

Experimenting with life: New sincerity in contemporary Slovak poetry

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New sincerity. Post-postmodernism. Post-totalitarian literature.
Contemporary Slovak poetry. Experimental poetry. Irony.

This article examines how sincerity operates in contemporary Slovak poetry within the experimental tradition, where irony, authenticity, and experimentation intersect rather than exclude one another. Against the backdrop of post-totalitarian history and global cultural transitions, Slovak poets have renegotiated sincerity beyond reductive binaries of irony versus authenticity. Drawing on “new sincerity” theory (Adam Kelly, Ellen Rutten, Mikhail Epstein) and focusing on Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik”, it argues that sincerity in 21st-century Slovak poetry is a mediated and context-shaped articulation – necessarily “contaminated”. The Slovak case thus contributes to and nuances broader debates on post-postmodernism by showing that sincerity re-emerges from within experimental practice.

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The notion of “post-irony” (Hoffmann 2016; Konstantinou 2016) and arguments suggesting that the rise of author-centered novels signals a movement “beyond the impasse of postmodernism” (Heinemann 2020, 13) are grounded in a view of irony as a defining feature of postmodern culture.¹ However, as Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal (2009, 2) point out, such understandings of postmodern irony are often oversimplified. Common critiques of irony tend to elevate notions of authenticity and sincerity, dismissing irony as politically disengaged or lacking in rhetorical depth. These critiques frequently rest on a reductive binary that opposes sincerity to irony, failing to account for the complexity and nuance of both. In the context of post-totalitarian East and Central European literatures – including Slovak literature – such binaries become even more problematic.

One of the proposed paradigms for understanding the post-postmodern condition – extending beyond literature – is “new sincerity”. David Foster Wallace (1993, 1996) is often seen as a formative figure in the emergence of what has been described as the ethos of “new sincerity”, while one of the most recent contributions to its theorization is Adam Kelly’s monograph *New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age* (2024). Kelly situates the period of new sincerity between the dominance of postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s and the so-called genre turn of the mid-2000s. Among the factors that, in his view, signaled a radical social change were “the coming of social media, the crystallization of identity categories as the vehicle for both political organization and market segmentation, the waning of American unipolar hegemony, and the shift in the publishing world to the ‘Age of Amazon’” (6).

Literary new sincerity combines elements of postmodern metafiction and genre aesthetics, but unlike those movements, it is not defined solely by form but rather by sensibility or ethos (6). New sincerity fiction is characterized by formal and narrative strategies such as second-person address, sudden shifts in perspective, and “intentional bad form” (Hoberek 2013, 217), which Kelly reads through Hegel as an expression of a striving for dialogicality – a fundamental feature of new sincerity writing (2024, 9). The sincerity of the writers on whom Kelly bases his theory, in his view, centers on cross-contamination – the intertwining of love and money, which “becomes the inescapable condition of writing in a neoliberal age” (34). Literary new sincerity is therefore sincere in a paradoxical way: cross-contamination is not only “the basic threat to a pure sincerity, in life and art” (34), but also its essential tool. Following Jacques Derrida ([1991] 1992, 1–33), Kelly treats contamination as “a necessary condition for existence” (2024, 34). An important metaphor for Kelly in the context of writing in the neoliberal age is the notion of the gift as conceptualized by Lewis Hyde (1983), who “protects a space for art as gift”, but “does not ignore the necessary claims of the market where the artist sells their ‘work’” (Kelly 2024, 32). Kelly argues that this contamination of the author’s sincere intentions to create art by capitalist conditions does not preclude the possibility of the sincerity of the writing and of authorial intentions, since, following Derrida as interpreted by Martin Hägglund (2008), a gift must inevitably be contaminated. Contamination means not only the market conditions, but also the presence of the reader, the writer’s self-awareness, or dialogicality – the necessity of response. In other

words, a true *gift – the text* – arises only when it passes through another person, through economy, consciousness, uncertainty – and precisely because of that, it can carry an ethos.

Although Wallace and Kelly's theoretical framework has gained worldwide influence, the unique historical and cultural context of Central and Eastern European literature calls for approaches that specifically address post-totalitarian experiences. The cultural, political, and aesthetic transitions that followed the fall of authoritarian regimes in 20th-century Central Europe complicate any straightforward reading of irony, authenticity, or postmodernism. In these literatures, the entry into contemporaneity did not simply replicate Western patterns but brought its own negotiations with historical trauma, censorship, and shifting ideological landscapes (Hostová 2020). One productive way to extend this discussion is to consider post-socialist debates on sincerity in the Russian context; Ellen Rutten's *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (2017) offers a valuable additional perspective. Rutten shows how the question of sincerity is important (also historically) for Russian society (13). At the same time, she emphasizes that reading new sincerity is crucial in the context and in relation to what preceded it – communism (4) and postmodernism (7). The author primarily draws on the work of "Russia's best-known advocate of the trend, the cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein" (9). In the book *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* ([1999] 2016) he states that the new sincerity, although it diverges from strict conceptualism (postmodern Moscow conceptualists), does not abandon its mechanisms:

This "post-postmodern" neo-sentimental aesthetics is defined not by the sincerity of the author or the quoteness of his style, but by the mutual interaction of the two. What is characteristic is the elusive border of their difference, which allows even the most sincere utterance to appear as a subtly quoted imitation, while a commonplace quotation may sound like a piercingly lyrical confession. (543)

In this context, it is thus no coincidence that the concept of post-postmodernism as articulated by Epstein was applied to Slovak literature – and to the very poet to be discussed below, Michal Habaj (Hostová 2014).

Rutten primarily traces the rise of new sincerity in the mid-1980s during the period of glasnost and perestroika (2017, 13), when "Russian creative professionals started to view the Soviet period as a bygone era, they began to persistently frame the category of sincerity as a healing tool" (18). She then examines sincerity after the fall of socialism up to the early 2010s (13), a period associated with the capitalist regime and the rise of consumerism, which relates to "the subsequent need for authors to adopt new socioeconomic survival strategies" (20), making sincerity both a capital and a tactic.

To summarize, the theoretical frameworks outlined above approach concepts such as irony, sincerity, and postmodernism from markedly different perspectives. As a result, irony and sincerity, rather than being mutually exclusive, often coexist or blur into one another, resisting easy classification. The coexistence of these approaches demonstrates that such terms cannot be treated as fixed or universally stable categories; instead, they must be understood in relation to local histories,

cultural memory, and the evolving role of the authorial voice. These nuances challenge the idea that post-irony is a clear break from postmodernism and call for more context-sensitive readings and the ambiguous mutual delimitation and positioning of irony and post-irony (or sincerity). For this reason, it is most productive to examine how these concepts are realized in the context of national literature within the specific textual practices of the poems analyzed in the following sections. Focusing on the experimental-deconstructive strand of contemporary Slovak poetry, I offer a close reading of Michal Habaj's long poem "Yangtik" (2012) to argue that sincerity re-emerges not as a simple alternative to irony but as a mediated, "contaminated" ethos.

IRONY, SINCERITY AND EXPERIMENTING WITH LIFE IN POST-TOTALITARIAN AND CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK POETRY

Like other post-totalitarian European cultural spaces entering the globalized world belatedly in the late 20th century (e.g. Serbia, see Đurić 2024, 374), Slovak culture is characterized by a synchronous accumulation of geopolitical and geocultural space-times. It constitutes a layered palimpsest of ideas, economic transformations, and shifting hierarchies, in which authenticity and radical self-revelation only began to permeate the public sphere during the totalitarian era in the mid-1980s (Hostová 2018). The parallel reinsertion of intimacy into poetry, alongside its rejection after the fall of state socialism – rather than a rejection prompted by oversaturation, which would have been the neutral condition – resulted in diverse poetic realizations of irony and sincerity.

Earnest commitment or sincere poetic testimony was largely taboo among radical Slovak poets of the 1990s – not only because they embraced experiment and irony as mediators between heterogeneous temporalities, but also because literary commitment had been devalued through its prescriptive use under the totalitarian regime of the later 20th century. In a small-literature context where individual poetic modes were less rigidly "encapsulated" and the innovative-traditional divide could be hostile without being structurally deep, such refusals acquired particular force (Hostová 2019, 58). The analysis presented here focuses on Michal Habaj (b. 1974) as a poet associated with a strand in Slovak post-totalitarian poetry that Slovak literary criticism has identified as rejecting lyric poetry as a vehicle of authenticity and sincerity. I focus on this strand because it has been especially responsive to developments in world literature and has, through its own formal modifications, registered and reworked changing approaches to irony. Slovak literary scholar Jaroslav Šrank described this strand as "experimental-deconstructive" (2013a, 380), which includes, among others, Michal Habaj, Peter Macsovszky, Peter Šulej, and Nóra Ružičková (45). He considers the poetics of these authors to be characterized by "the desentimentalization of expression and the thematic de-subjectivization of the text, [...] anaesthetic poetics and the problematic investigation of the nature of the literary work inspired by post-structuralist philosophy"² (382). Often subsumed under the label Slovak postmodern poetry (385), these writers pushed this de-subjectivizing impulse to the point that their work can be captured by Peter Macsovszky's description of his

debut as “an attempt to detach oneself from emotions that are thematized in poetry to the point of exhaustion” (2008, n.p.).

As experimental-deconstructive Slovak poetry has long been influenced by American writing, developments in U.S. poetry provide a useful point of reference for shifts within the Slovak field. Notably, the second decade of the 21st century saw American post-conceptual poetry undergo a marked turn, and Slovak poetry registered its own variation of this shift. In the United States, this turn was associated with post-conceptualism, which reintroduced affect, emotion, and ego (Bernstein 2015; Dworkin 2018), as well as with “experimental confessionality” (Smith 2018). In Slovak literary discourse, it was articulated in debates on subjectivity and emotionality (Rebro 2014; Hostová 2013), as well as on commitment in poetry (Angažovaná poézia... 2014; Biznárová et al. 2014; Biznárová 2015; Rebro 2013). A comparable reconfiguration of sincerity has also been traced in the post-Soviet context. Rutten writes that “Russian discussions on a post or late postmodern sincerity occur in an era of all-permeating internal unrest: that of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath” (2017, 16), and that Russian creative professionals saw the category of sincerity as “a healing tool [...], as an instrument to be used to help cope with the Soviet experience” (18). The Slovak trajectory, however, suggests a related yet distinct path. Slovak radical and postmodern poets addressed the need to come to terms with socialism with ironic detachment. Writers in this strand returned to commitment and more overtly sincere expression only two decades after the fall of the totalitarian regime. In the context of Kelly’s conceptualization of Derrida, this stance can be interpreted as paradoxically sincere: the refusal of literary commitment – motivated by a bitter memory of the discourse’s contamination by communist propaganda – constitutes a markedly authentic gesture, and it raises the question of how sincerity can re-emerge within an experimental-deconstructive poetics. Accordingly, I turn to a close reading of Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik” (2012) to show how sincerity re-emerges within experimental-deconstructive Slovak poetry as a mediated, “contaminated” ethos rather than an alternative to irony.

EXPERIMENTING IN EARNEST

The following analysis reads “Yangtik” through Kelly’s account of sincerity as a “contaminated” ethos-shaped by the gift’s unavoidable passage through economy and response (Kelly 2024, 32–34; Derrida 1992, 1–33; Hägglund 2008) – and through post-postmodern sincerity’s unstable border between confession and quotation (Epstein 2016, 543), asking how Habaj’s paratextual self-framing and fragment form stage that instability. Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik” is a poetic diary composed during a dark retreat (a practice of Tibetan Buddhism) and published in his self-titled collection *Michal Habaj* (2012). Formally, it consists of a sequence of short fragments that can be read as “intentional bad form” in poetry (Hoberek 2013, 217). Its paratext describes it as being “based on an experiment with life, not with text” (263), and while “Yangtik” is not a transcription of real-life enacted confessions like Trisha Low’s section in *Confessions [of a variety]* (2010), which led critic Hazel Smith (2018) to discuss experimental confessionality, it is not far from it either. Experi-

mentation with text, form, and the categories of authorship, subjectivity, and identity have long been characteristic of Habaj's poetry. Emblematic in this regard is his first collection of poems 80-967760-4-5 (1997) – titled after its ISBN – which lacks a unified speaking persona. Instead, the book operated as a self-referential hypertext:

you will get the most benefit from this poetry collection if
you carefully read the verses on the following
pages and if you follow them. this information is
provided to help readers orient themselves in 80–96

7760–4–5, to read as much as possible, and to do so with maximum savings of money, time, and effort. the reader will surely notice that [...]³ (Habaj 1997, 7)

Over time, the tendencies in Habaj's work shifted: while his poetry remains experimental, particularly in form, he also began to incorporate more traditional lyrical devices, most notably a lyric "I".

The collection *Michal Habaj* – whose eponymous title already foregrounds authorial self-presentation – contains the poetic diary "Yangtik" and is presented in the guise of a scholarly publication. It includes keywords, a detailed table of contents, and even a Magritte-like declaration by the author: "This is not a collection of poems" ("Toto nie je básnická zbierka"; Habaj 2012, [7]). The book also contains a section titled "Poznámka k metóde" (Note on a method), which reads:

The rhythm of this book is based on an experiment with life, not with text. [...] I attempted to grasp, reverse and abandon my life methodically [...]. The result is the poems in this book, which, in addition to their documentary function, may serve as a primary source for further research in the human and social sciences.⁴ (263)

It is precisely this gesture of authenticity and openness that invites reading the book through the lens of new sincerity. The self-titling of the collection, together with the life-based experiment, aligns with what Adam Kelly conceptualizes as key conditions of new sincerity writing, above all a high degree of self-awareness (2024, 34). The anticipation of turning himself into an object of inquiry implies a "collapsing of space between writer and reader" (3) and a contamination of the gift – not only because Habaj addresses issues of the capitalist economy in his writing and promotes it in a manner verging on commercial advertising, but also because he is himself a literary scholar, making "research" a potential marker of contamination by dominant discourse. The gift is thus contaminated not only by capitalist power structures but also by academic ones, from which the author cannot exempt himself.

"Yangtik", which is subtitled "Slová z Tmy" (Words from the Dark; Habaj 2012, [161]), documents 14 days of dark retreat meditation, a practice rooted in Eastern spiritual traditions. The sequence opens with a paratextual note: "The author of the text spent the first two weeks of March 2010 in Darkness"⁵ (193). "Yangtik" is composed of authentic notes written by the author during his time in darkness. It bears witness to a liminal situation that dissolves the boundary between life and literature. In the Slovak context, this kind of life-based experiment also has a local prehistory. Habaj's dark retreat implicitly – and perhaps unintentionally – echoes ex-

periments by the older-generation Slovak poet Ivan Laučík (1944–2004), who spent time in dark caves. An inheritor of the experimental impulses of the international avant-garde of the mid-20th century, Laučík was part of a trio of poets – alongside Peter Repka (b. 1944) and Ivan Štrpka (b. 1944) – who emphasized ethics and authenticity as concepts closely bound up with sincerity. This genealogy extends beyond Slovak literature as well: the motif of subterranean isolation recalls the underground experiments of the French geologist and speleologist Michel Siffre in the 1960s and 1970s, which explored the psychological effects of isolation. Reports of these experiments also appeared in Slovak periodicals ([Bt] 1965; [E.M.] 1972) and may have inspired Laučík.

At the same time, “Yangtik” reflects a unique convergence of philosophical and aesthetic frameworks – one that is inseparable from Habaj’s broader practice of life-based experimentation (Hostová 2025, 197). Drawing on the tantric tradition – here in the broad sense of Buddhist and Hindu practices that cultivate presence (Hensey 2016, 5) – the author’s authentic experience of darkness is interwoven with the aesthetic of new sincerity. The dark retreat represents a withdrawal from everyday life, which the author portrays chiefly through the influence of a globalized world marked by power structures, the pervasiveness of consumer society, surveillance, and inescapable interconnectedness. This is demonstrated in the first poem of “Yangtik”, entitled “So Ham”. As Habaj explains in one of his endnotes, *So Ham* “belongs to the simplest and most powerful mantras”⁶ (Habaj 2012, 193). Paradoxically, however, the poem is composed of a playful array of the mantras of the late-modern, material world – media outlets, intelligence agencies, currencies, and chat abbreviations: “BBC / KGB / MI5 / CI6 / TV5 / [...] / KFC / [...] / IBM / USA / USB / USD / [...] / CNN / NBA / NSA / CIA / FBI / WTC / WTF” (165–166). Formally, the mantra is “contaminated” by the lexicon of institutions, media, currencies, and surveillance – an instance of sincerity emerging through the very late-modern materials that threaten it, rather than outside them. Unlike Rutten’s account of sincerity as a “healing tool” in post-Soviet culture (2017, 16, 18), Habaj’s darkness-experiment relocates the problem: sincerity is tested under neoliberal saturation (brands, acronyms, surveillance), not recovered as a post-traumatic remedy.

Habaj’s withdrawal into darkness does not offer escape or isolation from such a world. In his first book, he critiqued capitalism by deploying an absurd image of the commodification, instrumentalization, and marketization of poetry through the then-dominant media register (a “how-to-read” manual), which can be read in the context of Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique ([1989] 2002, 97). Such a double-coded mode of criticism is, by its nature, masked. Against this background, the act of withdrawing into darkness marks a deeply introspective space for (re)constructing the subjectivity. In the darkness, the “ghosts” of both individual and societal crises and problems manifest in a much more concentrated, clearer, perhaps even sentimental form: “It teems with ghosts here. / Very, very bad. Fear”⁷ (177). This space, which allows for a tantric focus on the present, thus provides room for reflexivity: “To live in depth, not in breadth”⁸ (180). Such reflexivity emerges from the personally engaged self – the reconstituted literary subject: “Darkness before me / Dark-

ness behind me / Light within me”⁹ (175). This example illustrates the re-emergence of literary commitment in Slovak poetry – precisely within the work of a postmodern author associated with the experimental-deconstructive strand, which in the 1990s positioned itself against sincerity, subjectivity, and commitment.

Habaj, however, does not isolate individual experience (as the experience of staying in darkness might be) from domestic or global events, yet he does not ironize it either; “Yangtik” even incorporates a modified segment from another poem in the same collection, “Idaho, Connecticut”, which connects “the intimate sphere with civilizational reality, which in fact confronts the subject’s spiritual aspirations with the bonds of the material world” (Šrank 2013b, 18):

I cried for 70 hours
and then I went out into the streets

and I was shooting
I was shooting
until all of you
reached heaven¹⁰ (Habaj 2012, 167)

On the other hand, Habaj preserves certain ideological basis or textual strategies that are typical of modern or postmodern literature. For example, the hallucinations experienced in darkness implicitly raise the question of the boundary between fiction and reality: “At night I’m woken by weeping, children wailing. A scream of a woman. / Real – impossible”¹¹ (Habaj 2012, 174). Such manifestations of the author’s poetics should not be regarded as shortcomings or divergences from the cultural tendency within which I aim to present his texts. As mentioned in the introduction, the new sincerity emerging from postmodern literature was also discussed by Epstein, who emphasized the synthetic character of postmodern quoteness and new sincerity ([1999] 2016, 543). Thus, sincerity in Habaj’s “Yangtik” emerges as a mode of radical openness, inseparable from contamination by discourse, form, and history – a sincerity produced through mediation rather than grounded in transparent self-expression.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of sincerity in contemporary Slovak poetry within the experimental tradition reveals a field in which irony, authenticity, and experimentation do not exclude one another but dynamically intersect. Over the past three decades, Slovak poetry has negotiated its own relationship to sincerity against the backdrop of post-totalitarian history and a rapidly globalizing cultural sphere. Within this context, radical writing – exemplified by Michal Habaj – demonstrates how sincerity can re-emerge precisely in practices that appear to reject it, whether through radical self-reflexivity or the appropriation of conceptual and paratextual strategies.

Viewed through the lens of new sincerity, Habaj’s experiments – which short-circuit the division between lived experience and the artifice of writing – demonstrate how sincerity in 21st-century Slovak poetry is inevitably shaped by contamination. In Kelly’s terms, such sincerity operates as a “gift” that only becomes legible through its passage via economy, discourse, and response (2024, 32–34) – conditions that

do not negate sincerity but constitute its very possibility. At the same time, Habaj's writing confirms Epstein's claim that post-postmodern sincerity emerges at an unstable border where confession and quotation continually implicate one another rather than separating into opposing modes (2016, 543). The Slovak case thus contributes to broader debates on post-postmodernism by showing that sincerity is not a simple return to authenticity but a reconfigured ethos, shaped and complicated by specific spatial and temporal conditions.

NOTES

- ¹ The author used AI, specifically ChatGPT and Copilot M365, for copy editing and proofreading. The author declares that all uses of generative AI in this manuscript comply with established ethical standards. This paper is based on a presentation co-authored and delivered with Ivana Hostová on 11 April 2025 at the conference *The Rhetoric of Sincerity in Central and Eastern European Literatures from the 19th Century to the Present* in Vilnius. I am sincerely grateful to Ivana Hostová for her guidance, support, and formative influence on this research.
- ² Jaroslav Šrank likely adopts the term “anaesthetic poetics” from German philosopher Wolfgang Iser ([1990] 1993), but uses it in a partly modified sense. He most frequently describes the term as “texts without primary aesthetic value (philosophical, art-historical, popular-scientific, pseudo-scientific, descriptive and interpretative texts and metatexts)” (Šrank 2013a, 395). The use of the term “anaesthetic poetics” in the Slovak context from the 1990s onwards is analysed in more detail by Tímea Zvolánková (2026). Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Slovak into English are by the present author.
- ³ “najväčší úžitok z tejto básnickej zbierky získate vtedy, / keď si starostlivo prečítate verše na nasledujúcich / stranách a keď sa budete podľa nich riadiť. údaje tu / uvedené majú čitateľom pomôcť orientovať sa v 80-96 // 7760-4-5, prečítať čo najviac, a to s maximálnou úspou / rou peňazí, času a námahy. čitateľ si iste všimne, že [...]”
- ⁴ “Rythmus tejto knihy je založený na experimente so životom, nie textom [...] Pokúsil som sa svoj život metodicky uchopiť, zvrátiť a opustiť [...]. Výsledkom sú básne tejto knihy, ktoré popri svojej dokumentárnej funkcii môžu slúžiť ako pramenný zdroj výskumu v oblasti vied o človeku a spoločnosti.”
- ⁵ “Autor textu strávil v Tme prvé dva marcové týždne roku 2010.”
- ⁶ “patrí k najjednoduchším a najmocnejším mantrám”
- ⁷ “Hemží sa to tu duchmi. / Veľmi, veľmi zle. Strach.”
- ⁸ “Žiť do hĺbky, nie do šírky.”
- ⁹ “Predo mnou tma / Za mnou tma / Vo mne svetlo”
- ¹⁰ “70 hodín som plakal / a potom som vyšiel do ulíc // a strieľal som / strieľal som / až kým ste sa všetci / nedostali do neba”
- ¹¹ “V noci ma prebudí nárek, kvílenie detí. Výkrik ženy. / Reálne – nemožné.”

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