill a melancholic void” (224). Despite its initial contrast to the bilsdungroman then, the bilsdungtheorie and the university ultimately fail to deliver on their promise to radically transform the student.

*The Marriage Plot* begins with the revealing confession that Madeleine had lost her “faith in the significance of the day and what the day represented” (Eugenides 5). Indeed, the narrative diverges at graduation to remind Madeline that “in the world outside, the semester, and thus college itself, was quickly speeding towards its end” (80). Giving up the radicalism of what one had learned in class, “friends and acquaintances were doing campus interviews with investment banks [or] had gotten scholarships or fellowships or were moving to L.A. to work in television” (80). Far from being merely the setting for the main characters to interact, Brown University functions as a horizon of possibility for each character. In contrast to the literal sun, the Brown University seal “emblazoned on all pennants and banners draped up over the campus” was rising as a testament to the institutional production of knowledge. Meanwhile, Providence is rendered as “a corrupt town, crim-ridden and mob-controlled [with] the sketchy downtown and dying or dead textile mills [lying] below, in the grim distance” (9). On top of College Hill, the narrow streets named Prospect, Benevolent, Hope and Meeting flow
upwards into the campus (10). As the streets lead up to College Hill to testify to the university’s promise of possibility, we are thus also reminded that the institution works at a cost of being insular. Within the physical boundaries of the university, the reality of the socioeconomic situation in Providence is muted and ignored reversing the conflation of the literal and metaphorical sun earlier:

But this sun – the sun over Providence – was doing the metaphorical sun one better because the founders of the university, in their Baptist pessimism, had chosen to depict the light of knowledge enshrouded by clouds, indicating that ignorance had not yet been dispelled from the human realm, whereas the actual sun was just now fighting its way through cloud cover, sending beams of light and giving hope to the squadrons of parents […]. (4)

If, at first, the literal sun is celebrated for its brightness, there is also the subtext that “graduation” is not the culmination of caring for the self. Rather, we are told early in the narrative, by recourse to Baptist pessimism that a degree does not dispel ignorance. That is to say, although the university offers illumination, ignorance cannot be dispelled so simply, rather, it requires that one constantly search for truth about self and other. And, certainly, Madeleine’s misreading of Theory, her choice to bestow her faith upon the marriage plot reveals her refusal of the promise offered by the university – she chooses, in the name of love, not to think rationally about the unhealthy consequences of her relationship with Leonard. At the end of the section “A Madman in Love,” Madeleine abandons her graduation to reconcile with Leonard at Providence Hospital after his manic episode. As they discuss Barthe’s figure of avowal, it is not so much that they have subscribed to Theory; rather, they work to challenge the notion that “[o]nce the first avowal has been made, ‘I love you’ has no meaning whatever” (Barthes 147) by repeating it, and performing its symbolic weight again – they accept love as a kind of promise.
“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner”

The transition in Madeleine, Leonard and Mitchell’s lives – from inquiring scholars to the world outside campus – delineates a moment where their education ceases to be about nineteenth century novels, literary theory and theological texts. Perhaps most clearly marked in Mitchell’s global backpacking narrative, *The Marriage Plot* continues after university to problematize the knowledge obtained. While in France, for instance, Mitchell meets Larry’s girlfriend, Claire, who has just found the French feminists. Thinking to himself, he asks:

Hadn’t they just gotten out of college? Weren’t they finished with undergraduate politics? And yet here they were, staying with a women’s studies major on a junior-year-abroad program. Under the pretense of becoming a critic of patriarchy, Claire uncritically accepted every fashionable theory that came her way. (143)

Mitchell, despite never having been in Sem 211, is haunted by Theory until he leaves for India. What the scene illustrates, however, is that Theory as a promise remains after university in the form of cultural attitudes. Central to Mitchell’s narrative in the section “Pilgrims” is his inability to relinquish his fleshly desires for spiritual nirvana. Rather, his run-in with Claire reveals not only that he is not “past” university and theory but his patriarchal objectification of women (especially Madeleine) remains:

He was perfectly aware that certain once-canonical writers (always male, always white) had fallen into disrepute. Hemingway was a misogynist, a homophobe, a repressed homosexual, a murderer of wild animals. Mitchell thought this was an instance of tarr with too wide a brush. If he was to argue this with Claire, however, he ran the risk of being labelled a misogynist himself. More worringly, Mitchell had to ask himself if he wasn’t being just as knee-jerk in resisting the charge of misogyny as college feminists were in leveling it, and if his resistance didn’t mean that he was, somewhere deep down, prone to misogyny himself. Why, after all, had he brought *A Moveable Feast* in the first place? Why, knowing
what he had about Claire, had he decided to whip it out of his backpack at this particular moment? Why, in fact, had the phrase *whip it out* just occurred to him? (141)

Whereas Madeleine was exposed to Zipperstein’s esoteric probing to be “spiritually vetted [as] a campus lit-crit elite,” (21) the narrative positions Mitchell “undergo[ing] a [different] crisis of meaning” (69). While originally intending to be an English major, Mitchell reads *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and learns that religious feeling arises “from the most private interior experiences, either of great joy or of staggering pain” (93). Enrolling in Hermann Richter’s class, his final-take home exam was more about “why he was here, and how to live”; Mitchell’s enjoyment in taking the exam was in finding out how “education had finally led […] out into life” (96).

Mitchell’s narrative is driven by the conflict between his intense belief that he is Madeleine’s correct suitor and his quest for religious knowledge. Mitchell’s objectification and idolization of women expresses his inability to relinquish his carnal love in favour of divine love:

> Enlightenment came from the extinction of desire. Desire didn’t bring fulfillment but only temporary satiety until the next temptation came along. And *that* was only if you were lucky enough to get what you wanted. If you didn’t, you spent your life in unrequited longing. How long had he been secretly hoping to marry Madeleine Hanna? And how much of his desire to marry Madeleine came from really and truly liking her as a person, and how much from the wish to possess her, and in so doing, gratify his ego? (160)

If as Derrida tells us that a profession is an act of faith, Mitchell’s sincerity, his desire for divine inspiration, is partly predicated on whether he can relinquish his fleshly desires. Certainly, if Madeleine picks up Theory because it is in vogue, Mitchell is also feels an entitlement to speak it on campus when he finds out that the Jesus Prayer in *Franny and
Zooey “belonged to the religious tradition into which Mitchell had been obscurely
baptized twenty-two years earlier” (69). And yet, what the Jesus Prayer demonstrates is
precisely that Mitchell does not profess his faith:

Mitchell liked the chant-like quality of the prayer. Franny said you didn’t even
have to think about what you were saying; you just kept repeating the prayer until
your heart took over and started repeating it for you. This was important because,
whenever Mitchell stopped to think about the words of the Jesus Prayer, he didn’t
much like them. (69)

Embarking on a spiritual journey with his roommate Larry, Mitchell is continually tested
to show his faith. Sneaking off into churches, Mitchell would find himself moved in
“these dark, superstitious spaces” (201) to light candles and make in a solemn voice
“always with the same inappropriate wish: that someday, somehow, Madeleine would be
his” (201). However, what is most telling of Mitchell’s inability to profess is his time
spent volunteering at the Home for Dying Destitutes in the section “Asleep in the Lord”:

The bodies at the Home for Dying Destitutes, broken, diseased, were the bodies of
Christ, divinity immanent in each one. What you were supposed to do here was to
take this scripture literally. To believe it strongly and earnestly enough that, by
some alchemy of the soul, it happened: you looked into a dying person’s eyes and
saw Christ looking back. This hadn’t happened to Mitchell. He didn’t expect it to,
but by the end of this second week he had become uncomfortably aware that he
was performing on the simplest, least demanding tasks at the Home. (306)

In contrast to Mitchell, the narrative introduces a beekeeper from New Mexico who
brought his whole family as a Christmas and New Year vacation (304). The beekeeper is
figured as “a deeply sincere, deeply good person” (309) as he takes on the tasks that
Mitchell wouldn’t such as “cleaning wounds, or picking maggots from necrotic flesh with
a pair of tweezers” (309). Of course, Mitchell is also aware of his own “sick soul” but
finds the presence of the beekeeper as his reasoning for coming to Calcutta in the hopes
that the goodness in people like the New Mexican would rub off on him (309-310). What Mitchell finds out while helping the beekeeper, however, is that he is unable to stomach the type of commitment needed.

Returning to America, returning to Madeleine, Mitchell experiences his first epiphany but it is a negative one. What is interesting about this final religious experience is its indeterminate nature; Mitchell is ultimately unsure if “what he then experienced was an Indwelling of the Light […] as the things he saw weren’t revelations of a universal significance” (405). Rather, they are deeply personal about Madeleine and about his future:

He cried for the last ten minutes, as quietly as he could. At some point, the voice also told Mitchell that, in addition to never living with Madeleine, he would never go to divinity school, either. It was unclear what he was going to do with his life, but he wasn’t going to be a monk, or a minister, or even a scholar. The voice was urging him to write Professor Richter to tell him so. (405)

Interestingly, however, the encounter lends itself to being read as a confrontation between \textit{performativity} and the depth model of sincerity. Enacting a similar penance as the sincere converts of centuries past, Mitchell’s troubled epiphany begins when “[he] went [deeper] inside himself” (405). Mitchell’s realization that he has not, in fact, been sincere to himself becomes the occasion for penance. And yet, to say that Mitchell had \textit{always known} of his insincerity would ignore his journey through “Pilgrims” and “Asleep with the Lord.” Rather, is it possible to conceive of his insincerity, to God, to himself, and to Madeleine performative terms? That is, in undergoing his journey, Mitchell learns to accept who he is. To cite Derrida again, “‘[to] make profession of’ is to declare out loud what one is, what one believes, what one wants to be, while asking another to take one’s
word and believe this declaration” (214). To fail a profession, then, is also a revelation; it is dispelling what one is not rather than what one is essentialized to be. Indeed, to return to the earlier pessimism of the founders of the university, true self-mastery is an illusion; there are always clouds of ignorance but as the parrhēsiaste reminds us what matters is self-reflection and the willingness to challenge and be challenged.

A Lover’s Recourse

When Austin presented his lecture on performative utterances, one of his central examples was the declaration of marriage. And, certainly, there is a kind of “faith” in the normative construction of marriage as having faith and being faithful to. As Austin claims, the uttering of the marriage vow is the “leading incident in the performance of the act” (8) but there is also a suggestion that the utterance requires a continual reification to make it true: “I, ____, take you, ____, to be my partner. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.” Perhaps, for this reason, marriage has always been associated with commitment. For Madeleine and Leonard, this vow is breached on various occasions as they end up misunderstanding one another and fall out of love. In Madeleine’s case, her desire to be love and be loved is detrimental to her wellbeing as she learns, gradually, that Leonard is not the person she desires to be with:

Love had made her intolerable. It had made her heavy. Sprawled on her bed, keeping her shoes from touching the sheets (Madeleine remained fastidious despite her misery), she reviewed all the things she’d done to drive Leonard away. She’d been too needy, crawling up into his lap like a little girl, wanting to be with him all the time. She’d lost track of her own priorities and become a drag. (78)
That the narrative works to reverse the dynamic of dependency between Madeleine and Leonard is an intentional one. Her distinctive attitude of being “positive, privileged, sheltered, [and an] exemplary person” (122) has thus far allowed her to avoid unstable people. And, in such a way, Madeleine becomes tested for the first time on the endurance of her love with Leonard.

On the other hand, Leonard’s impossible childhood of emotional abuse (235) had fractured him into two different individuals: the manic and the depressive. For Leonard, the question of his sincerity is figured through the novel in his illness which teaches him, for the first time that being clever can be detrimental. At a group therapy session, Leonard self-consciously attempts to perform his “superior form of manic-depressive” as if mental illness had a hierarchy (253). Speaking to the other residents, Leonard believes that his intelligence would make him likeable:

He tried to take comfort in what they said. But his main thought was of how much worse off they were than he. This belief made him feel better about himself, and so he clung to it. But then it was Leonard’s turn to tell his story, and he opened his mouth and out came the most nicely modulated, well-articulated bullshit imaginable. (254)

Leonard is unable to accept that sincerity functions not through self-consciousness. In trying to win over his peers through his intellectual superiority, Leonard isolates himself from the group. True sincerity, the text suggests can only happen when one does not expect it:

The smarter you were, the worse it was. The sharper your brain, the more it cut you up. As he was speaking, for instance, Leonard noticed Wendy Neuman cross her arms over her chest, as if to defend herself against the blatant insincerity of what he was saying. To win her back, Leonard admitted to this insincerity, saying, “No, I take that back. I’m lying. Lying is what I do. It’s part of my disease.” He
eyed Wendy to see if she was buying this, or if she regarded it as further insincerity. (254)

Sincerity with intent or motive nullifies the claim. And yet, Leonard seems unaware of this in his relationship with Madeleine. During a confrontation with Madeleine whose “speech sounded rehearsed,” Leonard learns that Madeleine’s mother Phyllida, having found out that he was a manic-depressive, was not fond of him. In a response to this, Leonard has his “brilliant idea” to split his lithium pills and self-medicate. Although it works for a time, Leonard’s mania ends with a marriage proposal that Madeleine accepts in the belief that Leonard has been getting better. This, however, proves to be disastrous as his mania spirals out of control on their honeymoon and ends up with a prolonged depression in the residence of Madeleine’s parents, Alton and Phyllida.

Despite Leonard’s attempt to return to his optimistic self, it becomes apparent that the breach of trust has created a rift between the two. Madeleine, for one, began feeling that life with Leonard was suffocating (344); and, she soon begins to dread Leonard looking at her with empty eyes (339). Moreover, Madeleine begins to “[fantasize] about breaking up with Leonard, moving to New York, about getting an athletic boyfriend who was simple and happy” (345). In a sense, then, when Leonard instigates the divorce on the night of a Brown alumni party by telling Madeleine that he divorces her (383), the act is already done in bad faith to the extent that the marriage has already failed as a promise.

**The Promise of Sincerity**

Within *The Marriage Plot*, sincerity is figured structurally as a promise or profession of faith. Since sincerity cannot be known in advance, it functions as a
performative based upon a faith that the individual will become what they declare. At the same time, however, sincerity can and does fail when one is unable to fulfill the promise. In *The Marriage Plot*, this is figured in three interweaving narratives between Madeleine, Mitchell and Leonard: the university, the marriage plot and the religious journey. All these to some extent fail in delivering the promises that they intend to. What is important, however, is precisely that failure happens. What the central emblem of Brown University tells us is much akin to Foucault’s conceptualization of the *parrhēsiaste* to the extent that self-mastery is impossible. To believe, for example, in the unyielding promise of Theory to radically rethink the conditions of thinking ignores that Theory itself will need to be thought through. Hence, the *parrhēsiaste* is once again figured as Socrates who admits that he is ignorant. What *The Marriage Plot* tells us early on, then, is that knowledge (and certainly knowledge of self) is a continual process that must be questioned. It is in this sense that Derrida claimed that there should be no limit to what the university can critique. And, indeed, being sincere relies on a similar structural gambit since it can only be conceived of as an impossibility, an event that must not be named in advance lest it come off self-conscious. What the *performative* action of professing suggests is that sincerity is above all else a commitment (whether to Theory, God, or a lover) that requires the sincere person to bring into being what is declared and what will be. In such a manner, sincerity is always a fraught promise but it is also a powerful one.
Chapter 2: Family Matters in The Corrections: Post-9/11 Sentimentality

The Return of the “Great American Novel”

Late in the summer of 2001, Jonathan Franzen published his third novel, The Corrections, to great success amidst the literary and publishing spheres. Peter Galassi, President of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, claimed that the novel was one of the best books his company had published in the last 15 years (Kachka 295). Meanwhile, David Gates in the New York Times Book Review stated that The Corrections was a “marvelous new novel” that had “just enough novel-of-paranoia touches so Oprah [wouldn’t] assign it and ruin Franzen’s streetcred” (qtd. in Kachka 299). Published ten days before September 11th, the reception of The Corrections would be temporally suspended as conversations about reading, writing and the role of fiction in the twenty-first century were muted in response to the ascension of American discourses intended to refortify the nation vis-à-vis the terrorist “Other.” As Richard Gray tells us, the singular agreement among writers in response to 9/11 was how “the tools of their trade seem[ed] absurd” (1) under the failure of language – there was simply “nothing to say” (15). (To say the least, as François Cusset reminds us, theory was simultaneously besieged when the post-9/11 climate in the intellectual field was one of “desperate impossibility, complete with guilt and resentment” (xiii).) Despite Franzen’s realization in his controversial essay “Why Bother?” (originally titled “Perchance to Dream”) that “expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society [was] a peculiarly American delusion” (84), the belatedness of The Corrections seemed entirely dissonant from the national catastrophe that America was grieving daily. For a time then, it seemed that the publication of The Corrections would
be rendered inconsequential in a public sphere uninterested in the already-dated pages of social realism.

And yet, the reception history of *The Corrections* curiously contradicts this cultural narrative: *TIME* magazine, for example, has hailed Jonathan Franzen as “The Great American Novelist” while both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* have frequently been mentioned in conversations about the so-called “Great American Novel” (G.A.N.) as well. What does the taxonomical categorization of a novel as an alleged “Great American Novel” claim? What are the necessary characteristics or attachments that surround the novel and designate it as a representative of what novelist John W. De Forest historically conceived of as “the American soul” (qtd. in Buell 24)? By reflecting on these questions, my intention is not to align or exclude *The Corrections* as a member of this heavily contested, elusive, and, even, at times, deceptive category, but to ask what the novel *does*, as an alleged “G.A.N.,” in a cultural milieu that is characterized by a deep and subterranean anxiety akin to Alfred and Enid’s ringing bell (*The Corrections* 3). Since, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, the nation is “an imagined political community,” (6) the subsequent categorization of *The Corrections* as a “G.A.N.” elevates the text as a symbolic representation of the cultural and ideological practices which sustain the ubiquitous “American soul.” Moreover, the “G.A.N.” has a particular resonance within America where the internal production of an alleged literary exceptionalism is mirrored in the national mythology of American citizenship. And, indeed, if there is anything that links the diverse novels which have laid claim to the title, it is the belief that there is a fundamentally American substance that persists, even after two centuries, in these novels.
For this reason, unlike the Pulitzer or Man Booker Prize, the “G.A.N” does more as a tool than simply allow a nation to “visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves” (Anderson 77); the “G.A.N.” celebrates the original event of the American Revolutionary War as the origin of independence, supremacy and imperialism. Since discourses of American exceptionalism are central to the formation of the United States, the contemporary return of the “G.A.N.” as a cultural symbol functions to reset and rewrite the normative values that citizens should aspire to. In this manner, the “G.A.N.” is a national fantasy related to the American Dream (which incidentally grew out of, perhaps reciprocally, The Great Gatsby) that calls forth a relation of “cruel optimism where the subject interpellates himself or herself in the promise of meritocracy by continually deferring happiness in the pursuit of it. What the Dream and the “G.A.N.” do then, is articulate a complicated projection of national identity where “a national people [can only imagine] itself national […] insofar as it feels unmarked by the effects of those national contradictions” (The Queen of America 4).

In this chapter, I locate The Corrections within post-9/11 America by attending to the ways in which the postponed popularity of the novel signifies a cultural retrenchment towards the central figure of the liberal bourgeois family. As I will go on to argue, The Correction stages, to borrow a term from Lauren Berlant, a “national sentimentality” by allegorizing the Lambert family as a microcosm for America, thereby obfuscating the boundaries between the public and private sphere. Through the trials and tribulations of

In Cruel Optimism, Lauren Berlant tells us that “a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). Optimism is not inherently cruel, however, since all attachment is optimistic. Rather, if optimism is ambitious, “moving [one] out of oneself and into the world,”(1) it only becomes cruel when one returns to the conventional fantasy of the “good life”
the Lambert family, *The Corrections* mobilizes the intimate reservoirs of sympathetic identification to suggest that readers should learn to “correct” their emotional disposition towards, for instance, estranged fathers and mothers. What matters then, in the renewed national fantasy produced by this alleged “G.A.N.” is the “traditional notion of home, family and community” (Berlant 5), as we are led to believe that familial morality will protect us “from the harsh realities of power” (11). If, as arts writer Jennie Yabroof has retrospectively claimed, *The Corrections* eerily anticipates “the major concerns of the next seven years,” it is only because the novel has confusingly been transformed into a textual past that is desired nostalgically. To invert the relation then, *The Corrections* never *anticipated* the familial turn; rather it was the public sphere that has shifted alongside and with the novel, seeing it as evidence as such. Thus, my analysis of *The Corrections* works to highlight the allegorization of particular traditional values, which became the hegemonic attachments or qualifications that are subsequently reified under the denomination of “The Great American Novel.” In this manner, the popularity of *The Corrections* can be read as a retreat into a “nostalgia-based fantasy notion of the ‘American way of life’” (Berlant 5) where the denigration of American imperialism is predominantly felt and countered through the affective sphere.

When *The Corrections* was nominated as the September entry of Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club, Farrar, Straus & Giroux printed an additional 500,000 copies as a testament to the “minimum number of books sold of a work just named a member of the club” (Ribbat 555). Although we might attribute Franzen’s subsequent classification as a Great American Novelist to Oprah who claimed that *The Corrections* might be what “critics
refer to [as] the great American novel,” (Kachka 300) the corresponding controversy and withdrawal of the novel suggest that there are other reasons for its popularity. The incident in question has predominantly been read by scholars as a recalcification of the “high” and “low” divide in literary fiction particularly and art generally (Ribbat 557). Christoph Ribbat, for instance, suggests that Franzen “developed a useable approach to literature in an image culture [through] his self-positioning in the public spotlight” (559). While Ribbat partly absolves Franzen’s failure or poor handling of the media as “an almost conceptual move to trigger discussions of the [purpose of literature] in a postmodern world” (559), his suggestion fails to account for what Andreas Huyssen has called “the hidden subtext of the modernist project” (47), or, “the other of modernism, the specter that haunts it, the threat against which high art has to shore up its terrain” (56). Thus, while Ribbat’s claim is partially validated in its presumption about “literature,” Franzen’s statement that Oprah, despite having “picked some really good books, [also] picked enough schmaltzy, one dimensional ones” (Powell), recalls Virginia Woolf’s indictment of the “perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue [for women to] write this, think that” (“A Room of One’s Own”). What is vital about Franzen’s misgivings, then, is his reinscription of mass culture as feminine, and “high art” (real, authentic culture) as masculine (Huyssen 47). For Huyssen, the industrial revolution and cultural modernization of the nineteenth century enacted a female/male dichotomy whereby “inferior” literature was characterized as subjective, emotional and passive while “authentic” literature was seen as objective, ironic and aesthetically in control (46). To reread the Franzen-Oprah controversy in such a manner, then, draws attention to the
widening chasm between so-called “serious literary fiction” and “sentimental women’s writing.”

In this sense, scholar James Annesley’s suggestion that *The Corrections* is “not a complex or aesthetically innovative work of literature but a fairly conventional novel” (119), characterized by the kind of “easy readability of the folksy family saga [that] would seem to make an ideal addition to the tales of love, loss, struggle, and redemption so often favored by Oprah’s Book Club,” (119) is more revealing than he intends. Here, we can deconstruct Annesley’s claim of kinship between *The Corrections* and Oprah’s Book Club as “popular” and “pulp,” by considering the other influential “literary” writers who have also made the list: Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Cormac McCarthy, Charles Dickens, and Leo Tolstoy. What is being judged then, is not the book club itself, but the figure of Oprah, a popular television personality who, black and female, is seen as denigrating what “high brow” literature *should* be, intimating that she is not qualified to *choose*. Put another way, it is precisely that Oprah is seen through the rhetorical and historical mode of sentimentality as excessively *emotional* that her recommendations are denounced as not only antithetical to literary standards but also *harmful to American Culture*. This complicated reception history and prescription of literariness are deeply related then, to the monitoring and mastering of “the sympathetic movement of emotion between individuals and groups of people (Festa 3). Indeed, it is to the extent that Franzen has been engaged with the sentimental tendency to convert “the political into the personal, or the public into the private,” (Barnes 2) that the text has become a candidate for the Great American Novel. Within this particular reading of the
novel, *The Corrections* is part of a national narrative in crisis that reproduces the sentimental structures that conditioned and allowed for its mythological emergence as a country *par excellence*.

**The Family was the House’s Soul: Life in St. Jude**

If, as Ralph Ellison claimed the novel is “bound up with the idea of nationhood” (qtd. in Buell 10), it is perhaps unsurprising that *The Corrections* has been mentioned as a “G.A.N.” alongside sentimental literature like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which while certainly divisive in the context of the American Civil War mobilized sympathetic identification in order to imagine a new post-slavery collective citizenry. And yet, as Lynn Festa asks in a particular set of provoking questions:

> Why did sentimentality attain such a dazzling popularity just when European soldiers, merchants, politicians and scientists were piercing together colonial empires? Why did a literary form chiefly notable for its preoccupation with the individual self become a mode of choice for writing about colonized populations, about slaves, about disenfranchised, and the eighteenth-century poor? (3)

It would seem then, that the historical emergence of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century, “a time when Europeans were fanning out across the globe in search of commercial and colonial domination” (Festa 3) was no accident; rather, as a fictional discourse devoted to “showing people how to behave” (Bell 4), sentimental literature was *also* invested in “governing the circulation of feeling among subjects and objects [in order] to define who will be acknowledged as human (Festa 3). Tracing the publication of *Pamela* in 1740 and its subsequent decline after 1780, Michelle Burnham has noted how the sentimental novel has “during periods of crisis in national coherence […] offer[ed] the
consoling illusion of a community based on resemblance” (68). Moreover, in examining the archive of the American Revolutionary War, Burnham shows how the popular reception of sentimental novels was reciprocal: the decline of sentiment in England contrasted with the flourishing of the genre in America. For Elizabeth Barnes, sentimentalism functions by making “the family stand [in] as the model for social and political affiliations” (2). This displacement is a political concealment that “subordinates democratic politics to a politics of affinity, employing a method of affective representation that dissolves the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’” (4). Here, the dangers of sympathetic identification are made explicit as the mechanism that conceals the unruliness of difference in the production of imagined sameness. However, what is particular to sentimental literature is its ability to forcefully interject readers within narratives and demand a certain response. In other words, sentimentalism requires the “evocation of personal feeling [as] a necessary precondition for participating in the feelings of others” (18) and acts to correct dissident affective associations that are not aligned with the creation of national sameness. More than this, however, the sentimental mode always enacted a double movement that selectively designated what figures were “worthy of emotional of emotional expenditure” and objectified them through a gaze that practiced a kind of ethical violence. Ironically, sympathy could only be granted to certain subjects precisely because they were other than – recreating a hierarchical standing where to have sympathy was to be superior (in more than morality).

As sympathy converts “the otherness into sameness, [and organizes] sentiments around the perceptions of familiarity,” Barne suggests, sympathy becomes a project to
“[construct] a community of likeminded individuals” (115). Since, according to Barnes, sympathetic identification is founded on the belief that individuals are a part of a unified political body, it must familiarize the body by utilizing familial associations of likeness as a rhetorical device. For this reason, the body is conflated as public and private, collective and individual (115). Consider St. Jude, the fictional suburban Minnesota community in The Corrections. Framed by a heap of broken images, The Corrections begins with an extended metaphor that narrates a chasm between the way things were and what is to come:

>The madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through. You could feel it: something terrible was going to happen. The sun low in the sky, a minor light, a cool star. Gust after gust of disorder. Trees restless, temperatures, falling, the whole northern religion of things coming to an end. No children in the yards here. Shadows lengthened on yellow zoysia. Red oaks and pin oaks and swamp white oaks rained acorns on houses with no mortgage. Storm windows shuddered in the empty bedrooms. (3)

Set during the speculative information bubble of the late 1990s, the unpredictable chaos of the market is personified as a cold front coming in, separating an image of peacetime suburban St. Jude from a way of living under crisis. What is “ending” then, is the national religion that constitutes the exceptionalism of the American people. There are no children playing in the cultural imaginary of suburbia – they are undoubtedly inside, sheltered from the present with storm windows and rooftops in houses that have been homes for quite some time. St. Jude is presented as a uniform community filled with “normal” families that reproduce a likeness in their domesticity. More than this, however, St. Jude is also allegorized as a domestic site that stands in for the nation when we are told how
“in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground” (10).

The Lamberts, however, are not a “normal” family. And, indeed, if the Lamberts are presented as precisely the opposite of what an American family should look like, this is a deliberate projection to situate the Lamberts as the other of St. Jude:

From the street, if you paid attention, you could see the lights in the windows dimming as Gary’s train or Enid’s iron or Alfred’s experiments drained power off the grid. But how lifeless the house looked otherwise. In the lighted house of the Meisners, of the Schumperts and the persons and the Roots, people were clearly at home – whose families grouped around tables, young heads bent over homework, dens aflicker with TV, toddlers careening, a grandparent testing a tea bag’s virtue with a third soaking. These were spirited, unselfconscious houses. (269)

Rather than finding a household engrossed in the familiar domesticity of St. Jude, the Lambert house is portrayed as “a house with three people separately absorbed in the basement and only one upstairs” (270). Since the Lamberts are said to stand in for the nation, the household being described as “the mind of a depressed person” (270) indicates that the Lamberts, who are self-conscious, are an affront to the national ideals projected by St. Jude. Indeed, these contradictory juxtapositions are invoked through the slippages of the sympathetic mechanism where oppositions emerge: between collectivity and individuality; between sameness and difference; between “normal” and “depressed”; between public and private. And yet, if these contradictions are embodied in the Lambert family, this is a deliberate staging of what Stephen J. Burn has called the process of “narrative corrections” (102) whereby The Corrections, indeed, self-corrects perspectives throughout the novel. If The Corrections tells us, “whether anybody was home meant everything to a house” (270), then, the divided family is really a divided self, and,
perhaps more importantly, a divided nation. It is not an accident that the novel ends with the section “One Last Christmas” where all the Lamberts, despite the internal conflict between themselves, enact a homecoming for their aging patriarch, Alfred. What *The Corrections* ultimately “corrects,” through the course of the novel, is the self-conscious *otherness* of the Lamberts by turning them into a “normal” American family.

If the “whole northern religion of things [is] coming to an end,” it is unsurprising that *The Corrections* continually forces us to recognize that the world outside St. Jude is a threat against the American way of life. As Lauren Berlant writes, “it is precisely under transnational conditions that the nation becomes a more intense object of concern and struggle” (*The Queen of America* 13). And, indeed, if we are to believe David Gates that the novel has paranoiac touches, paranoia has a profound consequence for how *The Corrections* structures itself. Since paranoia is fundamentally about “connectivity,” Patrick O’Donell has argued that “paranoia manifests itself as a mechanism that rearranges chaos into order, the contingent into the determined” (11). By imposing a system of order that names the unknowable threats as outside of America, *The Corrections* is able to deflect attacks against American normativity. Consider, for example, the monolithic presence of the W__ Corporation that can be found in two separate sections of the novel: “The Failure” and “The Generator.” Chip as an assistant professor at D— College, teaches his “Consuming Narratives” class in Wroth Hall offering the W__ Corporation-sponsored “You Go, Girl” ad campaign as a final analytical task for his students to work through. In addition, Chip borrows money from his sister who is employed by Brian Callaghan, a software engineer who used his multi-
million dollar buyout from the W__ Corporation to open the titular restaurant, The Generator. This is further complicated by his marriage to Robin Passafaro, the sister of the “radical activist” Billy Passafaro who brutally assaulted Rick Flamburg, the corporate-image vice president of W__ Corporation. Elsewhere, the novel tells us that Alfred’s employer, Midland Pacific was bought by the Wroths. The Wroths are ubiquitous in the novel, appearing in every narrative and across different time periods.

On a simple level, these interconnections are meant to show, according to Burn, “the tendency of corporations to create closed systems” (11) and become an “omnipresence of corporate control” (111). And yet, for Burn, the interconnectivity between the Lamberts and other characters is a continual “[circulation], incestuously, within a closed system” (111). Indeed, the seemingly disparate list of connections is telling of Enid’s sentiment that “it’s a small world” (The Corrections 329) that they live within: Ted and Sylvia Roth—a white middle-class family from Pennsylvania whom Enid and Alfred meet on the cruise—dine at Denise’s Restaurant, Chip dates Julia Vrais (before going to work for her husband, Gitanas Misevičius) (Burn 111). Taken together, it is unsurprising that the metaphor of incest is employed by Burn to describe the closed network of St Jude as “the logical outcome of American culture’s most cherished ideals” (Barnes 3). That is to say, incest is a metaphor about “a culture obsessed with loving familiar objects” (3) and the continual pursuit of the reproduction of national likeness. If the boundaries between familial and social ties are confused, then, “one learns to love those to whom one already feels related” (3). Read in this manner, the recursive enclosure and return to the domesticity of St. Jude shows how The Corrections works to reproduce
a likeness, a sameness, rather than, *difference*. As Sara Ahmed tells us, it is no accident that “race has been understood through familial metaphors” that extend the family form to associate other members of a race as “like a family” (*Queer Phenomenology* 122). But, more than that, the enclosed nature of St. Jude, reinforced, to an extent, by the structures of the novel, becomes a particular way of living where any *otherness*, in the sense of subalternity, is seen as an affront to the community. What is lamented when a character says that “it isn’t like it used to be” or that “values have changed” is the lost traction of St. Jude’s white homogeneity. In these situations, *The Corrections* turns back on itself, repeatedly into the past, by relying on nostalgic projections of earlier and “simpler” times – frequently codified in the form of the family, a space of likeness rather than difference.

### “Our Virtues”: The View From St. Jude

Sentimentalism, Janet Todd writes, “expressed a longing not only for a domestic close-knit family but for a community firmly linked by sentiment and familial structure” (15). A particularly conservative movement, it originally “opposed the individualistic and thrusting values that were transforming Britain into an industrial and imperial power” (129), the relation between city and country be came stressed as London, the capital of Britain, was frequently reconfigured as the “place of vice and frivolous pleasure” as well as “social malice and economic greed” (14). What is more, the relation between *capital*, that is to say, money and emotion holds a particular resonance in “the sentimental scale of value [and] memorializes the conventions that draws person into a community of mutual dependence – into a social space” (95). Moreover, if a *lack* of money designates who
becomes an object under the sympathetic gaze Enid’s constant anxiety and denigration of herself as poor is meant to situate herself as a victim of economic patriarchy.

Enid, an upholder of chastity, is presented as “the preserver of moral values” (Todd 18) who discovers her self-worth within the domestic sphere. Because Enid must share her story alongside Alfred, the narrative blends the formal qualities of the text and Enid’s life together to suggest that despite whatever they were before, they have since become Lamberts. Indeed, the most pronounced impressions that Franzen offers of Enid occur when she must repress her actual desires for the sake of the family:

There were a thousand things she wanted from life, and since few were available at home with Alfred in St. Jude, she had forcibly channeled all her wanting into a numbered day, the mayfly lifetime, that the luxury cruise would last. (The Corrections 292)

If a lack of money designates who becomes an object under the sympathetic gaze then Enid’s constant anxiety and denigration of herself as poor is meant to sympathetically cast her as a victim of domesticity dependent upon Alfred for financial stability. For Alfred, Enid’s work’s work would never “get credit for these labors of hers” (251) as “his work canceled her work” (251). And yet, as we know, raising children under particular values requires labor as well. Enid’s pathological obsession with one last Christmas is a recuperation of her perceived failure as a mother and wife: the academic Chip, the divorced Denise and the impassionate Alfred. Living with the sometimes violent Alfred, Enid is a victim of domesticity whose labour, as female, is inherently dismissed for its indeterminable economic value.

At the same time, however, Enid also reproduces expectations of what a family is and should look like – creating severe consequences for her own family. Enid reinscribes
a particular understanding of family that relies on the notion that good families inherit success and values. Although Enid is not as vocal as Alfred on the nation’s others, her belief that only certain families can bestow desirable traits is linked, once again, to the nostalgic remembrance of a once white America:

In the pageantry of weddings Enid experienced the paroxysmal love of place – of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular – that for her was the only true patriotism and viable spirituality. Living under presidents as crooked as Nixon and stupid as Reagan and disgusting as Clinton, she’d lost interest in American flag-weaving [...] (118)

The self-described innocence of St. Jude, its isolation from the contrasting metropolitan spaces of Philadelphia and New York, is once again figured as an utopic space, echoing traditional sentimental narratives where “the country became a literary fashion, a state where mind harmonized with natural beauty and nature displayed human moods” (Todd 14-15). Indeed, the sentimental part of Enid’s heart finds that the insular nature of St. Jude brings forth a kind of humility:

And yet, although honesty compelled her to withhold the adjective “elegant” from weddings in this style, there was a louder and happier part of her heart that loved this kind of wedding best of all, because a lack of sophistication assured the assembled guests that for the two families being joined together there were values that mattered more than style. (The Corrections 119)

This is most clearly formulated in her desire to wed Denise with “a tall, broad shouldered, possibly Scandinavian young man [with] flaxen hair” (12) and not Emile who was “a short little man [so] Jewish-looking” (emphasis original 121). Here, aversion to otherness is registered via religion and Enid’s fear is precisely that non-Christian Midwestern values will be transmitted to her eventual grandchildren. Enid, like Alfred, had hoped that “a last child [would be] a last opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and make
corrections,” (281) but Denise, Gary and Chip “didn’t want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends’ children wanted” (122). Indeed, for Enid, they wanted “radically, shamefully other things” (122). Enid’s sentimental desire for Christmas, then, is located within her inability to deal with the present and how different the family genealogy has deviated from her prescribed hopes as a mother. What she yearns for is not the family she has but the family that could have been.

It is perhaps unsurprising that “Alfred loved weddings, too” as they seemed to have a “real purpose” (120). If the Lamberts are a microcosm for America, then Alfred is a crucial character upon which the national symbolic signifies and produces itself. Structurally, the concurrent introduction of Alfred and Enid in the section “St Jude” works to reinstate the “constitutional basis of the tyranny’s legitimacy” (The Corrections 9) as an economic patriarchy. But, if Alfred is projected as a sovereign, he is a decaying one that is meant to stand in for the passing of a generation of values. Indeed, the Alfred that is first introduced in the narrative has internalized the madness of the cold front within himself; overtaken by Parkinson’s disease and unable to navigate the contours of quotidian life, he is seemingly lost in the abyssal space between words. Moreover, when he reunites with Chip in New York, Alfred’s mental state is conflated with the economic as the dual meaning of depression is registered:

“I’ve suffered from depression all my life,” Alfred said, or seemed to say. “Excuse me?” Chip said. “Depression years changed me. They changed the meaning of a dollar.” “An economic depression, we’re talking about.” (20-21)

Alfred, despite being one a tyrannical patriarch, is reconfigured by the conflation of affect and money as a subject who should be read sympathetically. On the one hand, Alfred
maintains strong affiliations with the American Dream and the ethics of hard work. On the other hand, his ultimate sacrifice for the family, ostensibly protecting Denise from Don Armour, ends up severely limiting his financial stability and ostracizes him from the family as a foolish and arrogant man. Despite his inability to show emotion and his desire for solitude in his basement, Alfred is presented as longing for the opposite, for “someone [to] come and disturb him [and] to see how much he hurt” (266). Like Enid, Alfred is tyrannized by the emotional norms of domesticity; he must be masculine, impersonal and hide his desire to be loved. In a sense, Alfred’s future relationship with Chip, Denise and Gary especially is grounded upon this insincere representation of himself. Rather, what Chip remembers of Alfred is his frequency to yell – a telling indication that what is most frequently repeated becomes how a person is seen as sincere or insincere. And yet, like Enid again, Alfred works to reproduce the very normative values that restrain his emotional self. For example, Alfred’s belief in a hard working ethos is figured in a gendered binary:

Nobody in St. Jude would dare tell him to take it easy. On the high prairie where he’d grown up, a person who took it easy wasn’t much of a man. Now came a new effeminate generation for whom “easygoing” was a compliment […] “Take it easy” was the watchword of these superfriendly young men, the token of their overfamiliarity, the false reassurance that enabled them to ignore the filth they worked in. (245)

What Alfred mourns is “the myth of American invincibility,” (Faludi 145) where the alpha male or the “manly man” did not show a disposition of weakness. Instead, however, it is telling that St. Jude is once again figured as a haven of values against the “eastern blight” (245). In The Corrections, Alfred’s prescription of gender roles will reverberate in
the post-9/11 affective sphere where American “weakness” was codified as a frail femininity in need of “the return of the manly man” (Faludi 9).

Under the concealment of a liberal conception of meritocracy, Alfred is unwilling to accept that the American system that he has known is fundamentally unequal. Rather, Alfred resuscitates a nostalgic fantasy of “the American way of life” by positioning the subaltern subjects, who purportedly lack a the Midwestern work ethic, as carrying the burden of failure:

[Alfred] pronounced that “the blacks” would be the ruination of this country, “the blacks” were incapable of coexisting with the whites, they expected the government to take care of them, they didn’t know the meaning of hard work, what they lacked above all was discipline, it was going to end with slaughter in the streets, with slaughter in the streets, and he didn’t give a damn what Ruthie thought of him, she was a visitor in his house and his country, and she had no right to criticize things she didn’t understand. (23)

Alfred’s understanding of racial politics is a historical one that ignores how liberalism and meritocracy have contributed to the oppression of minorities. For Berlant, this has been a recent struggle in America where “a patriotic view of national identity, which seeks to use identification with the ideal nation to trump or subsume all other notions of personhood, [competes with] a view that is frequently considered unpatriotic and victim-obsessed, in which citizenship talk takes as its main subject the unequal material conditions of economic, social and political struggle and survival” (27). Rather than accept, as Charles Mills writes, that “racism is itself a political system” (3), to make such a claim is figured as anti-American. Following Berlant’s trajectory of citizenship, Alfred is unconcerned or ignorant of the possibility that America’s continued failure to actualize its promises of national belonging and prosperity not only remain but have been
particularly repressive to certain marginal groups. Indeed, Alfred, on his trip to inspect the Midland Pacific, feels invigorated by “the Midland Pacific’s superior size, strength and moral vitality in his own limbs and carriages” (245), but is unable to realize that the railroads of America, symbolically figured as the veins of the political body, have been gutted by neglect:

Although its trunk lines were still generally hale, its branches and spurs were rotting like you couldn’t believe. Trains poked along at 10 mph on rails no straight than limp string. Mile upon mile of hopelessly buckled Belt. Alfred saw crossties better suited to mulching than to gripping spikes. (244)

This corrosion of what Alfred holds dear is produced at the same time in the division between private/public (or, here, night/day). Alfred, who is characterized by Denise as a person she had “never really known [due to the] tyrannical rages [that] protected his interior,” (525-526) finds his “source of nationality (Berlant 56) continually challenged by a liberal sexual sphere:

It was unfair that the world could be so inconsiderate to a man who was so considerate to the world. No man worked harder than he, no man made a quieter motel neighbor, no man was more of a man, and yet the phonies of the world were allowed rob him of sleep with their lewd transactions… (The Corrections 246)

What Alfred’s understanding of America’s corruption is particularly revealing: it suggests not only that certain marginalized subjects are unable to access the American myth of exceptionalism but also locates subalternity as the cause of that corruption. Sara Ahmed, writing on a poster by the British National Party, examines how the common narrative of Britain having a ‘soft touch’ has been used to “suggest that the nation’s borders and defences are like skin; they are soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others” (The Cultural Politics of Emotion 2). For Ahmed, what the poster
rhetorically claims is that the soft nation is “too emotional” and has been “made vulnerable to abuse by its very openness to others” (2). Conversely, then, a nation must be “hard” or “tough” to seal off the invasion by “others.”

Rather than accept that the American republic is based on an inequality, Alfred reaffirms his solidarity with the national fantasy through a relation of cruel optimism whereby Alfred’s necessity to believe in America is that which leads him to “the souring of [his] life” (The Corrections 258). For Alfred, the “deep terrors beneath the flimsy bed” that haunted him in all those hotel rooms was the desire to ignore the crippling revelation that what he believed was “‘real’ and ‘authentic’ might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with” (275). What Alfred begins to realize is that the myth of America, based on meritocracy, exceptionalism, and privacy, is an impossible fantasy. But, if not the American Dream, what then? For Alfred, we are told “when you were falling into the water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children” (338). In this manner, the plunge at the end of “At Sea” is both a literal and sentimental event; Alfred chooses to retrench and remember the “evenings, and there were hundreds of them, maybe thousands, when nothing traumatic enough to leave a scar had befallen the nuclear unity” (338). If the myth of American exceptionalism is a lie that you spent your whole life believing, Alfred’s narrative suggests that the prospect of family and the “sweetness of Chipper” (555) could be a way “to get out of this prison” (535)

Sentimental Corrections
How is the reader supposed to feel when Chip enters into his father’s vision to receive “a smile of recognition and pleasure” (547) and notice, for the first time, how beloved he was by Alfred? Or, conversely, how is the reader meant to understand the emotional breakdown that Denise has in the kitchen upon learning her father’s sacrifice for her? These moments are deceptive and present the modes of sentimentality, according to Janet Todd, “when […] the story or argument is arrested so that the author can conventionally intensify the emotion and the reader or spectator may have time physically to respond” (5). As Barbara Benedict tells us, it is a tableau that recreates, moralizes and manipulates “the reader’s response so that it conforms with conventional social and moral judgment (11). And, indeed, it is unsurprising that the two radical siblings, who find a kinship with one another for this reason, come back home. What The Corrections performs in the final movement of the text is a peculiar juxtaposition that resituates Alfred and Enid as subjects worthy of sympathy from Denise and Chip.

Denise, marked as a queer subject who cannot reproduce Enid’s image of a heteronormative family, is figured inversely through Enid’s belief in premarital sex and sexuality. Prior to Denise’s extended section “The Generator,” the narrative traces the domestic violence that Alfred enacts upon Enid while she is pregnant. The Corrections leads the reader to believe that Denise’s sexual promiscuity was preordained: “[n]ot even born and already drenched in sticky knowledge” (281). Within the logic of familial reproduction, the statement that “what made correction possible also doomed it” is ironic given Enid’s desire for a perfect wedding and life for Denise, something she believes that she has failed to achieve. For Burn, “Denise […] functions as either an agent of division
for, or the binding glue that brings unity, to the family as a whole” (123). Since Denise is barred from a particular type of citizenship and participation in the domestic life, her productivity is channeled through economic, sexual and affective spheres. Indeed, her fantasies of living a life with Robin belong to a distinctly “queer liberalism” for the white, affluent homonormative subject. In allowing Denise to learn the economic details of Alfred’s retirement, Franzen inscribes her body with guilt when she realizes that her sexual relationship with Don Armour has caused deep internal fissure in the family. Attempting to atone for her double-coded sexuality, Denise works to reunite the family, as an affective conduit, to appease Alfred’s wish that they get along (132). To extend Burn’s comment then, Denise is figured as the impossibl savior to the Lambert genealogy; the culmination of Denise’s narrative is a sentimental production whereby she relearns the ways in which family is oriented to protecting one’s own. If Denise is characterized as the most successful of the Lambert children, it is a deliberate move to simultaneously return her to a form of “childlessness” (565) dependent upon the family for her mental well-being as she comes to be sincere about which “Version” she truly was (425). Since Denise is unable to “correct” herself as a mother then, she must become a better and more emotional daughter.

In a similar movement, the reconciliation between Chip and Alfred is one of the most integral cathartic moment in *The Corrections*, so much so that it is first initiated in New York as Chip dismisses the possibility that his father was anything other than “a shouter and a punisher” (22). The narrative works to correct this perception by recounting Chip’s early childhood stories and revealing Alfred’s reluctance to punish Chip for the
proxy war that Enid had started. What the reader is told by Denise is that Chip was too “busy feeling misunderstood that he never noticed how badly he himself misunderstood his father” (526). Indeed, there is a certain irony here that the professor who continually returns to the signifier and signified is unable to read his father. However, this is the narrative, it turns out, that works the hardest at solidifying the retrenchment towards the family since Chip’s conversion is particularly telling of the affective power that the national fantasy employs to draw political identification. The transition in Chip’s life – from academic to family man – demonstrates how national fantasy works to dissolve critiques against itself. Since we are told that Chip, a critical theory and cultural studies professor, consistently reminded his students “to sit up straight like active critics rather than be passive consumers,” (39) his disavowal of academic identity is a particularly powerful refutation of the analytical tools one learns to use in university. (That he expects his students to accept his reading of “You Go, Girl,” like his father’s imposition on his girlfriend, speaks to the irony that Chip has inherited his father’s traits.) Early in the narrative, Chip, in an attempt to make to win his girlfriend Julia back and impress his visiting parents, sells his accumulated knowledge, in the form of his library, to the Strand Bookstore in Manhattan:

It was pathetically obvious that he’d believed his books would fetch him hundreds of dollars. He turned away from their reproachful spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late-capitalist society, and how happy he’d been to take them home. [...] To raise money for lunch for his parents and Denise, all he had left was his beloved cultural historians and his complete hardcover Arden Shakespeare; and because a kind of magic resided in the Shakespeare – the uniform volumes in their pale jackets were like an archipelago of safe retreats – he piled his Foucault and Greenblatt and hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all for $115. (92-93)
Ironically, of course, the books that critiqued late-capitalism were “in their original jackets and had an aggregate list price of $3,900” (92). Franzen, like Eugenides, renders Theory as a non-utilitarian enterprise; and yet, within *The Corrections*, this devaluation of Theory serves a purpose and that purpose is the family. For all his knowledge and time with Gitanas, Chip is unable to see the most crucial mechanism that “the [American] wealthy few [used to subdue] the unhealthy” (444). While Gitanas alludes to this by suggesting how “the invader is a system and a culture” (447), Chip is unable or unwilling to associate the cultural hegemony of the family in American politics with power. Instead, the final moments of Chip’s narrative becomes a prodigal return where he both forgives and is forgiven, much like Alfred himself. Despite his original pursuit of the mind, Chip’s story ultimately becomes a narrative of normative correction. Swayed by responsibility for “his parents [who] had become the children,” (551) not only does he unlearn his radical belief that “parents are not supposed to be your best friends,” (59) but he becomes a father himself.

In the extended coda also called “The Corrections,” Enid, we are told, “was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life” (567). Her status as a victim of Alfred’s tyrannical patriarchy is reinforced by “the sorry fact seemed to be that life without Alfred in the house was better for everyone but Alfred” (566). Indeed, Enid had to “tell him [how wrong he was] every single day” (568). Speaking to Bea Meisner about queerness, Enid, almost overnight, undergoes a radical transformation when she refutes Bea’s claim that queerness is a choice and a weakness:
Enid was no champion of “alternative” lifestyles, and the thing she disliked about Bea Meisner she’d disliked for forty years. She couldn’t have said why this particular bridge-table conversation made her decide that she no longer needed to be friends with Bea Meisner. Nor could she have said why Gary’s materialism and Chip’s failure and Denise’s childlessness, which had cost her countless late-night hours of fretting and punitive judgment over the years, distressed her so much less once Alfred was out of the house. (565)

Enid, after being freed from Alfred, learns to accept her children for who they are so far as to be relatively happy with Chip’s marriage to Alison Schulman, “a kinky-haired and rather plain-looking Jewish girl from Chicago” (565). Rather, freed from the expectation that her opinions match her husband, she realizes that “she would have found fault and she would have condemned” the marriage otherwise (566). What Enid becomes then, is in a word, tolerant; and yet, in many occasions, tolerance is not the same as acceptance.

**Outside St. Jude: Gunnar Myrdal and the Racial Politics of The Corrections**

In his controversial essay “Why Bother?,” Franzen navigates what he perceived as contemporary movements that allegedly paralyzed his attempts to write a broad social realist text. His earlier manuscript, now a subterranean aspect of *The Corrections* was a “bloated” attempt to “[work] in contemporary pharmacology and TV and race and prison life and a dozen other vocabularies” (65). Writing that the “flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities” had revealed that “a universal ‘American’ culture was little more than an instrument for the perpetuation of a white, male heterosexual elite,” (79) Franzen noted that “the American experience [had] become so sprawling and diffracted that no single ‘social novel,’ [could]] even hope to mirror it” (80). And yet, the
reading of *The Corrections* as a “G.A.N.” in conflict with, but also with the connivance of Oprah’s Book Club suggests that there is more to the narrative. Meaning, to cite Tony Bennett, is “not something that texts have, but is something that can only be produced and always differently within the specific ‘reading formations’ that ‘regulate the encounters between text and readers’” (qtd. in Lynch 9). There are intertextual and institutional relations, for example, that regulate a reader’s disposition toward their reading matter: genre hierarchies; public discourses about why, where, who and with whom to read; economic and symbolic qualities like the price of books (9).

If St. Jude has become the privileged site of conflict in *The Corrections*, the object of readerly sympathy occurs, it has occluded the *otherness* in *The Corrections* that lies subterranean to the main narrative, like America’s own history with race. In a conversation between Klaus and Denise, the novel seems to acknowledge the whiteness of the narrative:

I rilly hate the phony democracy. The people in St. Jude pretend they’re all alike. It’s all very nice. Nice, nice, nice. But the people are not alike. Not at all. There are class differences, there are race differences, there are enormous and decisive economic differences, and yet nobody’s honest in this case. Everybody pretends! have you noticed this? (394)

The speech is presented as one of the few critiques of white America and it is done by an outsider to the main narrative (and country), no less. And yet, Denise’s misunderstanding that Klaus is gesturing beyond issues of personality “differences between [her] mom and Cindy’s mom” (394) becomes a moot point. Indeed, Klaus’s question “How can you distinguish the people when everybody pretends to be the same?” (394) is unanswerable, ignored in the progression of dinner and champagne. What Klaus’s intrusion into St. Jude
reveals is how the continually recursive closed community of St. Jude has put little
tought about how the community is oriented towards whiteness. Indeed, within the text,
the trip that Enid and Alfred take is ironically on board “a white high-rise of a cruise ship
[named] the Gunnar Myrdal” (131):

A crowd mostly of old people had converged on the gate and reattenuated in the
long, bright corridor beyond it. There was something netherworldly in their
determined migration, something chilling in the cordiality and white raiment of
the Nordic Pleasurelines shore personnel, the rain clouds breaking up too late to
save the day – the hush of it all. (131-132)

For Burn, the religious tones are deliberate as Franzen’s novel is shaded by
millenarianism, a sense of ending. Citing St. John, who announces that “[h]e that cometh,
the same shall be clothed in white raiment” (qtd. in Burn 90), the scene is a critical
questioning of who has benefited most from the disintegrating social structure of The
Corrections, and the myth of American exceptionalism.

According to Jodi Melamed, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish Nobel Laureate who
famously wrote An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, has
had a foundational role in “establish[ing] the moral legitimacy of U.S. global leadership”
(53). For Melamed, the text is part of a larger denomination of policies and texts that
espoused the “African integration within U.S. society and advancement toward, equality,
defined through a liberal framework of legal rights and racially inclusive nationalism”
(53). However, what seemed ostensibly to be antiracist, was also a double movement that
worked to “prove the superiority of American democracy over communist imposition”
and demonstrate to emerging post-colonial countries that “capitalist modernity [was] nt
hopelessly compromised by white supremacy” (53). For Melamed, what is crucial about
racial liberalism and Myrdal’s work is how white liberal America identified “a racially inclusive U.S. national culture as the key to achieving America’s manifest destiny and proof of American exceptionalism and universality” (58). Redefining race in terms of culture, liberalism, in this sense, made it so that an American national identity was synonymous with the universal subject (59). At the same time, however, prescriptions about African American society were created that represented it as antithetical to the great American symbolic: “In practically all its divergences, American Negro culture is not something independent of the general American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture” (emphasis in original, qtd. in Melamed 60). Myrdal concludes his study with a particularly pertinent statement about how sympathy can be mobilized: “With all we know today, there should be the possibility to build a nation and a world where people’s great propensities for sympathy […] would not be thwarted” (qtd. in Melamed 56). What Gunnar Myrdal ultimately prescribes as the framework for solving the differences between black and white Americans is sympathy.

Indeed, Myrdal writes that “[i]solation bars the growth of feelings of mutual identification and the solidarities and ideals in both groups” (645). Slavoj Žižek has written elsewhere on contemporary appeals to human rights:

Liberal attitudes towards the other are characterized both by respect for otherness, openness to it, and an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the other is welcomed insofar as its presence is not intrusive, insofar as it is not really the other. Tolerance thus coincides with its opposite. (120)

And, certainly, race is figured predominantly in St. Jude almost as another myth altogether – it is only when Enid and Alfred meet Sylvia and Ted Roth that they even think to think about race.
If the account of isolation that Myrdal requires further evidence, *The Corrections* stages an encounter between Enid, the sheltered Midwesterner, and the racial controversies that do not reach her in St. Jude. On their vacation Enid and Alfred encounter the grieving parents of Jordan Roth, Sylvia and Ted. In a racial subplot to the novel, *otherness* becomes figured in Khellye Withers, an African-American, who becomes a specter that haunts the domestic sphere through his violent actions. Withers is an unsettling force who reveals Enid’s separation from *otherness* and her racial presuppositions about the kind of person who would commit a murder. Enid, the novel tells us, is thoroughly disgusted by the traumatic narrative that Sylvia Roth is telling; and yet, she maintains her composure “because she was missing certain key facts, such as whether Khellye Withers was black and whether Jordan had been brutally raped” (305). Sylvia owns to a desire for revenge despite avowing “that killing someone else’s child wouldn’t bring back her own” (306). This quest for the violence on the other is rendered even more coldly when Sylvia admits:

> She wanted him dead despite imagining a society that provided jobs at a decent wage for young men like him [...], a society that stanchèd the flow of illegal drugs into urban neighborhoods, [...], she wanted him dead despite even her realization, in therapy, that his smirk had been a protective mask donned by a lonely boy surrounded by people who hated him, and that if she’d only smiled at him like a forgiving mother he might have laid aside his mask and wept with honest remorse. She wanted him dead despite knowing her desire would please conservatives for whom the phrase “personal responsibility” constituted permission to ignore social injustice. (307)

Here, Sylvia Roth is unable to find the type of racial sympathy that Myrdal suggests is required for a national community; rather, her desire for revenge is a pervasive retrenching of racial lines. At the same time, however, it is no accident that Robin
Passafaro decides to march against corporeal punishment for Khellye Withers (427). What is more, the novel consistently portrays Robin Passafaro as a defender of “[n]eighborhood kids between twelve and sixteen” through her Garden Project plans (401). Of course, these examples are interesting enough to contrast in deciphering white reactions to racial discourses, but, they also demonstrate precisely what St. Jude are unable to even consider.

To what extent does a reading of The Corrections as a “G.A.N.” depend on the concealment of the racial discourse figured in Khellye Withers and the habitual whiteness that inhabits St. Jude? Ahmed, in Queer Phenomenology, reminds us that consciousness is intentional and directed toward things (27). More than that, how we perceive an object also changes how we apprehend and take different directions with the object (27). And yet, what we can see depends precisely on the way we are facing, and also what we choose to place in the background (29). In addition, the background might be necessary “to sustain a certain direction [or] keep attention on what is faced” (31). Through the habitual practice of orienting ourselves in particular directions that what is familiar takes shape by being unnoticed (37). That whiteness is allegorized in The Corrections through the isolated community of St. Jude, is no accident; rather, it reveals the ways in which certain bodies can possess whiteness as a “characteristic” or “as if it were a shared attribute” (emphasis in original 124-125) without knowing. In this way, Khellye Withers can only ever be in the background in this kind of narrative, as the emergence of a racial other like Withers in St. Jude would disorient the tendency for whiteness.
For the “G.A.N” to stand for the American soul, it would seem, now more than ever, that race being positioned underneath, behind or beside the white characters of St. Jude is symptomatic of how America can not be separated from the racial issues at stake despite attempts to do so. And yet, there is something further at stake here; it is not possible to return to Myrdal’s assessment that sympathy will allow for the reconciliation between whites and blacks. What is crucial about Sylvia’s epiphany, regarding her desire for revenge, is that she enacts a double gaze upon Khellye Withers. On the one hand, Sylvia claims that revenge “required the death of a specific individual, the termination of a specific history” (306). On the other, Sylvia acknowledges her desire for revenge would remain even if he had performed his part by “[laying] aside his mask and [weeping] with honest remorse” (307) like a “true” victim of systematic oppression. What is interesting about Withers, then, is how he stands in for a matrix of complicated questions about the relations that emerge: between race and sympathy (who gets to be sympathetic, who becomes the object?); between race and sincerity (who gets read as being “truthful?”); between race and sentimentalism (what emotions are true to whom?). This mobilization of affect reveals in contradistinction to the belief that sentimentalism and sympathy have been used for nation-building alone. Rather, sentimentality and sympathy always maintain the possibility of being used for other purposes; indeed, the reconsecration of the white domestic sphere in *The Corrections* reveals precisely that certain others can be left out to consolidate the nation, especially if the America being reified is a longing for a white homogeneity that has passed.
Post 9/11 Affective Sphere and White Domesticity

Nostalgia, Marcel Proust warns us, is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were. Originating from the Greek word nostos (a homecoming or homeward journey) and algia (pain), the etymology of nostalgia is a formative definition that stirs together memory and desire in an “acute longing for familiar surroundings” (OED) – a homesickness. That home, and its association with family, becomes a sentimental refuge is not unexpected when we consider how nostalgia functions, according to Linda Hutcheon, as “simultaneously distancing and approximating” (“Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern: A Dialogue” 2). In the conjoined construction of the past and present, nostalgia renders previous experience as “simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful [and] harmonious” while the present is antithetically organized as “complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly and confrontational” (2). Under the unequivocal gaze of nostalgia, domestic and familial spaces are sanitized and represented, professedly, as a non-ideological and non-discursive utopic space. Why, then, is it that we choose to “beat on, [as] boats against the current, born ceaselessly into the past?” (The Great Gatsby 251)

What is it about the family, like the green light, that draws us backwards?

In The Terror Dreams, Susan Faludi tracks how the post-9/11 climate reinstigated oppressive gender discourses towards women, “endeavouring to wish into the present [the American] chosen ‘likeness of the past’” (8). Central to this concern was the inability to explain the attacks as anything but hitherto “unimaginable”. Almost overnight, Faludi notes how the “myth of American invincibility” reorganized itself through male/female dichotomies. To see the cultural anxiety of America during the War on Terror, one
needed only to inspect, according to Faludi, a *Slate* cartoon titled “How We Remember September 11th” by Daryl Cagle, where the juxtaposition of two separate frames “‘The Heroes,’” and ‘The Victims’ revealed “a square-jawed fire[man] in a helmet clutch[ing] an axe” and “a little girl in pigtails weep[ing]” (6). And, indeed, Bush’s sentiment that “[America faced] an enemy determined to bring death and suffering into our homes, (qtd. in Faludi 5) would repeatedly be codified in the figure of the female child victim. What is more, the alleged loss of “innocence” led to media-driven narratives of single women needing men, desiring dependency and biological reproduction. It was under the fear of the American way of living that the nation recalibrated around the *family* by creating the “illusion of a helpless family circle” (145) and the renewed emphasis on family as a “greater priority” than before (131). Is it any wonder, then, that *The Corrections* became associated with the “G.A.N.,” if it recalibrated emotionality back into the domestic sphere? In the attempt to recuperate the image of America as a superpower, the focus on heroic acts became figured as masculine while victimhood was suspiciously rechanneled into the family. Nostalgia, it would seem, was a very powerful tool indeed.

There is, however, more at stake here. As *The Corrections* reminds us; the racial specter was also displaced and managed. Indeed, at “home” behind the white picket fences, there was another story emerging that called on affective participation to prove one’s allegiance to America. Recalling an incident around Christmas 2002, Bill Brown comments on how a new commercial market emerged soon after 9/11 to include “not just flags and ground zero T-shirts and NYPD pins and WTC plastic snow globes” (36). The pronounced high-end and designer nature of these collectibles were marketed as “patriotic
gifts,” further imbricating the affective associations between guilt patriotism, and consumerism. That is to say then, “the more you give, the more you prove your feeling response to the sentimental stimuli of suffering and distress” (4). However, Brown argues that the commodities of 9/11 while being “passionately purchased, accumulated and displayed, [were] not really being collected” (37). For Brown, the value of the collectibles resided not within “personal identity but collective identity”: these seemingly kitsch items became an externalization of grief that “exhibit[ed] your participation in a national act […] no matter how distant from it you may [had] been” (37). Within the post-9/11 sentimental production of collective mourning and trauma as a “natural” and “morally correct” narrative, a particular mode of national belonging was called upon that operated through “the coupling of suffering and citizenship” (Berlant 1). If, according to Berlant, American citizens are solicited to act en masse when “private patriotic identifications are indeed not enough to sustain national culture at a particular moment,” (emphasis in original 52) then the enclosed and forced necessity to feel the conflated emotion of grief/patriotism was a deeply conservative movement. In other words, sympathy became a mechanism of othering whereby those incapable of exhibiting and visually producing emotion are codified as ‘not us, not American,’ and a risk to the population. Far from suggesting Jameson’s the waning of affect, the post-9/11 emotional habitus was a realm of feeling that included and excluded members based on their emotional disposition, or, “a sense of what and how to feel” (Gould 34).

And yet, it was precisely because one was supposed to feel that it became impossible to do so. According to Frederic Jameson, 9/11 disclosed a national
“disassociation of sensibility” whereby emotional reactions became “orchestrat[ed] and amplif[ied]” (297) by the media. In the white noise of 9/11, the “real event” had been transformed into a spectacle or simulacrum in which the emotions that “we [felt were] no longer our own feelings anymore but someone else’s, and indeed, if we [were] to believe the media, everybody else’s” (299). Under the guise of panic, this “amalgamation of media sentiment and emotion,” for Jameson and, as he argues, part of the public sphere was “utterly insincere” (297). Under the emotional regime produced by 9/11, the question of sincerity, as an emotional qualifier, is no longer strictly enforced but an insult to the individual’s ability to feel. As Jameson tells us, on a basic level “[people] don’t appreciate a theoretical discussion of their feelings” as it is an affront on their character (“Are you questioning the sincerity of my feelings?”) (297). And, indeed, the relationship between sentimentality and sincerity is a telling one as sincerity is, historically, the validating mechanism that would positively correlate the identity of personal feeling with professed principle (Bell 166). To read the etymological evolution of sentimentality:

It is not merely a historical accident, therefore that our principal term for discriminating truth or authenticity of feeling should be a negative one, only invoking the positive by implication. The history of the term is a paradigm of its meaning. The fact that we have no single word to signify true or authentic feelings reflects the hard-won psychological recognition that truth, in this domain, can only be approached by indirection. In a critically self-conscious life of feeling, even the most confident emotional affirmation stands against the lurking threats of insincerity, self-interest, and self-indulgence (emphasis original Bell 2-3).

But, this is of course, based on the depth model of subjectivity that draws upon “truth” and judgment to evaluate whether one is being sincere about their emotional attachment to America. Yet, to return to Myrdal and Berlant, if American identity at this historical juncture became a narrative against the perceived threat of the Middle East, what is being
invoked, above all else, is the *universal* figure of the American, as the moral and symbolic protector of freedom; in other words, the marginalized subject must affirm America above all other markers of identity. Although I have drawn from Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed to highlight how racial bodies have historically been codified as excessively emotional, there is a reversal in the post-9/11 era where the hyphenated ethnic American is interpellated by an impossible discourse: on the one hand, minority subjects were expected to sympathetically identify with the “overwhelmingly White face of [the victims]” (Ross 236); and, on the other hand, the one who grieved, felt, and sympathized was not only figured as American, but white – underwriting, or perhaps, highlighting the double bind of ethnicity and emotion.

It is perhaps for this reason, that Paula Abood has argued that the symbolic meaning of the attacks are dependent upon who was being spoken to as “the political commodification of September 11th perhaps best represent[ed] the privileging of white-Western suffering” (576). As Homeland Security created a cultural paranoia where terrorism was always present even under the alleged green “low risk,” certain subjects were expected to endure the rise of Islamophobic hate crimes prompted by the media-fueled suspicion. Thomas Ross building on Faludi’s claims about 9/11 and gender claims that The War on Terror had rhetorically codified a clash of civilizations between “the archenemy [who was] the brown skinned radical Muslim ‘terrorist’ [and] the White Christian ‘warrior’” (239). And, indeed, like the alleged feminist enemy at home, it was often enough to have “brown skin and [a] Middle Eastern identity” (239) to be seen as an enemy behind the white picket fence. These subjects were required to grieve for America.
Since love, Freud tells us, is a pronounced reaction to the loss of the object, mourning and grief are the clearest moments where the subject is heralded to reconfirm its love even in the absence of reciprocation (Ahmed 130). To cite Sara Ahmed, “national love [is] a form of waiting” (131). The nation promises a utopian imaginary where the length and extent of one’s investment are continually deferred for the future that is not quite yet here. For minority subjects, investment in the national future is marked by a perversion of power whereby self and familial sacrifice are inherently a product of immigration. In this sense, the renewed vigilance of racial profiling and surveillance on marginal others is rhetorically framed as a test of allegiance. Caught in a double bind, where ‘leaving’ would be a negation of the physical and affective labor exhausted in believing in U.S. exceptionalism, they were given the impossible task of pledging allegiance to the nation-state and being judged by the veracity of their claim.

How could Muslim and Arab-Americans prove their allegiance to America when the biopolitical state worked to mark their ethnic bodies as insincere – always containing the abstract evil of terrorism? What happens when sincerity, figured this way, as a test of allegiance was placed on Muslim and Arab-American subjects at this historical juncture? And, how might it be different from the heteronormative white subject’s avowal of allegiance? Under a particular perversion of power in the post-9/11 sphere, it does not matter fundamentally what the Muslim and Arab-American subject asserts; rather, the truth is already limited to the inscriptions upon their bodies. That sincerity reemerges as the exact mechanism used, historically by Christianity, to differentiate between “good” and “bad” subjects is not an accident; rather, sincerity was fundamentally impossible
unless you belonged to the form of the future generation – the white child. While Jameson argued that there was a lack of sincerity, it was clear that a crisis of sincerity did exist for certain “citizens” of America, who were not only theoretically confronted about their emotions but forced in actuality to confess their failure: I am not American because I am not white; I will never be American because I cannot be white; I do not grieve the passing of White America; even if I appear to grieve, it is a performance of your beliefs and is an empty parody meant to win your trust.

What The Corrections and the recent post-9/11 affective sphere tell us is that the “return” to sincerity is not altogether a simple task or without ideological motivations. Transfigured from the Christian tradition, sincerity has come to restrict the ability of marginalized others to speak in relation to the emotional habitus. Indeed, if one’s sincerity is defined by the external claims to one’s emotion, it is a fraught distinction between being “too sincere” and “not sincere enough,” often exploited and mobilized for ulterior reasons. How, then, would it be possible to perform sincerity without being imposed upon and judged? What I have tried to claim is that sincerity can be grasped through performativity; undoubtedly, given that performances are also judged and that sincerity is a part of performance, this is a peculiar way to think through the problem. It seems to me, however, that this is not altogether the case. Rather, to consider the parrhēsiaste or the act of philosophiam profiteri once more, professing or speaking freely disassembles the other; it disorients them because they believe you are foolish or banal for risking yourself for doing and speaking something impossible. Sincerity, then, is a peculiar transgression of norms that lack the “edge” of irony: it is simple for one to say
something and mean another; it is easy, still, to say what one means; but, it is something else to become what one says to the extent that *speech, action* and *being* are the same.

Socrates, sentenced to death for “corrupting the youth,” we are told, refused any help to escape him in *Crito*. Refusing to answer Athenian injustice with injustice, Socrates ultimately dies by hemlock – accepting his fate and choosing to risk death as a profession of his ideals. We might take better care of ourselves, to doubt ourselves, and know ourselves before we question others.
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