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## OCEAN VUONG'UN YERYÜZÜNDE BİR AN İÇİN MUHTEŞEMİZ ROMANINDA YENİ İÇTENLİK ETİĞİ

THE NEW SINCERITY ETHIC IN OCEAN VUONG'S  
ON EARTH WE'RE BRIEFLY GORGEOUS

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### Anahtar sözcükler

Ocean Vuong; Yeryüzünde Bir An İçin Muhteşemiz, Postmodern İroni; Post-postmodernizm; Yeni İçtenlik Etiği; Kuir Mahremiyet.

### Keywords

Ocean Vuong; On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous; Postmodern Irony; Post-postmodernism; The Ethic of New Sincerity; Queer Intimacy.

### Öz

Bu makale, Ocean Vuong'un Yeryüzünde Bir An İçin Muhteşemiz (2020) romanını yeni içtenlik perspektifiyle derinlemesine incelemektedir. Vuong'un poetikası ve anlatı etiğinin, kimlik, travma ve arzu üzerine geleneksel söylemleri aşan ve postmodern ironi ile sinizmi reddeden radikal bir incinebilirlik anlayışını nasıl dile getirdiğini açıklamaktadır. Beden ve dilin kesişiminde konumlanan Vuong'un dili, iğren(İL)me, yaralanma ve yeniden doğuş mefhumlarını müzakere eden duygulanımsal bir söylem kullanarak, anlamın hem kaynağı hem de mekânı olarak bedeni ön plana çıkarır. David Foster Wallace tarafından geliştirilen yeni içtenlik etiğinin kuramsal çerçevesinden yararlanan bu çalışma, Vuong'un anlatısının, dokunma duyusuna dayanan bir dil aracılığıyla benmerkezciliğin ötesine geçme etik zorunluluğunu içeren, yüzü ötekine dönük bir ilişkisellik yönelimini hayata geçirdiğini savunmaktadır. Sessizlik ve söz, bedenler arası geçişkenlik ve kuir yakınlık arasındaki karmaşık etkileşim, yeni içtenlik etiğinin basmakalıp duygusallık ya da indirgemeci bir yaklaşım olmadığını; aksine, varlık ve yokluk, ölüm ve yeniden doğuş, benlik ve öteki arasında eşikte oluş haline duyarlı ve bedenlerarası olduğunu açığa çıkarır. Romanın, dil öncesi ve bedensel bir iletişim biçimini simgeleyen plasenta dilini, yaşam ve ölümün birbirinin içine işlediğini ifade eden bir gösterge olarak kullanışını inceleyerek, makale Vuong'un anlatısını, yeni içtenliğin ironi ve mesafeye karşı direniş çizgisinin içine yerleştirmenin yanı sıra, kuir edebiyatında yazma, hafıza, temas ve aidiyet etiğini yeniden yapılandıran önemli bir müdahale olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu yeniden yönelim, incinebilirliği ve bedenlerarası yakınlığı etik yükümlülük biçimleri olarak ön plana çıkaran yeni içtenlik yazını akımıyla uyum içindedir. Bu nedenle Vuong'un romanı, anlatı pratiğini ilişki etik ve duygulanımsal tanıklık mekânına dönüştürerek okurdan, bedensel duyumsamaların dahil olduğu bir alımlama talep eden yeni içtenlik etosunu somutlaştırmaktadır.

### Abstract

This article advances a critical exegesis of Ocean Vuong's On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous (2020) through the prism of the new sincerity. It elucidates how Vuong's poetics and narrative ethics coalesce to articulate a radical understanding of vulnerability that transcends conventional discourses of identity, trauma, and desire, and that defies postmodern irony and cynicism. Situated at the interstices of corporeality and language, Vuong's prose foregrounds the body as both a site and source of meaning, deploying an affective register that negotiates the notions of abjection, wound, and regeneration. Engaging with the theoretical framework of new sincerity ethic advanced by David Foster Wallace, this study contends that Vuong's narrative enacts an extrorse orientation toward relationality, an ethical imperative to move beyond solipsism through a language of touch. The novel's complex interplay of silence and speech, trans-corporeality, and queer intimacy manifests that the ethic of new sincerity is neither sentimental nor reductive, but intersubjective and attuned to the liminality between presence and absence, death and rebirth, self and other. By exploring the novel's deployment of the language of the placenta, signifies a prelinguistic and embodied form of communication, as the signifier of interpenetrating life and death, the article not only situates Vuong's narrative within the lineage of new sincerity's resistance to irony and detachment but also posits it as a seminal intervention that reconfigures the ethics of writing, memory, belonging and contact in queer literature. This reorientation resonates with the movement of new sincerity writing, which privileges vulnerability and inter-bodied kinship as modes of ethical engagement. Vuong's novel thus exemplifies the new sincerity ethos by transforming narrative practice into a site of relational ethics and affective witness, demanding an embodied reception from its readership.

## Introduction

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2020) by Ocean Vuong is an epistolary novel that narrates the intimate life of Little Dog, a queer Vietnamese American writing to his illiterate mother. The novel's confessional style, lyrical prose, and nonlinear temporality exemplify contemporary queer autofiction's blending of memoir, poetry, and fiction. Autofiction blends autobiographical fact and fictional invention, allowing marginalized subjects to negotiate identity and memory through creative self-representation. Vuong's novel situates itself in this tradition, deploying autofiction to articulate queer diasporic subjectivity. Simultaneously, the work exemplifies a literary shift away from postmodern irony toward the ethos of "new sincerity", regarded as "a counter to the pervasive solipsism that Wallace sees as so prevalent in contemporary post-industrial urban living and writing" (Sloane, 2019, p. 52). The ethic of new sincerity refers to a mode characterized by radical emotional openness and rawness, ethical vulnerability, and hopefulness amid traumas. Baskin (2023) argues that the "ascendency of autofiction has occurred alongside a renewed emphasis on literary sincerity" (p. 126). The ethos of new sincerity emerges as a post-postmodern response to pervasive irony and cynicism, especially in the works of David Foster Wallace, "the post-postmodern advocate" of new sincerity (McGowan, 2020, p. 48). New sincerity insists on emotional authenticity, ethical connection, and hope. From Wallace's view of literature follows a distinct ethical demand binding on any writer who seeks to create genuine literature: the obligation to sincerity. It is this commitment to sincerity that grounds all other ethical duties of the writer, including the responsibility to craft writing that is "communicative" and "other-directed" rather than self-enclosed, purely "expressive" and "solipsistic" (Pitari, 2024, p.27). This dedication to sincerity forms the basis for the writer's broader ethical obligations such as creating writing that reaches outward to others, prioritizing communication and relationality over self-contained, purely expressive, or solipsistic modes of expression. Accordingly, Wallace presents solipsistic subjectivity that closes in on itself as "a problem to be confronted and overcome by producing, at best, haunting moments of sincerity" (Horn, 2014, p. 251). Vuong's writing exemplifies this ethos by embracing vulnerability and affect without succumbing to sentimentality or irony.

Vuong's novel stands a paradigmatic example of the new sincerity ethos. Hence, this article discusses how Vuong's novel embodies new sincerity, not as naive sentimentality, but as a radical, self-aware performance of vulnerability that embraces the complexities of trauma, love, and survival; therefore, this study explores the ethic of new sincerity in relation to vulnerability and relationality. The ethos of new sincerity emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries; it describes a turn away from the postmodern irony that

dominated late twentieth-century literature and culture. While postmodernism revelled in scepticism, parody, and distance, new sincerity foregrounds authentic emotional expression and an ethical imperative to connect through feeling. Unlike naive sincerity, which might ignore irony or scepticism altogether, new sincerity incorporates a knowing self-awareness, recognizing the pitfalls of blind idealism, but chooses sincerity as a deliberate, meaningful stance. It seeks to reclaim emotional depth and human connection without resorting to pure sentimentalism or pastiche. In recent queer literary studies, new sincerity is especially resonant because it challenges dominant heteronormative emotional regimes and fosters alternative affective economies marked by radical openness and care. Vuong's novel joins this conversation by enacting sincerity through poetic language and narrative vulnerability, producing an affective space where trauma and hope coexist without irony or dismissal.

Asserting that postmodernism has become "an empty, purely cynical pose", Wallace spearheads "a turn toward sincerity and sentiment" (Cohen, 2012, p. 72). As a reaction against the dominance of self-conscious irony in twentieth-century fiction, Wallace foresaw a novel literary trend that would embrace an ethos akin to the ethic of new sincerity in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction". Wallace challenges the "ironic postmodern self-consciousness" that jettisons connection among people and turns them into "an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers" (p. 161). Paulson (2012) claims that "E Unibus Pluram" was intended to prompt authors to "ditch irony in favour of sincerity" (p. 134). Similarly, Adam Kelly (2010) asserts that Wallace's fiction enacts the reawakening of sincerity, positing it against the contemporary literature's prevailing focus on authenticity both in literature and notions of selfhood. One should bear in mind that Wallace is a writer who, during his cruise, becomes disturbed by "the insincerity of the staff" and "the affected disposition" of the service industry during his cruise (Roiland, 2012, p. 32). The insincerity of the staff induces despair in him while they pamper "the Insatiable Infant part of me [him]" as he says in his collection of non-fiction entitled *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Wallace, 1997, p. 316-17).

From the perspective of the ethic of new sincerity, postmodernism often relies on irony, pastiche, and detachment as ways to critique culture, while new sincerity, though not abandoning critique, moves beyond reflexive scepticism to embrace vulnerability and earnest expression. The former is sceptical of grand narratives, yet the latter seeks meaning in personal and collective stories. For example, Wallace's notion of infinite jest critiques irony's emptiness while striving for emotional truth in *Infinite Jest*, which has been widely acknowledged for "its treatment of deeply felt human concerns" (Laird, 2020, p. 83). Works in this vein

prioritize raw, unfiltered emotion without fear of seeming sentimental. New sincerity acknowledges the constructed nature of art and identity but does not let that awareness prevent genuine engagement. It often explores individual experiences in ways that feel intimate yet universally relatable. While postmodernism often leaned into meaninglessness, new sincerity suggests that meaning can still be found, or constructed, through connection, art, and empathy. Like postmodernism, it borrows from various cultural sources but does so with earnest appreciation rather than ironic detachment. Postmodernism plays with artifice and surface whilst new sincerity acknowledges artifice but strives for depth. New sincerity is not a naive return to pre-postmodern innocence but a mature, self-aware embrace of authenticity in a fragmented world. It suggests that even in an age of scepticism, people crave connection, meaning, and emotional truth, and that art can provide it without irony as a shield. As McCaffery (2012) notes, the writer of new sincerity must “talk out of the part of yourself that can love [and] give the reader something” (p. 50).

### **New Sincerity: Moving Past Irony Toward Emotional Engagement**

Adam Kelly (2016) identifies a cohort of prominent American novelists born in the 1960s, including David Foster Wallace, as central figures in what he terms the movement of the new sincerity (p. 198). They are described as “postironic writers” (Konstantinou, 2012, p. 106). This literary movement emerges as a nuanced response to the legacies of modernism and postmodernism, particularly their focus on irony, aesthetic autonomy, and the critique of a stable, coherent self. The ethic of new sincerity defies the endless postmodern irony as it views it as “the imprisoning cage” (Tracey, 2010, p. 174). However, the ethic of new sincerity does not outright reject postmodernism; rather, it critically filters what it inherits from it. It questions postmodernism’s tendency to turn irony into a stance that negates human relationality.

As a result of this rejection of postmodern irony, Wallace is described as a “post-postmodern” author (Hering, 2010, p. 10). He seeks to move beyond the ironic detachment of postmodernism toward a renewed sense of sincerity, empathy, and ethical engagement. For such a writer, irony is no longer subversive but a shield against sincerity and vulnerability. Wallace is widely recognized for foregrounding sincerity as a reaction to the pervasive irony of the contemporary culture. As Kelly (2010) points out, Wallace “affirmed and embodied sincerity” as a fundamental principle guiding both his life and writing (p. 131). From his critique of irony and advocacy of a principle of direct, straightforward, unambiguous expression rather than layered irony in “*E Unibus Pluram*” to the thematic treatment of sincerity in *Infinite Jest* and other pieces, Wallace’s works continually interrogate the possibilities and limitations of honest

communication in a culture saturated with self-consciousness, media, and narcissism. *Infinite Jest* demonstrates Wallace’s “transition from a conspicuously metafictional, irony-driven sensibility” towards the felt, lived, hence embodied experience as reflected in the ethos of new sincerity (Benzon, 2010, p. 101). Wallace’s “stance of unironic sincerity” (Hamilton, 2020, p.126) champions transparent expressions of emotional attachments and entanglements. His writing moves away from gamey, relentless, pedantic metafictional exercises invested in ironic gestures and gravitates towards open and genuine expressions of emotional connection and interpersonal relationality. His writing is a call to “eschew irony as an end in itself and to initiate an affective reengagement” with emotions (Tracey, 2010, p. 172).

Wallace believes that the contemporary individual traded away sincerity and empathy in pursuit of “the deeper truths of abstraction, alienation, and cynicism” (Baskin, 2014, p. 144). Therefore, from the outset, he frames his artistic endeavour as a reaction against the dominance of irony in contemporary American literature and culture, a concern he articulated most explicitly in “*E Unibus Pluram*”. Wallace (1993) argues in this essay that television has fundamentally reshaped American consciousness and, by extension, American fiction. He points out that American postmodern fiction was profoundly shaped by the rise of television (p. 161). He posits that a symbiotic, and ultimately toxic, relationship has developed between TV and the postmodern literary tradition, leaving contemporary fiction writers in a difficult bind.

Wallace asserts that television has co-opted and neutralized the ironic, rebellious tools of postmodernism, the very tools a new generation of writers wants to use to critique it (Wallace, 1993, p. 171). This has created a cultural stasis where irony, once a weapon against hypocrisy, has become an oppressive, empty default mode that reinforces our passive, watchful alienation. Hence, Wallace's critique of postmodernism is not that it was wrong, but that it has been rendered ineffective and even harmful by the culture it tried to describe. Wallace acknowledges that postmodern irony was a necessary and radical response to the hypocritical, simplistic American self-image projected by 1950s and 60s television. Writers like Pynchon, DeLillo, and Coover used irony to explode hypocrisy and reveal a more complex, often darker, reality (Wallace, 1993, p. 167). However, it has been absorbed by the system it sought to critique. Television, a deeply cynical and commercial medium, is a genius at absorbing and repackaging any critique for its own purposes. When rebellion becomes the norm, it loses its power and becomes a new form of oppression. Irony is excellent for criticism and “ground-clearing” but useless for building anything new. It can identify what's wrong but offers no positive values or alternatives. In this ironic culture, the greatest fear is “fear of ridicule” and being seen as naïve, sentimental, or sincere (Wallace, 1993, p.

171). This creates a prison where no one dares to express genuine emotion or conviction for fear of ridicule. The critique is instantly consumed and becomes just another product. The result is a literary landscape that is at once humorous, disturbing, intellectually nuanced, and strikingly superficial. However, as Magill (2012) claims, sincerity and authenticity, unlike superficial, hollow, and instantly consumed relations, “take a long time to cultivate” and in contrast to “nearly all other qualities that you can market, you cannot actually fake them” (p. 234).

Thus, Wallace diagnoses the problem of ironic exhaustion and describes the kind of art that would be needed to break free from it. Hence, his writing is generated out of “this resistance: to irony, to debasement, to a nauseous, abysmal self-reflection” (Diakoulakis, 2010, p. 147). Irony no longer liberates but enfeebles us (Wallace, 1993, p. 183). He argues that the future literary rebels will not be more ironic rebels, but “anti-rebels” who boldly step away from ironic detachment, summoning the audacity to embrace “single-entendre values”, mean what they say without a subtext, approach timeless human struggles and feelings with respect, and deliberately avoid self-consciousness and weariness (p. 183). This new path would be incredibly risky. These rebels wouldn’t risk shock or outrage, but something perhaps more terrifying in a jaded culture: the risk of being called sentimental, melodramatic, naïve, or banal. They would have to be willing to be sincere in a world of onlookers who observe from the sidelines without fully engaging, lurk around hesitant to expose themselves emotionally and dread genuine attention and true connection more than anything else. Briefly, Wallace is critical of postmodernism because irony as its primary mode has been hijacked by televisual culture, defanging it as a tool for meaningful critique and trapping us in a cycle of cynical passivity. The essay is a call to move beyond this exhausted mode and forge a new artistic path that dares to be sincere, emotionally courageous, and constructive. In essence, Wallace’s ethos of new sincerity is self-aware, dialogic, structurally complex, and ethically attuned: it is a literary ethic that seeks connection, responsiveness, and truth, not through naïve transparency, but through an ongoing negotiation with irony, self-consciousness, and the reader’s reception.

### **New Sincerity in *Little Dog’s Letters of Flesh to His Illiterate Mother***

In his debut novel, Vuong embodies the ideal of sincerity, performing a radical ethics of queer vulnerability that resists postmodern irony through genuine feeling. The novel’s epistolary form and lyrical prose create a space of ethical witnessing and relational openness, where emotional labour becomes both personal and political. Vuong’s queer, diasporic new sincerity embraces hope amid trauma, tracing intergenerational wounds of war and displacement with compassion. Writing to a mother who cannot read

becomes an act of care beyond language, affirming sincerity as resistance to alienation and silence. Building on the theoretical framing of new sincerity as radical vulnerability and ethical engagement, Vuong’s writing enacts this ethos most vividly in key narrative moments and thematic arcs, where emotional openness becomes a form of resistance and survival. The novel’s opening lines immediately establish sincerity through the confessional tone: “Dear Ma, I’m writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are” (Vuong, 2020, p. 3). Here, the narrator’s hesitation and uncertainty break with traditional narrative confidence, embodying the tentativeness and fragility central to new sincerity. The letter becomes a site of intimate address, where vulnerability is not only admitted but performed as an ethical act of care and witness. This moment refuses the protective armour of irony; instead, it foregrounds affective risk, setting the stage for a narrative deeply invested in emotional truth-telling and connection. The letter’s opening situates confession as ethical vulnerability.

In this semi-autobiographical novel, in which he contemplates the importance of the mother tongue, Vuong opens his work with a quote from Qiu Miaojin, a Taiwanese novelist: “But let me see if – using these words as a little plot of land and my life as a cornerstone – I can build you a centre” (as cited in Vuong, 2020). This epigraph expresses the novelist’s quest after a little plot of land, after home, which is built through words, through language. It is an attempt, regardless of whether accomplished or failed, not to find an already located and defined centre, but to create one, to make one from scratch, to fashion one’s own centre by means of language. Vuong also quotes from Joan Didion: “I want to tell you the truth, and already I have told you about the wide rivers” (as cited in Vuong, 2020). This quote by Didion foregrounds Vuong’s novel as a novel of new sincerity because of its emotional honesty, intimacy and directness unlike postmodern irony or detachment. The personal truth that Vuong seeks to unearth springs from the wide rivers of his lived experience that run deep within himself. It also suggests that this story of new sincerity seeks a human or ethical connection from the reader. Hence, the natural enactment of sincerity yields truth and is anchored in being truthful towards self and other. As Mariëtte Willemsen observes, “sincerity, truthfulness toward oneself seems to be a condition of sincerity toward others” (as cited in den Dulk, 2014, p. 201). The ethic of new sincerity is oriented towards others, beyond the self-enclosing confines of a narcissistic, solipsistic self. Therefore, in contexts of intercultural and interpersonal conflicts and tensions, sincerity plays a key role. Besides, “sincerity is considered fundamentally corporeal” and “truth is enacted through the body” (van Alphen & Bal, 2009, p. 1). Once sincerity and truth are interwreathed, the body emits corporeal signs. Correspondingly, the ethic of new sincerity is enacted in Vuong’s story written in the “alphabet written

in the blood, sinew, and neuron”, though the language of the placenta and “blood utterances” (Vuong, 2020, p. 10, p. 137).

In this letter to his mother, whom words seal off from him, the narrator Little Dog does not use his mother tongue. His mother tongue does not offer him a home where he can peacefully play with language, where he may feel settled with a sense of belongingness, unencumbered by the sense of estrangement. Yet, he writes in English. Therefore, even if he is writing to reach his mother, words disengage him from her since she cannot read in English (Vuong, 2019, p. 3). Hence, Vuong’s writing stages “sincerity as the ‘outing’ of the inner self always already under erasure” (van Alphen & Bal, 2009, pp. 5-6). The first line of the novel immediately discloses the complexity of the task as he writes away from and toward his mother at once. In one way, writing is a form of wresting himself away from the mother. He weans himself by means of writing this epistolary novel to his illiterate mother. All the same, like all correspondence, it is heartfelt, sincere, and emotionally intense and direct, but there is no correspondence in the linguistic realm. This linguistic distance between the mother and the son is fundamental to the understanding of language and home. He writes away from the mother and home as he writes in English, yet he writes toward the mother and home as he writes in the language of the placenta; he knows that the placenta is a sort of language, “perhaps our first one, our true mother tongue” (Vuong, 2020, p. 137). The poetic diction of the placenta could be seen as a concrete manifestation of the ethos of new sincerity that advocates for a return to affective resonances, genuine emotion, earnestness, and authenticity in art, literature, music, and discourse, while still acknowledging the complexities and self-awareness of contemporary life.

This linguistic distance in English between the mother and the son offers him freedom as he writes away from his mother. He composes this letter since he wants to “break free” of his mother’s grasp, to escape from her hold. He knows that freedom is only “the distance between the hunter and its prey” (Vuong, 2020, p. 4). This image of the hunter and the prey is associated with another animal image in the opening page of the novel. He says that he writes to return to the moment when his mother was horrified, gazing at “the taxidermy buck” suspended above the machine, its rack casting shadows across her face and afterwards she kept shaking her head, saying she would never understand why they had kept a corpse that got stuck forever (Vuong, 2020, p. 3). It is of crucial importance to understand this strong urge to write, to remember and to go back to this moment by means of writing. The mother-son relationship is charged with this animal imagery and its connotations. The mother is associated with this taxidermy buck as its antlers shadow her face, she stares into its glassy eyes and sees her image, her body, distorted in its vacant eyes;

that is why she is horrified. This grotesque image of death is associated with the mother who cannot stand the sight of the corpse. The decapitated animal shakes the mother as it embodies an unfinished death or “a death that keeps dying” (Vuong, 2020, p. 3). The lifeless mirror in the eyes of the decapitated animal is an indication of this maternal death that keeps dying. The narrator wants to break free from the maternal corpse. He takes shelter in writing. Words become his home in the face of this unhomely image of the corpse that gets stuck forever. Language comforts him as he revisits this moment from the past and narrates the uncanny image associated with the mother. This act of writing, then, becomes not only a means of remembering but also an ethical gesture aligned with the ethos of new sincerity. By confronting the haunting image of the maternal body with unflinching honesty, the narrator transforms trauma into communication, enacting sincerity as an act of vulnerability and relational openness rather than repression or irony.

Little Dog seeks to write away from his mother because he had a brutal relationship with his mother, who is associated with death in the deep recesses of his psyche. His mother hit him as he was growing up. He understands that the war was still inside her and she was traumatized. He believed in the power of words; as a child, he was drawn further into “the current of language” as he read a story about a girl and her grandmother who baked “a cake in the eye of a storm” (Vuong, 2020, p. 5). He figured out that stories and words helped comfort him in the face of wars, disasters and violence. He wanted to share this power of language with his mother; therefore, he tried to teach his mother how to read: his lips brush her ear, his hand rests on her hand while words stir beneath the shadows they cast (Vuong, 2020, p. 5). But his mother was embarrassed when she failed to read properly. Her already tenuous identity was threatened once again as she stuttered and the words twisted in her throat. She gave up on reading and took up colouring books. Her son found an affinity between his writing and her colouring. For him, her experience of colouring resonated with his experience of writing. He is glad to find this similarity between himself and his mother and to feel that they are so close that the shadows of their hands are fusing, on different pages, though (p. 6). Despite the brutality in their relationship, he struggles to find intimacy and beauty. He sought to teach his illiterate mother to read in English because he wanted to save her from being the unvoiced, to resuscitate the dead mother, to rejuvenate the decapitated animal, to reinvigorate the corpse. He regards writing and colouring as an opening, a sortie into another reality, where he uses language to find home, to feel homely. This yearning to connect through language embodies the ethic of new sincerity, which values vulnerability, empathy, and the difficult labour of communication. In his attempt to bridge silence and pain through words, Little Dog enacts sincerity as an ethical practice of care—transforming expression into a

means of relational healing rather than detachment or irony.

Through writing, he replaces the image of the taxidermy buck with the image of two deer that merge into one another; as he was looking out of his window just before dawn, he saw a deer standing in the fog and the fog was so dense and bright that the second deer, not far off, resembled “the unfinished shadow of the first” (Vuong, 2020, p. 8). By means of poetic language and lyrical images, the son and the mother merge into one another in this misty realm of shadows. He also says that he writes this letter as a son as he is writing “from inside a body that used to be” hers (Vuong, 2020, p. 10). The symbiotic mother-son relationship is achieved through writing, through language. The maternal body is envisaged as a pre-linguistic realm where the mother and the infant become one. The maternal body is reimagined in the linguistic realm once more in this letter: the mother and the son find their home in this letter written in English to the illiterate mother who cannot read in English. This is paradoxical; it shows that one can never go back home, the maternal home. However, you can build a symbolic one through words; they might begin where the sentence ends; they could write by using “another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron” (Vuong, 2020, p. 10). A corporeal alphabet runs through the bodies of the mother and the son, reconnecting them. Like the butterflies that migrate to the south, they can roam the earth, live without a settled home, and create a country without borders in the linguistic realm that has no borders; a country is after all “a borderless sentence” (Vuong, 2020, p. 8). The butterflies that fly south never come back, but their children do. The mother never comes back (alive in language), but the son reconnects with the maternal body, the primary home, the uterine home through language, words, narrative composed in the linguistic signs written in the blood, sinew and neuron. The narrator believes that it is possible to be charged with this bodily inheritance and to transfuse this blood into his narrative. The body revisits the symbol, recharging it. This reimagining of the maternal body through language exemplifies the ethic of new sincerity, which transforms pain and loss into avenues of connection and care. By writing his way back into the maternal body, Little Dog enacts sincerity as an embodied form of relational openness—an act of emotional labour that reconciles fragmentation through vulnerability, love, and poetic expression.

Through language and writing, Little Dog searches for ways to forgive his violent mother who beat him until the age of thirteen when he finally said stop. His mother, whose life is weighted with ghosts after the war, says to his son that she is not a monster, but a mother (Vuong, 2020, p. 13). He said to his mother that she was not a monster, yet he confesses that he lied. What he truly meant to convey is that being a monster is

not so dreadful; the Latin origin of *monstrum* referred to a heavenly harbinger of disasters; it was later taken up by the Old French to signify “an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr”, so being a monster involves being “a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once” (Vuong, 2020, p. 13). As a queer Asian American writer who embraces diversity, hybridity and myriad origins, Ocean Vuong welcomes and reclaims the monstrosity of the mother. Little Dog re-appropriates the monstrosity; he does this through language, through delving into the etymological roots and the historical changes of the monster. The unhomey monstrous mother becomes a shelter, a lighthouse, a home in this narrative. The monstrous mother is also a divine messenger, warning her son about disasters yet to come. When he was bullied as a child, the queer son became one with the monstrous mother. He was tormented by the kids in the neighbourhood when he wore his mother’s dress. However, he had worn it, hoping that he might resemble his mother; the following day, the kids called him “freak, fairy, fag” and Little Dog would discover when he grew up that those labels were also variations of monster (Vuong, 2020, p. 14). Through words and their roots and uses, the queer son comes to realize the connection with his monstrous mother; the freak son comes to identify with the grotesque mother. Thinking about language and writing enables the fairy son to be reunited with the monstrous mother who shelters and warns him like a lighthouse. He says to his mother that she is a mother and a monster at once and so is he, and that’s why he cannot turn away from her and why he has “taken god’s loneliest creation and put you inside it” (Vuong, 2020, p. 14). We find out that the mother thinks the human eye is the loneliest creation. The son puts his mother inside his eye, his “I”, inside himself. They become one through this specular image. They become one in this narrative of blood, sinew and neuron. The monster mother and the freak son merge into one another in the linguistic realm of this epistolary novel. The linguistic signs allow them to be reunited in a mythical realm where the fairy, the divine messenger and the strange animals like centaurs come together. This is how the writer builds a home through language even though it seems to be an unhomey home. It is unhomey because Vuong knows that a new, unconventional language could arise within “diasporic communities that have lost access to language” (Ha & Tompkins, 2021, p. 209). The absence of the mother tongue represents a loss, yet it also allows for new possibilities; Neumann (2020) notes that diasporic people who are linguistically dispossessed and are subject to epistemic violence forge a new language, an “orphan tongue” that offers the possibility of new forms of belonging and attachment (p. 286). Thus, a new language is created as a path to new modes of belonging. This reconciliation with the monstrous mother through language reflects the ethic of new sincerity, which embraces contradiction, vulnerability, and the possibility of connection amid pain. By transforming monstrosity

into a site of empathy and recognition, Little Dog's narrative enacts sincerity as an ethical openness to otherness, and an act of love that transcends fear, shame, and alienation.

Little Dog studied English at college, read "obscure texts by dead people" and their sentences saved him; they enabled him to write this piece of auto-fiction, this letter of confession to his mother to tell her everything she will never know (Vuong, 2020, p. 15). As mentioned before, English is not his mother's mother tongue. She says to her son that she does not have the linguistic competence to help him and to say something to stop the bullies at school; she tells her son to use his "bellyful of English" to protect himself (p. 26). His mother speaks broken English; when she cannot find the word in English to name something, she often gestures to them. Even if she learns the word from her son, she forgets it the next day, "the syllables slipping right from your tongue" (p. 29). What is the narrator's mother tongue? He reflects on the loss of his mother tongue, referring to Roland Barthes, who suggested that the only object that is constantly in a relationship with pleasure is the mother tongue for the writer. Little Dog keeps asking what happens if the mother tongue is curtailed, constricted, stunted or ripped away, and what happens if the mother tongue symbolises a void and is itself a void at once. Little Dog wonders if one can find delight in "loss without losing oneself" completely (p. 31). For him, the mother tongue, the Vietnamese he owns, is lost. His mother tongue is an orphan; to express himself in his mother tongue is, for him, "to speak only partially in Vietnamese," yet utterly in war and death (pp. 31-32). For him, the mother tongue symbolizes pain and loss. He does not take pleasure in his mother tongue. He decides to use his English to protect his family; he promises himself that he will never fall short of words when his mother needs him to speak on behalf of her. So, he has turned out to be the official interpreter of the family who fills in their blanks and silences; he slips out of his mother tongue only to wear English "like a mask" so that others would see his face and, by extension, his mother's face (p. 32). This negotiation between languages embodies the ethic of new sincerity, which values authenticity not as purity but as an honest engagement with fracture, loss, and hybridity. By transforming linguistic displacement into a medium of connection and care, Little Dog's act of writing exemplifies sincerity as an ethical practice, one that turns vulnerability and translation into the very grounds of relational truth and expressive integrity.

For Vuong, language becomes both a promise and a performance of sincerity, where communication extends beyond words into the corporeal realm of touch and embodiment. "When we speak of a sincere promise, the sincerity of that promise is judged by what I undertake to fulfil that promise, not by some internal state of being" (den Dulk, 2014, p. 202). Little Dog makes a sincere promise, fulfils his promise by wearing the

English language like a mask, speaking for his family and filling in their blanks and silences. The undertaking of that sincere promise leads to the opening-up of the self and the connection of the self with the other. Little Dog employs words to build a centre. In this linguistic realm, Vietnamese and English leak into one another, generating another language. Vuong (2020) suggests that two languages nullify each other out but call forth a third (p. 33). Nonetheless, besides these symbolic languages, there is the language of touch: when words sometimes vanish into thin air, the tongue stutters, that third language is summoned to animate "where the tongue falters" (Vuong, 2020, p. 33). They are connected to each other by touch when the linguistic signs fail to emerge. This is also an indication of the alphabet written in blood, tears, sinew, sweat, semen, neuron, skin, tissue, and cartilage. Thanks to this corporeal language, he clings to a mother no bigger than a raft (Vuong, 2020, p. 34).

Throughout the narrative, the tension between silence and speech underscores the challenges of sincerity. For example, Little Dog acknowledges that some things cannot be said, yet they can only be felt. This acknowledgment of language's limits deepens sincerity, refusing simplistic transparency in favour of a nuanced understanding of communication's difficulties, especially in cross-generational and cross-cultural contexts. Vuong's poetic form, with its pauses, breaks, and fragmented sentences, mirrors this tension, enacting sincerity as a practice of listening as much as speaking, emphasizing emotional attunement rather than clear-cut articulation. A critical distinction in Vuong's new sincerity is the avoidance of sentimentality's reductionism. His prose refuses easy resolution or saccharine consolations. Instead, sincerity is fraught, sometimes contradictory, encompassing both shame and pride, love and violence, silence and speech. This ethical complexity demonstrates vulnerability as relational and unstable, not a fixed or pure condition. Vuong's novel performs a radical vulnerability that is legible through the heightened exposure to harm experienced by marginalized subjects. His queer immigrant identity situates him in a fraught space of social and bodily vulnerability, yet this exposure is not passive. Vulnerability can produce ethical relationality; the novel's epistolary intimacy invites readers into an affective encounter that demands solidarity. Vulnerability as a shared condition enriches our understanding of Vuong's radical openness. Little Dog's precarious embodiment models an ethical relationality that refuses cynicism and fosters coalition through emotional witnessing.

Little Dog's language is based primarily on the sense of touch; hence, tactile sensations are fundamental to this bodily language that signifies in the flesh. This language of the touch may be regarded as "a language for falling out of language" (Vuong, 2020, p.37). This corporeal language fuses the gap between English and Vietnamese. They find refuge in this homely language.

This embodied language comforts him because some days he feels like “a sound” and he touches the world not as himself but as “an echo” of himself (p. 62). They sometimes feel disembodied in English and feel “erased” or unheard and unvoiced. His mother’s English garbles, and her tongue outs her. When his mother feels embarrassed because of this, he steps in and uses his English; he trembles with sheer delight as the words are effortlessly flowing out of him (p. 52). This tactile mode of communication embodies the ethic of new sincerity, which privileges embodied presence and affective immediacy over irony and detachment. By grounding meaning in the sensory and the corporeal, Little Dog’s language enacts sincerity as a felt, lived relation, as an ethics of connection that arises not from abstraction but from the intimacy of shared being.

The intricate entanglement of language, the body, and mourning in Little Dog’s narrative reflects the ethic of new sincerity, which restores emotion and embodiment to the centre of meaning-making and transforms writing into an ethical act of care and vulnerable connection. Little Dog says that he has reread Roland Barthes’s *Mourning Diary*, which Barthes wrote after his mother’s death. Vuong and his novel converse with Roland Barthes, who appears as a motif throughout the novel. Does the narrator mourn his mother who is still alive? Does he mourn a pre-linguistic archaic lost mother that he seeks to find in the (un)homely language of the placenta? He also alludes to *The Pleasure of the Text* as he contemplates the act of writing: “A writer is someone who plays with the body of his mother, he says after the death of his own mother, in order to glorify it, to embellish it” (Vuong, 2020, p. 85). He remembers the times when his mother asked him to scrape her back; he says that he released “the bad winds” from his mother’s body and realizes that she healed through “this careful bruising” (pp. 84-85). The maternal body is fundamental to his writing, his playing with language. As he is writing this letter, he realises that the material reality of her body resists his attempts to move it; as he writes down these words, he places his hands on his mother’s back, noting how the areas they press against stand out against the unyielding canvas of her skin; he traces the folds of her body while he eases the stiffness of her back, untangling every strain, feeling the bones along her spine, like “a row of ellipses” that no silence can render in words; the difference between their skin still astonishes him, much like an empty page under his hand, pen poised, attempting to act upon its surface without spoiling its life; yet he mars it by writing: “I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once” (Vuong, 2020, p. 85). By means of writing, Little Dog glorifies his mother’s body; her skin becomes a black page, and his fingers become his pen. The physical fact of his mother’s body is incorporated into his language; this makes his language embodied and thus the language of the touch emerges. He rebuilds the primal home through words where the son merges into the maternal body. Through this language of the touch,

they fall out of symbolic language; they retreat into the pre-linguistic realm where tactile sensations are prevalent. They venture beyond the symbolic domain of linguistic signs and voyage into the pre-symbolic realm where the distinction between the infant and the maternal body is erased. The narrator embarks on a linguistic journey to reach the primordial home of every human being before they enter the symbolic language. This intimate interplay between language, body, and mourning exemplifies the ethic of new sincerity, which reclaims affect and embodiment as central to the act of meaning-making. By writing through the body of his mother, Little Dog transforms grief and language into ethical gestures of care and acts of sincere connection that resist irony and abstraction, grounding expression in vulnerability, touch, and relational truth.

This embodied language expressed through the letters of blood, skin, sinew, tissue and cells is also practiced as he worked on a tobacco farm. He talked to the other workers in this corporeal language. As he speaks to those men, he does use his tongue; he communicates with them through “smiles, hand gestures, even silences” and understands human beings, nouns, adjectives, verbs, abstract notions by using his hands and fingers and sketching on the ground (Vuong, 2020, p. 91). He even indicated his mother’s name, Rose, by cupping his hands “into a blossom” (p. 91). His mother emerges at this moment of the narrative as he describes this corporeal language since this language of the touch springs from his embodied understanding of his relationship with his mother. His bellyful of English was useless on the farm since almost no one spoke English. He managed to get in touch with these unvoiced people in this pre-linguistic language that originates from his relationship with the maternal body in the primeval home. That is why this work “somehow sutured a fracture inside me” (p. 90). He felt unified, complete for a brief while; this sense of feeling whole is reminiscent of the mother-infant symbiotic relationship in the pre-linguistic realm. This return to a pre-linguistic, bodily mode of communication embodies the ethic of new sincerity, which values authentic, affective connection over alienation and irony. By engaging with others through gestures, touch, and shared silence, Little Dog enacts sincerity as an ethical openness, thereby reaffirming the possibility of genuine human relation grounded in empathy, vulnerability, and embodied understanding.

Besides building a centre through language, a fulcrum made up of words, where a sense of completeness prevails, Little Dog also remembers the times when he felt incomplete, fractured and fragile as he was hit by a brutal mother who was violent in her relationship with her son. Home was also a place where he felt insecure. For instance, he recalls the time when his mother shut him away in the basement for wetting his pants: he inhales the musty smell of moist soil, corroded pipes tangled in cobwebs and his own urine and shuts

his eyes to conjure a darkness deeper than the one surrounding him (Vuong, 2020, p. 98). Home is where he is debased too. He is disgraced; he feels contaminated by his own bodily fluids as he is unable to make a distinction between what is clean and what is unclean. He stands with one foot atop the other, trying to touch as little of the damp floor as possible. This image shows him not only as weak and vulnerable, but also as resilient. He helps himself stop this feeling of humiliation; he closes his eyes to flee from the basement where he feels insulted. Now he writes about this experience from his childhood in the third person singular; he tries to distance himself from this boy; he seeks to heal by means of language and narrative. He writes away from his childhood as he writes about it.

Little Dog's relationship with his mother is reflected in his relationship with Trevor. The narrative about his relationship with Trevor is undercut by the narrative about his relationship with his mother in the second section of the novel where he meets Trevor as an adolescent. In this section of the novel, he is distanced from his childhood as he writes about Trevor. The novel shifts back and forth in time, between his adolescence with Trevor and his childhood with "A storm of mother" (Vuong, 2020, p. 101). His stories with Trevor are dovetailed with his stories with his mother; they shed light on each other. The yearning for a home where the language of the touch is in use is repeated in his relationship with Trevor. Besides this, the violence in his relationship with his mother, the dark underside of his first home, is also manifested in his encounter with Trevor. Since he identifies himself with his own mother in his relationship with Trevor, the same patterns in his relationship with his mother are repeated. When Trevor introduces himself, Little Dog apologizes for no reason; he realises that his apology has become an extension of himself because he is like his mother (Vuong, 2020, p. 94). He realizes that he has assumed his mother's position, for she always apologises to her customers in the hair salon.

In his quest for a homely place built through words where he employs the language of the touch, Little Dog employs an embodied language. He studies Trevor as if he were a new word he had just come across. The physical fact of his body is manifested in this corporeal language written in blood, sinew and neuron; he examines his body as if it was a new word. His eyes swallow Trevor's body without discerning him clearly as if he were "eating with the lights off"; devouring his body is nourishing even if he could not tell where his body ends and Trevor's body begins (Vuong, 2020, p. 103). Eating, swallowing and nourishing are central to this description. Trevor's body transforms into words; his blood in his reddish lips is transfused into language. The linguistic signifiers are heavily charged with bodily affects. Descriptions are so densely fraught with affect, desire and sensations that they evoke sexual intercourse; he

devours him through language, enters him through words, penetrates him through a language that falls out of language. His words swell as his body is swollen with desire: his eyes dilate, he absorbs him, taking him deeper (p. 103). His corporeal language opens, expands, dilates on his body as his eyes dilate, become larger to devour his image. This specular penetration is a manifestation of this embodied language. Their shoulders almost touch and "the thin film of heat" that gathers between their bodies becomes palpable (p. 104). Even the moon becomes tangible (even edible) as it seems like "a gnawed bone above the field" (p. 104). The language of the touch pervades everything around them. As the game rages on, the space between their skins diminishes, their upper arms becoming damp from contact so light that neither of them notices; "the sharper edges of his body" pierce through the shadows, a body half-submerged in, or emerging from, from the surface of a river (p. 104). They fall out of a symbolic language; their bodies take over, so the language of the touch emerges; he says his name so quietly that the syllables never make it past his lips (p. 104). The syllables are choked; the symbolic language is extinguished. When he is with Trevor, he feels colours: "Not words – but shades, penumbras" (p. 106). When bodies end in the dark and flesh is pressed against the dark, words become null; colours, shades, penumbras emerge in this language of the touch. Distinctions evaporate and bodies merge into another; one feels home, unified and complete. While sitting, their silhouettes spread on the red exterior, shifting and blooming "like purple graffiti" as his body longs for his body (p. 106). This erotic and affective merging of bodies through the language of touch exemplifies the ethic of new sincerity, which foregrounds intimacy, vulnerability, and the yearning for genuine connection beyond irony or detachment. In his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog transforms desire into an ethical encounter, one that reimagines sincerity as a corporeal, affective mode of communication where love, pain, and longing converge to create moments of authentic relational truth.

Language and the body generate one another in Ocean Vuong's universe. Vuong treats language not as a transparent medium or a detached representational tool, but as something that is inseparable from embodied experience. The body is both the source and the site of meaning: trauma, desire, memory, and queerness are experienced corporeally, and it is through poetic, fragmented, and highly tactile language that these experiences are communicated. This interdependence mirrors new sincerity's insistence on emotional honesty and direct engagement. Just as new sincerity resists irony and detachment, Vuong's prose refuses to mediate the body's sensations through cool, distanced narration. Instead, the act of writing becomes an ethical encounter: the speaker's body, the objects around them, and the scars of history are rendered intimately and vulnerably, producing a kind of sincerity that is ethical as well as aesthetic. For example, the description of physical

trauma or queer desire in Vuong's novel is inseparable from the linguistic form itself: syntax, rhythm, and fragmentation enact the body's experience on the page. Moreover, this language-body reciprocity resonates with new sincerity's broader moral aims. By presenting the self as embodied, vulnerable, and relational, Vuong cultivates a readerly intimacy that echoes the movement's focus on authentic, ethical connection. The novel's epigraphs, including the quotes from Qiu Miaojin and Joan Didion, further reinforce this ethos: they foreground truth-telling as a bodily, lived act rather than a mere intellectual claim. In Vuong's universe, then, the poetic and narrative form itself becomes a manifestation of the body's ethical and emotional reality, embodying the new sincerity principle that the writer's and reader's emotional engagement is both unavoidable and generative. Vuong demonstrates that language and body co-constitute one another: language is a site of embodiment, and embodiment generates the language necessary to articulate experience, as seen in the image of the placenta, in which "nutrients, hormones, and waste are passed between mother and foetus" (Vuong, 2020, p. 137). He thinks that the placenta is a language, "perhaps our first one, our true mother tongue," as the mother and the foetus speak in "blood utterances" (p. 137). The infant and the maternal body are connected through this language of the placenta. The utterances of blood make up the corporeal language written in blood, sinew, tissue, and neuron. This mother tongue is the primordial home for the foetus. This uterine tongue permeates Little Dog's narrative: "the comma resembles a foetus – that curve of continuation. We were all once inside our mothers (...) with our entire curved and silent selves" (p. 139). This uterine language brings the comma and the foetus together; the linguistic signifiers intermingle with the pre-linguistic affects. He sees the scar on Trevor's neck "like a comma"; Trevor takes the one-winged sparrow for something that smoulders "like a word" (pp. 154-55). His narrative is imbued with this maternal tongue. He sees Trevor and himself like babies parting from their mothers' wombs and he likens themselves to calves trapped in "boxes the size of themselves"; it is "like a coffin, but alive, like a home" (p. 156-59). Each is like a calf in a "box tighter than a womb" (p. 159). Little Dog leaves his mother's womb through his relationship with Trevor yet comes to this uterine realm of oneness through language and narrative. This uterine language informs his metaphors and images, which contributes to the embodied-ness of his language.

This uterine language is based on the intermingling of shadows: the shadows of Little Dog and his mother, Little Dog and Trevor, Little Dog and Gramoz, a fellow student from the first grade when they were six. Gramoz offered him a piece of his pizza bagels, but he was too timid to reach out, lacked the courage to touch, so Gramoz took his hand, turned it over and set his own warm hand in Little Dog's palm (Vuong, 2020, p. 132). Later, during recess, he trailed Gramoz everywhere he

went because he wanted to return the favour to the boy who offered him his first pizza bagel by becoming his shadow (p. 132). The maternal tongue which is predicated upon the merging of shadows is a pre-linguistic language which he learned in his primordial home. It was pre-linguistic because he could not speak English at the time. This language of shadows was beyond what was signifiable in the linguistic realm. This language of the placenta was more like a punctuation mark that does not punctuate or interrupt rather than a linguistic signifier. He thought about why he was pursuing him like a shadow; perhaps he was not seeking "a destination" but only "a continuation" (p. 132). This language of the placenta rests upon the oneness of the maternal body and the foetus; therefore, it thrives on continuation, not separation.

In this trans-linguistic realm, there is not a distinction between self and other, or subject and object. Bodies melt into one another. This could be intimidating and threatening for another person embedded in the linguistic realm of differentiation; therefore, Gramoz shouted at Little Dog, telling him to stop following him, and called him "freak!" (Vuong, 2020, p. 132). Gramoz did not want to be his continuation; the freaky son of the monstrous mother was denied or expelled from this realm of undifferentiated shadows. With his mirror image vanishing, the freak son saw himself as a "shadow cut from its source" (p. 132). The comma, that curve of continuation, was replaced by a period. The narrator investigates this encounter with Gramoz years later; he thinks he might have followed him like a shadow since he was "a mirror of myself" (p. 138). Then he tries to understand why he needs a mirror image: perhaps we gaze into mirrors not just to find beauty, however fleeting, but to reassure ourselves that we still exist, that the body we inhabit has not yet been obliterated; we look into mirrors to see ourselves as ourselves; this is a sanctuary that men who have not been denied would not understand (p. 138). Little Dog realizes that this uterine realm where shadows intermingle is illusive, but a refuge which he needs to feel that he has not been obliterated, to feel that the queer boy, the freak has not been scraped out (of the womb). He needs to reproduce his image, to replicate himself by looking into the mirror; he comes to see what he wanted from Gramoz was "replication"; Gramoz made him feel "seen" and his act of kindness made him feel "worthy of generosity" (pp. 138-39). This pre-linguistic realm of shadows, mirror images, replication and continuation is a maternal realm of wholeness, fullness and plenitude even though it is illusive. The freak son of the monstrous mother regarded himself as worthy through this replication or extension of self. He yearned to return to this state of completeness which is expressed through the embodied language of the placenta. Through clinging to his shadow, he sought to extend himself into the future in which he feared he may be annihilated. Therefore, he feels that a body is yearning for another body (p. 106). Bodies desire to cling to one

another. Little Dog attempts to describe his desire for Trevor yet realises that what he experienced then was not desire itself “but the coiled charge of its possibility,” a sensation which “emitted its own gravity, holding me in place”; he remembers how Trevor looked at him as they were working in the fields, which made him feel seen and anchored; it was an astonishing sensation for him as his mother had taught him to remain invisible to stay safe (p. 96). The yearning to be noticed is central to his relationship with Trevor. He wanted Trevor’s gaze to anchor him in a world where he “felt only halfway inside of” (p. 96). This account of melting bodies, mirror-seeking, and the desperate need for replication exemplifies new sincerity’s insistence that truth and ethics are located not in ironic distance but in embodied, vulnerable striving for recognition. Little Dog’s yearning to be seen functions as an ethical appeal, as a non-ironic demand for relational recognition that forges kinship and sustains queer survival.

Through his relationship with Trevor, Little Dog builds a queer home through the language of the placenta. In this trans-symbolic language of intermingling shadows, things merge into one another, bodies extend into one another, self mingles with other. In this pre-linguistic realm, there is no differentiation between subject and object; everything is malleable. Ocean Vuong describes the scenes of sexual intimacy between Little Dog and Trevor by means of employing this language of the intermingling shadows; the body accommodates “pain by dulling it into an impossible, radiating pleasure” (Vuong, 2020, p. 202). Pain changes into pleasure; the distinction between binary oppositions is blurred. The language of the touch is fundamental to the description of the sexual encounter between Little Dog and Trevor. Sexual intercourse is used as a metaphor; bodies interpenetrate one another; the difference between “I” and “you” is eradicated. The narrator quotes Simone Weil, the French philosopher: “*Perfect joy excludes even the very feeling of joy, for in the soul filled by the object, no corner is left for saying ‘I’*” (p. 202). As the difference between subject and object is obliterated, there is no space for an individual “I”. The language of the touch provides space for the extension of the selves and the intermingling of the bodies. While they were making love, Little Dog instinctively reached back and touched himself to reassure himself he was still there, but his hand landed on Trevor “as if by being inside me, he was this new extension of myself” (p. 202). It felt life as if two bodies were returning to one life and merging until no corner was left untouched to refer to a distinct “I”. The narrator describes this scene of sexual intimacy by using the language of the placenta. Like the maternal body and the fetus being malleable, these two queer bodies merge into one another; bodies extend into one another; they return to one life; they retreat into the womb where there is no differentiation between self and other. A queer home is built through the uterine language of the placenta. The language of the placenta haunts

Little Dog; he writes about his love and desire for Trevor as he reminiscences those scenes of sexual intimacy and erotic attachment. By means of remembering, he is intermingled with Trevor; the hauntings of sincerity annihilate a solipsistic self that closes in upon himself. Likewise, Wallace regards the haunting of sincerity as a challenge to solipsism; solipsism or self-embowered consciousness “does not have enough ground to eradicate the hauntings of sincerity” (Horn, 2014, p. 255). Yet, the outer-directed ideal of sincerity is grounded in the bodies of the lovers. Reflecting on the other-directed ideal of sincerity in Wallace, Zadie Smith, as another novelist of new sincerity, explains Wallace’s particular creed by utilising “a Wallacian word—*extrorse*” which implies that “awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self” (Smith, 2009, p. 266). Hence, Little Dog is an *extrorse* lover as he faces outwards or turns outwards; he opens outwards as he gravitates toward Trevor. In the same way, this novel lodged in the ethic of new writing demands a new way of looking, asking “readers to pay attention to what they might otherwise turn away from”, urging readers to be *extrorse*, as well (Song, 2019).

Things become malleable during sexual intercourse. They get dirty because of bodily fluids. Little Dog says that “the dark inside me” touched Trevor’s body and adds that “I was inside out” (Vuong, 2020, p. 203). In this uterine realm where bodies merge into each other, the distinction between inside and outside is obliterated. Likewise, the difference between what is clean, pure and proper and what is unclean, impure and improper is wiped out. At first, Little Dog panicked, fear for what might happen then, for what Trevor, “raised in the fabric and muscle of American masculinity,” might say; he blamed himself; he felt that he had defiled him with his “faggotry,” and the filthiness of the sexual act had been revealed by “my body’s failure to contain itself” (p. 203). The narrator speaks with genuine sincerity; he gestures toward the core of genuineness as he speaks of his fears and insecurities without cynicism; his language is embodied as speaking truthfully and sincerely about one’s fears involves ushering in the body; his diction is raw and visceral. Little Dog was embarrassed that his body betrayed its incapacity to remain contained; he thought it was his fault to have contaminated Trevor. He was ashamed because he believed he had sullied his lover. He associated the filthiness of the sexual act with his being queer. Confronting the elements of the body often marked by shame and reclaiming the body is central to Vuong’s auto-fictional form of new sincerity writing. The ethos of new sincerity takes shape as an effort to culturally restore the body and its frequently stigmatized aspects. Sloane (2019) argues that Wallace makes “the figurants of daily corporeal life” as he does not omit “the stars of his own carnivalesque literary emissions” and, as a result, his work shows “a kind of brutal honesty” (p. 5). New sincerity initiated by Wallace entails “rehabilitating the body and its many often shameful and therefore

unrepresented tendencies” and it urges one to lay bare “the occluded so that ‘we become less alone inside’” (p. 5). Hence, Little Dog becomes less alone inside by revaluing the body and addressing its aspects that have been traditionally viewed with shame. To speak with sincerity has an exceptional resilience.

When bodies intermingle, bodily fluids merge, too. Their relationship “straddles boundaries by mobilising the abject” and their abject-centred “intimacy engages the abject in form of bodily fluids crossing bodily boundaries” (Slopek, 2021, pp. 748-49). Their abject-centred sexuality corrodes boundaries, and the boundaries become porous and malleable. Their being contaminated is an indication of this merging; the verb “contaminate” is derived from the Latin verb *tangere* which means to touch, so they touch one another, thus they contaminate one another (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In this pre-linguistic realm, bodies come together, touch each other and become malleable. Kelly states that new sincerity “articulates a desire for contamination” (Kelly, 2017, p. 25). Sincerity endeavours to cultivate ethical earnestness in surprising ways; contamination is one of these ways. Kelly also suggests that sincerity may lead to a state of “aporia” or a state of unknowability, uncertainty (Kelly, 2010, p. 140). Contamination leads to the unknowability of what lies beyond the boundaries between bodies that intermingle; it leads to a sense of uncertainty as to where self ends and other begins. Some critics have referred to Wallace’s fiction as “preoccupied with the in-between and unknowable” and pointed out that this preoccupation with the in-between and unknowable may be associated with “Wallace’s spirituality” in a post-secular age (Lackey, 2020, p. 152). One may think about the mystical language of the placenta and the queer baptism that follows the sexual intercourse Little Dog and Trevor in such a way that seems to be attuned to the streak of ritualistic spirituality in new sincerity writing. Likewise, Amy Hungerford (2010) links sincerity with post-secular forms of spirituality, stating that “sincerity overshadows irony as a literary mode when the ambiguities of language are imagined as being religiously empowered” (p. xix). Little Dog’s poetic diction is endowed with lyrical ambiguities that springs from the collapse of boundaries, which chokes ironic utterances and might sound like the poetic diction of a spiritual ritual, yet one should bear in mind that the narrator queers the ritual of baptism which follows contamination. Little Dog and Trevor go out into the night: in the starless night Little Dog glimpses only Trevor’s pale back tinted “in the grey-blue of the un-light”; he describes the ritual of baptism using a very dense lyrical language, leaning into texture, rhythm, and atmosphere; then, the river announces itself and he hears the sound of water reaches him; the mild yet insistent current of the river foams as it curls about his thighs; Little Dog’s poetic language maintains the sensual, almost mythical register as he keeps describing the scene; the crickets swell, thick with sound, lush and

fevered, while, across the river, the trees whisper, rustle, and the branches stir in the heaped invisible shadows; Trevor dips under, vanishes beneath and then breaks the surface again; water runs down his jaw, droplets tinkle around him (Vuong, 2020, p. 204). Little Dog’s voluptuous lyrical diction stems from a semiotics of new sincerity. His richly poetic prose heightens the physical into something mythical, even mystical. His imagery is steeped in liminality as he describes the scene between day and night, visibility and obscurity, reality and dream; this suspension creates a threshold atmosphere where perception itself feels unstable. The synaesthetic textures of his poetic diction move across senses fluidly, with water turning into sound, making the visual glimmer audible, as though the nocturnal air is alive with subtle resonances. As the landscape is personified, the natural world is given agency; the current curls, the crickets grow louder, the trees rustle unseen; this animism imbues the environment with its own voice, not just as backdrop, but participant. The rhythmic cadences of short, punctuated sentences alternate with longer, flowing ones; this modulation mirrors the river’s own movement, which is gentle, then frothing, then subsiding. The focus on Trevor’s body is filtered through elemental images of water, shadow and sound, as if desire is transfigured into natural metaphors; eros is inseparable from the atmosphere of the scene. Little Dog’s style blends lyrical density with sensory immediacy, turning this fleeting moment of watching someone in the river into a ritualised, sacred vision. The queer lovers are consecrated. Little Dog’s other-directed language entangled in the natural world demonstrates how far away he is from being self-occupied, in-bent, onanistic and solipsistic. The self extends into the other in this scene, which ultimately exemplifies the ethic of new sincerity, as Little Dog’s lyrical, corporeal language transforms eroticism and contamination into an ethical expression of openness, interconnection, and transcendence. Through this queer baptismal moment, Vuong redefines sincerity as a post-ironic spirituality, as an embodied poetics of vulnerability and communion that dissolves the boundaries between self and other, word and flesh, the human and the divine.

In the uterine night they cleanse themselves; there are no external eyes watching over them as it is a starless night. They wash themselves in the intimate unlight of the confidential night. They are immersed in the fluids of the natural world; the river’s current froths white as if it ejaculated. It is the uterine realm of massed shadows; the air is cool, the crickets are lush, the trees rustle unseen, water droplets are tinkling, the river’s current is gentle. Like the heaped shadows, these two queer bodies huddle together, nestled closely in this queer space and temporality. They become one through contamination; they are a mass of bodies, bones, neurons, sinew, blood, filth, eyes, hands, bodily fluids; each is no longer a distinct shape. “Clean yourself,” Trevor says, “his tone oddly tender, almost frail” (Vuong,

2020, p. 204). They wash themselves in the watery womb of mother earth. They are tender and frail like newborn infants. Trevor puts his hand on Little Dog's neck, and they remain still and quiet with their "heads bent over the river's black mirror" (p. 205). Trevor tilts Little Dog's head up and he meets Trevor's gaze. They gaze at each other in the river's black mirror, and they are entangled through this specular image in this realm of bodily extensions, replications, continuations, commas, and mirror images. They continue to make love: Trevor "had knelt in the shadows, knees sunk in river mud. I shook – his tongue so impossibly warm compared to the cold water, the sudden, wordless act, willed as a balm to my failure in the barn" (p. 205). Still immersed in the fluids of mother earth, they make love; it is an ineffable, entirely embodied act since they are in the trans-linguistic realm of intermingling shadows and merging bodies. They continue to contaminate each other, to touch each other. Little Dog thinks it is "a kind of mercy" to be thus purified, to be "clean again" and to be "good again"; he reflects on the sexual act and that it has taken on an explosive intensity; he feels as if he were devoured by desire itself, not consumed by Trevor as an individual, as if he were reclaimed, overtaken by desire, "that want", and reabsorbed into longing, immersed and consecrated by its urgent necessity, as if they were "baptized by its pure need" (p. 206). The elemental, sacramental language has a concussive power as if the experience detonated within the body; he encounters desire in its overwhelming form. The imagery of devouring evokes loss of boundaries and the annihilation of the self; they are immersed in the watery, muddy realm of desire; they venture into this realm of unidentified bodies, indefinite boundaries. They are baptized by desire itself, by contamination and penetration. Little Dog feels as if he were swallowed, as if the individual "I" was obliterated in this almost mystical language of the placenta. They are regenerated and reborn. This sexual experience is reframed affirmatively through the religious lexicon of baptism and reclamation. To be baptised and reclaimed by desire figures eros as both destructive, annihilating and sacred, rejuvenating. The repeated infinitives such as "to be reclaimed" and "to be baptised" underscore a ritualistic rhythm, as if the speaker submits willingly to a rite of transformation. This baptismal scene epitomizes the ethic of new sincerity, as Vuong transforms queer eroticism into an act of radical vulnerability and ethical openness, into an embodied poetics that rejects irony and self-protection in favour of sincerity as a shared, corporeal truth, where language, desire, and the body converge in a gesture of mutual reclamation and tender exposure.

Little Dog's exploration of queer desire is a locus of new sincerity. As theorized in new sincerity discourse, this ethic of vulnerability and unguarded emotional expression replaces postmodern irony with an earnest engagement with desire and intersubjectivity. Little Dog's straightforward, honest, concussive and unflinching descriptions of love and sexuality reflect a desire

for intimacy unmediated by shame or irony. The narrator points out that he wants to show his lover how he could hold someone without breaking them. This vulnerability is a political stance that refuses heteronormative shame and demands recognition of queer love's legitimacy and fragility. Rather than depicting desire cynically or as performative, Vuong's narrative embraces its tenderness and risks, creating a sincerity that both affirms queerness and insists on its vulnerability in a hostile world. The narrator speaks of desire in its sacred and filthy forms; the scenes of sexual intimacy, desire and new birth, are undercut by the images of death, intermingling annihilation and regeneration. Little Dog describes the moths drawn to the plants for sustenance yet realises that the lingering pesticide from the fields kills them the moment their mouths touch the leaves; they fall around the lovers, their wings trembling "in the midst of death throes" (Vuong, 2020, p.203). The moths that dip in and out between Little Dog and Trevor and that keep dying represent their desire for one another; like moths to the flame, they touch each other with an irresistible attraction for one another, devour each other as if desire is an ontological force. Little Dog and Trevor are also nocturnal moths dying into a new life. The death of the moths symbolises the death of the individual "I" that is obliterated in the realm of intermingling shadows and articulating bodies. To die is also to have an orgasm; the sensation of orgasm is likened to death, as in the French expression *la petite mort*, meaning "the little death", referring to the post-coital moment of loss or weakening of consciousness. The death of the moth stands for the death of the subject. Little Dog and Trevor die into a new life as they are baptized through a ritual of initiation.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* through the lens of the poetics of new sincerity, situating the novel within a literary movement that seeks to recover vulnerability, empathy, and affective authenticity in the aftermath of postmodern irony. By adopting this framework, the analysis highlights how Vuong's prose embodies an ethics of openness and relationality that resonates deeply with the central concerns of new sincerity. Vuong's narrative redefines the possibilities of language, embodiment, and affect in the aftermath of violence and displacement. Through his lyrical excavation of memory and desire, Vuong crafts a poetics of vulnerability that transforms trauma into tenderness, rupture into relation. His novel is a sustained performance of what the ethic of new sincerity envisions: an earnest, post-ironic openness to emotional truth and relational being. Against the irony characteristic of postmodernism, Vuong's writing dares to feel, to inhabit sincerity not as naïveté, but as a radical ethical stance grounded in corporeality, empathy, and the refusal to turn away from pain. Throughout the novel, Vuong's language functions as an embodied medium, where words bleed, touch, and breathe. The tactile and

placental language Little Dog inherits from his mother becomes the site of both wounding and healing, collapsing the boundary between body and text. His use of touch, gesture, and silence forms a language for falling out of language, a corporeal idiom that speaks through sensation rather than abstraction. This redefinition of communication aligns with the new sincerity's reclamation of affect and embodiment as ethical gestures of care. In Vuong's hands, writing becomes a practice of sincerity, where the self is not shielded by irony, but exposed to the risk of intimacy.

The novel's recurrent merging of bodies through desire, grief, and contamination illustrates the relational ethic that underpins Vuong's post-ironic vision. The scenes of queer love and bodily intermingling blur distinctions between self and other, life and death, illustrating a poetics of malleability that privileges connection over separation. In these encounters, sincerity manifests as a willingness to be touched, altered, even undone by another. This openness to transformation, to being "contaminated" by love or loss, marks the moral and aesthetic heart of Vuong's project. His language refuses to sanitize vulnerability; instead, it turns exposure itself into an ethical and creative force. Vuong's attention to death, mourning, and regeneration extends this sincerity into the spiritual. His reimagining of sex and death as intertwined forms of dissolution and renewal recalls the post-secular dimension of new sincerity, characterised by a faith in relationality and transcendence outside traditional religious systems. In Little Dog's narrative, this faith is embodied rather than doctrinal: the river becomes baptismal, the wound becomes a site of reunion, and writing itself becomes a form of prayer. The queer body, defined as abject, porous, ever-changing, becomes the text through which a new, sincere spirituality is written. Ultimately, Vuong's poetics of touch, contamination, and rebirth articulate a queer ethics of sincerity, which resists irony's detachment and embraces the messiness of feeling, the porousness of bodies, and the precariousness of care. His prose performs relational authenticity, which corresponds to a mode of being that acknowledges fragmentation yet insists on connection. In doing so, Vuong's novel does not merely depict vulnerability; it enacts it. Through the language of the placenta, the tactile rhythms of mourning, and the queer merging of bodies and words, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* transforms sincerity into a radical aesthetic of survival, where to write, to touch, and to feel are all acts of regeneration, tenderness, and ethical becoming.

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