I Mean It

By LAURA KIPNIS

Things weren't going well for sincerity even before Hallmark strip-mined it down to muck. Lionel Trilling pronounced it dead some 40 years ago. Snark and irony have long had more cultural cachet. Among its many pitfalls is that the more you seek or proclaim it, the less sincere you seem. (Only politicians have yet to get the message.) Another small problem: if people truly did say what was in their hearts on a regular basis, marriages would rupture, friendships would founder and no one would ever sit through a faculty meeting again.

None of this dissuades R. Jay Magill Jr., whose "Sincerity" wrests a surprisingly dramatic story out of what otherwise seems like wrung-out idiom. Fortuitously for Magill, the word has colorful origins: its first recorded English use was in 1533 by the Protestant reformer John Frith, shortly before being burned at the stake for asserting the primacy of individual conscience over church dogma. Frith, who becomes the charred mascot of Magill's story, was praising the "sincere life" of the 14th-century heretic John Wycliffe, vilified in his own day for translating the Latin Bible into English. (The word had previously referred only to the purity of physical things, not people, derived from the Latin *sincerus* — substances that were whole and unadulterated.) Magill skillfully hurtles us back to these Reformation-era brutalities, and it's fascinating to be reminded, in this age of rampant self-absorption, that something as seemingly quiescent as introspection was once a radical endeavor.

The exaltation of the inner voice ushered a new kind of person onto the historical stage, the modern individual. It also accompanied the end of the traditional social order: with capitalist expansion, upward mobility and the anonymity of cities came new public spaces like salons where you were likely to encounter people you didn't know. New forms of concealment became fashionable (wigs, rouge, fans, manners), and social life, bogged down by "byzantine rules," had become an "elaborate lie." Knowing whether someone was bona fide — the real thing — newly mattered.

Soon the Romantic era arrived, piloted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his autobiography, "Confessions," which Magill describes as, "an attempt to write the most sincere work ever written." But with the secularization of sincerity — Rousseau was trumpeting the truth of himself for Art, not God — another of sincerity's drawbacks became evident: it can be annoyingly self-congratulatory. Voltaire and Diderot thought Rousseau was an ass: "The man is artificial from head to foot; his mind and soul are wholly artificial," Voltaire sniped. The new penchant for self-examination was simultaneously a driving force and a losing battle. As Freud would later announce to the world, the self is too irrevocably split to ever truly know what it's up to.

Also, a rival idiom had been winning ground since the end of the 18th century: irony. Not long after Romanticism jumped an ocean, taking up American citizenship in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, ironists and skeptics from Nietzsche to Shaw ("It is dangerous to be sincere, unless you are also stupid") were massing, joined by aesthetes, dandies, *flâneurs* and of course, Oscar Wilde, whose very existence was one prolonged protest against meaning what you say. Still, Magill sees the contest as not quite settled, exhuming sincerity from even its most ardent critics. He argued a similar point in his previous book, "Chic Ironic Bitterness," to which "Sincerity" forms a companion volume — the skeptical worldview secretly preserves the ideals of integrity and honesty rather than contesting them. Cynics are disappointed romantics; ironists are closet sentimentalists.

The "x is just the flip side of y" move may come a little easily, though. It also works to minimize the stakes of the question. In Trilling's 1972 "Sincerity and Authenticity," the stakes were nothing less than the fate of the modern

self. “Now and then it is possible to observe the moral life in the process of revising itself,” was the large claim with which he opened this rather short book. From the 1960s to the 1970s there was actually a surge of books and essays on the cult of sincerity, Magill points out. But Trilling’s book also belongs to another cohort of roughly the same moment — Herbert Marcuse’s “One-Dimensional Man” (1964), Philip Rieff’s “Triumph of the Therapeutic” (1966), Richard Sennett’s “Fall of Public Man” (1977), Christopher Lasch’s “Culture of Narcissism” (1979) — variously anguished accounts of how the totality of character structure was, at that moment, being drastically transformed. These are books written as though their authors were personally witnessing a cataclysm. “One culture is dying while no other gains enough power to be born,” Rieff wrote. “This book describes a way of life that is dying,” Lasch laments. The ground is shifting under their feet; they’re groping their way through the accumulated rubble of modernity, trying to make sense of the jarring new social types being hatched. Reading them, even now, you feel the urgency in your bones.

Where Trilling saw the decline of sincerity as a rupture, a historic break, Magill sees continuity, tracing the strands of a Protestant-Romantic trajectory for nearly 500 years right up to the hipster culture of today. The difference between Trilling’s moment and ours (or maybe between Trilling’s sense of grandiosity and Magill’s) can be measured in the tone of their respective books: for Magill the urgency is gone. He may be annoyed by the smug simulated sincerity of contemporary figures like Sarah Palin, but even as he hacks his way heroically through overgrown thickets of hipster irony, the stakes just aren’t the same.

“Sincerity” is a serious and engaging cultural history painted on an admirably large canvas, yet Magill is careful not to take himself too seriously, as evidenced in his snarky asides and chatty footnotes. He wraps up on an eminently reasonable note: society needs both sincerity and insincerity. You can’t go too far in either direction: neither the frothy superficiality of court society nor the deadly purposefulness of the French Revolution. Who can argue with that? Though it’s hard not to wonder if this sense of repose really just means that the transformations rued by Marcuse, Trilling and the others have now unfolded so completely they’re no longer even visible to us. What were once moral imperatives are now style choices. Magill even cites a blog post entitled “Sincerity Is the New Black.” The juxtaposition of Christian martyrs and Brooklyn hipsters doesn’t seem jarring because the history of subjectivity is now a shopping mall of flexible identities, none particularly deeply held. Magill offers a brief semiotic analysis of hipster affectations — trucker hats, Pabst Blue Ribbon — to exemplify how irony now has the task of conveying sincerity, allowing the trendy to gesture at working-class affinities while keeping a safe distance from anything resembling a political commitment.

Of course, irony too has its hazards. “It’s the hardest addiction of all,” Patrick Melrose, the newly sober protagonist of Edward St. Aubyn’s “At Last,” remarks. “Forget heroin. Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning.” Presumably the members of a Brooklyn band Magill mentions, “The Pains of Being Pure at Heart,” would agree, though they probably aren’t about to go to the stake over the right to use air quotes.

Laura Kipnis teaches at Northwestern University. Her most recent book is “How to Become a Scandal: Adventures in Bad Behavior.”