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Neo-Sincere Theory?

Abstract: This article plays with the possibility of applying the tenets of New Sincerity, an American literary movement, to the practice of literary theory. The characteristics of the resulting Neo-Sincere theory could include simplification and popularization, irony, broad syntheses and interdisciplinarity, and finally institutional irreverence.

Keywords: institutional reform, irony, literary theory, New Sincerity, popularization

It seems to me that, in the last few centuries, very few applied academic disciplines have proved as flexible – almost invertebrate – as literary theory, so sensitively has it reacted to every gust of wind in philosophy and literary practice, always becoming an amalgamation, periodically replacing most of its basic assumptions. In this article, I will be playing with the possibility of an approaching paradigm shift, anticipating some aspects of a movement which could, theoretically, appear in the timeline after modernist and postmodernist literary theory. Because of issues of power and politics, I do not actually believe this will happen on a large scale, but I am certain it would be a very healthy, fresh, and most cleansing gust of wind.

If we view the progression of alternating movements in literary theory in terms of structuralist binary oppositions, an interesting candidate for replacing postmodernism seems to be New Sincerity, a loose category of writing styles emerging in the late 1980s in the US, characterized by writers stepping back from postmodern irony and distant cynicism, and getting to grips with the realities of human existence. Perhaps the best introduction to the Neo-Sincere mindset can be found in the musings of David Foster Wallace:

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point, why they’ll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “How banal.” Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness

to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. (Wallace 1993, 192–193)

Imagine literature as a pendulum that had swung through modernism to the very apogee that is postmodernism, stalled, and is now coming back to realism, though transformed and more sophisticated after the experience. The question is: can someone do to literary theory what David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Dave Eggers did to literature? What would a Neo-Sincere literary theorist be like? How could the maxims of New Sincerity translate to literary theory?

1 Wuthering words

Modernist and postmodernist literature utilizes many convoluted literary devices that reinforce the feeling of belonging to an educated elite. While they can be considered advancements in the narrow field of “high literature,” these devices not always contribute to answering the basic questions of the *conditio humana*, or, for that matter, to authentic narrative pleasure. New Sincerity writers know and often use many of these devices, but they put special emphasis on returning to a full, non-evasive treatment of the basic “human troubles and emotions.” They have retained their erudition but they have developed a new awareness of how to apply it to what is important for society as a whole in the ancient sense of the word.

Can you think of any elitist aspects of academia? To save you the time spent enumerating, can you think of any non-elitist aspects of it? Let us start with terminology. Humanities scholarship is often rendered unreadable by the use of highly complex concepts: no matter what is being said, nobody outside literary theory will ever get to use it because it is simply out of reach by definition. A Neo-Sincere theorist could attempt to communicate and maybe even create meaning in a way similar to that of fiction, with elaborate structures built from simple concepts, so that the quality of scholarship can be verified from the outside.

Consider Milan Kundera and his *Art of the Novel* (1988). He is able to deliver an intriguing analysis of several centuries of the European novel using, if not downright simple language, then at least concepts mostly familiar to educated people without a literary background. An even more popular example is Kurt Vonnegut’s theory of the “shapes of stories,” in which he attempts to categorize narratives based on charts mapping the emotions of the protagonists (originally appearing in his master’s thesis, this theory became the subject of several lectures and was included in his essay collection entitled *A Man without a Country* [2005, 23–38]).

I should stress that this does not mean literary theory would do well to get rid of its concepts, the fruits of centuries of careful analysis, but rather that it should talk about them in a different way, revisit its channels of dissemination. I am not the first one to suggest that, since literary theory claims to serve the public and at the same time depends on people paying taxes (or at least tuition fees), it might want, in order to be sincere with itself, to ask “who cares about this?”, to process its product accordingly, and to present it for the enjoyment and intellectual growth of the public. It is true: In the humanities, we do not measure direct utilitarian benefits like those that arise from the natural sciences; but that does not imply that we should not measure the degree of intellectual inspiration that ordinary people draw from a given humanities discipline. In order to improve in this respect, Neo-Sincere literary theory could

- stop endlessly producing papers and books no non-literary theorist ever reads, and start teaching more, organizing events, and enriching the public sphere with applied skills of interpretation and relevant cultural commentary; and
- leverage the methods of the digital humanities and learn how to pass on knowledge in a clearer and more easily digestible way, making use of sound, image, and movement.

2 Irony inversion

One of the defining features of New Sincerity fiction is that it relinquishes much of the irony and cynicism brought by postmodernism in order to address genuine emotional issues facing the contemporary citizen. If literary theory wants to get closer to “human troubles and emotions,” maybe it should do the opposite and start being a bit more ironic and cynical. Maybe it should look in the mirror, see how far from the actual readers of literature it has gone, and reflect – which, in this case, is hardly possible without making fun of itself in the process. A good example of this is Pierre Bayard’s *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read* (2007). It ironically depicts the rigid, hypocritical conventions that require a certain kind of static knowledge about an arbitrary set of books and their interrelations, but at the same time it foregrounds the literary text as an infinitely mobile object that works best when it is constantly reinvented. The most important thing is that the irony is productive. Bayard is obviously critical of the institution, but he makes it clear that its subject – literature and literary enquiry – is crucial to society. He does not say that the enterprise is pointless; he says that it is very important but being done in the wrong way.

3 Holistic hope

According to Wallace, New Sincerity fiction writers “have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles” (1993, 192) – they risk being laughed at as naive, they willingly embark on the impossible mission of reconciling the abundance of moral ambiguities and contradictions in human life in a futile attempt at reaching something like truth (which, they claim, is being avoided or audaciously relinquished in postmodernist prose). They risk failure in an attempt to achieve something even more valuable for society than what their predecessors have achieved. What could an analogous aspiration be in the case of Neo-Sincere theory?

Narrow specialization in technology and the natural sciences turned out to be a major evolutionary advantage which catapulted Western civilization to an unprecedented level of prosperity and individual freedom. But can narrow specialization, when applied to the humanities, be justified as more effective in creating value? If reading, discussing, and remembering counts, the answer is a resounding “no”: the holists win by a wide margin. The “pop idols” of literary theory celebrated in the latter half of the twentieth century all had a heavily contextual, interdisciplinary approach to global ethical issues. Just like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Jean-François Lyotard, or Slavoj Žižek, the Neo-Sincere theorist could attempt to factor everything in and surround detailed knowledge with a broader synthesis, a unique worldview that is relevant to the lives of non-literary-theorists. There is a very high risk of failure in this kind of enterprise, failure to say something really new about the big topics, but writers would be able to maintain a particular kind of moral integrity that can be a reward in itself, just like the ethical mission pursued by New Sincerity writers.

4 Institutional irreverence

By challenging their predecessors, New Sincerity writers contradict and subvert the literary canon, the institution that seeks to control literary value. Literary theorists also have an institution which controls the value of their theory – the academic community and its nodes (individual universities and institutes). Like any other sizeable public or private entity with an internal hierarchy of power that is at the same time connected to external funding, academia is extremely susceptible to corruption and oligarchic tendencies. There are individuals and groups who monopolize both financial and intellectual resources by restricting what is worth researching and who is fit to do it on the basis of personal gain, material

or immaterial. Anyone who has ever seen academic institutions from the inside knows that public scandals merely scratch the surface of the subterranean volcano, of all that is so deeply wrong with the institution.

Where would a Neo-Sincere theorist stand? Foucault comes in handy again here for a different purpose: Neo-Sincere theory could produce a Foucauldian archaeology of academia as an institution of power, stand up face-to-face against the system that it springs from, and deconstruct it, revealing how power mechanics deform authentic social relations and genuine intellectual curiosity.

A fine example of an academic and renowned literary critic who also devotes painstaking effort to thoroughly exposing and criticizing academia and universities is David Lodge, the author of the campus-novel trilogy *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work* (Lodge 2011). These novels are at the same time disarmingly hilarious and almost academically accurate in their observation of the social, psychological, and economic absurdity of 20th century academia. Throughout the trilogy, Lodge gains momentum; while *Changing Places* is mostly entertainment without any grave ethical questioning of the institutions, *Nice Work* builds a binary opposition between a female scholar and a male factory manager and thus takes on the almost impossible task of reconciling liberal and conservative values, addressing some of the most important questions by juxtaposing the importance of free-market capitalism and the value of liberal-arts education.

5 Conclusion

Why am I writing all this for a comparative literature publication? It seems that the basic defining features of comparative literature predispose it to adopting many of the maxims I have mentioned. One could say that it is already partly Neo-Sincere because it compares the writing of radically different cultures, crosses boundaries, and redefines the basic concepts that are relevant for actual living beings inside those cultures. This aspect is even more prominent when literature is compared with other spheres of human activity such as history, politics, philosophy, art, or science. It is part of the definition of comparative literature that it speak to all people, be interdisciplinary, and constantly challenge our understanding of what literature is and what it means to be human.

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