

Universidad de Córdoba

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana

**The Romance of Community:  
Form and Ideology in Jonathan Franzen's  
Fiction**

Tesis doctoral presentada por

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## **TÍTULO DE LA TESIS: The Romance of Community: Form and Ideology in Jonathan Franzen's Fiction**

**DOCTORANDO/A: Jesús Blanco Hidalgo**

### **INFORME RAZONADO DEL/DE LOS DIRECTOR/ES DE LA TESIS**

(se hará mención a la evolución y desarrollo de la tesis, así como a trabajos y publicaciones derivados de la misma).

La presente tesis se concibió como un intento de proporcionar una visión global de la producción narrativa del escritor norteamericano Jonathan Franzen desde una perspectiva que integrase tanto elementos de análisis narratológico como principios de hermenéutica marxista. El concepto de comunidad quedó determinado, desde el comienzo, como el concepto alrededor del cual debía de girar la reflexión. En estos cuatro años el doctorando ha leído con provecho un amplio conjunto de textos críticos, tanto de estilística narrativa o narratología estructuralista y post-estructuralista (Propp, Toolan, Genette, Hillis Miller) como de teoría sociológica marxista pura (Lukács, Althusser, Beck) y aplicada al texto narrativo (Bakhtin, Jameson, Moretti). Además, el doctorando ha llevado a cabo una lectura exhaustiva tanto de la obra primaria de Jonathan Franzen como de la crítica existente sobre dicha obra. El resultado ha sido un descubrimiento gradual de la lógica interna que articula los textos narrativos de Franzen, una lógica de carácter externamente formal, pero internamente ideológica, que pivota en torno a la noción, característica del "romance" narrativo, de salvación-redención. De este modo ha logrado un equilibrio hermenéutico muy valioso entre lectura atenta de carácter estilístico y revelación del componente ideológico que subyace al posicionamiento político de los textos: ambas cosas aparecen normalmente separadas en la crítica existente sobre Franzen.

Algunas de las ideas que organizan este trabajo ya han sido presentadas por el doctorando en foros académicos como los congresos de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos (AEDEAN) celebrados en Málaga en 2012 y en Alcalá de Henares en 2014. Resultado del primero es el artículo "In the 'Vacuum': Political Readings and Misreadings of Jonathan Franzen's Novels." (Proceedings of the 36th AEDEAN Conference, Málaga 2012). En el congreso de Alcalá, ha presentado la ponencia titulada "Clean Steel and White Concrete" Jonathan Franzen and the Era of Hardware". Otro resultado directo de esta investigación es el artículo titulado "*Knowable Conspiracies: Ideology and Form in Jonathan Franzen's The Twenty-Seventh City,*" que ha sido aceptado por la revista *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* publicado por la Universidad de Zaragoza y será publicado próximamente. Otro resultado de investigación estrechamente vinculado con el marco teórico marxista que articula la tesis es la ponencia titulada "The Produced Self: Resistance to Subject Commodification in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth,*" que el doctorando ha presentado recientemente en el congreso internacional "Finite, Singular,

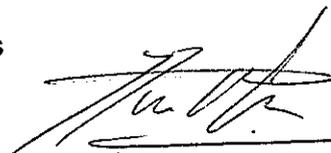
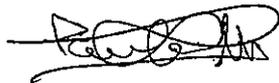
Exposed: "Who's Afraid of the Modernist Individual" celebrado en Córdoba los días 30 y 31 de octubre de 2014.

Consideramos que estas ponencias y artículos son indicios claros del grado de madurez alcanzado por el doctorando en su trabajo, y adelantos evidentes de un trabajo muy sólido y original que habrá de constituir sin duda una contribución importante al conocimiento de la obra del narrador norteamericano Jonathan Franzen.

Por todo ello, se autoriza la presentación de la tesis doctoral.

Córdoba, 22 de Diciembre de 2014

Firma del/de los director/es



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## **Description of contents: Aim, scope and structure of this work.**

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a thorough ideologico-formal account of the fictional work of American novelist Jonathan Franzen (1959, Western Springs, Illinois), embedded in an analysis of relevant aspects of its historical, cultural and political context. The present study includes the examination of certain rhetorical devices of self-legitimation present in Franzen's work, previously unaccounted for in the existing critical literature devoted to the novelist. In addition, I will examine the most important elements of the critical reception of Franzen's four novels to date. In the following section the reader will find a succinct delineation of the contents of this work in the form of a brief summary of each chapter.

### **Chapter 1: A critical introduction to Franzen's fiction.**

The introductory chapter begins with a statement of the objective of this project, which is to contribute to fill in the rather noticeable gaps in the critical response to Franzen's novels. The specific form of my contribution will focus, as already noted, on social, ideological and formal aspects. The theoretical framework of my approach is also specified in this chapter: since narrative is a social activity, I have mainly relied on critics that have dealt with the social dimension of literature. Some of the fundamental critical references of this study can be inscribed with more or less precision within the Marxist tradition. In particular, the theoretical work of Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti and Pierre Macherey has been fundamental in the articulation of my critical method, which concentrates on the symbolic role of Franzen's narrative with respect to ongoing social, historical and ideological circumstances. In the introduction I discuss at length though in general terms several concerns which will be treated more specifically later in the chapters concerned with the analysis of the novels. Taken together, these concerns form the main thesis of this study, which could be summarized as follows. As some critics have noticed, Franzen has deliberately presented his literary evolution in terms of a quasi-religious narrative. This narrative, which serves a self-legitimizing purpose,

involves an initial state of corruption, a moment of revelation, an act of conversion and finally the attainment of personal salvation after the necessary self-amelioration. As this study seeks to demonstrate, Franzen replicates this pattern in the biographical trajectories of the main characters of his novels, thus drawing legitimation for his own literary and ideological evolution. In this process, he relies on formal and generic elements from genres such as romance, *Bildungsroman* and melodrama. This is a textual strategy which certain critics, sometimes overly influenced by Franzen's own presentation of his case, have tended to interpret in rather simplistic terms as a straightforward transition from postmodernism to realism. This book also analyses the political significance of Franzen's deployment of narratives of individual salvation—a move which, following Jameson, I interpret as an attempt to solve inescapable social and ideological contradictions through the symbolic power of narrative, and particularly through the symbolic substitution of the more manageable community of the family for a public sphere perceived as intractable.

In the first chapter of this work the key aspects of our examination of Franzen's use of realism are introduced. In this respect, my inquiry is based on the theoretical work of Jameson, György Lukács, Terry Eagleton and Peter Brooks, among other critics, and draws on our diachronic study of the realist novel, to be introduced below. Particular attention has been paid, following Lukács, to issues of perspective and class discourse.

Finally, the introduction presents the points of view informing this work's social approach. The general assumption of contemporary culture being a manifestation of the mode of production known as late capitalism derives from Jameson's already classic studies. In addition, I have resorted to the theoretical work of Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck to interpret ongoing socio-cultural transformations which are reflected in Franzen's novels. In accordance with contemporary critical trends, and also with Franzen's explicit concerns, this interpretation will be mindful of the effect of those transformations in American communities as they are perceived and reflected by Franzen in his novels.

The fact that this study is limited to the analysis of Franzen's fiction—that is, of his four novels, leaving aside his already considerable work of non-fiction—needs to be addressed here. There is an obvious similarity of concerns between the two branches of

Franzen's production, but several reasons have coincided to make our limitation of scope advisable. To begin with, Franzen's non-fictional texts are worthy of serious study on their own; and their sheer size and variety, which includes famous essays of cultural enquiry, political analysis, literary criticism, reportage, his autobiographical pieces and a memoir volume, would be distracting in the analysis of the novels. This is not to say that I have disregarded Franzen's essays. On the contrary, I have resorted to them for some of my main contentions in this study. But whenever I have used them to interpret or clarify a particular aspect of Franzen's work, I have tried to do it in my own terms rather than in Franzen's. A common mistake among the critics of the novelist has been to take the essays, particularly the influential *Harper's* essay (1996), at face value, all-too-readily accepting Franzen's own views about his work. As I argue in the introduction, Franzen has an acute sense of the way his work is regarded and is very adept at influencing other people as to how to interpret it. He is, so to speak, a sagacious manager of the image of his own work, even if not always a successful one, as his quarrel with talk-show host Oprah Winfrey in 2001—discussed in the third chapter—proves.

## **Chapter 2: Analysis of the critical reception of Franzen's novels.**

Before starting my discussion of the novels, I have judged necessary to include an extensive survey of the critical reception of Franzen's work, a kind of compendium which, to my knowledge, is presented here for the first time.<sup>1</sup> This section will not only delineate Franzen's profile in the contemporary American literary scene but will also anticipate some key formal and political questions that will have an important place in our analysis of the novels. This study reveals a remarkable capacity for generating critical controversy on Franzen's part. However, since the main aim in this chapter is to chart the critical landscape on Franzen, my account of it will remain basically neutral. As we will observe, the impact of Franzen's first two books was far from negligible but in no way comparable with the response elicited by *The Corrections*, the novel that set Franzen on his current prominent place among American novelists. That piece of fiction quickly directed reviewers to the *Harper's* essay, and together they sparked a lively

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<sup>1</sup> Practical reasons have determined that this survey will be limited to references in English and exceptionally French and Spanish on certain relevant occasions.

media debate about the supposed obsolescence of the postmodernist novel and the salutary comeback of literary realism. Considerable hype was generated and Franzen was even saluted by certain reviewers as a sort of renovator of American fiction. *The Corrections* also attracted academic attention to Franzen's work and the response focused on roughly two issues: Franzen's complex stylistic relation with postmodernism and realism, and the political import of the novelist's critical stance. I have organized my account of Franzen's reception in consequence, but with the proviso that, as I see it, form and ideology are indissolubly related, as there is no such thing as an ideologically-neutral form. The special character of Franzen's reception has determined that a majority of references have appeared in journalistic media—including a considerable number of internet sites—rather than in academic publications. Stephen J. Burn, author of the only monograph on Franzen's work to date, has certainly been an important critical source for this study. Similarly, regarding the most openly political aspects of the critical discussion of Franzen's work, I must highlight a series of essays by James Annesley, Ty Hawkins and Colin Hutchinson with which I have regularly engaged in the course of my analysis of Franzen's novels. The highly successful *Freedom*, on its part, seems to have failed to make a significant impact in departments of English so far. My extended discussion of it aims to contribute to fill in this critical gap.

### **Chapter 3: A clarification of the concept of narrative realism.**

As the survey of Franzen's reception shows, the question of realism is central to a great part of the critical discussion of the novelist's work. This is hardly surprising given that, after the success of *The Corrections*, Franzen's carefully staged abjuration of literary postmodernism and embracement of more traditional narrative forms was one of the literary events of the early 2000s. This was, of course, the *conversion* that has marked Franzen's career ever since. However, stylistic and formal discussion of Franzen's work has often been characterized by the use of rather simplistic or otherwise inadequate concepts of realism. Consequently, in order to fully grasp the extent and implications of Franzen's use of that narrative mode, I have conducted a diachronic inquiry on the development of the realist novel from a historical, social and political point of view. The ensuing picture of narrative realism has not only allowed me to cast a critical and complicating view upon widespread, oversimplified accounts of Franzen's

stylistic evolution, but also, and more importantly, it has generated an essential part of the theoretical coordinates of this study. Very succinctly, I may state here that these references are concerned with the political implications of narrative realism. Since they are part of the general theoretical framework of this book, these coordinates are presented in the introductory chapter.

### **A critical reading of Franzen's novels.**

Another related prefatory consideration to be addressed here concerns the formal structure of this study. I have chosen to present my interpretation of Franzen's fiction as separate analyses of each one of his novels in order of apparition. Clearly, this is but one arrangement among other possibilities. There are several key matters that are common to all four of Franzen's novels and they would have therefore allowed a different organization of my materials, namely around these transversal topics. Such disposition would have had the advantage of a diminishing of redundancy in certain discussions. However, from my point of view it would have also entailed obscuring the evolutionary characteristics of Franzen's body of fiction, its formal and ideological development from novel to novel. Not least of all, a transversal arrangement would encumber the examination of the gradual development of that large-scale rhetorical persuasion device constructed by Franzen which I have called the narrative of conversion. As a result, as in a serialized narration each chapter includes a measure of recapitulation. This is, after all, a study very much concerned with narrative and it seems fitting that it should adopt some of its characteristics, like linearity and that of being, from a structuralist point of view, a dynamic combination of repetition and difference. As Todorov has argued, the essence of narrative is *transformation*, which is realized in sequence.<sup>2</sup> This is a dynamic that shall characterize the present project as well.

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<sup>2</sup> As Michael J. Toolan quotes (Toolan, 1988: 7): "The simple relation of successive facts does not constitute a narrative: these facts must be organized, which is to say, ultimately, that they must have elements in common. But if all the elements are in common, there is no longer a narrative, for there is no longer anything to recount. Now, transformation represents precisely a synthesis of differences and resemblance, it links two facts without their being able to be identified" (Todorov, 1977: 233).

#### **Chapter four: *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988).**

In my account of Franzen's first novel I highlight its contradictory features: a clear influence of postmodernist writers such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo coexists with typically realist traits. For example, the classic postmodernist motif of the conspiracy, which in postmodernist fiction is usually a means to represent the perceived unintelligibility of an overwhelmingly elusive *system*, is here used rather untypically as an analytical tool to show and explain the workings of economic and political power under Western capitalism. Such functioning is synthetically presented, in very much realist fashion, by the portrait of a city of St. Louis which is both real and symbolic.

In addition, Franzen's portrait of St. Louis is characterized by the emphasis on its decadence. For Franzen, the city's abandonment represents the decay of that symbolic area of public intervention which Habermas described as the public sphere. Such realm is seen by Franzen as irremediably corrupted by the privatizing forces of capitalism. Indeed, the novel sports a fatalistic view of an immobile bourgeois society which seems indebted to Guy Debord's or Herbert Marcuse's dark visions of contemporary culture, as well as to a *Zeitgeist* which predicates the end of History. As it turns out, at the heart of these bleak visions are perceptible Utopian longings which are interpreted in the light of relevant theory by Jameson and Ernst Bloch.

The collapsing end of the novel, marked by the triumph of social apathy and a meaningless contingency which is characteristic of prototypical realism, forms a truly depressing conclusion which will serve as the departing point of Franzen's subsequent narrative of conversion, inasmuch as it allows the subsequent development of Franzen's fiction to be presented as a way out of depression.

#### **Chapter five: *Strong Motion* (1992).**

Franzen's second novel is also characterized with a distinctive blend between the postmodernist subgenre of the Systems novel, described by Tom LeClair (1987), and the analytical aspirations of realism—an explanatory drive which is ostensibly fuelled by Marxist and Marxist-related theory. Some concerns already present in *The Twenty-Seventh City* are here confirmed as staples of Franzen's fiction: his interest in the emotional problems of dysfunctional Midwestern families and the tribulations of misfit

adolescence, his preoccupation with the deleterious effects of capitalism. Environmental issues, already perceptible in Franzen's first novel are central to *Strong Motion*, as they will be later in *Freedom*. From a different point of view, the novel is marked by the appearance of the salvational perspectives that will characterize Franzen's subsequent fiction. As the novel shows, not even the realization that a destructive earthquake has been caused by corporate greed can shake society out of its ideological conformism. Consequently, the novel's characters are directed towards individual forms of salvation realized in the narrative by means of formal elements brought from romance and melodrama, avoiding thus the desolation that characterizes the ending of *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

#### **Chapter six: *The Corrections* (2001).**

The salvational narrative pattern of *Strong Motion* is confirmed in Franzen's best-selling third novel, under whose wide social scope and complex structure lies a veritable family romance that includes the novella of formation of its main character Chip Lambert. *The Corrections*, whose writing proved to be a long and agonising process for its author, effectively evinces Franzen's distancing from his previous postmodernist references. This is manifestly proved by an enhanced emphasis on the construction of characters and also by an increased readability with respect to the previous novels. Franzen's transition, however, is not as clear-cut as certain critical accounts would have it and, as in a sort of palimpsest, there are abundant vestiges of the first, more postmodernist-influenced design this chapter traces. I am, however, more interested in exploring what Franzen's vision owes to realism. In this sense, in the light of theoretical work by Lukács and Jameson, this study focuses on Franzen's approach to totality, which is in sharp contrast with typically postmodernist worldviews based on conspiracy and *undecidability*. Also drawing on Lukács' work, I analyse another crucial aspect of Franzen's realism, namely the depth and limits of its social perspective. Another important issue raised by *The Corrections* which is examined in this chapter concerns the specific political position held by Franzen as a member of mainstream America, so to speak, in an age in which the American cultural scene is being widely perceived as increasingly compartmentalized. Finally, in this chapter I argue that *The Corrections* provides a valuable blueprint for a contemporary realism of necessarily

global preoccupations, even though it is partially undermined by the narrowness of its perspective and by its tendency toward ideological compromise.

### **Chapter seven: *Freedom* (2010).**

There is little left of Franzen's earlier narrative experimentalism or linguistic adventurousness in *Freedom*, which is also devoid of any signs of previous political radicalism. However, Franzen's successful fourth novel shows the same concerns that are present in his preceding work: the economy of relationships within troubled Midwestern families, the anxieties of perplexed adolescence, the natural environment under assault. More than any other novel by Franzen, *Freedom* bears the traces of composition under ideological fire during an age of embittered ideological struggle in the United States, and is consequently pierced by acute longings for social reconciliation. Such reconciliation, however, is not yearned for unconditionally, but rather from the point of view of Franzen's now unabashed liberalism. In this chapter I interrogate Franzen's ideological position drawing on the critical work of Slavoj Žižek, among others. Besides, following Jameson's theory of the socially symbolic role of narrative, and Franco Moretti's account of social and psychological functions of the novel of formation, I argue that *Freedom*, with its emphatic, melodramatic staging of the salvation of its main characters through reconciliation, constitutes the culmination of Franzen's salvational metanarrative, the means through which he manages to impose on a disturbingly contradictory socio-political world the almost magical, meaning-conferring powers of narrative closure.

### **Chapter eight: Conclusion.**

In the last section of this work the ideological implications of Franzen's narrative choices are further examined. The focus is on the way in which the closings of Franzen's novels contribute to the novelist's rhetorical strategies of persuasion and legitimation. The compelling ending of *Freedom*, whereby Franzen seems to be staging a general act of closure for his own metanarrative of salvation, is highlighted. In the light of theory by Bloch and Jameson I underscore the Utopian longings made perceptible in the course of the very processes of ideological legitimation performed by

the novels. Similarly, a recapitulation of the ways in which this study tries to contribute to previous discussion of Franzen's work is provided.

# **1. Introduction: a formal and ideological approach to Jonathan Franzen's fiction.**

*To read a plot—to take part in its work of recognition—is to imagine a transformation of life and its conditions, and not their mere reproduction.*

—Ian Duncan

## **1.1. Justification of this work.**

This study starts with the realization that the work of American novelist Jonathan Franzen has not received the academic attention that its significance should have elicited. The reception of his work can be described as a mixture of overblown and sometimes mystifying praise in journalistic media and a conspicuous neglect, with certain exceptions sometimes marked by political hostility, from academic quarters. Franzen's novels constitute one of the most interesting bodies of fiction in contemporary American literature and this book aims to analyse it from a rigorous theoretical perspective that transcends both the obscuring clichés of mass media reviewers and the incomplete accounts produced so far by academic critics. Needless to say, I consider Franzen's novels to be genuinely interesting in terms of their literary achievement, but it is not the intention of this study to produce a justification of their artistic merits. What is evident, in any case, is that Franzen's novelistic work raises a series of questions which are central to the understanding not only of modern-day American fiction but also of contemporary culture in the United States and elsewhere—a circumstance that makes the afore mentioned academic disregard all the more regrettable. Studying Franzen's work means coming to terms with pressing issues such as, in no particular order, the viability of the novel as a form of mass entertainment today; the cultural and political status of the socially engaged writer, and more specifically, of the white straight novelist in the face of the perceived compartmentalization of American culture; the chances of making compatible artistic achievement and commercial success; the possibility of exerting effective political critique in the age of late capitalism; the alleged exhaustion of postmodernist fiction and

the pertinence—or mere feasibility—of an updated realist social novel in our postmodern times; the advantages and limits of each literary style in terms of their critical potential; the practicability, or even conceivability, of truly transformative political action in our age. Besides, the fact that Franzen sets his fiction in the present time, together with his calling for the inclusive social novel, also facilitates our discussion of the recent socio-historical development of the United States: its almost accomplished transition from *industrial society* into *advanced modernity*, to use Ulrich Beck's expressions, the so-called *culture wars* and, in short, the current state of American *Gemeinschaft* or community. These are all issues that are reflected in Franzen's work and this study will be dealing with them in the course of the analysis of his novels. In fact, and this is another reason that makes Franzen an outstanding writer among his contemporaries, he has openly addressed some of these questions in quite outspoken essays. The discussion of these topics *per se*, however, is not the primary goal of this study. Rather, it is intended to be subservient to the main objective of this study as the necessary reconstruction of the cultural, historical and political context of Franzen's work. And this study's main objective is to offer a personal critical reading of Franzen's fiction that will focus on its formal and ideological aspects, drawing attention to the relationship between these two domains. My analysis of Franzen's novels includes the discovery and exploration of a complex, large-scale rhetorical strategy of persuasion and self-justification which unfolds through his novels in conjunction with some of his essays—a strategy so far unaccounted for in the existing critical literature on Franzen and which I have called, following remarks by Jeremy Green (2005) and Robert Rebein (2010), *the narrative of conversion*.

## **1.2. The narrative of conversion.**

As the chapter dedicated to Franzen's reception demonstrates, Franzen is still widely regarded as the novelist who—as Rebein put it—said “No” to Po-Mo. The novelist who publicly abjured of postmodernism to embrace realism and subsequently attain massive success. To be sure, this is a more than adequate foundation for a story with religious overtones. The first critic to call attention to Franzen's frequent use of quasi-religious discourse was surely Green, who devoted a chapter to Franzen's work in his monograph *Late Postmodernism* (2005). In his text, somewhat derisively, Green

interprets Franzen's famous act of recantation in his 1996 essay "Perchance to Dream" (soon to be known as simply the *Harper's* essay) as a "retreat from the political" (Green, 2005: 104) partially disguised under "humanist platitudes" (2005: 95). As Rebein later observed (Rebein: 2007: 209), for Green, Franzen's argumentation in that article evinced "a deeply traditional notion of literature as quasi-religious solace" (2005: 96). It was Rebein, nevertheless, who specifically discerned a narrative in the way Franzen's presented its literary evolution from postmodernism to realism. In the same way, it was also Rebein who perceptively drew the parallelism between Franzen's move and a religious conversion. Rebein brought to bear the already well-known *Harper's* essay, and also a 2002 piece published in *New Yorker* under the title of "Mr Difficult," where Franzen set out to criticize what he saw as "needless difficulty" in much postmodernist fiction. As in the *Harper's* essay, in "Mr Difficult" Franzen predicated the existence of a community of solitary readers paradoxically united in their shared vital concerns and in their expectation to find these preoccupations reflected in literature. And the satisfaction of these readers, Franzen argued, should be the novelist's aim, rather than a sterile pursuit of phony literary recognition by means of contrived obscurity. In his essay Franzen proposed a twofold division of novelists: there were those who abided by a "Contract" model, in which the writer is compelled by a sort of compact to provide a pleasurable experience to her readers; and there were "Status" novelists who selfishly aspired to membership of an isolated literary elite in abstraction of—or even against—their potential readers. There is clearly an ethics as well as an aesthetics implied here. In the essay Franzen chose his declared former idol, the archetypal postmodernist writer William Gaddis, as the paramount example of self-sufficient, arrogant and ultimately vacuous Status novelist. As Rebein sharply recognized, Franzen was advocating a vision of literature as a cult in which he arrogated to himself the role of a reformer:

It goes without saying that this, too, is a religion of sorts, that Franzen has cast himself not in the role of a faith-denier like Nietzsche, but rather in that of a faith-reformer, like Martin Luther ... The dark, corrupt "Catholicism" of postmodernism (the formulation is Franzen's, not mine) has given way to a lighter, more honest and forgiving "Protestant"-style realism. It is a faith that will allow Franzen to pursue without guilt his interest in locale and character—to concentrate wholly, in his own words, on the business of "peopling and

arranging” his “own little alternate world,” trusting all along that “the bigger social picture” he used to worry so much about will take care of itself. (Rebein, 2007: 212)

Right as Rebein was in his perception of the religious elements in Franzen’s arguments, his insight was nevertheless limited by his complete acceptance of Franzen’s version of his own case. And a certain lack of critical distance also transpires in his decided endorsement of Franzen’s views on the necessity for accessible fiction in an age of fragmentation and mass entertainment where reading habits and skills are inexorably receding. In Rebein’s words, “[b]y this reckoning, the aesthetics of literary postmodernism have become an indulgence the contemporary writer can ill afford. To put it another way: when communication itself begins to be scarce, the value of clarity raises exponentially” (2007: 221).

In any case, what both Green and Rebein stop short of realizing is the fact that the narrative of self-justification that Franzen offers in his essays is also inscribed and replicated in his novels (with the exception of the first one) by means of a series of salvational narratives which indirectly support and legitimize Franzen’s formal and political evolution. Indeed, from *Strong Motion* on, the protagonists of Franzen’s novels go through vicissitudes that in some way or other mirror Franzen’s own *Künstlerroman* in invariably legitimizing ways. In this way, Franzen presents his case—and Rebein thus confirms it—as that of a young aspiring novelist who, partly out of admiration for a respected group of novelists, namely the classic American postmodernists, and partly out of a misguided notion of literary value, cultivates a kind of fiction completely alien to his literary self. In the end, the strain of writing against himself leads him to clinical depression, despair of the novel in contemporary culture and, in short, sheer inability to continue writing. As Franzen recounts in the *Harper’s* essay, eventually he undergoes a sort of epiphany with the providential mediation of the linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath, a researcher of contemporary reading habits. Franzen then discovers his real vocation for addressing and serving an extant community of readers of which he is himself a part. In that essay he also brings to bear a reassuring letter from his admired Don DeLillo in which the older writer expresses his confidence in the persistence of the novel as a relevant cultural form. It is not difficult to notice that Heath and DeLillo perform an essential structural role in Franzen’s own salvational metanarrative: they become *helpers*, to use Greimas’ term. In this way, Franzen recounts how Heath

discloses to him the findings of her research: for readers, the point of reading is the sense of “having company in this great human enterprise” (Franzen, 2002: 83). In turn, in the final part of the essay, Franzen recalls having written to DeLillo “in distress”, to be thus reassured by the latter in his response: “Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly *to save themselves, to survive as individuals*” (Franzen, 2002: 96, my italics).

Franzen regains then his faith in the genre and starts writing fiction that emanates from his true self, achieving therefore literary and personal salvation. From an external point of view, the less becoming aspect of this transformation is that it implies getting rid of a good deal of previously avowed literary and ideological professions. This renunciation could be very generally synthesized as a dismissal of literary and ideological radicalism and the forsaking of a public sphere perceived as beyond repair. And though prior persuasions are duly denigrated and abjured with publicity in the *Harper's* essay and “Mr Difficult”, these moves seem not to be enough for Franzen, possibly because of his awareness of deeply entrenched cultural prejudice against this sort of disavowals. As a result, one after another these salvational narratives gain prominence in his novels. Franzen's protagonists are debased by different types of selfishness, dishonesty or self-delusion until an epiphany-like moment in which they humbly come to terms with themselves. It is therefore an epiphany related to (self-) recognition. Franzen's heroes are subsequently redeemed by rejection of their previous pretension as well as by ethical commitment to the closest community of family or lovers. This pattern quite obviously points in the direction of romance, a *pre-realist* narrative genre characterized, according to Fredric Jameson, by the presence of a “salvational or redemptive perspective of some secure future” (Jameson, 2002: 90). Indeed, these narratives are so similar from a structural point of view than they lend themselves easily to classic formalist and structuralist analysis. The fundamental biographical events that articulate the plots in Franzen's novels (degeneration, humiliation, improvement, reconciliation, etc.) appear then as clearly drawn in their structural role as the narrative *functions* in Vladimir Propp's time-honoured study of the morphology of the Russian folk tale.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the recurrent presence of fixed plot

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<sup>3</sup> As is known, in his study originally published in Russian in 1928, Propp managed to reduce the variety of plots that can be found in Russian folk narrative to a total number of just thirty-one structural elements

elements might allow us to talk, as Tzvetan Todorov did in his structuralist examination of Bocaccio's *Decameron* (Todorov 1969a), of a kind of narrative "grammar" in Franzen's fiction. In this sense, it is conspicuous that, at a certain level of abstraction, the main narrative patterns that Todorov discerns in the *Decameron* are remarkably close to those we identify in Franzen's novels, which suggests that the novelist is drawing on an ancient and probably universal repository of narrative resources. The critic argues that all stories in the work under study are informed by the same broad schema: "two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed by a process of degeneration and a process of improvement" (Todorov, 1969b: 75). But for Todorov it is possible to make a distinction between two kinds of stories in the *Decameron*: what he labels narratives of "avoided punishment"; and those of "conversion", which are essentially descriptions of an improvement process through which a character gets rid of a certain flaw (1969b: 75). Readers of Franzen's novels will surely recognize that his protagonists (Louis Holland, Chip Lambert, Walter, Patty and Joey Berglund) are invariably beset by a moral blemish, be it selfishness, hypocrisy, self-delusion or a well-nigh daemonic determination (such as for instance Walter's environmental engagement) which is obviously perceived as misguided. All of them get close to receiving irreversible punishment in the form of any of the following: utter dejection and loneliness, clinical depression, definitive estrangement from the loved ones, or even material poverty. And all of them achieve redemption through humiliation, enhanced sympathy and ethical commitment. They are in this way freed from their flaws or at least—in quintessentially novelistic fashion, as we will see—they learn to live with them. Of course, these structural models can also be applied to the narrative through which Franzen presents his literary career in the *Harper's* essay. Thus, for example, the times of dejection recounted by Franzen would correspond to Propp's twelfth function, or *first function of the donor*, whereby the hero is tested, preparing the ground for his receiving a magical agent or helper, the *donor*, a role which would in this case be performed by the encouragement received from Heath and DeLillo. If we choose to apply the less empirical and more synthetic *actantial* model of narrative devised by A. J. Greimas (1966), we see that the basic scheme also holds. In his *Sémantique Structurale*, Greimas is able to further refine Propp's analysis of narrative structure by subsuming the thirty-

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involving a change of state (all of them appearing in the same sequence), which he called *functions* (Propp 1968).

one functions into three pairs of more abstract dimensions of narrative or *actants*, a category which includes characters and situations. According to Greimas, these six actants are articulated along two axes: Sender-Subject-Receiver and Helper-Object-Opponent. According to Greimas, one actant can be realized by one or more agents and vice versa.

In this model Franzen is obviously the *subject*. The role of the *object* is split between Franzen's personal happiness and a valid form of the novel that is suited to our times. The *sender* that sets the narrative in motion is embodied by contemporary cultural decay, admittedly the cause of Franzen's depression. The *receiver* is formed by the members of the community of readers, whose supply of spiritual nourishment is further secured thanks to Franzen. But the novelist himself can be also seen as a *receiver*, inasmuch as he is the first beneficiary of a newly acquired vision which gets him out of his despondency. The *helper* is represented, as we have seen, by Heath and DeLillo. Finally, the *opponent* is realized by the hegemonic techno-consumerism inimical to literature which Franzen deplors in his essays and novels. It may be added, in this sense, that in the subsequent instalment of this narrative constituted by "Mr Difficult", the role of the *opponent* is also performed by postmodernist experimental fiction and specifically, as we know, by Gaddis, who becomes a veritable *villain* in this story.

But it is not the intention of this study to conduct a formalist or structuralist narratological study of Franzen's fiction, even though advantage is taken of categories and insight from such disciplines. To be sure, narratology has traditionally been more oriented towards the logic of formal structure than to the actual content of stories. Todorov, for one, recognized that in examining Boccaccio's compilation his goal was not "a knowledge of the *Decameron* ... but rather an understanding of literature or, in this specific instance, of plot" (1996b: 75). Obviously, the aim of this project is different. In this respect, I cannot but concur with Jameson when, in an early article (Jameson, 1970: 12) quoted by Michael J. Toolan, warns against strictly formalist approaches to literature:

Formalism is ... the basic mode of interpretation of those who refuse interpretation: at the same time it is important to stress the fact that this method finds its privileged objects in the smaller forms, in short stories or folk tales,

poems, anecdotes, in the decorative detail of larger works ... The Formalistic model is essentially synchronic, and cannot adequately deal with diachrony, either in literary history or in the form of the individual work, which is to say that formalism as a method stops short at the point where the novel as a problem begins. (Toolan, 1988: 43)

My intention then is to transcend the study of form to grasp its *content*: its social, historical, ideological and even psychological import, always bearing in mind that there is not a clear separation between form and content, as the former is always meaningful, historical and ideologically charged. With this aim it will be required to be mindful of the diachronic aspects of the novelistic form throughout our study. And since the interest of the latter is, as I explain below, ultimately political, I shall look into the political implication of Franzen's narratives of self-amelioration, which quite obviously boils down to the belief that salvation can only be individual. Similarly, we will observe that these narratives consistently end with acts of reconciliation which in the light of the theories of Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti I will interpret as symbolic resolutions of social and individual contradictions.

It should be clear that this arrangement of the narrative materials in Franzen's fiction does not reveal a kind of master plan, but rather constitutes a piecemeal series of legitimizing responses to a series of literary and ideological moves. Certainly, the novelist did not have in mind the closing of *Freedom* while he was at work with *The Twenty-Seventh City* or *Strong Motion*. It is far from my intention to forge any type of organic reading of Franzen's fiction. I am not proposing the array of salvational narratives as a *meaning* of Franzen's work which I have arrived at through some hermeneutic process. Instead, these narratives are analysed as recurrent rhetorical instruments of persuasion and ideological and political self-legitimation which are informed by a pattern that gets ever clearer after each novel. This caveat does not prevent us from noticing an obvious evolution in the way these narratives of salvation are presented, especially as regards the increasing assertiveness of their closings. This suggests that each one of Franzen's novels includes an implicit evaluation of the previous one, a circumstance which by means of accretion rather than planning gives substance to a metanarrative. The chronology of the deployment of these salvational narratives could be roughly drawn as follows: the first one appears at the end of *Strong Motion* (1988) as an escape from the dismal perspectives that characterize the ending of

*The Twenty-Seventh City*. Personal salvations, ethical commitment, melodramatic elements, reconciliations and neat dramatic closure surface in the last chapters of *Strong Motion* to rescue Franzen's second novel from ending with the same disheartening literary, social and political grimness of the first one. And just as there is no master plan, there is no manifesto either: four years after the release of *Strong Motion*, the *Harper's* essay does not document, as many critics would have it, a novelist that has resolved his stylistic and ideological contradictions, but rather one that is still wrestling with them, as Stephen J. Burn rightly claims. Burn has argued that the *Harper's* essay does not represent a successful resolution of the creative problems that plagued Franzen after the release of his second novel. He has even characterized its conclusion as a "simulated epiphany". In his words, "Perchance to Dream" "charts the resolution of an aesthetic problem that Franzen had not really resolved and did not resolve for several more years" (Burn, 2008: 50). Burn is quite right here. Our disagreement with Burn lies in his resistance to considering the ideological dimension of Franzen's "aesthetic problem". At any rate, the hybrid and contradictory quality of *The Corrections*, released five years later, would be proof enough of those uncertainties. But in that novel the shift of focus with respect to the previous ones is so pronounced that, as a result, the salvational and reconciliatory elements must acquire centrality and the legitimating effect over Franzen's move must be more intense, as the biographical narrative of Chip Lambert sharply illustrates. The success of *The Corrections* prompts critics to turn their attention to the *Harper's* essay and to interpret it as a literary declaration of principles which came to be realized with Franzen's third novel. However, it is actually with the publication of "Mr Difficult" in 2002 that Franzen's strategy of legitimation becomes clear, in an essay which even includes an explicit justification of narrative choices. Finally, again after nearly a decade, Franzen's metanarrative reaches its culmination with *Freedom*. As we shall see, this novel, which includes an implicit but vehement apology of liberalism, constitutes Franzen's ultimate element of legitimation of his abandonment of radicalism and of his relinquishment of initiatives aimed towards the transformation of the public sphere. Fittingly enough, the rotund, melodramatic way in which the novel's characters finally attain salvation through reconciliation represents the real closure of Franzen's narrative of conversion.

In this introduction to Franzen's rhetorical devices of self-justification, we should not leave unmentioned another, secondary but conspicuous, self-legitimizing

strategy that recurs in his non-fiction essays and even in his novels since *The Corrections*, namely a strikingly aggressive denigration of critical and literary theory. The rejection of a critical theory seen as essentially phony in favour of the ethical commitment to the close, substantial community of the family is of course enacted by Chip Lambert in *The Corrections*. In a more subtle way, it can also be perceived in the failure of Walter Berglund's radical environmentalist views in *Freedom*. More recently, Franzen has dwelled on the subject in different essays. For example, in his 2011 address at Kenyon College "Pain Won't Kill You":

The first thing we jettisoned was theory. As my soon-to-be wife once memorably remarked, after an unhappy scene in bed, "You can't deconstruct and undress at the same time." ... But what really killed theory for me—and began to cure me, more generally, of my obsession with how I appeared to other people—was my love of fiction ... if you really love fiction, you'll find that the only pages worth keeping are the ones that reflect you *as you really are*. (Franzen, 2012: 10, my emphasis)

Similarly, in his essay "On Autobiographical Fiction," compiled in the same volume, Franzen directs mordant remarks to Harold Bloom and his theory of poetic influence (Franzen, 2012: 121). In fact, the execration of theory has come to be so frequent in Franzen's work that its motives seem to go beyond the obvious wariness of criticism on the part of a novelist who invariably seeks to be interpreted in his own terms.<sup>4</sup> Several reasons of consequence may be discerned behind this animosity. The most evident one is that postmodernist fiction, especially at its most experimental, seems indissolubly linked to theory: it is usually written by novelists of remarkable theoretical awareness and tends to be the object of study of academic critics who apply to it their abstruse theoretical apparatuses. More often than not, postmodernist novels are difficult readings that are highly regarded at elitist academic circles. They constitute then the embodiment of the "Status" type of fiction which Franzen fiercely attacks in "Mr Difficult". We should remember that Franzen is also a novelist with a high degree of theoretical training and that this fact was very evident in his first two novels. Critical theory is therefore part of the object of Franzen's disavowal. In his religious analogy Rebein likens Franzen to a reformer, but he could just as well have chosen the figure of

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<sup>4</sup> We may remember, as an instance of Franzen's attempts to shape the public image of his work, that in the *Harper's* essay he proposes his own critical term to define it: *tragic realism* (Franzen, 2002: 91).

the convert, usually characterized by heightened hostility towards the old faith. But there are other, perhaps subtler, motivations for his open rejection of theory. For one, critical theory stands for radicalness. To be sure, much critical theory, especially the different kinds of negative criticism developed in the wake of post-structuralist thought, is characterized by a kind of abstract rigour and a relentless quality that, as Franzen no doubt suspects, cannot but pose a threat for the political liberalism he has embraced and its traditional tendency towards compromise. Franzen's antipathy towards theory then would amount to a sort of pre-emptive strike.<sup>5</sup> However, Franzen's proposed substitute for out-and-out theory, a sort of common-sense, natural, or, to use his own term, "Contract" approach to literature, clearly amounts to just another kind of theory—an implicit theory which, like hegemonic ideologies, seeks to come through as the natural, non-ideological way to see things. In this, Franzen's attitude recalls that of those literary critics who present their work as non-ideological. As Terry Eagleton puts it, "the power of ideology over them is nowhere more marked than in their honest belief that their readings are 'innocent'" (Eagleton, 1996: 173). There is no literary theory that is not ideological or political, as all of them involve a series of explicit and implicit assumptions about what is meaningful or valuable or desirable in the real world. And so is the case with Franzen's tacit one. Indeed, Franzen's *theory* is inseparable from his own narrative of conversion and the salvational narratives of his novels and it can be viewed as one more instrument of self-legitimation.

### **1.3. Theoretical coordinates and critical procedures.**

For this study of course theory has a very different meaning. If Franzen is adept at presenting theory as ineffective speculation that gets in the way between the subject and the world, in this book theory is seen as precisely the instrument that allows us to trace the complex relationships between the literary work and the world of which it forms part. Jonathan Franzen is avowedly a writer of social concerns who conceives of the novel as having a performative power worthy of what used to be known as social engagement. Indeed, much of the discussion of Franzen's work—including his own

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<sup>5</sup> Franzen's attitude recalls Paul De Man's account of the sense of threat aroused within the literary establishment by the new approaches to literature that came into being during the 1960s and subsequently informed the protean field of literary theory (De Man, 1986: 7). Among the reasons behind this alarming quality of theory identified by De Man there is one that seems particularly relevant here: "It upsets rooted ideologies by revealing the mechanics of their workings" (1986: 11).

contribution to it in his essays—turns around the old concept of the social novel: the degree to which Franzen’s production corresponds to that concept, the viability of a socially engaged novel in our time, or the (de)merits of this type of fiction as opposed to other genres of supposedly more private preoccupations (see for example Wood 2001a). This means that we will be concerned, to put it very briefly, with issues regarding the way in which novels reflect society and the way in which society receives novels. And in this approach to Franzen’s work, the Marxist critical tradition has proved to be the best equipped to highlight the social and political dimensions of the novelistic genre. As Jameson has put it, “there is nothing that is not social and historical ... everything is, ‘in the last analysis’ political” (Jameson, 2002: 5). Of course, not all the authors on whose theoretical work we have relied can be inscribed in that tradition, but the awareness of the social character of literature is common to all of them. As will be evident, in this study the work of Fredric Jameson has been central in its three most significant aspects: I have been inspired by Jameson as the leading analyst of the reflection of our mode of production in contemporary culture, as an investigator of realism, and as a fundamental theorist of narrative.

Jameson (in 2009: 44 and 2002: 60-61) has proposed a model of critical interpretation conducted within three concentric frameworks of analysis which are intended to restore the full historical and political significance of a literary work. The objective is to produce a semantic enrichment and enlargement of the apparently inert givens and materials that form the social and historical ground of a particular text. These three levels of analysis can be described as follows: 1) In the first place, the examination of punctual historical events belonging to the realm of political history. 2) Secondly, the evocation of larger class and ideological conflicts and traditions; 3) Finally, our attention should be directed to impersonal socio-economic patterning systems brought about by the evolution of the mode of production (e.g. reification and commodification) as they are reflected in the text. Additionally, for Jameson the treatment of agency in the literary work should be mapped across these three levels. In many respects, my reading of Franzen’s novels abides by these principles: 1) Regarding the first level of Jameson’s approach, this study traces in the novels world-historical episodes such as the decay of American cities, the cold war, the fall of the socialist bloc, the Iraq War, the latest financial crisis, the advance of globalization, and other which together constitute the immediate external historical context of the novels and as such

contribute to their meaning in an important way. 2) With respect of Jameson's second level, different aspects of Franzen's social perspective are examined, such as his vindication of his particular vision of the middle class; his views on gentrification; his use of distinction as a social marker; the class antagonism behind his support of environmentalism, which is also perceptible in his take on the so-called culture wars; or his yearning for class reconciliation in his own terms. 3) As for larger issues related to the mode of production, for example, an account is provided for Franzen's views on the decline of communities and the advance of individualism and social fragmentation; the contemporary weakening of historical thought is addressed; the component of Utopian thought perceivable in Franzen's work is analysed, including Utopian aspects of his environmentalism; Franzen's tackle of globalization (which entails a new awareness of the mode of production that can be observed in *The Corrections*) is also examined. As far as agency is concerned, I look into Franzen's vision of an apathetic society in his first and second novels; I probe his pessimistic vision of activism in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*; and, finally, I consider his general tendency towards ideological conformism.

### **1.3.1. Socially symbolic narratives.**

Arguably no other contemporary critic has been more penetrating than Jameson in tracing the relation between form and ideology, as well as that between the latter and the mode of production. One perceptible consequence of his influence on my approach to Franzen's work is the attention paid to the way in which the mode of production manifests itself in it. The following case will illustrate our procedure. The current stage of capitalism corresponds to its purest and most homogeneous expression to date, as previously extant "enclaves of socio-economic difference" (Jameson, 2009: 43) have been already colonized or commodified. One consequence of this is the universalization of what the critic has famously called the cultural logic of late capitalism. As Perry Anderson has succinctly put it, "Jameson construes the postmodern as the stage in capitalism development when culture becomes in effect coextensive with the economy" (Anderson, 1998: 119). For Jameson, this situation has entailed an enfeebled sense of history and a resistance to totalizing thought. This circumstance has a crucial importance in my assessment of Franzen's use of realism, which is of course a central issue in this study. In this sense, I have learned from Erich Auerbach and Mikhail

Bakhtin that realism is a trans-historical category with historical materializations to be studied in social and ideological, rather than merely stylistic terms. In Ian Duncan's words, "[r]ealism is not a revelation of nature but a rhetoric and an ideology" (Duncan, 1992: 6). To Auerbach and György Lukács I also owe the notion that no true realism is possible without a sense of history and a dynamic vision of society as formed by different groups with transformative potential. This conception has crucial implications when we bring it to the analysis of much contemporary fiction, including Franzen's, which is implicitly informed by typically contemporary ideas about the end of history. Jameson has identified the decline of historical thought as one of the traits of the culture of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991: *ix*), and, as is known, the collapse of the soviet bloc was accompanied by enthusiast proclamations of the end of history (see Fukuyama 1992). However, it is interesting to note that in *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács observed already in 1920 a similar impasse in bourgeois thought. This would suggest that the sense of historical closure is a constant in hegemonic ideologies such as the bourgeois:

At this point bourgeois thought must come up against an insuperable obstacle, for its starting-point and its goal are always, if not always consciously, an apologia for the existing order of things or at least the proof of their immutability. "Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any", Marx observes with reference to bourgeois economics, a dictum which applies with equal force to all attempts by bourgeois thinkers to understand the process of history (It has often been pointed out that this is also one of the defects of Hegel's philosophy of history). As a result, while bourgeois thought is indeed able to conceive of history as a problem, it remains an *intractable* problem. (Lukács, 1967: n.pag.)

In contrast, for Auerbach, as for Lukács, the ability to think the present in historical terms is a precondition of the realist novel. However, such ability has come to be increasingly rare in our postmodern times. This entails a painful situation for novelists of a progressive persuasion such as Franzen: a closed horizon of events that precludes the possibility of imagining a radically different future for society; a total immersion in the ideology of late capitalism which presents what is the product of historical contingency as the natural state of affairs for good. Indeed, Jameson has often pointed out, it has become far easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of

capitalism or bourgeois society, as innumerable products of contemporary mass culture prove.

With this we have come to a central point in my analysis of Franzen's fiction, which is the examination of its Utopian content. We believe, with Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson, that even in the cultural artefacts more rigidly constrained by dominant ideology there can be found Utopian content which is the expression of latent emancipatory impulses. Jameson has vindicated the study of Utopian thought as part of a revival of negative ideological criticism which is especially pertinent in contemporary bourgeois society:

Attenuation of the Oedipus complex, disappearance of the class struggle, assimilation of revolt to an entertainment-type value—these are the forms which the disappearance of the negative takes in the abundant society of postindustrial capitalism. Under these conditions, the task of the philosopher is the revival of the very idea of negation which has all but been extinguished under the universal subservience to what is; which, along with the concepts of nature and freedom, has been repressed and driven underground by the reality principle. This task Marcuse formulates as the revival of the Utopian impulse. For where in the older society (as in Marx's classic analysis) Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions, in our own time the very nature of the Utopian concept has undergone a dialectical reversal. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself, and stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform even its adversaries into its own mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is. (Jameson, 1974: 110-111)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> My analysis of Utopian content in Franzen's fiction is mainly informed by the work of Fredric Jameson, who, in turn, elaborates on the theory of Ernest Bloch. The latter's magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*, has been translated into English (see Works Cited) but, as a work of remarkable length and difficulty, its influence has been limited. For an introduction to Bloch's thought see Kellner 2010. From another point of view, since my working concept of this kind of thought is dependent on Bloch and Jameson, I keep their spelling with capital U. In the same way, capital E for *Event* is used in this study when the term is utilized in the special sense given to it by Badiou.

In this way, Franzen's first and second novels are dominated by the weight of a blocked future that shows in their collapsing endings. In both novels the conclusion seems to disavow the perspectives of hope that their plotlines had previously opened. In *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* we can find two evoked possibilities of political rupture, two potential Events, in the sense given to the term by Alain Badiou, which eventually turn out to be pseudo-events. But independently of the actual outcome of these potentialities, their simple presence in the novels is a symptom of what Jameson has called a "hunger for the sheer event" (Jameson, 1991: 309), a disposition which undoubtedly has a strong Utopian charge. Consequently, I analyse as Utopian content plot elements like the Indian conspiracy of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the earthquake provoked by secret corporate malfeasance in *Strong Motion*, or the activism which manages to uncover the latter. Although ongoing political issues (e.g. globalization, neocon hegemony, the Iraq war) also occupy an important place in Franzen's subsequent two novels, in them the novelist refrains from evoking acts of systemic rupture and concentrates instead on narratives of personal salvation within the realm of the family. This kind of substitution of private for public salvation, a pattern which as we know actually starts at the end of *Strong Motion*, can be interpreted in the light of the discomfiture caused by the frustration of the implied political potentialities of the first and second novels—a frustration which the hegemonic ideology of late capitalism compels to appear as well-nigh compulsory. This is, however, a dissatisfaction also invested with Utopian significance and, following the conceptualization by Bloch and Jameson of the ideological and the Utopian as dialectically related, we can identify a sublimated Utopian drive in Franzen's advocated retreat to the small communities of family and lovers. Similarly, we can also trace Utopian implications in Franzen's treatment of nature in his early novels: his fondness for the drawing of deserted natural spaces reflects the yearning for an outside to the all-encompassing system of late capitalism.

At this point it seems fitting that a theoretical tenet that has been crucial in my approach to Franzen's fiction is specified, namely Jameson's notion of a political unconscious of literature. In his fundamental *The Political Unconscious* (1981) the American theorist argues that "all literature, no matter how weakly, must be informed by what we have called a political unconscious, that all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community" (Jameson, 2002: 56). Jameson

proceeds to apply his argument to the study of narrative and predicates of the latter the character of a symbolic act aimed at the resolution of unsolvable social—or ideological, we may add—contradictions. The idea brings its own hermeneutics with it. In the critic's own words, "the will to read literary or cultural acts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions" (2002: 66). This kind of criticism is necessarily ideological, as it concentrates on the ideological dimension of artistic production:

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions. (Jameson, 2002: 64)

Following this principle we will observe that Franzen's novels stage a retreat from a public sphere perceived as intractable into the small community of the family. The latter is to be sure a realm turbulent enough but, as his novels reflect, in contrast with what seems to be the norm in the public sphere, reconciliation and peace can be finally attained within the family. With this move, Franzen opens a symbolic space in which deplored historical facts are not quite irreparable or definitive and ideological contradictions not so unsurmountable. Of course, this symbolic strategy is an ideological act that implies that there is no room for collective emancipation and then salvation can only be individual. This is the path signalled by the reconciliatory ending of *Strong Motion* and is then unfalteringly followed and developed in Franzen's subsequent novels.

Given that ideology is a central concern of this study, it is probably necessary to stop to specify here that my conception of it derives mainly from the work of Louis Althusser, the thinker who in the 1960s brought to Marxism the new views and procedures of French post-structuralist thought. Althusser incorporated a new dimension taken mostly from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory to the classic Marxist concept of ideology as "false consciousness", or the misrepresentation of the real workings of the capitalist system. The particularities of Althusser's notion of ideology may be briefly illustrated by his famous (re)definition of it as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 2008: 36). In

contrast with previous accounts of ideology, Althusser places a double remove between the subject and the *real* conditions of existence, which are not only imagined but, following Lacan, can never be really grasped since our access to them is mediated by language and the *symbolic order* we inhabit. This notion of ideology can also be traced, with logical individual differences, in the work of some of the theorists who have influenced this study, such as Jameson, Eagleton, Žižek or Laclau and Mouffe.

The other theoretical source of my conception of the novel as a symbolic form can be found in *The Way of the World* (1987), Franco Moretti's classic study of the *Bildungsroman*, where its author proposes a view of the novel as a symbolic device comparable to Jameson's. This perception will be fundamental as well in my analysis of Franzen's work. For Moretti, the novel is also a symbolic artefact which tends to the assuagement of social and psychological conflicts, particularly those arising from the individual's need for self-determination and the commanding demands of socialization. But if for Jameson the novel enacts symbolic resolutions of social contradictions, for Moretti it rather teaches us how to live with them, and holds social reconciliation and the protection of the Ego as ultimate ends. For Moretti, the history of the *Bildungsroman* constitutes

a constant elusion of historical turning points and breaks: an elusion of tragedy and hence, as Lukács wrote in *Soul and Forms*, of the very idea that societies and individuals acquire their full meaning in 'a moment of truth.'

An elusion, we may conclude, of whatever may endanger the Ego's equilibrium, making its compromises impossible—and a gravitation, in contrast, to those modes of existence that allow the Ego to manifest itself fully." (Moretti, 2000: 12)

As in liberal politics, mitigation, rather than radical or transforming measures, is the key for the novel's symbolic function—and accordingly compromise is its recurring theme. Moretti's theory will then help us understand Franzen's incorporation of elements from the *Bildungsroman* in his novels, his penchant for acts of reconciliation and, especially in his last novel, his clear rejection of radicalism, his eulogy of liberalism, and his general embrace of compromise. This is the sense, for example, of Walter Berglund's abandonment of his most radical environmentalist views regarding population control and his final acceptance of the conflicts of his family life.

The problem with this kind of rhetorical or thematic operations conducive to the defusing of conflicts is that they tend to go accompanied by ideological implications that will not be acknowledged by the novelist or, to be more precise, by the novel itself. This fact brings us to another key theoretical source for this study, namely the pioneering work of Pierre Macherey. Even if his work is not as openly present in this book as that of Jameson, in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), the French critic has provided this project with a distinctive perspective into Franzen's fiction which has also proved crucial. In fact, the critical approaches of both Macherey and Jameson are easily complementary. In some respects, certain insights of the former look like a precedent of key issues later expanded by the latter. This is the case of their views on the ideological value of inherited forms, discussed below, or their notion of an "unconscious of the work" (Macherey, 1989: 92). In this sense, I have tried to follow the critic's injunction to tackle and bring to light that which the work cannot say because it would threaten the ideological tenets that brought it into existence in the first place, but which is nevertheless inevitably implied by it. Macherey clarifies however that this analysis should not be equated to a deconstruction or demystification of the work, but as "the production of a new knowledge; the enunciation of its silent significance" (1989: 150). As he elaborates:

In fact, a true analysis does not remain within its object, paraphrasing what has already been said; analysis confronts the silences, the denials, and the resistance in the object—not that compliant implied discourse which offers itself to discovery, but the condition which makes the work possible, which precedes the work so absolutely that it cannot be found in the work. (1989: 150)

Some examples of what Franzen's novels resist recognizing or showing are the following: the reality of class struggle and the novelist's own partaking in it; the ongoing collective emancipatory fights and, accordingly, his own abandonment of that prospect—what, to use Badiou's term, we could call his *unfaithfulness* to the old ideal of emancipation; the reality of class domination that underlies Franzen's liberalism; the failure of the latter to cope with pressing social contradictions, the obviously class-ridden character of his environmentalism; the inherent contradiction between his scientism and his Utopian visions of nature; the limits of sympathy and reconciliation, whose healing properties, both in the individual and social domains, are vested with rather unrealistic powers in Franzen's novels. These ideological contradictions coexist

more or less easily in Franzen's first novel, unabashedly radical and open-ended. But they become more acute, and paradoxically more readily perceptible within our critical approach, as he tries ever more forcibly to conceal them by means of the closing powers of narrative and the soothing elements brought from *Bildungsroman*, romance and melodrama. We could say that in *Freedom* they finally become glaring, they just will not let themselves be smoothed out. Therefore, my critical task has not been to gloss any kind of unity or organic quality in Franzen's work, but rather to recognize its transformations and contradictions. As Roland Barthes argues in *S / Z*, we should assume "the multivalence of the text, its partial reversibility" (Barthes, 1974: 20).<sup>7</sup> Therefore my discovery of a linear rhetorical strategy of legitimation across Franzen's novels should not be taken as a sort of unitary reading which reconciles contradictions. Instead, what I have called the narrative of conversion actually amounts to Franzen's attempt to hold together his multifarious and contradictory formal and ideological materials by virtue of the meaning-conferring powers of narrative.

### **1.3.2. The question of realism: clarifying terms.**

So far it will probably be clear that the issue of realism has a prominent place in the discussion of Franzen's fiction: the true extent of his commitment to either postmodernism or realism, the contour of Franzen's evolution towards realism, the political implications of each narrative mode, etc., are to be sure central concerns in our study. However, in the survey of Franzen's reception included in this book we can realize that media reviewers, and even academics, have tended to use the term in rather a-critical, superficial or partial ways. For example, influential critics such as James Wood or Robert Rebein have identified realism solely with a greater emphasis on the description of character and locale (in opposition to postmodernism's alleged lack of interest on these aspects of narrative), ignoring thus its innate and inseparable social dimension. In general, most critics have handled this highly complex concept as if it were self-explanatory. It seemed to me then that if realism was going to be a pivotal category in the study of Franzen's work, I should try to clarify it first. Consequently, I have devoted a chapter of this dissertation to the study of realism as embodied in the

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<sup>7</sup> As the French critic argues, "if the text is subject to some form, this form is not unitary, architectonic, finite: it is the fragment, the shards, the broken or obliterated network—all the movements and inflections of a vast 'dissolve', which permits both overlapping and loss of messages" (Barthes, 1974: 20).

realist novel, so as to restore the richness, depth and historicity of the concept before its utilization in the analysis of Franzen's fiction. One of the results of this preliminary study has been the dismissal of what we see as stereotyped binary oppositions between realism and postmodernism (especially those involving the cliché of realism's linguistic or epistemological naivety). Another has been the crucial realization that realism is, ultimately, a political concept. Generally speaking, my research has yielded a picture of Franzen's stylistic evolution which is far more complex than the simplistic outline—to a great extent based on Franzen's own account of it—which his critics usually operate with. As we have seen, Franzen's own narrative of conversion holds that the period of personal crisis recounted in the *Harper's* essay concluded in a sort of revelation which involved discarding postmodernism, the narrative mode he had used in his early novels—and which, according to the novelist, had turned into sterile literary pyrotechnics, to adopt a much more congenial and reader-oriented realism. According to the narrative, this was proved by Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections*. In contrast, I have been somewhat reluctant to concur with the opinion that Franzen wrote two wholehearted postmodernist novels. For us *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* are obviously influenced by certain American postmodernist novelists, especially Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. In emulation of these masters, Franzen adopts the typically postmodernist format of the Systems novel (LeClair 1987) and the also characteristically postmodernist conspiratorial theme. Yet he uses these elements in very particular ways that point in the direction of the classic realist novel, rather than towards postmodernist fiction. Partly due to unsolvable ideological contradictions, in his third novel Franzen re-directs his focus towards family-oriented matters (which were already a significant concern in his fiction). He also drops typically postmodernist traits such as the use of conspiracies, the structural irony or the low emotional temperature that corresponds to a characterization technique less based on sympathy. However, rather than as a realist novel, I see *The Corrections* as a hybrid text in which Franzen's postmodernist influences, especially DeLillo's, are still perceptible. And rather than an endorsement of true realism, I discern in that novel the adoption of elements from romance, *Bildungsroman* and melodrama which, although not historically uncommon in the realist novel, are not properly realist (a move already observable at the end of *Strong Motion*, as we have seen). The approach to Franzen's work through the lens of a fuller concept of realism generates then a more complicated account of the former, one which does not lend itself easily to the application of generalizing labels. But this is, from my

point of view, the most productive move. This contention includes the efforts made by other critics such as Robert McLaughlin (2004) or Stephen J. Burn (2008) who devote a considerable amount of conceptual energy to putting together the shaky notion of narrative post-postmodernism into which they include Franzen's work. In the end, the pertinence of this approach is shown by the fact that the study of realism has brought to the fore issues which have proved to be fundamental in my interpretation of the novels.

### **1.3.3. Realism, contingency and the weight of inherited forms.**

One of the key aspects of the realist novel which we have brought to bear in our analysis of Franzen's fiction is the attitude towards contingency. From the young Lukács we have taken the vision of the novel as a response to a de-sacralised world marked by contingency (Lukács, 2006c: 70). In fact, contingency, can be taken to be a mark of true realism—what Moretti has referred to as a sort of compulsory meaninglessness (Moretti, 2000: 120). This notion has important bearings in the study of Franzen's fiction, as it comes to complicate—once again—the common conception of Franzen's first novel. In this sense, *The Twenty-Seventh City* is usually considered as the most clearly postmodernist, and hence the least realist, of Franzen's novels. Granted, there is in the novel a conscious attempt to adopt some of the trappings of the classic American postmodernist novel: conspiracy, concern with *the System*, unrelenting irony. Yet, following Moretti this study focuses on its worldview characterized precisely by contingency; on its deliberate avoiding of not only a happy end but any kind of reassuring closure; and other characteristics such as its aspiration to the rendering of social totality, which is discussed below, to claim for this novel a nucleus of realism which is diluted in Franzen's subsequent work. But we should not forget that, in fact, pure, unalloyed realism is rare. Therefore, just as the realist novel incorporated parts of the non-realist genres which it had destroyed in the course of its historical development, such as romance, melodrama or *Bildungsroman*, in his subsequent novels Franzen includes non-realistic ingredients from those same genres so as to escape the truly depressing conclusion of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. In this way, from *Strong Motion* on we find in Franzen's novels recognizable melodramatic plot sequences such as the one formed by the *courting / falling in love / adultery / estrangement / reconciliation of lovers* in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*. There are

picaresque episodes such as those which can be found in many novels of formation, as is exemplified by the participation of Chip Lambert and Joey Berglund in different swindles and deceives in *The Corrections* and *Freedom* respectively. We can also observe the traditional romance-novelistic motif of the rise or fall of social class in all four novels. Of course, pride of place is reserved for the biographical pattern that takes characters from selfishness, self-deception and illusions of grandeur, through the humbling illumination produced by the clash with reality, to a kind of moral coming of age which, like in a *Bildungsroman*, involves an equilibrium between individual needs and social integration—an integration whose only valid starting point for Franzen seems to be the family. It is the case of Louis Holland, Chip Lambert, and Walter, Patty and Joey Berglund. Here we may remember Eagleton's remark apropos of the persistence of disguised elements of romance in the nineteenth-century English novel, as it seems to fit Franzen's fiction just as well: "In fact, nothing less than the magical devices of romance will do if, like the Victorian novelist, you are going to conjure a happy ending from the refractory problems of the modern world" (Eagleton, 2005: 2-3).

But these structural components are not ideologically neutral. On the contrary, in this regard they have, so to speak, an autonomous life of their own. As I have advanced above, Macherey showed that these formal elements, like the linguistic sign for Bakhtin, carry an ideological weight that is independent of the author's intention and is not completely dissolved in that of the new work:

The writer, as the producer of a text, does not manufacture the materials with which he works. Neither does he stumble across them as spontaneously available wandering fragments, useful in the building of any sort of edifice; they are not neutral transparent components which have the grace to vanish, to disappear into the totality they contribute to, giving it substance and adopting its forms. (...) They have a sort of specific weight, a peculiar power, which means that even when they are used and blended into a totality they retain a certain autonomy; and they may, in some cases resume their particular life. Not because there is some absolute and transcendent logic of aesthetic facts, but because their real inscription in a history of forms means that they cannot be defined exclusively by their immediate function in a specific work. (Macherey, 1989: 41-42)

Jameson has argued in a similar way when discussing the ideological import of inherited structural elements: “inherited narrative paradigms, conventional actantial or proairetic schemata” (Jameson, 2002: 137), which constitute “narrative unities of a socially symbolic type” or *ideologemes* (2002: 172). One of the keys of our study rests on the interpretation of these ideologically charged formal and generic components.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these structural components do not only comprise plot elements. Rather they can be found at all levels of the literary work. Especially important is the construction of characters, which usually has significant implications of class discourse. It is the case, for example, of Franzen’s frequent presentation of working-class characters as hostile, anti-intellectual and politically reactionary. In any case, the presence of these forms, which Macherey designates as *themes*, is not necessarily obvious or easy to trace, as they are subject to a sort of historical transformation that modifies their formal properties and ideological value. As Macherey puts it:

[t]hese forms do not exist in the mode of an immediate presence: they can survive beyond the moment of their usefulness, and it will be seen that this poses a very serious problem; they can be revived, in which case they will have undergone a slight but crucial change in value which must be determined. In fact, these forms do not appear instantaneously but at the end of a long history—a history of the elaboration of ideological themes. The history of forms—which will subsequently designated as *themes*, in the strict sense of the word—corresponds to the history of ideological themes; indeed they are exactly parallel, as can easily be demonstrated with the history of any idea (...) The form takes shape or changes in response to new imperatives of the idea: but it is also capable of independent transformations, or of an inertia, which bends the path of ideological history. (1989: 91)

In this sense, for example, we do not find in Franzen’s fiction the most evident recurring structural elements that Northrop Frye identifies as constitutive of the genre of secular romance in Hellenistic adventure narratives: “stories of mysterious birth,

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<sup>8</sup> The term *proairetic* was introduced by Barthes in *S / Z* (1970), his structuralist analysis of Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine*. In this study, Barthes proposes five structural and semantic dimensions or *codes* whereby texts are constituted. Two of them are especially relevant for the study of narrative: the hermeneutic code, a set of practices that drive the narrative forward by creating an enigma which generates suspense until it is disclosed; and the simplest code of all, the proairetic, which makes reference to the sequences of actions and events that occur in the text (Barthes, 1974: 18-19).

oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine” (Frye, 1976: 4). We do find, however, some of its modern-day equivalents in the actantial elements of Franzen’s novels. In this way, in Franzen’s novels we can observe recurrent narrow escapes from punishment, as we have seen. There is also a clear narrative pattern formed by a sequence of recognitions: the epiphany-like recognition (or ἀναγνώρισις, in its classical formulation) by the hero of his true self in the first place is followed by—or presented as simultaneous to—his recognition of his closest other(s), a development heretofore prevented by the hero’s egocentric self-delusion, and finally by the recognition of the hero by the members of a small community which is usually that of his family.<sup>9</sup> As in traditional romance, reconciliation is a fundamental ingredient in Franzen’s novels, where we can find acts of reconciliation of lovers and spouses, parents and their offspring, estranged friends, etc. In fact, such reconciliation is presented as *salvation* for the hero and as such is the culmination of the narrative, as it is obvious in the endings of *Strong Motion*, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. And it is this salvational element in Franzen’s narratives that is the most distinctively related to romance. We have already advanced that a defining characteristic of romance narratives is their orientation towards salvation or redemption. As Jameson has synthetically put it in his examination of Frye’s theory of romance:

Romance is for Frye a wish-fulfillment or utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced. (Jameson, 2002: 96-7)

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<sup>9</sup> We are using masculine reference here because in Franzen’s novels the hero of this narrative pattern is typically a male protagonist: Louis Holland, Chip Lambert, Walter and Joey Berglund. What is then the role in this scheme of two superbly etched female characters such as Renée Seitchek and Patty Berglund? If we draw again on Greimas’ actantial model, from the point of view of the male hero we may regard both female protagonists as Helpers that are necessary for the attainment of the hero’s Object, which is redemption and happiness. It should be noticed that here being *necessary* does not imply becoming a mere *instrument*, as in this case the Object is inseparable of the Helper. Of course, Renée and Patty are the Heroines of their own narratives, which are virtually identical to those of their masculine counterparts in terms of their actantial structure. However, the *focalization* of Franzen’s narrative accompanies for longer the point of view of their male heroes in the *récit*, to use Genette’s terms, and thus the stories of Renée, Patty, and also Denise Lambert, are on the whole less developed than those of Louis, Chip and Walter. That being said, we should remember that the point of view of Patty Berglund is given centrality during a considerable stretch of the text by means of a curious and somewhat archaizing plot device: an inserted biographical narrative presented as written by the character at the suggestion of her therapist.

This is certainly a definition of romance which is consistent with the interpretation of Franzen's salvational narratives advanced in this book. But once the form is identified, as Macherey suggests, the ascription of its ideological import should not be an automatic, straightforward affair. On the contrary, it is to be carefully and individually examined. As regards the case under consideration here, there is no such thing as a single, historically invariable ideological value of romance. As both Frye (1971: 304-5) and Jameson (2002: 91) have recognized, the fact that romance is a form driven by wish-fulfilment implies a measure of unstable political ambiguity, which opens the possibility for it to become a vehicle for the expression of the desire for social change. Besides, romance is unconcerned with the creation of true-to-life and historically dimensioned characters and settings, unlike the realist novel, which frees it from the inherent ontological conservatism of the latter.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Franzen's fiction, however, the function performed by romance is typically more soothing. For Franzen, romance is the instrument that allows him to transcend social and ideological contradictions that he is unable or unwilling to confront and thus attain the bliss of social and personal reconciliation. It is the means by which he seeks to impose the comforting and meaningful closure of narrative upon a world, the fallen, contingent world evoked by Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), which stubbornly resists any closure. It is, in short, the means whereby he manages to shun Sartrean *viscosities*. In any case, no one should be shocked by the realization of Franzen's leaning towards romance, or by the way he blends it with the analytical procedures of realism. After all, as Moretti (2000) and Duncan (1992) have noted (albeit each one with his own different valuation of the fact), romance is at the spine of the great tradition of the English nineteenth-century novel, which not only includes the more openly sentimental fiction by Dickens but also the ambitious, comprehensive social analyses of Eliot. In fact, Duncan goes as far as to claim that the best achievement of British prose fiction should be credited to romance, rather than to the novel as such (Duncan, 1992: 3).

#### **1.3.4. Realism, totality and late capitalism.**

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<sup>10</sup> In Frye's words: "It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine and villain respectively. That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks" (Frye, 1971: 304).

As we have advanced, contingency is not the only realist attribute exhibited by Franzen's first novel. As Peter Brooks (2005) has shown, the realist novel is typically characterized by an explanatory vocation which is the result of its rise in the middle of a frantically changing world and the need for its readers to make sense of it. The typically urban worlds (re)created by the realist novel can be regarded, according to Brooks as small-scale models built with the aim of gaining better knowledge of their real-size referent. This function is evident at first sight in the clear topographical quality of *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, realized in the abundance of visual renditions (including maps and aerial views) of actually existing places. But, perhaps more importantly, we may find the analytico-pedagogical calling of realism in the investigation into the workings of the system, synthetically reflected in one city, which *The Twenty-Seventh City* constitutes. Similarly, at the heart of *Strong Motion* lies a true quest for understanding of the systemic processes that shape our world and influence people's lives—an endeavour symbolized by the scientifically driven activism of its indefatigable heroine Renée Seitchek. And, we should also notice, this analytical impulse is characterized by a globalizing scope which is unabashedly influenced by Marxist theory, as can be perceived with special clarity in *Strong Motion*. Certainly the belief that the world can be analysed and made intelligible, possibly related to his declared interest in science, is a distinctive mark of Franzen's fiction which is consistent with the traditional demystifying impulse of realism (see Jameson, 2002: 138). We cannot think otherwise in sight of the way he renders the economic dynamics of late capitalism in *The Corrections*. Shunning the allegories of elusive conspiratorial networks of mysterious undergrounds, unaccountable transnational corporations and obscure government agencies that writers such as Pynchon and DeLillo have turned into a mainstay of the American postmodernist novel, Franzen describes the economic processes of globalization in down-to-earth terms of governmental de-regulation, privatization, outsourcing, speculation, and corporate greed, which are far from unknowable or undecidable. In the chapter dedicated to *The Corrections* I argue that globalization (as later the 2008 global financial crisis) has brought about a sort of *de-familiarization* of capitalism that has stimulated its systematic, totalizing study in ways which have rendered conspiratorial views of totality outdated. Although Franzen's flare for globalizing focus was present in his novels from the beginning, it seems clear that it is *The Corrections* the one that benefits the most from the new awareness of global interconnection.

Franzen's globalizing approach to social reality and his obvious interest in demystification can be regarded as part of what for Lukács was an indispensable feature of the realist novel: its vocation for the description of *totality*. For the Hungarian critic, the aspiration for totality, for the rendering of the synchronous interrelation of social events across social groups, and for the account of the mediating social circumstances on individual acts, should be the guiding principle of the realist artist, the one which will invest her work with depth. There can be few other notions more discredited by post-structuralist thought than that of totality. Yet abstract totalizing thought is necessary to see through the confusion of immediacy, that is, the overwhelming variety of social epiphenomena we are incessantly confronted with and eventually achieve some sort of effective agency. This brings us again to Jameson and his analysis of the cultural manifestations of the mode of production. As we have seen, for the critic, our time is characterized by a resistance to totalizing thought not only at a broadly cultural level, but also at the more specific of critical theory. In Jameson's view, this distrust of totality characteristic of a postmodernism usually focused on difference and margins is due to a misconception. For him, totality can be basically made of differences and still constitute a system: "the notion that there is something misguided and contradictory about a unified theory of differentiation also rests on a confusion between levels of abstraction: a system that constitutively produces differences remains a system" (Jameson, 2009: 37). In accordance with his belief in the social determination of thought, Jameson interrogates the conditions of possibility of totalizing thought ("Why is it that the 'concepts of totality' have seem necessary and unavoidable at certain historical moments, and on the contrary noxious and unthinkable at others." [2009: 39]), and concludes that the latter is, like the realist novel, the product of a historical alignment of socio-economic factors. In this way, for the theorist, writers such as Walter Scott or William Faulkner inherited a "historical raw material", namely the memory of civil wars and revolutions, which entailed an awareness of the coexistence of different modes of production that is inscribed in their work (2009: 43). For Jameson then, the ability to think a new reality and articulate a new paradigm presupposes a certain "conjuncture" of (historical) circumstances: "a certain strategic distance from that reality, which tends to overwhelm those immersed in it" (2009: 43). That is, the observer must be in some way an "outsider." This helps explain contemporary difficulties to think our system (which sometimes, according to Jameson, amount to a veritable repression of that concept) and the already discussed waning of our sense of

history: “Where everything is henceforth systemic the very notion of a system seems to lose its reason for being, returning only by way of a ‘return of the repressed’” (2009: 43). And the logical consequence of the weakening of our ability to systematically think the complexities of our mode of production is, in the final analysis, our inability to ascertain our true place and function within it.

A recurrent point in Jameson’s analysis of contemporary culture is the pressing need to regain the awareness of our place within the system through a kind of orientational practice which the theorist has called *cognitive mapping*. In this sense, with their analytic intention and their theory-fuelled systemic approach, *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* can be regarded as orientational efforts with a totalizing slant which is truly outstanding among contemporary novelists. We just have to consider how the motif of conspiracy, that kind of consoling substitute for adequate cognitive mapping in Jameson’s view, is put at the service of an analytical vision of the capitalist system. The problem for Franzen lies in the inevitable frustration arising from the awareness of the seemingly unshakeable reality of ideologically-legitimized oppression and exploitation which characterizes the system, and the perception of the impossibility of effective transforming action. Then, in keeping with the contemporary *Zeitgeist* discussed above, the analytical and demystifying impulse that characterizes Franzen’s fiction does not lead to the assertion of effective agency in his novels. *The Twenty-Seventh City* is characterized by a destruction of evoked hopes and ends with a triumph of apathy; in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom* activism brings no solid results. In fact, *The Corrections* and *Freedom* stage a retreat from public arenas into the realm of the family. These are circumstances which have earned Franzen harsh remarks from left-wing critics, as this study shows. In the last resort, this impotence can be viewed as the consequence of a conception of system which implies a network of ideology and power of such perfection that precludes any real possibility of change, which is to say an unassailable system like the one described in Franzen’s two Systems novels: *The Twenty-Seventh-City* and *Strong Motion*. In this sense, Jameson has criticized as one such concept of system the one theorized by Michel Foucault. This is one of the reasons behind Jameson’s preference of the concept of mode of production as a category of analysis over that of system (a view which is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s rejection of the determinist notion of a “sutured” society) In Jameson’s words:

[M]ode of production is not a ‘total system’ in that forbidding sense [i.e. Foucauldean, 1984- like], and includes a variety of counterforces and new tendencies within itself, of ‘residual’ as well as ‘emergent’ forces, which it must attempt to manage or control (Gramsci’s conception of hegemony): were those heterogeneous forces not endowed with an effectivity of their own, the hegemonic project would be unnecessary. (Jameson, 2009: 43-4)

### **1.3.5. The problem of perspective.**

Franzen’s inability to imagine a valid form of transformative political action does not invalidate in itself the critical power of his two first novels, as some of his critics would have it. In this respect it is hard to agree with Lukács’ disparaging opinion of modernist writers such as Kafka. As I argue in the chapter dedicated to *The Twenty-Seventh City*, there *is* a critical potential in expressions, for example, of anxiety and frustration. But there are other factors explored by the Hungarian theorist that set a limit to the critical leverage of Franzen’s novels. Indeed, there is an important want related to Lukács’ concept of the realist novel which undermines Franzen’s totalizing impulse in spite of the orientational value of his fiction, namely the narrowness of his social *perspective*. For Lukács, perspective is the novelist’s principle of selection of the materials for her novel, and as such it includes a “hierarchy of significance” (Lukács, 2006a: 34): “in any work of art, perspective is of overriding importance. It determines the course and content; it draws together the threads of the narration; it enables the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic” (Lukács, 2006a: 33).

If we bear in mind that the basic working mechanism of the realist novel is *synthesis*, a metonymical process whereby characters, situations and events in a novel acquire a symbolical quality and become representative of larger social realities, the crucial importance of the novelist’s perspective becomes obvious. Perspective, according to Lukács, depends on the novelist’s ability to grasp what is *typical*, in terms of characters and situations, in a given society at a specific historical time. It must be noticed that Lukács does not mean typical as average but rather as representative or essential. The more penetrating the writer’s perspective, the truer to social totality will be her work. In fact, as Lukács observes, subsequent historical development tends to

confirm the social perspective of great novelists, with which the term acquires a diachronic dimension as well as a synchronic one. In the critic's words: "a typology can only be of lasting significance if the writer has depicted the central or peripheral significance, the comic or tragic characteristic of his types, in such a way that subsequent developments confirm his portrait of the age" (Lukács, 2006a: 57). As might be expected, for Lukács the depth of a novelist's perspective is related to her social class, as a writer will naturally concentrate on the class she knows from within.<sup>11</sup> Logically, a perspective restricted to one social group is bound to be lacking as regards its account of totality. This is, to be sure, Franzen's case: the focus of his novels is unfailingly directed to middle or higher-class white families. In this norm, Franzen's first novel constitutes an exception once again. There is of course the conspicuous fact that the promoters of the conspiracy are Indian. But it is perhaps more important that only in *The Twenty-Seventh City* can we find a black, working-class character of some (small) significance. The ensuing reduction of perspective seems quite an impoverishment for a novelist of realist aspirations.<sup>12</sup> This has important ideological implications. As it is argued in the corresponding chapter, since its inception as a genre, the novel has powerfully contributed to mark the limits of what is significant, of what is to count as real. Substantial limitations in perspective then tend to transmit a specific class discourse and favours particular relations of power within society: This circumstance has been analysed by Raymond Williams:

In modern class societies the selection of characters almost always indicates an assumed or conscious class position. The conventions of selection are more intricate when hierarchy is less formal. Without formal ramification, all other persons may be conventionally presented as instrumental (servants, drivers, waiters), as merely environmental (other people in the street) or indeed as essentially absent (not seen, not relevant) ... The social hierarchy or social norms that are assumed or invoked are substantial terms of relationship which

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noticed that, while Lukács duly acknowledges that, in the Marxist tradition the proletariat is the one truly universal social class (a circumstance that would grant literary leadership to socialist realism), in practice he relativizes the literary implications of this fact asserting the artistic superiority of bourgeois *critical realists* such as Thomas Mann before the novelists of socialist realism, as we discuss in the chapter dedicated to the realist novel.

<sup>12</sup> Lukács wide notion of perspective has a narrower narratological counterpart in Gerard Genette's structural category of *focalization*, or the viewpoint from which things are seen and assessed in a narrative. As Genette recognizes, focalization always implies "a restriction of field" (Genette, 1988: 74). On his part, Toolan proposes a similar but more inclusive concept, that of *orientation*, which takes into account "cognitive, emotive and ideological perspectives" (Toolan, 1988: 68).

the conventions are intended (often, in the confidence of a form, not consciously) to carry. They are no less terms of social relationship when the hierarchy or selection is not manifestly social but based on the assignment of significant being to the selected few and the irrelevant many. (Williams, 1977: 175)

In fact, it is not only that in Franzen's novels lower and working-class characters are obviously underrepresented. It is that when they appear as sideshows, as I have already advanced, they tend to be drawn in rather deprecatory ways. This is evident in *Freedom*, where working-class characters invariably assume the role of antagonists of the novel's (first middle, then upper-class) protagonists.

The concept of social class as a category for social interpretation is not one that elicits enthusiasm in the contemporary ideological climate dominated by interested notions of the end of history and ideology in a technocratic society. However, with the caveat that it is prone to fall into the perfunctory and shallow, the analysis of class discourse remains indispensable in any serious ideological analysis. In Jameson's words:

Nothing has, of course, more effectively discredited Marxism than the practice of affixing instant class labels (generally "petty bourgeois") to textual and intellectual objects ... But abuse of class adscription should not lead to over-reaction and mere abandonment of it. In fact, ideological analysis is inconceivable without a conception of the 'ultimately determining instance' of social class. (Jameson, 2007: 201)

We will find that Franzen's novels abound in expressions of social antagonism and class / group vindication and legitimation that coexist with an urge towards (conditional) reconciliation. I would like to emphasize that my interpretation of class discourse in Franzen's novels will not be limited to the mere identification of class motifs and values, as in traditional sociological interpretation. Rather, I will try to reveal its relational character, that is, the fact that class values are, in Jameson's words, "always actively in situation with respect to the opposing class, and defined against the latter" (Jameson, 2002: 69). All this will be particularly evident in the analysis of *Freedom*, where the class background of ongoing cultural or ideological struggles in the United States is examined. For example, I will analyse the class antagonism inherent in

Walter Berglund's environmentalism in the light of Slavoj Žižek's contribution to the theory of ideology. In that chapter it is also shown how, in his search for the legitimation of his political stance, Franzen tries to transcend conventional positioning in terms of class and supports instead less objective social markers based on his particular conceptions of dignity, distinction and enlightenment. Jameson has claimed that one crucial role for the realist novel to play in the times of late capitalism is that of contributing to a revival of class consciousness—which now should necessarily be global. Already in 1977, Jameson saw this awareness indispensable to fight the pervading reification and alienation brought about by our mode of production through reopening access to a sense of totality on the decline:

[R]eification is a process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality. It is a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity. The reification of late capitalism—the transformation of human relations into an appearance of relationships between things—renders society opaque. It is the lived source of the mystifications on which ideology is based and by which domination and exploitation are legitimized. Since the fundamental structure of the social 'totality' is a set of class relationships ... reification necessarily obscures the class character of that structure ... if the diagnosis is correct, the intensification of class consciousness will be less a matter of a populist or ouvrierist exaltation of a single class by itself, than that of the forcible reopening of access to a sense of society as a totality. (Jameson, 2007: 212)

In this sense, it is necessary to admit that *Freedom*, with its obscuring of the relations of production and of social antagonism, does not contribute to that objective of dispelling reification and bolstering cognitive mapping.

In any case, a contemporary analysis of social division should be consistent with contemporary social and epistemological theory. Therefore, following Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the account of class discourse in Franzen's fiction provided in this book reflects the plural and often contradictory character of social groups, avoiding essentialist views of classes as stable, homogeneous agents. And, to be sure, this study intends to avoid the kind of moralistic judgement that to an extent mars some of the left-wing criticism of Franzen so far. Indeed, traces of disappointed political hopes are

perceptible in the critical analyses of Annesley (2006), Hawkins (2010), or Hutchinson (2009), which at times recall Lukács' defence of socialist realism. It should be born in mind, however, that in spite of the avowed influence of Marxism in Franzen's intellectual formation, so visible in his first and second novels, Franzen has made explicit his distance from that political stance (see for example Connery and Franzen 2009), and has repeated time and again his conception of the novel as a politically liberal form (e.g. Franzen 2012b). Relatedly, as regards political import, my analysis of Franzen's fiction takes into account an important aspect of the realist novel which is usually overlooked by critics, namely the inherent conservatism of the genre, often pointed out by authors such as Jameson or Terry Eagleton. For the former,

The literature of realism has the ideological function of adapting its readers to bourgeois society as it currently exists, with its premium on comfort and inwardness, on individualism, on the acceptance of money as the ultimate reality (we might speak today of the acceptance of the market, of competition, of a certain image of human nature, and so forth) ... [T]he realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of social reality, on the resistance of bourgeois society to history and to change. (Jameson, 2013: 5)

These circumstances are behind the traditional ill disposition of the realist novel toward acts of political rupture: they threaten a premise on which its rhetorical power lies: the stability of what is. In consequence, it would seem that the realist novel is much more suited to the support of reform than revolution. Even more, it could be argued with Eagleton that the realist novel is reformist in spirit:

The novel is the mythology of a civilization fascinated by its own everyday existence. It is neither behind or ahead of its times, but abreast of them. It reflects them without morbid nostalgia or delusory hope. In this sense, literary realism is also moral realism. This refusal of both nostalgia and utopia means that the realist novel, politically speaking, is for the most part neither reactionary nor revolutionary. Instead, it is typically reformist in spirit. It is committed to the present, but to a present which is always in the process of change. (Eagleton, 2005: 6-7)

Yet realism itself tends to undermine that reformism:

You cannot, as a novelist, argue that the world should be changed in certain respects unless you dramatize what is wrong with it as compellingly as possible. But the more effectively you do this, the less changeable the world may come to seem. Dickens's later novels portray a society so false, warped and stiflingly oppressive that it is hard to see how it could be repaired. (Eagleton, 2005: 12-13)

This means that there are certain possibilities of radical criticism that are available to certain kinds of symbolic or experimental narrative—be it of postmodernist lineage or not—which are by definition out of reach of realism. This is something that can be observed in Franzen's fiction too: the same realist logic toward which the first and second novels gravitate, and which makes for sharp and comprehensive socio-cultural analysis, demands the failure of the evoked possibilities of rupture. On its part, the reformist impulse sported by the main characters of *Freedom* eventually leads to a rejection of radicalism and a celebration of compromise and reconciliation.

#### **1.4. Community issues.**

Another major concern of this study is the relation between Franzen's fiction and recent theoretical approaches to community. Certainly, communitarian longings are at the heart of the Utopian dimension of Franzen's novels, possibly because the desire for true community is the Utopian impulse *par excellence*. The current problems of community in the United States are an overt preoccupation for Franzen, present in both his novels and essays. As countless other contemporary commentators, Franzen denounces and laments what he perceives as an ongoing loss of community in America. Here we may acknowledge the pertinence of Jean-Luc Nancy's remarks in his *The Inoperative Community* (1991). For Nancy we should be wary of lamentations for the decay of community, as this feeling of loss has been a constant feature of Western thought from its very beginning. As the French thinker argues, our idea of community is a metaphysical concept developed as the archaic worldview—the ancient world of the epic referred to by Lukács in *The theory of the novel*—based on immanence receded. In Nancy's words:

Thus, the thought of community or the desire for it might well be nothing other than a belated invention, that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern

experience: namely, that divinity was withdrawing infinitely from immanence, that the god-brother was at bottom *himself* the *deus absconditus* (this was Hölderlin's insight), and that the divine essence of community—or community as the existence of a divine essence—was the impossible itself. (Nancy, 1991: 10)

In my opinion, Nancy's interrogation of the metaphysical notion of community is compatible with Jameson's accounts of the reification and fragmentation of human bonds brought about by capitalism, which form part of the theoretical grounding of this study. It may well be that, as Nancy has put it, "community has not taken place" (Nancy, 1991: 11), but this does not prevent communitarian bonds from being eroded on a daily basis by what Ulrich Beck (1992) describes as the individuating processes of modernization. From a Marxist point of view, of course, this phenomenon is a consequence of the development of the reifying logic of capitalism. As Jameson has pointed out:

although the various precapitalist modes of production achieved their capacity to reproduce themselves through various forms of solidarity or collective cohesion, the logic of capital is on the contrary a dispersive and atomistic, 'individualistic' one, an anti-society rather than a society, whose systemic structure, let alone its reproduction of itself, remains a mystery and a contradiction in terms. (2009: 38)

And it seems safe to affirm that late capitalism has brought about an increased momentum to the destruction of older communitarian formations. For Franzen, the current dissolution of community is parallel to the eclipse of what Habermas described as the public sphere, and both are embodied in his fiction in the ongoing decay of the American city. Just as the public sphere, the agora-like symbolic space of public intervention in the matters of the polis, is corrupted by privatizing forces, the classic American city is drained by white flight in favour of wealthy homogenised suburbs.<sup>13</sup> The poorer inhabitants of the city are abandoned to their fate or expelled by gentrification and the face of the city literally vanishes. This phenomenon is explicitly thematised in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, but the concern is also present in the rest of the

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<sup>13</sup> In spite of Franzen's open decri of suburban expansion, we shall note that his treatment of the suburbs in his novels is marked by ambiguity. In Franzen's fiction the suburb is a heterotopic locus that, according to his purposes, can be an eventless site of soul-destroying conformity and boredom, as in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, or else be characterized by communitarian bonds of good neighbourliness, as in *The Corrections*.

novels. Franzen's first and second novels are remarkable, nevertheless, for the way in which the process is clearly presented as a dynamic inherent to capitalism.

In my examination of the way in which Franzen's novels reflect the fragmentation and individualization of contemporary society I have relied on the sociological analyses of Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck. The former is the author of already classic descriptions of the instability and insecurity that the economic logic of capitalism has entailed for great parts of the population in advanced countries over the last decades, and has also been concerned with the communitarian yearnings that this situation has produced. The latter is one of the leading investigators of the relentless process of individuation that modernization has brought with it, and of the multiple ways in which the effects and conflicts entailed by this individuating dynamic are staged in people's everyday life. Like Jameson in his own way, both Bauman and Beck coincide in identifying a new stage in the process of modernization which advanced countries have already entered. Bauman then differentiates between classic or heavy modernity and liquid modernity; while Beck on his part refers to industrial society as opposed to advanced modernity or risk society. For the purposes of this study, Bauman's and Beck's dichotomies are perfectly complementary, and their descriptive categories have guided its exploration of the distinctive nostalgia for American industrial society that can be detected in Franzen's novels. The reason for such longing is evidently the perception of industrial society as a more favourable soil for community than the exacerbated anomie of liquid modernity. This lament for a disappearing age already occupies a central place in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, where the protagonist, the contractor Martin Probst stands, like the ruined city itself, for the decline of American classic modernity. The theme can also be found in *Strong Motion*, with its eulogy for infrastructure based on its communitarian value, pertinently recognized by Bruce Robbins (2007), and retakes a pivotal place again in *The Corrections*. In this sense, Franzen's third novel is partly organized around a Midwest / East opposition which roughly corresponds to the contrast between American modernity and postmodernity. Here the elder Lamberts represent traditional Midwestern communitarian values which are opposed to the fierce individualism of the postmodernity inhabited by their offspring. Similarly, the type of security which used to characterize industrial societies—the stability that dominated the realms of labour, family and close community—is contrasted with the maddening evanescence of liquid modernity.

However, Franzen does not idealize American industrial society or its fundamental institution the classic nuclear family. On the contrary, his novels also dramatize the manifold social, ideological and environmental contradictions that used to characterize it and which are at the root of our present-day disorientation. His nostalgia is then a conflicted one.

As I discuss in the chapter dedicated to *The Corrections*, in Franzen's stance regarding the rampant individualism of contemporary society we can observe a notable coincidence with Daniel Bell's views on the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" (Bell 1973). In consequence, Franzen's critical position suffers from the same problems as that of Bell and other more recent intellectuals that have deplored the decay of American communities, such as Amitai Etzioni (1994) or Robert D. Putnam (2000). Both Bell and Franzen conceive of the realms of economy and culture as essentially separate. This entails that for them the causes of the cultural disorders they lament, such as unchecked individualism, exaggerated consumerism, lack of moral values, etc. remain within the sphere of culture, rather than in the economic base of the system. As Robbins (1999) has accurately argued, this position leads to the current vulnerability of liberals before the political Right in the ongoing ideological struggles known in the United States as culture wars, as it implies that only the realm of culture is to blame for the perceived moral disorder. Culture then becomes the scapegoat of the ills wrought by a productive system that once again remains out of sight. The ensuing impotence of liberals before the conservatives, all the more frustrating for not being well understood, produces the exasperation and despair that is so apparent in *Freedom*, especially as embodied by the character of Walter Berglund. And when despair of larger communities dominates, it is the small communities of family and lovers that appear as a meaningful refuge. In fact, it can be argued that liberalism is a factor in Franzen's anxieties about community: with its intrinsic individualism and its distinctive distrust of supra-individual political and ideological constructions, liberalism seems destined to forsake larger social communities and drive all communitarian concerns into the private realm of the family.

Another aspect of Franzen's thought in which his despair of larger communities transpires is his often-quoted proposal of a community of readers which he advanced for the first time in the *Harper's* essay. Its symptomatic value is evident: the solution to the disorders of the realm of culture (social fragmentation, techno-consumerism, social

irrelevance of literature, etc.) is to be found within the same realm of culture. Only this time it is not a solution—which is deemed impossible—but mere consolation. In “Mr Difficult”, Franzen tries to draw populist credit from the notion of such community through his idea of a “contract” between writer and readers. However, it is hard not to see his proposed virtual community of isolated readers as an acknowledgement of impotence. His community of “matching diasporas,” devoid of collective or political agency, is only left with the possibility of individual self-amelioration and certifies his abandonment of any transformative prospects for the public sphere. This should not be taken as a condemnation of Franzen’s political stance: not only because it is not my purpose in this study to pass this kind of judgement on Franzen, but because I consider that his novels constitute imperfect but valuable exercises of cognitive mapping. Indeed, in spite of all the class bias, limitations of perspective and ideological blind spots that can be found in Franzen’s social vision, I consider that the analytico-pedagogical impulse that characterizes his fiction, his vocation for the rendering of synthetic visions of totality, his keenness on demystification are truly remarkable in contemporary American fiction. As will be shown in this study, the novel has historically been a fundamental means (never ideologically neutral) for societies to interpret themselves. Part of the communitarian import of the genre is to be found in this capacity to help communities understand themselves. In this the novel performs a symbolic function in the maintenance of communities akin to that accomplished by infrastructure, a recurrent motive in Franzen’s novels, as we will see. But this function clearly requires a novel that is interested in the social dimension of human beings, a novel which for a variety of historical reasons has come to be ever rarer. It is in this cultural context that Franzen’s effort is best understood.

## 2. The critical reception of Jonathan Franzen's novels.

### 2.1. Introduction: a controversial novelist.

Jonathan Franzen is undeniably one of the most prominent American novelists of our time, as was shown by the release of his fourth novel *Freedom* in 2010: from president Obama's praise to the cover of *Time* magazine featuring the headline "Great American Novelist", and all this without the deafening controversy that accompanied the publication of *The Corrections* in 2001. Yet a close look at the critical response earned by his novels reveals some intriguing facts. To begin with, Franzen's novels have given rise to a conspicuously small amount of academic criticism. In his 2008 monograph on Franzen, the only one as of 2014, Stephen J. Burn calls attention to this gap and notes that "his novels have often received distractingly overblown praise from reviewers eager to find and praise a major talent, but at the same time, his work has attracted less serious academic attention than might be expected" (Burn, 2008: ix). Burn suggests that Franzen's "hostility toward the academy" might have caused critics to retract, an argument that has been readily dismissed by Timothy Parrish (2010), rather sceptic himself about Franzen's artistic merit.<sup>14</sup> And this leads us to another interesting circumstance, namely the fact that Jonathan Franzen is an extraordinarily controversial writer, at least in terms of the critical reaction he provokes. Leaving aside the mild scandal following his clumsy handling of the selection of *The Corrections* for the Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, which we discuss below, the source for his ability to generate polemic is surely to be found in his essays, especially his 1996 *Harper's* essay "Perchance to Dream". In this text, Franzen laments the increasing irrelevance of great literature in contemporary American culture and expresses doubts as to the future of the novel as an artistic form. He also advocates a fiction addressed to a community of readers for whom literature is a means to resist the alienating forces of contemporary life. Indeed, after the success of *The Corrections*, the essay was soon examined and

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<sup>14</sup> In his 2010 essay "Tribal Politics and the Postmodern Product", Parrish states that "Franzen's most notable act as an author has been his assertion of his own celebrity and literary importance by his public repudiation of the Oprah Book Club" (Parrish, 2010: 652).

taken as a programmatic text, a kind of promise to be fulfilled in the mentioned novel, rather than as the circumstances-bound piece that Franzen has insisted it to be.<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, Franzen has been decidedly polemical, as in his 2002 *New Yorker's* essay “Mr Difficult”, in which he criticizes excessive difficulty in fiction, as exemplified by William Gaddis. It is likely, in any case, that Franzen’s way of discussing literature in personal, biographical terms—like in the *Harper's* essay, where in somewhat romantic fashion the suffering writer / poet is the hero of his own essay / poem—has stimulated critical attacks.<sup>16</sup>

Franzen’s first and second novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992) were generally well received by reviewers, even if praise was far from unanimous, as was to be the usual case with Franzen. They did not attract academic attention however, with some minor exception discussed below. *The Corrections*, in contrast, generated an enormous amount of media attention in the form of a confusing mixture of vituperation of the snobbish author on account of his dispute with Oprah Winfrey, alternating with expressions of support for the harassed writer, and mostly enthusiastic reviews in the major media. One of the most influential comments on the novel nevertheless was surely James Wood’s article for the *New Republic* “Abhorring a Vacuum” (Wood 2001b), which was far from enthusiastic. We have to wait until 2002, several months after the publication of *The Corrections* for the appearance of the first academic papers which analysed Franzen’s work at any significant length. Those essays focused on what was then Franzen’s latest novel, but inevitably looked back to the *Harper's* essay for interpretation, as is the case of Beatrice Pire (2002) or Christoph Ribbat (2002). Soon afterwards, critics were extending the analysis to Franzen’s early novels too, as in Robert L. McLaughlin (2004) or James Annesley (2006).

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<sup>15</sup> In the foreword to *How to Be Alone*, Franzen explains: “To each succeeding interviewer I explained that, no, to the contrary, I had barely mentioned my third novel in the essay, that the notion of a “promise” had been invented out of thin air by an editor or a headline writer at the *Times Sunday Magazine*; and that, in fact, far from promising to write a big social novel that would bring news to the mainstream, I’d taken the essay as an opportunity to renounce that variety of ambition” (Franzen, 2002: 4). Of course, the extent to which Franzen actually renounced the mentioned ambition is open to debate, in sight of the evident social content of *The Corrections* and *Freedom*.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Tom LeClair’s review of *The Corrections*: “Like ‘Perchance to Dream’, *The Corrections* has a mewling quality, projecting a feeling that its characters and maybe even its author were somehow deprived of a success and happiness to which they were—again somehow—entitled” (LeClair, 2002: n.pag.).

One of the tenets of this study is that there is an ideological message inherent in all literary forms, a message which may or may not be in full accordance with the author's conscious professions. Form therefore should not be considered in abstraction of its ideological considerations, or vice versa. The obvious fact that this dissociation of ideology and form is a generalized critical practice reveals a certain ideological blindness on the part of critics, which is the usual result of the naturalizing effect of any dominant ideology. It is with this proviso that in my survey of Franzen's critical reception I will to an extent keep that predominant dissociation of form and ideology. Therefore, although Franzen's novels have been studied in relation to very different issues and from very different perspectives, broadly speaking we could divide critical discussion of his work into two intersecting branches. The first one revolves around Franzen's complex relation with postmodernism, in view of his stylistic evolution from a fiction clearly influenced by prominent postmodernist figures to more traditional—although in the case of *The Corrections* still mixed—narrative modes, characterized by a more straightforward use of realism and greater emphasis on character. Franzen's transition takes place in the context of a widespread assumption in the field of literature about postmodernism being in its final stage—a belief, of course, by no means universal or unproblematic—and accordingly his work, especially *The Corrections* and the *Harper's* essay, has been used to illustrate a reaction against the alleged state of exhaustion reached by postmodernism. It is the case of Ribbat (2002), Rebein (2007), or Burn (2008). The latter, for example, is not alone in proposing the term post-postmodernist to describe Franzen and other contemporary novelists such as David Foster Wallace or Richard Powers. That same evolution, however, has also drawn harsh accusations of commercialism on Franzen, such as LeClair (2002) or Ben Marcus (2005). In this survey, this type of mainly aesthetic discussion is studied under the heading “Hybrid modes and postmodern uncertainties”.

The other general trend in Franzen's criticism is openly political and for the most part rather critical. Franzen's declared attempts at social criticism have been met by a number of papers, such as Annesley (2006) or Colin Hutchinson (2009) that from a left-wing perspective condemn what they perceive as Franzen's ideological shallowness or even, as in the case of Annesley, directly accuse him of inadvertently reinforcing the system of consumer capitalism that he is apparently out to criticize. Other critics such as the humanist Ty Hawkins (2007, 2010) are more sympathetic, if still critical, in this

respect. This side of the discussion is treated here under the title “The art of engagement”. Within these two sections, critical contributions are presented in chronological order.

*Freedom*, Franzen’s latest and highly successful novel was released almost one decade after *The Corrections*, which has motivated that the analysis of its reception is included in a separate section of this chapter. As could be expected, the media attention dedicated to the novel was enormous, and not exempt from a seemingly unavoidable amount of controversy. Critical response was mostly appreciative, sometimes enthusiastic, but far from uniform and even including fierce attacks. On its part, the academic debate on Franzen has drastically decreased. As of 2014, no significant articles specifically devoted to *Freedom* can be found, so the discussion is limited to the most relevant pieces in major media players.

## **2.2. Early fiction: *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*.**

For some time, “sixty reviews in a vacuum”, to use Franzen’s phrase (2002: 61), was just about all there was. Franzen meant it to show, in his famous *Harper’s* essay, the failure of his “culturally engaged novel to engage with the culture”. However, without going deep into the intriguing figure (all but impossible to check today and suggestive of a laborious tracking task at that time), it is safe to define the reception for Franzen’s first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, as a quite welcoming and auspicious one.

The novel was released with due advertising campaign from the publishers in September 1988,<sup>17</sup> in a first edition of about 40,000 copies (see Burn, 2008: 43), and was met by on the whole appreciative reviews. Thus, in his *New York Times* review, Peter Andrews called it “an impressive debut by a gifted young writer” (Andrews, 1988: 22); and for Michele Slung, *Washington Post Book World*, it had “elements of both ‘Great’ and ‘American’. . . a book of memorable characters, surprising situations and provocative ideas” (Slung, 1988: n.pag.); while Laura Shapiro wrote for her

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<sup>17</sup> The campaign included a two-page advert in *The New York Times Book Review* with the announcement “It’s 1988 in St Louis and Big Brother is a woman” (Burn, 2008: 43).

*Newsweek*'s review that the novel was "a huge and masterly drama ... ripping and surreal and utterly convincing" (Shapiro, 1988: 59).

Yet most praise was not unalloyed, as probably fits an imperfect if compelling novel. While some critics such as John Blades quickly discerned Franzen's indebtedness to such postmodernists as Pynchon and DeLillo (Blades, 1988: 5) some other reviewers were baffled by Franzen's play with genres, which led to the novel being reviewed under the heading *Crime / Mystery* in the mentioned *New York Times* issue, where it was compared favourably with "more conventional potboilers" (Slung, 1988: n.pag.). On occasion, it was Franzen's overly inclusive ambition, both in subject matter and technique which earned him critical rebuke. This way, for Richard Eder, the novel was:

a sprawl of talents, sometimes a tangle of them ... Franzen succeeds extraordinarily well in joining his sombre message to the incandescence of his story. The story itself suffers from a number of things. Like someone who goes on talking—wittily to be sure—long after he has made his point. Franzen's plot tends to lose itself in its own convolutions. (Eder, 1988: npag.)

Likewise, Slung remarks: "[Franzen's] virtue and simultaneous vice is that he seems always to be thinking—he's as manipulative as Jammu—and occasionally, *The Twenty-Seventh City* suffers from it. But never enough to keep us from admiring his accomplishment" (Slung, 1988: n.pag.). And certainly these objections did not overshadow a generally favourable reception that was underscored by the \$25,000 Whiting award later that year.

Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion* was published in January 1992. At that time, the writer had already entered a period of dejection which lasted for several years and he discusses at length in the *Harper's* essay ("By the early nineties I was as depressed as the inner city of fiction" [Franzen 2002:62]). In the author's words, while in his previous novel he had used "irony and understatement" in his social critique, and was met by the silence of the culture he had tried to engage, this time he had come out "throwing rhetorical Molotov cocktails". To little avail, though:

But the result was the same: another report card with A's and B's from the reviewers who had replaced the teachers whose approval, when I was younger, I

had both craved and taken no satisfaction from; decent money; and the silence of irrelevance. (Franzen, 2002: 63)

The reviewers' response to *Strong Motion* could actually be described as more tepid than the one earned by Franzen's first novel, and the sympathy for the young novelist making an ambitious debut seemed to have passed away. There was the odd decidedly enthusiast reviewer, such as Herbert Mitgang at *The New York Times*, for whom the novel "confirms his [Franzen's] abilities and expands his political horizons" (Mitgang, 1992: n.pag.). The critic seemed to acknowledge Franzen's ideological explicitness, but found no problem with it: "Mr. Franzen stops the action now and then to deliver a lecture, which is never less than provocative". Mitgang also pointed to Pynchon's influence before concluding:

By the sheer force of his imaginative writing and his unsheathed views of American life, Mr. Franzen succeeds in joining together a love story, a family story and a corporate-cum-environmental story. *Strong Motion* is a mature novel with original characters and challenging ideas that leave a distinctly original aftertaste. (Mitgang, 1992: n.pag.)

Even more commending was Dan Cryer at the *Chicago Sun-Time*: "Blending John Updike's eye for social observation, John Irving's penchant for Dickensian plotting and Don DeLillo's gift for quirkily beautiful phrasing, Franzen emerges as a hugely talented original" (Cryer 1992: n.pag.). The critic also saluted Franzen as a representative of the abandonment by young writers of then fashionable "minimalist" narrative: "Franzen is at the cutting edge of a refreshing movement in American fiction away from the once trendy constrictions of minimalism and toward greater boldness of conception and richness of language" (Cryer, 1992: n.pag.). Cryer was not alone in remarking Franzen's "maximalism." Thus, for R.D. Pohl in *The Buffalo News*:

Franzen has been justifiably called a "maximalist". His work is "hot"—multilayered, complex and politically engaged—as opposed to the "cool", largely ironic and detached tone of many of the lesser imitators of the master minimalists Raymond Carver and Donald Barthelme. (Pohl, 1992: n.pag.)

However, many reviews were rather mixed, and though they usually acknowledged Franzen's talent and ambition, they characterised *Strong Motion* as an

imperfect novel. Even the otherwise openly appreciative Pohl in *The Buffalo News* remarked: “Unfortunately, the sheer density of this narrative and Franzen’s incomplete success at integrating all the novel’s disparate themes . . . make this a very good book rather than a great one” (Pohl, 1992: n.pag.). *The Boston Globe* also denounced structural faults, pointing to the novel’s unnecessary complexity:

Without the elaborate plotting, without trying to expose too many social issues, Franzen might have had more energy left to explore the provocative human drama he sets up . . . The truths of the novel are choked by its ambitious structure. (Gilbert, 1992: n.pag.)

Some critics observed a too discursive or exceedingly obvious ideological conveyance in the novel. Thus, for example, *Entertainment Weekly*: “Franzen, however, finally succumbs to the American novelist’s most irresistible temptation and mounts a pulpit” (Klepp, 1992: n.pag.). Similarly, for *The Washington Post*, Franzen “indulge[s] himself in a small orgy of sermonizing” (Yardley, 1992: n.pag.). For the critic, “*Strong Motion* is just another entry in the America Sucks Sweepstakes”; and he goes on: “Jonathan Franzen is a writer of abundant energies, but he has turned them here to trivial purpose: an anti-American screed masquerading as a novel” (Yardley, 1992: n.pag.).

*The New York Times*’ reviewer compared the novel to *The Twenty-Seventh City*, “a sprawling neo-Dickensian hybrid that shouldn’t have worked . . . Yet *The Twenty-Seventh City* was held together by the sheer exuberance of his [Franzen’s] storytelling and by his vision of the city itself” (Rubins, 1992: n.pag.). In contrast, for the critic, “*Strong Motion* lacks the center around which even a flawed, overextended novel might be made to spin.” And he proceeds: “The narrative here is marred by the unlikely contrivances that link up the many plots and themes.” The review ends with nuanced but promising prospects, which anticipate Franzen’s painful reappraisal of his whole approach to writing novels, as discussed by himself in the *Harper’s* essay:<sup>18</sup>

Still, however uneven this second novel is, it is less a disappointment than an affirmation of Mr Franzen’s fierce imagination and distinctive seriocomic voice.

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<sup>18</sup> “At the heart of my despair about the novel had been a conflict between a feeling that I should Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream, and my desire to write about the things closest to me, to lose myself in the characters and locales I loved.” (Franzen: 2002: 95)

Whether he continues to be something of a daredevil or scales down his aspirations . . . his will be a career to watch.” (Rubins, 1992: n.pag.)

It is remarkable how accurate these words proved to be. For the rest of the decade, Franzen remained out of the limelight. He retreated into journalism, writing essays for several periodicals.<sup>19</sup> It was a period of serious personal crisis (including what he has overtly referred to as “depression”), during which he struggled with his third novel, which did not take off until he had thoroughly rethought his relation to the genre. A process involving, among other reconsiderations, a *scaling down of aspirations*.<sup>20</sup> Yet his reappearance, with the publishing of *The Corrections* in 2001, was destined to be one of the noisiest events in America’s recent cultural life.

### **2.3. *The Corrections and the Oprahgate.***

*The Corrections* was published on September 5 2001, a few days before the terrorist attacks that seemed to mark a historical watershed. In Franzen’s words, “[t]his was a time when it seemed that the voices of self and commerce ought to fall silent . . . Nevertheless, business is business. Within forty-eight hours of the calamity, I was giving interviews again” (Franzen, 2002: 3). Indeed, from the very beginning, the novel attracted the attention of the media, earning extensive coverage and lengthy reviews, which for the most part praised it as a major achievement. The ground had been prepared: Farrar, Straus & Giroux had distributed 3,500 copies to reviewers and booksellers, each one with a note from Jonathan Galassi, head of the publishing house, calling the book one of the best in their catalogue (Lacayo: 2001, n.pag.). One of the first and most important reviewers was Michiko Kakutani, the *New York Times*’ leading critic. For her, *The Corrections* marked a breakthrough with respect to Franzen’s previous novels, “messy and wildly ambitious epics, crammed to overflowing” (Kakutani, 2001: n.pag.). At the heart of the success was Franzen’s shift of focus away from his characteristic wide ranging social criticism:

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<sup>19</sup> Most of these essays, which were published in *Details*, *Graywolf Forum*, *Harper’s*, and *The New Yorker*, were compiled in *How to Be Alone* (2002). The volume contains the famous *Harper’s* essay from 1996 (entitled by the magazine’s editors *Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels*), though edited by the author for the compilation and retitled as *Why Bother?*

<sup>20</sup> “As soon as I jettisoned my perceived obligation to the chimerical mainstream, my third book began to move again” (Franzen, 2002: 95).

Mr. Franzen has brought a family and its problems center stage to try to write a sort of American *Buddenbrooks*. In doing so he has harnessed his penchant for social criticism and subordinated it to his natural storytelling instincts, while at the same time, shucking off the influence of other writers to find an idiosyncratic voice of his own. (Kakutani, 2001: n.pag.)

However, just as was the case with Franzen's earlier novels, this one was also to be described as an irregular one, "often self-indulgent and long-winded", and one that "would have benefited enormously from a strict editing job". These imperfections, however, did not preclude the fact that "*The Corrections* remains a remarkably poised performance ... By turns funny and corrosive, portentous and affecting" (Kakutani, 2001: n.pag.).

Even more appreciative was David Gates, also at *The New York Times*, four days later. Although he acknowledged the novel's irregularity—an unpromising start, inconclusive plot lines—he is captivated by its addictive qualities. He remarks nevertheless—quite ironically in hindsight—that for all its readability the novel contains "just enough novel-of-paranoia touches so Oprah won't assign it and ruin Franzen's street cred" (Gates, 2001: n.pag.). The critic recognised Pynchon and DeLillo's influence but interestingly compared Franzen's work to that of another contemporary young novelist:

the success of David Foster Wallace's epic, minutely interconnected, ultimately unresolved *Infinite Jest* has made a novel like *The Corrections*—a far less dense and demanding read—seem part of a new mainstream, in which either teasing hints of formalism dress up the randomness or irruptions of randomness juice up the formalism. (Gates, 2001: n.pag.)

Very soon after the novel had been released, critics and interviewers started to turn their looks upon the so far obscure essay published by Franzen back in 1996 in *Harper's*, and see *The Corrections* in the light of that piece of writing, whether justifiably or not. It is the case of *Time* magazine, which in its September issue devoted a "good-size spread" in "the magazine your [Franzen's] late father always wanted to see

you in.<sup>21</sup> And in that story you get a sentence he would have loved: *The Corrections* is one of the great books of the year” (Lacayo, 2001: n.pag.). For the reviewer, the novel improved on its postmodernist predecessors: “when you correct certain problems in the postmodern novel—its cartoonish characters, its repetitive paranoia and absorption in Big Patterns—you get a better book”.

Gail Caldwell, from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* was another one of those early reviewers who seemed to understand *The Corrections* as an attempt at fulfilling the promise to “right some of those wrongs” suffered by the novel in our contemporary culture (Caldwell, 2001: n.pag.). Thus was inaugurated a pattern of interpretation of the novel which has lasted to this day. In the foreword to the essays compilation *How to Be Alone*, Franzen recounts that common association, which in his view often involved a certain misreading—or a *no reading*—of the essay (2002: 3).<sup>22</sup> It may be safely argued that many of these critics have tended to take the essay at face value, overlooking its troubled, contradictory nature. Certainly the *Harper’s* essay has become a central piece of writing when one approaches Franzen’s work, but the complex relationship between the author and the text is underscored by the fact that, on occasion of its reprinting for the compilation *How to Be Alone*, Franzen refurbished it changing its title to *Why Bother?*, cutting it by a quarter and presenting it in the volume’s preface in a self-mocking way as somehow the product of a distressed personal state.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, just as enthusiasm for the novel was developing into hype, on September 24 it was announced that *The Corrections* had been selected for the hugely popular Book Club hosted by presenter Oprah Winfrey in her show. According to Burn, “Winfrey had evidently called Franzen on the afternoon of August 31 to reveal that *The Corrections* would be selected by her powerful book club . . . Farrar, Strauss and Giroux apparently printed 500,000 more copies on the strength of her choice.” (Burn 2008: 45-6) However, a few weeks after agreeing to appear in the show, Franzen, then in the

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<sup>21</sup> In the *Harper’s* essay/*Why Bother?* Franzen recounts: “I can report that my father, who was not a reader, had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* magazine put them on its cover and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority.” (2002: 62)

<sup>22</sup> In Franzen’s words: “Because most interviewers hadn’t read the essay, and because the few who had read it seemed to have misunderstood it, I became practised at giving a clear precise précis of its argument” (2002: 4).

<sup>23</sup> For practical reasons, in our discussion of the essay we provide reference to the version included in *How to Be Alone*, unless otherwise stated.

middle of a sixteen-city promotional tour, began to express his misgivings about his participation in Oprah's Book Club in different interviews to local media. In repeated occasions he expressed his dislike of a great part of Winfrey's previous choices as well as of her treatment of them, both of which he seemed to regard as, so to speak, middlebrow. Similarly, he declared his uneasiness about the fact that the new volumes of *The Corrections* were to be printed with the Oprah's Book Club logo in their covers. Eventually, Winfrey withdrew her invitation to the show (though not her recommendation of the book). The dispute immediately turned into a national media affair which filled countless pages and minutes on air and attracted numerous accusations of ingratitude, elitism and snobbism upon Franzen.<sup>24</sup> As respects *The Corrections*, however, the controversy apparently only added to its popularity.

Franzen's increasing fame also motivated that the publishing of the book in the United Kingdom, due January 2002, was moved six weeks forward to take advantage of the hype. The reception, as in the United States, was mostly laudatory. Thus, *The Evening Standard's* review appeared under the heading "Welcome back to the Great American Novel" (Walden, 2001: n.pag.).

One of the most influential reviews of *The Corrections* to appear in Britain was published by *The Guardian* on November 9. The author, James Wood, also posited the novel as a sort of *correction* of typical postmodernist drawbacks. He compares *The Corrections* to DeLillo's *Underworld*, "the most influential American novel of the last 15 years", and one that "seeks to represent the interconnectedness of American Society by picturing it as a web threaded on strings of paranoia and power—a kind of *Bleak House* of the digital age" (Wood 2001b: n.pag.). For Wood, there is a problem with DeLillo's novel that Franzen sets out to correct, and we can notice that the notion of *fulfilment of a promise* is also present here:

His novel was a Dickensian novel without any humans in it ... there are no human beings in the novel, no one who really matters and whose consciousness matters to himself ... Franzen realised something like this when he read *Underworld* and pledged to put the matter right by producing, in his novel *The*

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<sup>24</sup> The dispute with Oprah Winfrey is discussed in all of the academic papers on *The Corrections*, with rather different degrees of sympathy for the novelist. The accounts of the affair that can be found in Ribbat (2002) and Green (2005) are surely the most complete and perceptive. Franzen provides own his side of the story in "Meet Me in St Louis", one of the essays included in *How to Be Alone*.

*Corrections*, a book of DeLillo-like breath and intellectual critique which was centred on human beings. He proposed, in effect, a softened DeLilloism. (Wood 2001b: n.pag.)

In his review, Wood also shares in a common objection aimed at Franzen's novels ("*The Corrections* suffers from a desire to put too much in it") and rejects previously published comparisons between Franzen's novel and the work of Tolstoy and Mann as exaggerated. Rather, he points at the "smart young man irony" of the kind Franzen shares with Rick Moody and David Foster Wallace.

This review was a condensed version of a longer piece of writing that Wood had published in the American periodical *The New Republic* a few weeks before, on October 18, an often quoted text that signalled him as one of the most significant critics of Franzen. In that article, Wood also relates *The Corrections* to the *Harper's* essay, but, unlike other reviewers, he conducts an in-depth analysis of that text. Wood, who combines acknowledgement of Franzen's gifts and merits as a novelist with harsh denounce of his perceived shortcomings, exposes what he sees as the contradictions of Franzen's argumentation on the viability of the social novel. For Wood, a vigorous advocate of the novel of character over "certain kind of social novel", Franzen "rightly asked the question, perhaps the most tormenting one for contemporary novelists, of how to write a novel both of its time and properly resistant to its time" (Wood, 2001a: n.pag.). By the end of the essay, Wood argues, Franzen had concluded that there was "something wrong with the whole model of the novel of social engagement" (Franzen's words quoted by Wood), advocating for an aesthetic solution instead: "To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?" (Franzen's words quoted by Wood). The critic agrees with Franzen's option but finds two substantial problems with it. To begin with, he sees Franzen's essay as "so autobiographically infected that his argument quickly sickened into subjectivity" (2001a: n.pag.). Secondly, and even more importantly, for Wood Franzen's case is invalid since "although his solution may have been aesthetic, the reasons that he offered for the difficulty of continuing with the social novel are themselves social reasons, not aesthetic ones" (2001a: n.pag.). In the *Harper's* essay, Franzen laments the inability of his culturally engaged novels to engage the culture he had meant to provoke. In Wood's view, Franzen's premises, investing the culture as judge of the success of the novel, actually "flatter the culture that the novel is supposed to resist". For the critic, "the only

true success for a novelist is aesthetic success, and ‘the culture’ will never validate aesthetic success” (2001a: n.pag.). Wood deplors the crudity of Franzen’s attempts at comprehensive social and cultural analysis, while he celebrates the novel’s explorations of character and consciousness:

Franzen is at his finest when being ambitious and even theoretical about the soul, when he is examining consciousness and finding, willy-nilly, that consciousness is the true Stendhalian mirror, reflecting helplessly the random angles of the age. (Wood, 2001a: n.pag.)

For Wood, “[t]he novel of intimacy, of motive, of relation, creates a heat that burns away feebler energies such as the social novel”. Thus, Franzen errs when he persists in his unnecessary transposing of the corrections theme to a social level, for “[w]hat is larger, as a subject, than the eternal corrections of family?” (Wood, 2001a: n.pag.).<sup>25</sup>

One of the most significant non-academic reviews of *The Corrections* was probably the one by Tom LeClair (2002: n.pag.) in the *American Book Review*, and it seems especially interesting as it comes from postmodernist quarters. LeClair, a novelist himself, had coined the term “Systems novel” (LeClair 1987) to refer to a certain type of postmodernist fiction particularly concerned with science and technology, a term which has achieved some success and was even used by Franzen in 2002 to retrospectively refer to his second novel *Strong Motion*.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, LeClair is disappointed with Franzen’s realist turn and suggests that *The Corrections* does not stand up to the work by Pynchon or DeLillo that influenced Franzen’s first and second novels or even to those two novels themselves. In his rather harsh review, LeClair, who characterizes the novel as having, like the *Harper’s* essay, a “mewling quality”, criticizes Franzen’s current more realist style as “forced”, and therefore not truly realist. For LeClair, this realism “seems present to satisfy mainstream readers’ lust for Tom Wolfe detail rather than to serve as a cultural synecdoche” (LeClair: 2002: n.pag.).

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<sup>25</sup> During the course of an interview for *Boundary 2*, upon being reminded of Wood’s article, Franzen declares: “Right, that review of Wood was unbelievably dumb” (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 43).

<sup>26</sup> Franzen, in his 2002 *New Yorker’s* essay “Mr Difficult”, refers to *The Twenty-Seventh City* as a Systems novel.

*The Corrections* kept generating abundant production of media commentary, usually also including discussion of the *Harper's* essay, during the year following its release. Wood's aforementioned essay nevertheless remains the most important piece on Franzen to appear in a non-specialised periodical, if we are to judge from its having been frequently quoted by academic papers. The latter kind of literature, however, would not find its way into print until well into the following year. Meanwhile, *The Corrections* received the National Book Award for Fiction and was a finalist for both the Pulitzer and the PEN/Faulkner award, marking its claim for the book of the year in the United States.

#### **2.4. Hybrid modes and postmodern uncertainties.**

The first commentary on Franzen's fiction to appear in an academic periodical was in all probability the one made by Melvin Jules Bukiet (1996), who uses the term "Crackpot Realism" to refer to the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, Jonathan Franzen and especially Richard Powers. For Bukiet, these authors seek to reflect the web of connections that seem to underlie contemporary world in novels where conspiracy is often suggested and the role of chance is exaggerated. "Plots run rampant in Crackpot Realism", with paranoia as an important ingredient. So are science and technology, usually taking on an ominous character, which relates this novel to LeClair's *Systems* novel, and assumed by Franzen himself, as was mentioned above. Bukiet summarizes the concept in these terms:

a literature that faces the absurdity of modern life, as does Barthelme, with the imaginative freedom of Márquez and the seriousness with which Updike pursues his suburban angst. Then, if one adds a pinch of mystical gnosis to the stew, one begins to get the recipe for Crackpot Realism. (Bukiet, 1996: n.pag.)

However, it may be said that specific treatment of Franzen's work in academic articles starts with *The Corrections*. One of the very first scholars to analyse the novel was Pire (2002), who identified the *Harper's* essay ("son essai / manifeste") as "la matrice théorique" of *The Corrections* (Pire, 2002: 46). She recalls Wood's remarks on Franzen's subjectivism in the essay when she affirms that "[l]e problème de Franzen est donc sans doute plus personnel qu'il n'en a l'air. L'essai peut simplement trahir un vif

désir de reconnaissance et de visibilité” (Pire, 2002:47). Pire is ahead of later discussion on the so called “plight of the white male writer” (to use the expression coined by Jon Kucich, to be discussed later in this study) in relation to Franzen when she describes him as

un jeune auteur blanc, issu des classes moyennes, dont le travail créatif ne s’identifie ni à la culture de masse (admise par la partie la plus grande de la société) ni aux productions plus élitistes mais marginales des minorités sexuelles ou raciales (largement convoitées par les éditeurs américains depuis plusieurs années). (Pire, 2002: 47)

Contemporary white male anxiety is studied more at length by Catherine Toal (2003) in an essay in which she examines the portrait of depression in *The Corrections*, along with Rick Moody’s memoir *The Black Veil*, and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. For Toal, the three authors set out to explore the widespread contemporary preoccupation with depression. However, in Toal’s view their engagement (even if ironic) with current popular discourse on mental health prevents them, in spite of their enquiry, to attain a critical position of authority on the issue. In these writers’ outlook, Toal finds the anxieties of a current “crisis in masculinity” caused by the erosion of patriarchal values. In this respect, again, they fail to articulate a valid critical stance: “Due to their ambivalent relationship with cultural authority, the three writers are inclined to affirm and occasionally exalt the shapeless masculinity generated by the very social ills—and accompanying remedies—that they resist and criticize” (Toal, 2003: n.pag.).

In this, Toal breaks the ground for future criticism of Franzen on account of his inadvertently supporting situations he means to denounce. She is especially critical when she examines Franzen’s sympathetic treatment of Chip Lambert, whom he presents “as a victim of the social power of women and minorities.” Of particular interest for our study, as we will see, is Toal’s realization of Franzen’s use of depression as a source of legitimation for his turning away from perspectives of social reform. As she puts it, Franzen borrows from popular discourse on depression “its power to confer identity and to sanction a release from the burdens of criticism and opposition” (2003: n.pag.).

Most scholarly literature on Franzen focuses on *The Corrections* but also traces the evolution with respect to Franzen's previous work, generally discussed in relation to the *Harper's* essay. Much deliberation is devoted to his work's problematic relation to postmodernism and the new trends that attend its alleged final stage. Many early papers also include an account of the Oprah affair, as suited the proximity and media magnitude of the scandal. It is the case of Ribbat (2002), one of the very earliest academic critics to devote a paper to Franzen's work, who sees that affair as a symptom that the gap between high and low culture is still open after more than three decades of a postmodernism which was supposed to bridge that dichotomy. Discussing Franzen's first two novels, Ribbat observes that the novelist tries to unite the textual games of the postmodern, "Pynchonesque" novel and the "direct simplicity of neorealism". Ribbat comments on the somewhat artificial distinction between realism and postmodernism, categories which should be referred to as "coexisting strategies of representation" (Ribbat, 2002: 560), rather than styles or period labels, since the differences between them are gradual. He sees one reason for Franzen's commercial and critical success in that "his fiction finds an especially comfortable middle position between these two camps" (2002: 561).

Ribbat quotes Franzen's interview with Sven Birkerts in *Esquire*<sup>27</sup> in which he mentions the emotional content of his novels as setting them apart from the work of writers such as DeLillo or Gaddis—"For better or worse, I'm ... an emotions guy" (Ribbat, 2002: 562)—to support his claim that Franzen's straightforward treatment of emotions (as opposed to the elusive, paradoxical, and problematized way in which they are typically handled by postmodernist writers) might be a sign of a turn toward "post-postmodernism" (2002: 562). For the critic, such emotional import is also present in the work of generational peers such as David Foster Wallace and Jeffrey Eugenides. Although it is not discussed by in his essay, the new focus on the emotional charge of literature postulated by Ribbat cannot but bring to mind the plausibility of a way out of the "waning of affect" which Jameson theorized as characteristic of postmodernism (Jameson, 1991: 10). In his discussion of the *Harper's* essay, Ribbat focuses on Franzen's concern with the current tribalization of American literary landscape, which denies the straight white male writer the possibility of identifying with a subculture.

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<sup>27</sup> "The Esquire Conversation: Jonathan Franzen." Interview with Sven Birkerts. *Esquire* 17 September 2001. Web 10 Nov. 2011.

Ribat was not the only one to relate Franzen to a new “post-postmodernist” current. For McLaughlin (2004), a reaction against the perceived dead end reached by postmodernism has been crystallising since the late 1980s; a reaction caused by “postmodernism detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of non-referential language” (McLaughlin, 2004: 55). McLaughlin identifies an “aesthetic sea change”, motivated by “a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, to reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world” (2004: 55). For the critic, this post- postmodernist backlash is led by two novelists: Jonathan Franzen and (especially) David Foster Wallace, accompanied by other young writers such as Rick Moody, Lydia Davies, Bradford Morrow, Richard Powers or Cris Mazza. McLaughlin turns to Franzen and Wallace because they have been “the most articulate in expressing the post-postmodern discontent and in speculating on directions for the future of fiction” (2004: 59). The critic proceeds then to an account of the *Harper’s* essay taken as Franzen’s programmatic manifesto. McLaughlin remarks that Franzen’s response to the decline of the novel in contemporary culture is “essentially conservative”, since for him

The novel’s value is that it offers a way out of the loneliness engendered by the atomized privacy that results from contemporary consumer technology, but not by bridging the gap between ourselves and the social world. Instead, the novel reconnects us to fundamental human problems. (McLaughlin, 2004: 61)

McLaughlin presumes that the ideas contained in the essay influenced *The Corrections*, a novel which he criticises on aesthetic grounds as a sort of “mishmash”, characterised by an “inconsistent attitude toward language”, apparently “the result of an author in flux, unsure of how he relates to the world and to his art form” (2004: 63). McLaughlin then examines Wallace’s outlook through an analysis of his famous critical essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction* (1997). In this essay Wallace traces the origins of postmodernism in the United States back to a rebellion, by means of irony, against the myth of America spread by television. However, Wallace explains, postmodern tools such as irony and self-referentiality were gradually co-opted by TV and have since become “agents of a great despair and stasis”, in a culture where weary cynicism is the widespread worldview and naivety is ridiculed. As McLaughlin observes, following Wallace, “the culture of irony and ridicule that postmodernism has brought is essentially conservative, negating the possibility of change at the same time it

despairs of the status quo” (2002: 65). Wallace’s suggested way beyond postmodernist sterile irony, as Franzen’s, seems also conservative: a return to a plain, convinced treatment of human troubles and emotions, in defiance of the hip ironists’ scorn. The difference between Franzen and Wallace here is that the latter, according to McLaughlin, is aware that “neither America nor the fiction that seeks to represent it can return to a state of pre-postmodern innocence regarding language and the processes of representation” (2004: 65). McLaughlin agrees that fiction should serve to a better understanding of language, narrative and the process of representation, if nothing else to claim this awareness back from the institutions that use it to promote the “cynical despair that perpetuates the status quo” (2004: 67). He therefore posits as “the agenda of post-postmodernism” the production of a socially engaged fiction that is theoretically aware enough to lay bare the language-based nature of many oppressive constructions, thus opening our eyes to the fact that other realities are possible. The obvious problem with this post-postmodernist agenda, in our opinion, is that it would make a rather unreliable criterion to tell a post-postmodernist novel apart from many classic postmodernist texts.

Susanne Rohr (2004) quotes Bukiet (1996) and claims that *The Corrections* is also a good example of “Crackpot Realism”, though in her view Pynchon and Franzen use very different narrative strategies to reflect “a worldview of chaos and disruption”. Rohr sees *The Corrections* as a hybrid novel, sharing in both modernist and postmodernist features, and yet making use of narrative realism:

This novel neither gives primacy to wild modernist aesthetic experiment nor does it delight in anarchic post-modernist playfulness . . . Yet although the novel is moved by epistemological concerns related to those of modernism and post-modernism, it chooses a different narrative strategy for staging them. It follows the conventions of literary realism. (Rohr, 2004: 98)

For Rohr, this blend is aesthetically successful since “neither radical aesthetic experiment, nor boundless narrative frivolity could create the chilling image of the hearty familiar increasingly defying interpretation that sets the scene in *The Corrections*” (2004: 98). The critic claims that the novel’s realist construction is an example of a “new conventionalism” that is making its way into contemporary fiction. For Rohr, this trend, which allows for extended study of character, manners and social

relations, is easily understood as a reaction to “decades of laborious efforts in both literature and literary criticism to undermine subjects and subject positions in every imaginable way” (2004: 102). Rohr also interprets the increasingly common withdrawal into the boundaries of family matters as a reaction to the threats of globalization, and proposes *The Corrections* as an example of “a new form to the genre of the novel: the novel of globalization”, a new kind of “post-urban city novel”, concerned with “the undermining forces of insecurity, disintegration, and loss of familiar structures of experience—all of which are related to the threats of globalization” (2004: 103).

Stylistic hybridity and global anxieties are also the concern of Hipsky (2006), who in a lengthy essay studies the parallelism between *The Corrections* and another successful contemporary narrative: David Chase’s television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). To begin with, for Hipsky, both the series and the novel target the same demographic group—white-collar, “blue” America, an audience that relates to depictions of psychic fragmentation and paranoia. They both address middle-class strata’s anxieties of self-definition that have attended the end of Cold War (as well as “middle class liberal guilt”), producing contemporary portraits of white, bourgeois families that link domestic anxieties and a diffuse yet deeply felt sense of “global paranoia” (Hipsky, 2006: par. 2). Following, among others, Patrick O’Donnell, Hipsky identifies this paranoia as a constituent of late capitalist society. From another point of view, both the novel and the show renounce high postmodernist experimentalism (be it of “Pynchonesque or David Lynch-style”), and incorporate instead modernist and postmodernist elements in a pleurably accessible way into a traditional realist narrative. Thus, both narratives provide psychic explorations that “verge on the authentically surrealistic but that are in each case reined in, their potentially destabilizing vistas of the unconscious shuttered by their service to plot and character development” (Hipsky, 2006: par. 6). Hipsky also discerns a distinct new kind of hybrid irony in both the series and the novel, an amalgam of unstable, disaffected postmodern irony and traditional, “grounded” irony, especially evident in their family portraits.

“Turncoat”, the provocatively titled essay by Robert Rebein (2007) is the most comprehensive attempt to trace and explain Franzen’s stylistic evolution from the postmodernism of his first two novels to the particular form of realism that characterises *The Corrections*. Rebein quotes Franzen himself in the essay “Mr Difficult” and several interviews to show that the postmodernist filiation of his early novels was the product of

a self-denying effort against his true, more realist nature, which was explained by the pre-eminence of the great figures of high postmodernism at the time of his coming of age as a reader and writer. As Franzen explains in his interview with Donald Antrim, “that was what the first book, *The Twenty-Seventh City* was: a conversation with the literary figures of my parent’s generation. The great sixties and seventies postmoderns” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.) Consequently, he adopted “a lot of that generation of writers concerns—the great postwar freak-out, the Strangeloveian inconceivabilities, the sick society in need of radical critique” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.). He was “attracted to crazy scenarios” and explored them through “large, externalized, heavily plotted dramas” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.). However, according to Rebein, even in his first novel there were “signs of the realist writer hidden beneath all the po-mo machinery” (Rebein, 2007: 204), something which is even more evident in *Strong Motion*, where, in Rebein’s view, its “more rounded characters” seem to struggle with the plot imposed upon them. Quoting the *Harper’s* essay, Rebein recounts how *Strong Motion* is followed by a period of profound personal crisis for Franzen, ultimately leading to his third novel’s hopeless stall, mainly because of his inability to believe in what he was writing. His liberation, as we have seen in our introduction to this study, only came when he abjured the dogmas of postmodernism. Indeed, in a way that is ironic and approving at the same time, Rebein, as Green (2005) before him, explores the striking similarity of Franzen’s stylistic evolution to a religious conversion. In this, Rebein is undoubtedly helped by the quasi-religious rhetoric Franzen uses when discussing the value of art. In this conversion, according to Rebein Franzen adopts the role of a reformer of the “dark, corrupt Catholicism of Postmodernism”, to give way to a “lighter, more honest and forgiving Protestant-style realism” (Rebein, 2007: 212). In his essay “Mr Difficult”, Franzen identifies his former hero William Gaddis as representing postmodernist excesses, and therefore becomes “a kind of High Priest of this particular brand of po-mo writing. As such, his life and works must be shown to be empty and without meaning if Franzen is to replace them with his own, reformed religion of art” (2007: 211).

In spite of the irony, Rebein evidently welcomes Franzen’s abandonment of postmodernism and claims that it is precisely with *The Corrections* that Franzen finally gets to effectively connect the social and the personal in a novel, since in this book the social questions he sets out to raise are “evoked, brought to life first within the characters and finally within us as readers” (2007: 219), rather than forced upon us. For

Rebein, who perhaps follows Franzen too closely in identifying postmodernism with *experimental* postmodernism, Franzen's evolution is another sign of the final stage reached by postmodernism, which for him "has been losing ground to a revitalized realism since at least 1980" (2007: 220), as is exemplified by the work of other younger writers such as William T. Vollmann, or even DeLillo's *Underground*. In his view, Franzen's generation of novelists is likely to be the last one influenced by the great postmodernists as in the future the ever diminishing reading public is due to be less and less willing to spare the effort that postmodernist aesthetics requires. At this point, it is worth noting that Franzen's attacks on excessive experimentalism expressed in "Mr Difficult" and the interview "Having Difficulty with Difficulty"<sup>28</sup> drew some harsh criticism upon him, most notably by Ben Marcus. In a caustic essay in *Harper's*, Marcus accused Franzen of being excessively concerned with pleasing a massive audience, while at the same time passing off too sweeping literary judgements on avant-garde literature on the only basis of his own (bland) tastes, a "populist pundit [who] puts up his dull wall and says what literature can and cannot be" (Marcus, 2005: 52). Similarly intended but less convincing—he acknowledges he has not read the novel—is David Shields' more recent denounce of *The Corrections*, where he defines it as "the big, blockbuster novel by middle-of-the-road writers, the run-of-the-mill four-hundred-page page-turner" (Shields, 2010: 197).

In 2008 Burn publishes the only monograph on Jonathan Franzen to date. Burn eludes discussion of ideological aspects and, at times, his text fails to achieve an advisable critical distance with its object of study. Nevertheless, his is an important book and an unavoidable reference for scholars of Franzen's work. Burn studies Franzen as the most significant figure of a new mode in fiction, post-postmodernism, and discusses his work in relation to the other two most prominent representatives of the movement according to him: David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers. Burn traces the development of the current along the 1990s, pausing at landmarks such as Wallace's essay *E Unibus Pluram* (1997), which denounced the co-optation of postmodernist techniques by the establishment, or the fiction compilation *Avant Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation*, edited by Larry McCaffery in 1993. Burn then makes an attempt at defining the differentiating features of the movement as opposed to those commonly

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<sup>28</sup> "Having Difficulty with Difficulty." Interview with Ben Greenman. *New Yorker Online Only* 23 Sep. 2002. 30 Sep. 2002.

attributed to postmodernism, a rather tricky task if we bear in mind the enormous flexibility and inclusiveness of that concept. As the most important traits he identifies a greater importance given to plot as opposed to form in post-postmodern works; a less frequent use of metafictional techniques, usually employed to different ends; a deeper concern with character development; or the influence of neuroscientific research. Burn has a point in criticizing Rebein's (2007) account of Franzen's stylistic evolution as unsubtle: "Rebein has attempted to glibly smooth the finer distinctions of Franzen's relationship with postmodernism with a reductive formula that asserts that Franzen said 'no' to Po-Mo" (Burn, 2008: 130). However, the extent to which Burn's criteria suffice to differentiate post-postmodernism from different forms and nuances of what is usually called postmodernism is certainly debatable and has been refuted by Parrish (2010), who claims that Burn does not articulate a valid way to tell an alleged post-postmodernism apart from postmodernism. For Parrish, who passes a rather quick and negative judgement on Franzen's work in his article, Burn's attempt "only underscores the degree to which these writers remain postmodernist and arguably belated in relation to Gaddis, Pynchon and DeLillo" (2010: 652), since in his opinion "nearly all of the qualities he identifies as post-postmodernist are exactly what Hutcheon and Jameson describe as postmodernist" (2010: 651). In any case, Burn performs a meticulous task in gathering information on early work by Franzen, including juvenilia, uncollected work and scientific articles co-signed when he was a research assistant at Harvard. He is especially pertinent in drawing a clear distinction between Franzen's novels and his essays, which are usually taken by critics as what Adam Kelly—in his review of Burn's monograph—calls "the keys to his fiction" (Kelly, 2009: 550). For Burn, "[i]n his essays, Franzen frequently expresses his divided feelings about a subject, or presents an opposition, but he nearly always reaches some kind of resolution by the end of the essay" (Burn, 2008: 48). However, as Burn rightly claims, in his fiction Franzen does not resolve these oppositions, but maintains a "double vision", which creates "an unsettling tension at the heart of his works that is absent from his essays" (2008: 48). This tension, for Burn, is a reflection of the (unresolved) opposition between postmodernism and more traditional modes of fiction to be found in Franzen's novels. If for many critics the *Harper's* essay expresses Franzen's resolution of an aesthetic problem, Burn shows persuasively that such a problem would remain unsolved for several years, as is proved by Franzen's own accounts of the process of writing *The Corrections*. Burn's conclusion that Franzen's comments on his own work are

misleading is an important one, given the extent to which such comments have informed the critics' response. But perhaps Burn's most valuable contribution to the understanding of Franzen's work lies in his detailed analysis of the novels, which reveals a much more careful construction than many critics have been ready to acknowledge, with many layers of significance and countless intertextual allusions full of rich interpretative potential.

## **2.5. The art of engagement.**

In his book on contemporary American fiction, Green (2005) dedicates a long and often quoted chapter to examine Franzen's work from a social and ideological point of view, preparing thus the ground for a number of papers to come. Green is sympathetic with Franzen when he describes the controversy with Oprah Winfrey as the product of two conflicting views of the self: as constructed through theatricalized therapeutic confession for Winfrey and her followers; and for Franzen as intellectual and emotional property—the “private reserve of the writer” (Green, 2005: 90). He is more critical though when he analyses the *Harper's* essay, again taken as a programmatic manifesto that would be realized in *The Corrections*. Green observes a burden of “humanist platitudes” (2005: 95) in the essay but nevertheless credits Franzen for bringing to light with it “some of the pressures and shifts within the literary system”. He is probably one of the first critics to call attention to Franzen's “traditional notion of literature as quasi-religious solace” (2005: 96), and is particularly insightful when he analyses the ways in which Paula Fox's short novel *Desperate Characters* acts a model for Franzen's new concept of fiction, which subordinates social analysis in favour of character exploration. Even though he acknowledges that there is a place for social content in that model, Green laments that Franzen does not advance a way of dealing with the problems he identifies, but rather shows a retreat from the political: “By returning the world of the novel to the private sphere, at the levels of both literary production and consumption, Franzen fails to engage with the absence of a political and cultural space that is his merit and timeliness of his essay to identify” (Green, 2005: 96).

In this way, Green charges Franzen with a complacency that “vitiates the cultural and political critique he mounts in the first part of the essay” (2005: 96), paving the way for later, more radical critics. There is some inconsistency, nevertheless, in

Green's argumentation, since he claims that Franzen "abandons the social novel" to embrace psychological realism (2005: 104), and later in the essay he ascribes Franzen to a "tradition of social realism that draws its power from the richness of the metonymic social fact"—in spite of some postmodernist "vestiges" of "paranoid systematization and interconnectiveness" (2005: 106). Green is also concerned with the awkward position occupied by Franzen in an identity-based cultural scene, as he presents "the experience of white upper-middle class Midwesterners—all those middles in an age fascinated by margins—as constituting an identity specific enough for intense fictional exploration" (2005: 91). In this respect, for all the involved difficulties, Franzen's endeavour was fortunate, according to Green, who attributes to *The Corrections* the quality of a "successful resolution": nothing less than "the invention of a position between class identity and cultural authority" (2005: 103).

If Green's criticism of Franzen was ambivalent, Annesley's (2006) is scathing. In an influential essay, he quotes Rohr (2004), who presented *The Corrections* as an instance of a new form of the novel: "the novel of globalization". For Annesley, however, this claim is much more problematic than it may seem, as the term globalization itself refers not to a stable reality, but rather to a complex debate about contemporary social, political and economic processes. Therefore it is crucial to analyse the ways in which the novel engages with that debate. Following Thomas Peyser, Annesley argues that novels themselves are agents that may play an important role in the very process of globalization due to their capacity to shape people's attitude towards that phenomenon. This circumstance explains the need to analyse the extent to which *The Corrections* contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon. According to the critic, Franzen's contribution is seriously flawed. Annesley undermines Franzen's critical position under the charge of unsound ideological awareness, which he illustrates with analyses not only of the novels but also of his essays and even the controversy with Oprah Winfrey. Thus, in his essay *Scavenging*,<sup>29</sup> with which Franzen attempts to criticize technological consumerism, he actually "finds himself strengthening the foundations upon which consumer society rests, even as he is trying to attack them" (Annesley, 2006: 126). Annesley is especially mordant in his interpretation of the Oprah affair. To begin with, he rejects Franzen's aspiration to the status of high literature for his work. For the critic, *The Corrections* is precisely the kind of conventional,

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<sup>29</sup> The essay is included in *How to Be Alone*.

undemanding reading that is usually favoured by Oprah's Book Club. Annesley is also caustic with what he sees as Franzen's attempt to present his work as outside the world of commerce, when the publisher of the novel is part of a giant corporate conglomerate. The critic claims that Franzen he is unable or unwilling to see literature, including his, as the product subject to market forces that it has always been.

For Annesley, however, Franzen's main weakness lies in the determinism of his social vision, as he fails to see globalization as a dialectical process, that is, as one that brings something more than ever greater opportunities for the expansion of financial and corporate power. For the critic, Franzen represents globalization "as an irreducible reality that the novel is powerless to either interrogate or resist" (2006: 124), and therefore "he closes off the possibility that his characters (and indeed his own writing) may have a dialectical relationship with the conditions of globalization" (2006: 124). With his characters deprived of agency, and his "hegemonic and incontestable" (2006: 125) depiction of globalization, Franzen is actually reinforcing the process he is trying to criticize. Annesley's assumption here seems to be that the merit of a novel lies in its progressive value, and that this progressiveness is best served by novels in which the characters exert their agency against the system. Curiously, Annesley follows Wood (2001a) in condemning Franzen's social writing, although Wood denounces him for different reasons, namely for priming the social over the aesthetic. However, Annesley finally discerns—somewhat patronizingly—encouraging signs in *The Corrections*' closing (specifically in its last five lines), as it seems to qualify the rigid determinism that characterizes the rest of the novel, as well as Franzen's previous work. Thus, although in his view *The Corrections* cannot be properly taken as a novel of globalization on account of all the previously mentioned defects, Annesley concludes that if Franzen pursues "the implications raised in his ending, he may yet muster the 'cultural authority' needed to write a 'social novel' that offers an effective engagement with globalization" (2006: 127). It may be argued though that, if one is to accept the whole of Annesley's argumentation in his relentless criticism of Franzen, it becomes difficult to follow him now and accept that the novel's last sentence ("She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life", referred to Enid Lambert) should make that much of a difference as to provide a last-minute indult for Franzen, much important as novels' last sentences usually are.

Hawkins (2007) also studies *The Corrections* from an overtly ideological point of view, but in this case to vindicate Franzen (“the best of America’s twenty-first century social realists, a writer who deftly balances concern for the individual and the social” [Hawkins, 2007: 66]), inscribing him in a lineage that goes back to Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Arthur Miller. From a markedly humanist point of view, Hawkins studies the representations of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*, *Death of a Salesman* and *The Corrections*. Hawkins follows Roland Marchand in describing the rhetoric of the American Dream as originally a reaction against the depersonalization of business that became generalised by the early twentieth century, due to the increasing systematization of production and sales. This rhetoric accreted into a metanarrative whereby workers willingly participate in their own subjugation, ultimately leading to alienation and psychic fragmentation. For Hawkins, the mentioned works “all deal with the manner in which the advertised dream debases the American spirit by entrenching the hegemony of materialism and thereby limiting the potential establishment of communal spaces that escapes commercialization” (Hawkins, 2007: 50-51).

Nevertheless, the workings of the Dream on the characters studied by Hawkins differ in the three works. While *Gatsby* is unable or unwilling to realize the trap involved in the Dream and, in an act of “self-machinization”, becomes an advertisement for it, in Miller’s play, some characters get to be aware of the “farcical nature” of such construction. Biff Loman, the son of the ill-fated protagonist Willy, to name one, is able to observe at the end of the play that “Willy had the wrong dreams”. Miller accordingly seems to suggest a way out this alienating rhetorical cage by means of meaningful, fulfilling work related to one’s environment, such as farming work, the kind of activity Biff seeks at the end of the play. Franzen, however, is aware that this escape from fragmentation is unavailable in our age, due to the advance in the processes of systematization and globalization, and exposes the myth of hands-on work as already assimilated by the American Dream. For Hawkins, Alfred Lambert exemplifies “the failure of work as escape”. Theoretically, Alfred’s job as an engineer for a railroad company meets Miller’s requirements for meaningful, fulfilling work, a feeling that the novel reinforces by deploying the train as a symbol of community threatened by impersonal economic forces. Yet we learn that “Alfred had boundless energy for work but as soon as he quitted he could barely stand up” (qtd. Hawkins, 2007: 61), showing how ideologically disguised enslavement can become the very prop that keeps you on

your feet. In sight of this predicament, according to Hawkins Franzen suggests that wholeness may only be achieved through the combination of a macrocosmic awareness of one's entrapment within a commercial culture and a microcosmic commitment to the creation of community in the ever-shrinking spaces this culture leaves relatively unfettered (Hawkins, 2007: 51). This move is represented in the novel by the character of Chip Lambert, who, as a professor of cultural studies, has the theoretical equipment to see through the Dream, yet has to combine his critical approach with emotional engagement with his surroundings. He proves it with his commitment to Alfred's assistance at the end of the novel, showing us that "the Dream may be shifted, that its terms may be humanized" (2007: 64).

Hutchinson (2009) draws on criticism of Franzen by Annesley (2006), Wood (2001a) and Green (2005) and then tries to arrive at a synthesis of his own. Hutchinson also relies on work by Kucich to signal Jonathan Franzen as the foremost example, even more than DeLillo, of the crisis of white male liberal writer struggling for a place in a landscape increasingly dominated by the New Right on one side, and marginal discourses such as identity-based politics and literature on the other. Hutchinson describes Franzen as torn between different discourses: a libertarian impulse dating back from the counterculture of the 1960s, and the 1980s communitarian response to Reaganism; experimentalism and realism; radical and pragmatic politics; rejection or adherence to the distinction between "high" and "low" culture. Hutchinson criticizes the sense of social stasis ("a tired sense of defeatism" [Hutchinson, 2009: 192]) evoked by Franzen's first two novels, which end not in apocalypse but rather in anticlimactic apathy and reassertion of the status quo. For him, the "prevalent political tone in Franzen's fiction [is]: one that both accepts and regrets the apparent draining of all possible resistance, conflict, or meaningful difference" (Hutchinson, 2009: 193). As in the case of Annesley, Hutchinson's view avoids considering the possibility that warning or indictment are present in the novel, or else that these are valid forms of critique. It is a view informed by the assumption that challenging the system for a novel requires the presence of ideologically aware, "agent" characters and, of course, that such challenge is a measure of the value of a novel. Hutchinson differs from Annesley though in recognizing in *Strong Motion*, the "germ of a communitarian impulse that will be developed further in *The Corrections*" (2009: 196).

For Hutchinson, Franzen's ambivalence and conflicting impulses are represented by the criticism he receives from Wood, for whom his approach is insufficiently conservative, and Annesley, who considers it too conservative. This tension produces anxieties that can be perceived in the novels. In the critic's opinion, "[t]hemes of entrapment within circularities, and of resistance being undermined by ambivalent impulses, are at the heart of *The Corrections*" (2009: 199). For Hutchinson, the characters' conflicts reflect:

contemporary left-liberal desire for a discourse that is more substantial than pragmatic, piecemeal attempts at melioration, but that avoids counterproductive programs that promote violence and suffering. The outcome of this dilemma is baffled despair that stems from the perception of a blocked future (the abandonment of Utopia), a lost past (the impossibility of return), and a present that is compromised by dependence on capitalist prosperity. (Hutchinson, 2009: 203)

Like Annesley, Hutchinson also perceives a positive social implication in *The Corrections*, although it is not in the closing of the novel where he finds it. In a conclusion that is possibly stronger than Annesley's because the criticism has been less sweeping, Hutchinson argues that the characters' attempts at rebellion are ineffective because they are based on individual, rather than collective liberation. In showing that, the novel is both addressing the need for transgression in an oppressive system, and pointing the way for some form of transgression that is not individual but collective, substituting solidarity for libertarian individualism

In his second essay on Franzen, this time devoted solely to him, Hawkins (2010) is much more critical from a political point of view, although he also sees, like Annesley and Hutchinson, encouraging signals in Franzen's work that suggest he may eventually put his "extraordinary talent" to good use and adopt a more properly critical approach in his fiction: "Let us hope ... that Franzen takes advantage of this opportunity, conjoining the personal and the public in a novel that truly proves progressive" (Hawkins, 2010: 82-83). Hawkins recognises Annesley and Hutchinson's influence, although he differs from them in his avowedly humanist ideological stand. Thus, he defends a progressivism which is not defined in the usual way it is in U.S. politics, but as a form of universal love or, in its classical formulation, "agape", a

somewhat loose definition that arguably undermines his position. The essay's title answers a question posed by Franzen in the *Harper's* essay to support his alleged shift of focus away from the social: "To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?" (Franzen, 1996: 49)<sup>30</sup> To this Hawkins retorts that "Franzen's entrenchment in 'refuge'—an entrenchment his fiction often enacts—is one that undercuts is social vision" (Hawkins, 2010: 63). Hawkins agrees with Annesley in deploring Franzen's depiction of globalization as a monolithic and irresistible force, failing at realising its complexity and the opportunities it presents for improving the status quo. Recalling Negri and Hardt in *Empire* (2001), Hawkins advocates a social fiction that represents "the experiential realities attending to myriad shifts in culture, economics, politics, et cetera, by way of myriad points of entry, thereby expanding readers' sense of human potentiality, variety, and prospects for connection" (2010: 63).

Like Annesley, Hawkins contends that Franzen's novels buttress the system he aims to criticize: the critic concedes that *The Corrections* provides the readers with insightful knowledge of the intersection of the social and personal in contemporary society, but he also provides them with the wrong models, since "these readers confront characters whose lives may look a lot like theirs and who tend toward political paralysis, which of course, only reinforces a reader's own sense of paralysis and therein furthers the aims of the 'infernal machine' he despises" (2010: 64). It is noticeable, however, that this contention attributes a personal "sense of paralysis" to readers, something which is not further explained. In any case, Hawkins traces an evolution in Franzen's novels, from the stifling immutability suggested by the end of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, to *Strong Motion*, where we can see the character of Renée Seitchek questioning and challenging the state of affairs, even if at the end of the novel it remains basically unaltered. According to Hawkins, nevertheless, Renée and Louis Holland never attain true intimacy because the former's rationalist pragmatism acts as a roadblock to actual commitment. Hawkins's point is that a worldview based on reason without a humanist metanarrative is likely to commit "the same evils as the free-market ideology" (2010: 75). The journey towards a more communitarian vision culminates in *The Corrections* with Chip's commitment to Alfred at the end of the novel, which leaves Franzen "on the brink of a metavision of community that could anchor the

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<sup>30</sup> As we have discussed above, these rhetorical questions had already been quoted by Wood (2001a)

twenty-first century social novel which effectively challenges the hegemony of self-interest” (2010: 82).

## 2.6. *Freedom* as the latest Great American Novel?

The release of Jonathan Franzen’s fourth novel, on August 31 2010, quickly became one of the main literary events of the year in the United States, if we are to judge from its sales and the media attention it received. Remarkable coverage had already begun a few weeks before, on August 12, when *Time* magazine dedicated its cover to Franzen featuring the announcement “Great American Novelist”; a recognition which was both appropriate and ironic twelve years after the *Harper’s* essay, where he had complained that “the dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority, an organ like *Time*, which not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, now serves mainly to reflect it” (Franzen, 1996: 38). No less striking, in its suggestion of circularity, was his invitation to Oprah Winfrey’s show later in the year (December 6), after *Freedom* had been picked for her Book Club. This time there was no misunderstanding and both novelist and presenter civilly discussed and dismissed their previous dispute.<sup>31</sup>

The novel was reviewed by every significant printed American media, earning a generally appreciative response. It was however possible to find a very wide range of critical stands, from exhilarated acclaim to downright hostility. Many reviews show that particularly American fondness for large novels of wide social scope that capture the mood and the plight of the times—that eagerness for the next Great American Novel. Worn-out as it may seem, this pair of adjectives appeared associated to *Freedom* in an appreciable number of reviews. The notion of the Great American Novel has often been dismissed a facile media cliché, and the fact that it was used by *Time* magazine to describe *Freedom* right upon its release only seems to corroborate it. However, it is obvious that there are reasons worth considering behind the resilient fascination power of the concept. It is out of the scope of this study to conduct a deep examination of the idea of the GAN, to use Henry James’s acronym, but it seems safe to state at least that its persistent allure in American culture points to the role of the novel as the heir of the epic, the form that used the meaning-conferring power of narrative to make sense of the

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<sup>31</sup> Video recordings of the show are available online at <http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/Jonathan-Franzen-Videos-on-Freedom-Oprahs-Book-Club>

collective history of a body of people—sometimes by *creating* that history itself. The persistence of the myth of the GAN, a type of novel that aims at reflecting great socio-historical transformations through the story of a small group of characters, would attest then to the enduring need for a nation as heterogeneous as the United States to make sense of its history by having it told time and again—and by the same token possibly also to the Althusserian view of history as fundamentally lacking any sense.<sup>32</sup>

Be it as it may, one of the reviewers who applied that critical concept to *Freedom* was Alsup at *Esquire* (“Some people believe the era of the Great American Novel is over. *Freedom* makes them look like fools” [Alsup, 2010: n.pag.]). Sam Tanenhaus at *The New York Times* was also enthusiastic, calling *Freedom* “a masterpiece of American fiction . . . a narrative that in its majestic sweep seems to gather up every fresh datum of our shared millennial life” (Tanenhaus, 2010: n.pag.). *Freedom* was especially well received in the UK, where it was released with a delay of only three weeks on September 23. Thus Blake Morrison at *The Guardian* suggested that Franzen could already be the leading writer in twenty-first-century American literature (Morrison, 2010: n.pag.).

Probably as a backlash to the enormous expectation and the raving reviews, there were also full-blown attacks such as the one by Ruth Franklin, senior editor of *The New Republic*, who called the novel a “pseudo-masterpiece”. The review, which curiously appeared in the same journal where James Wood had published his influential article on *The Corrections* nine years before, was at times so contrived that it would seem an attempt to profit from the novel’s popularity. For example, apropos of a climactic, emotionally charged line in the last part of *Freedom* she argues:

That is the line, I suppose, that has had some of the book’s reviewers (including this one) in tears . . . But beware such tears. When we cry at a book or a film, it is often not because it is genuinely moving, in the sense that it has succeeded in shaking and even altering our previous understanding of life, but because its

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the finest account of the concept of the GAN and its history can be found in the recently published *The Dream of the American Novel*, by Lawrence Buell (2014). Buell traces the origin of the notion back to the mid-nineteenth century and posits *Uncle’s Tom Cabin* as its first widely recognized realization. In his study Buell explores the multiple relationships between novel and nationhood, using the concept of the GAN “as a platform for exploring the specific pathways that have helped certain novels come to the fore as reference points for imagining U.S. national identity” (Buell, 2014: 1). Interestingly for our study, Buell mentions *Freedom* as “the most widely acclaimed GAN contender among the growing number of post 9/11 fictions” (Buell, 2014: 4).

sentimentality is uncomfortably at odds with our own knowledge of what life is really like, and we are being offered a swift transit back to our sweet dreams. (Franklin, 2010: n.pag.)

Among the negative reactions to the success of *Freedom* was also the controversy, faintly reminiscent of the Oprah affair, which started when best-selling writers Jennifer Weiner and Jody Picoult complained via Twitter about gender bias in the media treatment of literature. Weiner and Picoult subsequently criticized Jonathan Franzen's "overcoverage", and accused *The New York Times* of favouring white male authors.<sup>33</sup>

Of course there were more reasoned and balanced analyses of *Freedom*. One of the most important was again the one by Michiko Kakutani, the *New York Times*' literary critic.<sup>34</sup> In her review Kakutani acknowledges Franzen's evolution, from an "apocalyptic satirist", struggling to squeeze his grand social critique into his novels to, "a kind of nineteenth-century realist concerned with the public and private lives of his characters" (Kakutani, 2010: n.pag.). This transition, according to the critic, was still incomplete in *The Corrections*, a "hybrid" work characterized by the tension between Franzen's impulse to create fully-dimensional characters and his usual satiric and critical intentions. A struggle that for Kakutani was resolved with an excess of symbolism imbued in the characters. This is not the case with *Freedom*, she argues, where Franzen shines at showing the inner lives of his characters, "fully imagined human beings ... confused, searching people capable of change and perhaps even transcendence" (Kakutani, 2010: n.pag.). She nevertheless scorns the novel's allusions to *War and Peace* as "laughably conceited". Kakutani seems close to critics such as Annesley and Hutchinson (2009), who have rebuked Franzen on account of a deterministic social vision and characters deprived of agency, when she concludes:

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<sup>33</sup> Picoult and Weiner are interviewed by [www.thehuffingtonpost.com](http://www.thehuffingtonpost.com) on the controversy. See "Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Weiner Speak Out On Franzen Feud: HuffPost Exclusive". [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jason-pinter/jodi-picoult-jennifer-weiner-franzen\\_b\\_693143.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jason-pinter/jodi-picoult-jennifer-weiner-franzen_b_693143.html)

<sup>34</sup> The Pulitzer Prize-Winner literary critic of *The New York Times* had been the object of a well-commented outburst by Franzen when he claimed, at a lecture at Harvard University in April 2008, that she was "the stupidest person in New York City", following a harsh review by Kakutani of Franzen's memoir *The Discomfort Zone*. A report of the incident by *The Harvard Crimson* is available at <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2008/4/29/with-critic-franzen-criticizes-criticism-the/>

In the past, Mr Franzen tended to impose a seemingly cynical, mechanistic view of the world on his characters, threatening to turn them into authorial pawns subject to simple Freudian-Darwinian imperatives. This time, in creating conflicted, contrarian individuals capable of choosing their own fates, Mr Franzen has written his most deeply felt novel yet — a novel that turns out to be both a compelling biography of a dysfunctional family and an indelible portrait of our times. (Kakutani, 2010: n.pag.)

Kakutani was not the only critic to make this kind of remark on *Freedom*'s characters: for Keith Miller, at the *Telegraph*, “you never get the sense that the characters are mere Hegelian stooges, passive instruments of an impersonal historical process” (Miller, 2010: n.pag.).

For Sam Sacks, at *The Wall Street Journal*, the novel affords “a weirdly addictive reading experience”, although it is sometimes weighed down by its “tendentious speechmaking” (Sacks, 2010: n.pag.). Sacks analyses Franzen's study of freedom and finds it remarkably bleak, as the novel shows that it can only be gained at the expense of someone else's freedom; while all interactions, even within the framework of the family, are presented as different forms of competition.

As is usual with Franzen's novels, *Freedom* elicited little critical consensus. However, some reviewers agreed in signalling one of the book's narrative devices, Patty Berglund's autobiography, as a flaw, since Franzen does not attempt to create a distinctive writing voice for her. In this way, for Hari Kunzru at *The Financial Times*,

[t]he book is marred by the decision to present part of it as an “autobiography” written by Patty at the behest of her therapist. Patty's voice is *exactly* the same as the rest of novel, and we never believe that she has the eloquence or self-awareness to analyse the world in this way. (Kunzru, 2010: n.pag.)

James Lever argues in a similar way in *The London Review of Books*:

one soon realises that Patty's autobiography isn't written by her. It's composed not in a distinct Patty Berglund voice but in the familiar lucid cadences of the 2001 National Book Award winner, with the dial turned down half a notch. This early decision may keep the novel's fluency high but it is fatally limiting: it imposes a ceiling on the reality of what we're reading. (Lever, 2010: n.pag.)

Ron Charles at the *Washington Post* expresses very much the same complaint about that fragment. However, there are also other critics such as Kakutani (2010) who overlook this possible problem or, like Tim Walker (2010) at *The Independent*, are ready to forgive Franzen for it.

Perhaps surprisingly, bearing in mind the accusations of commercialism drawn by *The Corrections*, especially from postmodernist and academic quarters, Franzen's use of nineteenth-century-like realism, seems to be taken as natural by most critics, and goes unremarked in many reviews. Among those who welcome the use of this kind of narrative is Tim Walker: "Panoramic and personal; all-encompassing, yet minutely detailed, *Freedom* is resolutely a novel in the classic form, a nineteenth-century-style narrative set against the wars—political, social, actual—of the twenty-first. It succeeds utterly" (Walker, 2010: n.pag.)

Similarly, Morrison applauds the stylistic choice as "[t]he nineteenth-century novel had, at best, a moral complexity and social range that allowed readers to understand the world they lived in" (Morrison, 2010: n.pag.). A much needed ability in these confused times when, as he puts it quoting the *Harper's* essay, books are the place "where you can actually engage productively with an otherwise scary and unmanageable world" (Franzen's words quoted by Morrison). This acceptance suggests a widespread critical desire for a return to more straightforwardly realist narratives, or simply an understandable distancing from rarefied experimentalism among media reviewers. Even the allusions to *War and Peace* in *Freedom*, apparently likely to attract sarcastic remarks, do not draw significant critical fire upon the novel, with the already mentioned exception of Kakutani's review. Nevertheless, Charles Baxter at *The New York Review of Books* mentions David Shields (2010) as an example of the kind of reader annoyed by Franzen's slow-paced narrative; an uneasiness which Baxter sees as an echo of Virginia Woolf's famous criticism of the "materialist" realism of Arnold Bennet's *The Old Wives*:

If we fasten, then, one label on all these books, on which is one word, materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring. (Baxter, 2010: n.pag.)

Contrary to their academic counterparts, media reviewers do not get involved in discussion on the complexities of Franzen's relation to postmodernism—and much less post-postmodernism—. One exception is Baxter, who perhaps too simplistically claims that “[f]or the most part Franzen writes as if literary modernism and experimental postmodernism had never occurred” (Baxter, 2010: n.pag.). Tanenhaus, on his part, reminds us that with *The Corrections*, “Franzen cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism” (Tanenhaus, 2010: n.pag.).

Similarly, comparative reference to other contemporary novelists is scarce, apart from Kakutani's allusion to Franzen's “David Foster Wallace-esque ability to capture the absurdities of contemporary life” (Kakutani, 2010: n.pag.). It is perhaps surprising the general absence of any mentions of Franzen's friend and to some extent literary rival, so abundant in previous academic work. Only for Miller, “a bulky, bandana-girt shadow looms over the book: Franzen's friend David Foster Wallace, who killed himself in 2008. *Freedom* is marbled with his spectral presence” (Miller, 2010: n.pag.).<sup>35</sup>

It could also be argued that *Freedom*'s fairly evident political import is not examined in depth by most reviewers. Some critics in any case find Franzen's handling of ideological or philosophical elements too obvious and obtrusive. As was mentioned above, Sacks (2010) criticizes the novel's biased lecturing. Tim Walker is less harsh when he observes that *Freedom* “contains a few too many lengthy dialogues about the correct approach to environmentalism” (Walker, 2010: n.pag.). In a similar way, Ron Charles criticizes “the book's worn-out satire of Republicans and the Iraq war” and complains:

Unfortunately, the novel doesn't offer its themes so much as bully us into accepting them with knife-to-the-throat insistence. The word “freedom,” for example, beats through the book frequently enough for a frat-house drinking game. As the characters attain the freedom they craved—from children, from spouses, from work—they inevitably discover that it's unsatisfying and self-destructive, which is the same puritanical sermon that Amis pounded away on

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<sup>35</sup> Franzen recalls the shock of Wallace's death in his interview with *Time* magazine in August 2010.

earlier this year in his cerebral sex farce, *The Pregnant Widow*. (Charles, 2010: n.pag.)

Likewise, for Jess Walter at *The San Francisco Chronicle*: “Blunt repetition also threatens to undermine the novel's politics (cranky liberal) and its otherwise spot-on theme, that America's obsession with personal liberty is both destructive and illusory” (Walter: 2010: n.pag.).

Some other critics focus on Franzen's interrogation of American liberalism. This way, for Tanenhaus he seems to be exploring liberal guilt:

Franzen grasps that the central paradox of modern American liberalism inheres not in its doctrines but in the unstated presumptions that govern its daily habits. Liberals, no less than conservatives—and for that matter revolutionaries and reactionaries; in other words, all of us—believe some modes of existence are superior to others. But only the liberal, committed to a vision of harmonious communal pluralism, is unsettled by this truth. (Tanenhaus: 2010: n.pag.)

In the same way, for Miller, *Freedom* is “a pacy, clever, big-hearted comic novel about the strange death of liberal America” (Miller, 2010: n.pag.). Kunzru lists most of the political and ethical concerns of the novel, from the “ethical vacuity of the Bush years” to the environmental effects of limitless growth, and concludes that “Franzen's wish to tackle complex questions through the medium of the realist novel sometimes feels strained but, by and large, his characters can bear the weight he places on their shoulder” (Kunzru: 2010: n.pag.).

Baxter interestingly examines the bitter, angry political voicing of the novel which oscillates “between moral outright and despair”. The critic strikes a key note when he argues that this despair is the consequence of a widespread view among American liberals of the public sphere as “a total loss” where the big problems are seen as unsolvable. The consonance between Baxter's views and one of our main contentions in this dissertation is perceptible: for (the liberal) Franzen, Baxter observes, there seems to be no place but for individual redemption:

To save the cerulean warbler, the book's emblematic symbol of beauty and the spirit, only small gestures, not large political ones, will work. As a consequence, the ending of *Freedom* has an atmosphere of quietism, the hush of

steely detachment falling down over despair. This quietism is the book's answer to its own angers, but it seems willed into being under tremendous pressure, as if all the major battles have been lost and the only consolations are to be found in winning the minor ones. (Baxter, 2010: n.pag.)

This despair of the public sphere is consistent with Franzen's ever deeper exploration of family and its internal emotional economy in his novels. This is noticed by some critics such as Philip Hensher at the *Spectator*, who seems influenced by Ulrich Beck's views when he points at sociological reasons for an increased interest of American novelists in family issues: "Perhaps now that family ties are growing more dependent on volition and goodwill (or bad) rather than on duty and obligation, family is becoming more of a fruitful territory for the novelist's investigations, rather than less so" (Hensher, 2010: n.pag.). Or for Miller: "As with Franzen's last novel, *The Corrections*, family life is taken to be the essential American mystery: the great white whale, the last frontier" (Miller, 2010: n.pag.). What is missing in both critics' reflections on that alleged generalized focal shift towards the realm of the family, is some sort of follow up of the ideological implications of that move.

## **2.7. Latest critical references.**

After the release of *Freedom*, the production of academic criticism on Franzen seems to have dwindled even further to become virtually a trickle. Jason Polley's volume (2011) examines Franzen's concept of justice as reflected in *The Corrections* and conducts similar surveys of the work of Jane Smiley and Don DeLillo. The circumstance that, ten years after the affair, the critic insists that "any serious discussion of Jonathan Franzen and his work" requires a previous study of the "cultural event" constituted by his quarrel with Oprah Winfrey (Polley, 2011: 101) seems to attest to the fact that Franzen's work is clearly in need of further academic criticism.

Two pieces of criticism discussing Franzen's work have appeared in 2013. One of them is the epilogue to *Violet America*, Jason Arthur's study of American regionalist fiction. The chapter begins with an acerbic criticism of what the author considers Franzen's phony presentation of his pursuit of a large readership and commercial success:

Part of what makes Jonathan Franzen infuriating to so many of his contemporaries is that he acts as though he invented the desire to have a big audience for literary fiction, as if his decision to write readable social novels is part of some private, Promethean urge to consolidate the otherwise niche reader communities of contemporary America. (Arthur, 2013: 119)

The piece, written from a Midwestern regionalist perspective, continues with an analysis of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. In his commentary, Arthur resents what he sees as Franzen's snobbish and coldly detached portrait of Midwestern society. Somewhat surprisingly, given his previous explicit reproach of Franzen's *coastal defection*, the author later focuses on the conciliatory tone and praise of America's variety that he finds in Franzen's contribution to Weiland and Wilsey's *State by State* (2009), together with his reconciliation with Oprah Winfrey, to eventually praise Franzen as a welcome contributor to the depolarization that, according to the critic, the United States are in sore need of.<sup>36</sup>

The other 2013 reference is interesting not so much because of its insight into Franzen's work but because of what it insinuates about the lack of academic interest in it that we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In this way, the approach of Studer and Takayoshi's article suggests that such disregard might be due to a critical classification of Franzen's later work as basically middlebrow. In their article, Studer and Takayoshi revise Franzen's arguments in favour of a "contract" between reader and writer, exposed in "Mr Difficult" (rightly highlighting the somewhat disturbing connotations of a commercial transaction between reader and writer), together with his aspiration, expressed in the *Boundary 2* interview, to reach the "open-minded but essentially untrained fiction reader" (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 34). To ascertain the extent of Franzen's success in attaining that objective, as well as to study the literary strategies which are necessary for its attainment, the scholars conduct a survey of over one thousand customer reviews of *The Corrections* at Amazon.com. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the study reveals that values such as realism, recognizable situations, and identification with characters quote high in the average reader's esteem. It should be noted that, although the authors seem to take for granted Franzen's middlebrow

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<sup>36</sup> *State by State* was edited in by Weiland and Weisley as a tribute to the state guide series published during the Depression with the support of the *New Deal Works Progress Administration*. Franzen was commissioned with the chapter on the state of New York. The piece, a fictional interview with a personalized New York State was also compiled in *Farther Away* (2012)

ascription, they do not condemn Franzen on account of his intention to reach a large audience. Rather, the critics vindicate the role of pleasure in literary pedagogy and finally even suggest that the specialized “closed system of techniques and procedures for aesthetic appreciation” of trained readers might ultimately boil down to a disguised form of expressing mere “likes” and “dislikes” (Studer and Takayoshi, 2013: n.pag.).

## **2.8. Franzen’s reception in Spain.**

Although a translation of *The Corrections* was published by Seix Barral in 2002, it is fair to state that Franzen only became a relevant figure of foreign literature in Spain after the publishing of the Spanish version of *Freedom* by Salamandra in 2011. Previously, Franzen was generally included by Spanish critics among a heterogeneous group of young American novelists known in Spain as the “Next Generation”, a label popularized by publishing house Mondadori, which in May 2002 organized a promotional conference in Barcelona to publicize the work of novelists such as Michael Chabon, Chuck Palahniuk or Jonathan Lethem, to be marketed under such tag. Awkward and obscuring as it was, the term stuck for a number of years and was still used in 2006 by Vicente Luis Mora (Gascueña and Martín 2006, eds.) in an analysis of the work of the younger American novelists of postmodernist filiation. In his overview, Mora underscores these writers’ conflicted dependence on mass audiovisual references and commercial culture. The critic remains generally unimpressed with these novelists with the exceptions of Wallace, Eggers, Chabon and Franzen.

On occasion of the release of the Spanish version of *Freedom*, the situation changed and Franzen received abundant attention by journalistic media, including enthusiast reviews. Thus, Eduardo Lago (2010) reported on the release of *Freedom* in *El País* and declared it a masterpiece. Approximately one year later, José María Guelbenzu (2011) reviewed the Spanish translation for the same newspaper and suggested Franzen’s incorporation to the canon of the Great American Novel.

### 3. The realist novel: A socio-historical approach.

*This is the city .... and I am one of the citizens;*

*Whatever interests the rest interests me*

—Walt Whitman

#### 3.1. Introduction: what we talk about when we talk of realism.

The analysis of critical discussion on Jonathan Franzen's work shows a general consensus on his transition from a typically postmodernist fiction, heavily influenced by writers such as Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, to what is commonly regarded as a distinctively realist narrative. Many critics have specifically pointed to classic nineteenth and early-twentieth century realist novels as Franzen's new reference in this evolution, a process which is seen as beginning in *The Corrections* and achieving completion in *Freedom*.<sup>37</sup> Some critics have even argued that Franzen has always been a realist at heart, whose natural inclinations, traceable in his previous novels, had been suffocated by his commitment to postmodernist ways. It is the case, for example, of Robert Rebein:

And yet even in this early work [*The Twenty-Seventh City*] Franzen was already showing a sign of the realist writer hidden beneath all the Po-Mo machinery ... *Strong motion* continues this drift toward realism, particularly in the second half, where Franzen's more rounded characters seem poised to escape the squirrel cage of his plot. (Rebein, 2008: 204)

As it has been shown, critical understanding of Franzen's stylistic development has been considerably influenced by the novelist's own account of it in the *Harper's* essay. In that work, Franzen is taken by many critics as exposing the shortcomings of postmodernism and as a kind of promise of liberation from them to be fulfilled in *The*

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<sup>37</sup> See for example Kakutani 2001, where *The Corrections* is compared to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, or James Wood 2001b, a review of *The Corrections* under the significant title "What the Dickens".

*Corrections*, his next novel, a liberation involving a return to realism.<sup>38</sup> In that essay, Franzen himself—somewhat tentatively—refers to his newly found approach to the writing of fiction as “tragic realism”, with “tragic” explained as “just about any fiction that raises more questions than it answers: anything in which conflict doesn’t resolve into cant” (Franzen, 2002: 91).

Discussion of Franzen’s work as illustrating a general exhaustion or phasing-out of postmodernism is also a critical commonplace. It is noticeable in Rebein’s essay, included in a volume significantly entitled *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, or in the no less explicit Burn’s monograph *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. Such analyses usually suggest a slow but widespread comeback of realism over the last decades, as in Rebein: “literary postmodernism has been losing ground to a revitalized realism since at least 1980, if not before” (2008: 220); or at least propose new hybrid modes where realism has become a major component again, as in the post-postmodernism proposed among other by Ribbat and Burns. Of course, attempts to escape the usual, neat binary opposition between realism and postmodernism can be traced back in time. In her exploration of the concept of postmodernism, Paula Martín Salván (2006) refers to some of these theoretical efforts, such as Paul Maltby’s distinction between “introverted postmodernism” and “dissident postmodernism” (Maltby, 1991; 1). Likewise, Salván studies Alan Wilde’s proposal of the term “midfictional” (Wilde 1987) to identify a kind of narrative which escapes the conventions of realism yet keeps the ability to refer to a reality outside itself. A similar position is defended by Amy J. Elias, who proposes the term “postmodern Realism” to describe this kind of fictional “middle ground” (Martín Salván, 2006: 32).

In all the public deliberation on the realism in Franzen’s work it is striking to notice the conspicuously uncritical way in which that concept is used. Indeed, the study of Franzen’s reception shows that in their discussion of the novelist most critics seem to take realism as an unproblematic, straightforward notion. With the possible exception of Burn, who in his effort to tell post-postmodernism and plain postmodernism apart goes into more nuanced stylistic analysis, the rest of the critics assume realism to be a univocal, taken for granted term. Indeed, for most of these critics, realism amounts to little more than a greater attention to “characters and locales” (Franzen, 2002: 95) on the

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Caldwell 2001 or Rebein 2008.

part of the novelist. This inattention is readily observable in many reviews of *Freedom*, where the presence of narrative features which are commonly associated with the nineteenth-century realist novel, such as, for example, the elements incorporated from the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, seem to demand little or no explanation. In the same way, the political implications of the use of realism and its different subgenres or *modes* (to use Jameson's term), in terms of the ideological messages inherent to each of them, have scarcely received the critical heed that their importance demands. Needless to say, the question of the conditions of possibility of high realism in the elusive times of late capitalism, perhaps the most difficult issue of all which arise from the study of the contemporary social novel, has also been overlooked. As is known, many attacks on realism from postmodernist quarters concern the alleged inadequacy of the former's traditional mimetic procedures to reflect a disjointed, incomprehensible reality. Gerald Graff's position is exemplary of such views. For Graff, postmodernist anti-realism would be the actual realism of our times as the truly mimetic form for the "unreal reality" of the contemporary world (Graff, 1979: 180). From my point of view, Graff's point is weakened by his contentious assumption of contemporary society as more "unreal" than previous ones. My concern with the current conditions of possibility of realism arises from a different ground, namely the concept of cultural forms as emanating from specific socio-economic historical configurations. If the realist novel emerged and developed under certain socio-economic circumstances, can it continue when these conditions no longer obtain (if this is really the case)? Later in this chapter and in the one devoted to *The Corrections* I argue for the possibility of updated and theoretically enlightened forms of realism.

Similarly, Franzen's critics have taken for granted the not unproblematic distinction between being a postmodernist and a chronicler of postmodernity. Salván summarizes the critical positions regarding this dichotomy as splitting into those who think, like Linda Hutcheon, that to bear witness to postmodernity "implies being a postmodernist writer"; and those who, as Amy J. Elias does, differentiate between "postmodernist experimentalism and the realistic representation of a postmodern world" (Martín Salván, 2006: 31). Salván argues that this twofold division evinces an "unresolved distinction between an aesthetic Postmodernism and a postmodern age", which characterizes critical discussion of the subject (Martín Salván, 2006: 31).

This critical neglect as far as realism is concerned might seem surprising in a contemporary critical climate where postmodernist tenets form the very element we inhabit. It would seem that certain contemporary criticism, exemplified by Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), has tended to scorn realism as a naïve narrative mode that assumes a transparent relation between the world and its linguistic representation, but has showed that very same delusion with respect to the concept of realism. This is consistent with the general disregard of realism as a subject of critical enquiry along the last decades, especially when compared with the academic attention received by other broad literary movements such as modernism or postmodernism itself. It has proved all too easy to forget that, in Terry Eagleton's words, "[t]he realist novel represents one of the great revolutionary forms of humanity" (Eagleton, 2005: 19). Therefore, if we are to discuss Franzen's career in terms of his transition to realism, or if we aim to understand a contemporary literary scene where postmodernism is allegedly in retreat before realism, it is pertinent to clarify this key term and try to arrive at least at a working concept of literary realism which underscores its fundamental complexity and restores its historicity and ideological bearings, all the while tracing the most significant points of relation between Franzen and the realist tradition, to be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

### ***3.2. Take thy neighbour seriously: novelistic populism in a fallen world.***

Even a hurried consideration of the concept of literary realism hints at its intractable multiplicity, not unlike that of postmodernism, and makes the prospect of devising even a modest working concept a daunting one unless limitations in scope are applied. In the present chapter, a summarized account of narrative realism will be provided from a historical-ideological point of view, in consonance with the general approach of this study. In J.P. Stern's expression, realism is a "perennial" literary mode (Stern 1983). Inevitably, then, our approach will be both synchronic, seeking to identify the defining characteristics of the realist narrative mode, and diachronic, reflecting its development, if we are to believe Auerbach, over twenty-five centuries. This extensive—indeed impossible—historical character brings about obvious difficulties regarding focus. Fredric Jameson has observed that a great deal of studies of realism tend to concentrate either in its emergence, as is the case of Ian Watt's classic work; or

in its dissolution as a genre, as was studied in its relation with modernism by Lukács (Jameson, 2013: 1). Furthermore, as the American theorist argues, there seems to be no way of avoiding the discussion of realism in terms of binary oppositions such as those of realism vs. epic, realism vs. romance, realism vs. melodrama, realism vs. naturalism, etc. Each play of opposites has its own historical dimension and is furthermore “invested with political and even metaphysical significance” in a proliferation which ultimately prevents any definitive resolution of the matter (Jameson, 2013: 2). Then, we should state that our study of realism will be mainly concerned with realism as embodied by the realist novel, a specific evolutionary historical form whose canonical configuration we assume to have crystalized by the first half of the nineteenth century. This ultimately arbitrary restriction helpfully reduces the range of the examination, but should be accompanied by the proviso that Auerbach identifies realism in texts as old as Jewish scripture. Furthermore, as Jameson has pointed out, critics such as Bakhtin discern the quality of “novelness,” an unmistakable mark of modernity, as much in the Alexandrian World as in the Ming dynasty (Jameson, 2013: 3). It is necessary then to draw a distinction between realism (or even the “novelness” alluded to by Jameson for that matter) understood as a vastly diachronic set of rhetorical and cognitive practices, and on the other hand the realist novel, which is a historical form where some of these practices coalesced in a specific genre, and whose appearance was indissolubly linked to a particular confluence of socio-economic and cultural circumstances, or, in other words, a particular historical configuration of the mode of production in Western nations.

Advancing a picture of literary realism without resorting to the magisterial work of Erich Auerbach seems scarcely possible. In his *Mimesis* (1946), Auerbach traces the evolution of realism from Antiquity to the advent of modernism, showing it as a way of representing reality characterized by the ability to focus in earnest on the lives of common people who are seen, as Raymond Williams would put it, as “active bearers of personal experience” (Williams, 1973: 168). Indeed, for Auerbach realism lies in the representation of the fates of low people as potentially problematic, allowing the possibility of tragedy, normally reserved for high-born characters, as part of their sphere. Not least of all, according to Auerbach, realism requires that the characters’ drama should take place in an intelligible social context and be projected against a background of moving history. Auerbach’s criteria for identifying realism are therefore

rather more sociological and historical than formal or strictly epistemological, and it is not difficult to see an incipient democratic quality in realism's congenital drive towards the expansion of the realm of the worthy of literary or, generally speaking, artistic treatment. As Eagleton (2003: n.pag.) puts it, for the German critic realism is "the word for a warm-hearted populist humanism".<sup>39</sup> The full development of this mode of representation was of course a slow process, but Auerbach shows its seeds in the narratives of the Old Testament. Biblical narrations are indeed populated by low people whose life course is given the utmost importance, people whose actions are driven by complex motivations, and who are related to social forces of intense transformative power. In contrast to these representations, Auerbach shows how in Western Antiquity realism is severely limited by certain strict conventions such as the separation of styles, whereby elevated style and conflict are reserved for members of the higher class, while everything domestic or related to the life of the lower classes was necessarily confined to the realm of the comic and satirical. Therefore, when portraying lower class life,

[e]verything problematic, everything psychologically or sociologically suggestive of serious, let alone tragic, complications must be excluded, for its excessive weight would break the style ... Everything commonly realistic, everything pertaining to everyday life, must not be treated on any level except the comic, which admits no problematic probing, as a result the limits of realism are narrow. (Auerbach, 2003: 31)

In addition, the realists of classical Antiquity completely ignore what Auerbach calls "social forces", meaning the dynamics of social groups, relationships and conditions conducive to social change, which results in a social picture characterized by stasis, "a given fact, an institution unalterably established in the background of the action and requiring no explanation as regards either to its origins or its effects" (2003: 32). Even in the case of satirical writing, it is individuals, no matter how many, that are criticized for their vices rather than social or cultural constructions, and thus "social criticism never leads to a definition of the motive forces within society" (2003: 32). For Auerbach these limitations not only marked the boundaries of realism but also of the

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<sup>39</sup> Rachel Bowlby concurs with the appreciation of the democratic character of realism, which for her flourishes during the nineteenth century with the realist novel in parallel with the period's enfranchising movements. As she puts it: "Realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded or out of bounds. The extension of the constituencies of political representation went along with an extension of the fields of literary representation" (Bowlby, 2010: xvi).

historical consciousness of Antiquity. The German critic relates the progress of realism to the triumph of Christianity, a religious belief that was “realist from the beginning”, carrying with it a new “sermo humilis” which is nevertheless capable of aiming to the eternal and the sublime. According to Auerbach,

no sooner [the Passion of Christ] comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles; it engenders a new elevated style, which does not scorn everyday life and which is ready to absorb the sensory realistic, even the ugly, the undignified, the physically base. (Auerbach, 2003: 72)

The infiltration of popular speech in written literature overriding rigid stylistic traditions certainly carries deep psychological and ideological implications. According to Jameson, the “gradual unlimbering of hierarchical sentence structure” described by Auerbach amounts to a new grasp on reality or, in Jameson’s words, the ability to “register a hitherto unperceived local complexity of the Real” (Jameson, 1998: 147). It is this contribution of realism to the opening of new forms of perception, together with that destructive quality also noticed by Bakhtin, that leads Jameson to claim for it the same kind of description that is usually reserved for modernism itself. Indeed, for the American critic realism and modernity are indissolubly linked, as both are manifestations of a general process of reification of pre-capitalist cultural forms which was also to produce modernism and postmodernism, an argument to which we shall return below. Auerbach, in any case, continues his charting of the development of realism in European culture through landmarks such as Dante and Cervantes until he reaches the nineteenth century, the period when the realist novel attains its canonical form.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that the consistent use of the term “realism” as a critical (and initially also derogatory and polemical) label starts in the 1850s, the heyday era of the realist novel. However, it was not narrative but painting that it was first applied to, in the course of a lively controversy that took place in France at the time over a new pictorial style. The central figure of the polemic was Gustave Courbet, who set his own art exhibit in Paris under the banner “Pavillon du Réalisme” in 1855. The extent to which Courbet’s painting matches Auerbach’s concept of realism is remarkable, as it is shown, for example in his *Tableau de figures humaines, historique d’un enterrament à Ornans* (1849), known as *The Burial*. The painting, analysed by Brooks (2005: 73-6), portrays a group of low, nondescript villagers at a funeral, depicted in serious demeanour at an enormous scale hitherto reserved for heroic figures. The scandal provoked by the painting was caused by its subject—vulgar people lacking even the typicality of being dressed in regional clothes or engaged in traditional peasant activities— then considered unworthy of representation, and even more by the grandiose treatment of the subject.

If the seed of realism was already planted in Jewish Scripture, in fact, it is conceivable that the realist impulse described by Auerbach would have spent itself at an early stage, had it not coalesced with the unstoppable energy of parody, of laughter and its emancipating power, which are so particularly well suited to irreverently interrogate both past and present, disregarding piousness and decorum. These are the basic characteristics which Mikhail Bakhtin associates with the novelistic.

In his investigation of the origins of the novel, Bakhtin points at realism as a constitutive feature of the novel. He identifies certain “serio-comic” forms of folk origin, such as mime, fable, bucolic poems or satire—all of them having contemporary reality as their subject—as predecessors of the novel, and finds in them the inception of the “novelistic spirit”. For Bakhtin, in these genres,

[f]or the first time, the subject of serious literary representation (although, it is true, at the same time comical) is portrayed without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact ... Even where the past or myth serves as the subject of representation in these genres there is no epic distance, and contemporary reality provides the point of view. (Bakhtin, 2000: 327)

Bakhtin highlights the importance of the comical origin of these genres for the development of realism:

Laughter demolishes fear and pity before an object, before a world, making it an object for familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. (Bakhtin, 2000: 328)

For Bakhtin then, this irreverence which is a prerequisite of realism, and by the same token of the novel, also involves doom for those genres such as the epic, which depend on a pious approach of hierarchical distance. For him, “[t]he novel took shape precisely at the point when epic distance was disintegrating ... when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality that was inconclusive and fluid” (2000: 330). In this sense, “parodic-travestying” literature played a fundamental part in preparing the ground for the novel at the expense of

previous genres such as the epic or tragedy. By means of dissociating the genre and its object, allowing the examination of the generic form from different perspectives, parody revealed the former's ultimate inability to adequately describe the object. The corrective of laughter for Bakhtin means "the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre." (2000: 334)

With their focus on language as they mocked different styles, these parodic-travesty forms also brought about a sharp increase in linguistic awareness. Bakhtin sees this awareness as decisive for the development of the novel in that it "liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net ... A new mode developed for working creatively with language." (2000: 336) If so far old genres, already closed and "ossified", had been homogeneous as regards the discourse informing them, now the possibility appears for *heteroglossia*, the internal stratification present in every language at any time, to enter the novel. In this way, a dialogized multiplicity of social voices—authorial speech, narrators, different characters belonging to different social groups, inserted narratives—forms the basic stylistic feature of the novel. It is therefore unsurprising that Bakhtin sees its blueprint form appear in those eras—Hellenistic Greece, Imperial Rome, late Middle Ages—when ideological and linguistic centres begin to dissolve. In this, the Russian critic—as well as Auerbach—differs from other genealogists of the novel who, as we will see, tie the birth of the genre to the rise of the bourgeoisie, opening it instead to different forms of marginal and underground culture in Ancient and Medieval times.

From the very beginning then, the novel shows that extraordinary plasticity which has allowed it to appropriate features when needed from not only the epic, but virtually any other genre, irremediably destabilizing them in the process. In this, the novel performs, as Jameson has put it (2002: 138), a historic function, "the systematic undermining and demystification, the secular *decoding* of those pre-existent inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms which are its initial givens".<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to note how in its mixture of genre awareness and subversive urge, paradoxically the

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<sup>41</sup> In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson follows Bakhtin in considering narrative a site where antagonistic class discourses are dialogically related by way of subversion, appropriation, transformation, co-optation or neutralization. Since for Jameson the novel tends to reflect and transmit hegemonic discourse, these oppositions are obscured and must be reconstructed and reintroduced in the text to arrive at an adequate interpretation.

novel has often displayed a most literary anti-literariness. Needless to say, none of these previous genres has been able to survive intact in a world dominated by the novel.

Another great theoretician of realism, György Lukács, also saw the novel rising from the ashes of the epic, although his approach, at least in his pre-Marxist stage, was rather more sombre than that of the Russian critic—he defines the novel as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (Lukács, 2006c: 88). For Lukács, the novel is the heir of the epic in a modern world where everything has ceased to have an immanent meaning: “The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life” (2006c: 60). In the world of the novel things must strenuously be bestowed value by the subject, forever fighting the tantalizing “impossibility of finding a constitutive object adequate to the constitutive subject” (2006c: 65). According to Jameson, then, for Lukács the novel is a form “essentially distinguished by its capacity of registering problematization and the irreconcilable contradictions of a purely secular modernity” (Jameson, 2013: 4). We may also observe here, with the American critic, that the Marxist Lukács would later identify secular modernity with capitalism and the epistemological capacities of the novel with those of realism. In any case, for Lukács, the new conception of the world has its correlate in a new kind of character: the hero of the novel. According to the Hungarian theorist, in the world of the epic there is no room for anyone to be radically different from everyone else, with interiority as the main source of difference. Even the bravest, strongest and cleverest of the epic heroes are just *primus inter pares*, which fits their traditional function as the embodiment of the destiny of a community. For the Hungarian critic, “[t]he completeness, the roundness of the value system of the epic cosmos creates a whole which is too organic for any part of it to become so enclosed within itself, so dependent upon itself ... to become a personality” (2006c: 66). In contrast, the hero of the novel is “the product of estrangement from the outside world”, since, for Lukács, “[t]he autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm” (2006c: 66). Perhaps a reaction to a perceived loss of immanence accounts for the seed of communitarian preoccupation carried by the novel since its inception as a genre, a concern which attained its fullest dimension as it developed into its classic form as the realist novel. It is interesting to note that, although for Jean-Luc Nancy, as we have already discussed, the consciousness of lost community is consubstantial to Western

thought (especially after the cultural taking over of Christianity), he discerns it most distinctively in the work of thinkers and artists approximately contemporary with the inception and development of the modern novel: Rousseau, Schlegel, Hegel, Bakunin, Marx, Wagner, Mallarmé (Nancy, 1991: 10). Then, even if the roots of such consciousness of loss are traceable all the way down to Ancient Greece, it is difficult not to relate it to the great transformative socio-economic—and thence cultural and intellectual—processes of modernization which gathered momentum in the eighteenth century.

Lukács also realized that the world of the novel makes different demands on form than those of the epic *Weltanschauung*. In contrast with the epic's organic immanence, the novel and its world are characterized by contingency, which means that "totality can only be organized in abstract terms ... not directly suitable for aesthetic form-giving" (2006c: 70). Therefore, in making a novel, totality is divided into contingent, relatively independent parts which must be ordered in ways that have a "strict compositional and architectural significance", lest we destroy the whole. These rather stricter formal needs explain why the novel so often takes the outward form of biography: the biographical form becomes a powerful organising principle of what would otherwise be a chaotic whirl of materials. Furthermore, the biographical form brings forth one of the distinctive constituents of the novel, when an outward world which must always be incomplete, and the permanently inadequate individual are reconciled to produce "a new an autonomous life that is, however paradoxically, complete in itself and immanently meaningful: the life of the problematic individual" (2006c: 78). The biographical novel then inevitably takes the form of the problematic individual's journey of self-discovery:

On the one hand, the scope of the world is limited by the scope of the hero's possible experiences and its mass is organised by the orientation of his development towards finding the meaning of life in self-recognition; on the other hand, the discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receive a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life. (2006c: 81)

It is then unsurprising that the *Bildungsroman* became the first prototypical form of the novel in the eighteenth century; in Moretti's words, the one to "dominate or, more precisely, make possible the Golden Century of Western narrative" (Moretti, 2000: 3), offering a "fuller interiority" than previous forms and an engaging compromise solution to the demands of the self and the imperatives of socialization. In *The Way of the World*, Moretti analyses the extraordinary success and importance of the *Bildungsroman* in terms of its social and psychological functions. He shows how its main concern, youth, comes to embody the essence of modernity, "the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past" (Moretti 2000: 5). Youth, it must be added, is rendered problematic for the first time by accelerated social and economic change. The traditional uneventful process of socialization of the youth is complicated by the collapse of status society, changes in the labour market or new forms of education; and consequently, what had previously been a matter of simple biological differentiation—not being an adult—becomes an issue. However, for Moretti, in its fondness for the *Bildungsroman*, European culture was not only rethinking youth, but rethinking itself:

Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a culture of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the great narrative of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*. (Moretti, 2000: 5)

Moreover, Moretti argues that socialization depends not on solving contradictions, but *interiorizing* them, that is, learning to live with them; and, in this sense, the *Bildungsroman*, with its inherent tendency to *compromise*, was particularly suited to smooth out the contradictions in modern culture. In our study of Franzen's fiction we will be discussing how the same properties that Moretti predicates of the *Bildungsroman* as regards reconciliation and compromise are conspicuously deployed by Franzen in his fourth novel, *Freedom*, to close the metanarrative in which he has wrapped his own work. At any rate, from a historical point of view, the inherent pliancy of the genre partly explains the pre-eminence and survival of the *Bildungsroman* in contrast with other contemporary, more rigid narrative forms such as the epistolary novel, the "romantic novel" or satire. In addition, according to Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* also performs the fundamental function of building and protecting the Ego, by "bringing together the conflicting features of individual personality". In his words, "the *Bildungsroman* attempts to build the Ego, and make it the undisputable

centre of its own structure” (Moretti, 2000: 11). Furthermore, for Moretti the novel in general seeks to avoid “whatever may endanger the Ego’s equilibrium, making its compromises impossible”, and accordingly tends to favour “those modes of existence that allow the Ego to manifest itself fully” (2000: 12). Finally, these harmonizing functions are joined by the novel’s ability to give meaning to normality *from within*, rather than as negation of its exceptions, to produce “a phenomenology that makes normality interesting *as* normality” (2000: 11), which is, as we have seen, an essential feature of Auerbach’s concept of realism. It is nevertheless important to remember that while the realist novel achieved hegemony over other narrative forms such as romance or the Gothic novel during the eighteenth century, this did not mean the end of those forms. As Michael McKeon points out,

[t]he narrative procedures of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Fielding may explicitly subvert the idea and ethos of romance, but they also drew, without apparent irony, on many of its stock situations and conventions ... [Although] only as a superseded genre, romance can be seen to inhabit both the form and the content of these early eighteenth-century narratives. (McKeon, 2000, 382)

Realism then can be seen as a destructive genre which in the course of its development erodes other related forms but is however able to incorporate them, to different extents, in its protean quality. In this sense, like conquered civilizations subsumed into a new empire, these forms are rendered unviable by realism but nevertheless manage to leave their visible traces in it.<sup>42</sup> Another way of putting it is that realism’s opposition to these forms is somehow internal. As Jameson claims, “realism is opposed to romance only because it carries it within itself and must somehow dissolve it in order to become its antithesis” (Jameson, 2013: 139). Be it as it may, the blueprint of romance is certainly visible, though transformed, in many of the landmarks of the nineteenth-century British novel: writers such as Charles Dickens or even George Eliot incorporated non-realist elements from romance or melodrama into their novels, attesting to the inclusiveness of the genre as well as the flexibility of their readership.

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<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of the dynamic whereby the realist novel both destroys and partly incorporates competing forms can be found in *Don Quixote*: the novel which delivered a lethal blow to romance in Spanish literature but that nevertheless incorporates perceptible elements from that genre.

For Eagleton, this suggests that novels are in essence romances that have adapted to a new environment:

Novels are romances –but romances which have to negotiate the prosaic world of modern civilization. They retain their romantic heroes and villains, wish fulfilments and fairy-tale endings, but now these things have to be worked out in terms of sex and property, money and marriage, social mobility and the nuclear family ... In the Bröntes, George Eliot, Hardy and Henry James, you can find vestiges of “premodern” forms such as myth, fable, folk-tale and romance, mixed with “modern” ones like realism, reportage, philological investigation and the like. (Eagleton, 2005: 2-3)

On his part, Ian Duncan explains the survival of romance within the novel as a consequence of its becoming indispensable for fiction. For Duncan, romance is that which prevents the novel from becoming mere mimesis without plot, and thus—he implies—ceasing to be a novel at all. For the critic, romance would be nothing less than “the essential principle of fiction: its difference from a record of ‘reality’, of ‘everyday life’” (Duncan, 1992: 2). In Duncan’s words:

A novel could describe, by metonymy and metaphor, the shape of the world and everything in it; it could also narrate its historical formation through time. The modern formation of concepts of society and culture coincides with the great age of the novel in nineteenth-century Britain. But even as the novel began to totalize its mimetic range it reasserted fiction, and not mimesis, as its critical principle, in an elaborate commitment to plot. (Duncan, 1992: 2)

In any case, the inclusiveness of the novel—this “omnibus form, cobbled together out of heterogeneous materials” (Jameson, 2013: 153)—seems to have fuelled its constant historical evolution. In this way, the *Bildungsroman* was followed by new forms of realism which succeeded each other as they undermined or overturned pre-existent types. Jameson has explained the decline of older forms in terms of reification: as existent forms reify and prove inadequate with current narrative necessities, they are discarded or instrumentalized for new purposes “[w]here some new attention to scene and to the present proves incompatible with the reifications of the older tale or story types, in which general images of the various shapes of a reified destiny were vehiculated” (Jameson, 2010: 279). This makes for a partially overlapping succession of

realisms, each with a different proportion of basic ingredients. Jameson (2010: 280) has proposed a typology of the realist novel formed by four genres or sub-genres: the *Bildungsroman*, the historical novel, the novel of adultery, and naturalism (albeit admitting the latter to be “a somewhat different combination of plot type and a mode”). To these four types he has later added melodrama, considered as a genre (Jameson, 2013: 145). In his classic essay on the latter, it should be added, Peter Brooks argues the important contribution that this form made to the nineteenth-century realist novel. For Brooks, one of the defining characteristics of melodrama is its theatricality, which is projected onto the novel with vitalizing effects:

The nineteenth-century novel needs such theatricality, as we shall see, to get its meaning across, to invest in its renderings of life a sense of memorability and significance. With the rise of the novel and of melodrama, we find the entry into literature of a new moral and aesthetic category, that of “the interesting”. (Brooks, 1976: 13)

Jameson, on his part, locates the essential service rendered by melodrama to the realist novel in the former’s structural contribution to the latter. This grant is substantiated in melodrama’s capacity for activating the novel’s central sequence of events as well as its effectiveness in bringing about narrative closure. In fact, for the American critic, melodrama is all but indispensable to realism:

Zola’s cataclysms, Balzac’s frantic denouements, all testify to the persistence of this temporal structure and its indispensability to a form which, particularly in the mode of nineteenth-century serialization, would be sorely challenged without some such device, some such signal of closure and completion. (Jameson, 2013: 161)

In our study of Franzen’s novels we will trace and discuss the presence of these generic elements from romance, *Bildungsroman* and melodrama, in order to show both how they contribute to Franzen’s rhetorical strategies of persuasion and their ultimate political implications.

From a different point of view, in accordance with its role in the development of modern European consciousness, the novel becomes the arena for certain ideological struggles. McKeon analyses how progressive ideology, as exemplified by Daniel Defoe,

subverts aristocratic ideology, and is in turn subverted by conservative ideology, as represented by Jonathan Swift. This conflict, according to McKeon, evinces a profound crisis characterized by two forms of categorial instability: that of generic categories and that of social categories. This is reflected in the two great concerns of the eighteenth century novel: what McKeon (2000: 383) calls “questions of truth”: epistemological questions on “how to tell the truth in narrative”; and “questions of virtue”: questions on the relation between social and moral, internal codes. In fact, for certain critics, if a main, distinctive *topos* may be identified as recurrently informing the novel, this is the inadequacy for a main character of the social space that has been his or her lot, and the subsequent struggle to change that circumstance. As Nancy Armstrong claims, the history of the novel is populated by misfits, “protagonists who cannot inhabit the social position into which they have been born” (in Moretti, 2006: 349). Far from merely showing a tendency towards formulaic construction, this pattern has important ideological implications. Actually, Armstrong locates in this strife for individual assertion the core of bourgeois morality, which comes therefore to be intimately knitted with the novel. For Armstrong, the genre

sets a protagonist in opposition to the prevailing field of social possibilities in a relationship that achieves synthesis when two conditions are met: 1) the protagonist acquires a position commensurate with his or her worth, and 2) the entire field of possible human identities changes to provide such a place for that individual ... As a result we tend to recognize a narrative as a novel when it evaluates both a protagonist and the field of possibilities in which he or she acquires a social identity on the basis of whether they further or frustrate such a synthesis. This standard and its disciplinary rhetoric are what we generally mean by the term *bourgeois morality*. (Moretti, 2006: 349)

The outcome of the tensions between individual and society enacted by the novel was, according to Armstrong, none other than the development of the modern subject or, in other words, what today we mean by “the individual”. As she puts it,

Once formulated in fiction ... this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy ... and

other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit.  
(Armstrong, 2005: 3)

### **3.3. Historical present: The novel and the development of historical thought.**

In spite of important eighteenth-century landmarks such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* or Fielding's *Tom Jones*, some important ingredients of Auerbach's notion of realism were still missing in the novelistic genre. One of them was related to the change in European historical consciousness that took place around 1780-1830, and which was most deeply wrought in France, where tremendous socio-political upheavals followed one another. For the first time, history becomes, in Lukács' words, "a *mass experience*, and moreover on a European scale" (Lukács, 1976: 20). Constant change produces a sense of mutability of the social order and, more importantly, an awareness of the present as the product of the historical past. At the same time, according to Auerbach, Rousseauist Romanticism's contrasting of the natural condition of men with their present, historically determined condition also contributed to the development of a modern realist outlook, by rendering history problematic and consequently invalidating typical eighteenth century static historical pictures. Hegel's philosophy also supports this new conception of history, as Lukács puts it, providing "a philosophic methodology for the idea that revolutions constitute necessary, organic components of evolution" (Lukács, 1976: 26). The importance of historical awareness for the development of the realist novel is both corroborated and enhanced by the appearance of the historical novel. According to Jameson:

The historical novel isolates the new sense of history emerging at the time of the French revolution, a historicity which determines the very emergence of modern historiography from the older chronicles and corresponds to the new dynamisms of capitalism after the industrial revolution. (Jameson, 2013: 146)

In this sense, Walter Scott's historical novels constitute a landmark in the development of realism. For Lukács, Scott's novels are revolutionary in their "derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age" (Lukács, 1976: 15). Moreover, Lukács continues, Scott rejects the then fashionable "demonic hero" of Byronic descent and chooses heroes of rather average quality, in an

attempt to “portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces” (1976: 33). After Scott it was possible to conceive of a realist novel as a historical novel of the present, to the extent that, as Jameson argues following Lukács,

[T]he realist novel is already itself profoundly historical, its new sense of everyday life now transforming the latter from the static sketches of custom or folkloric urban scenes into a sense of change—destruction, rebuilding, ruins, scaffolds, new and unrecognizable quarters ... It is a feeling of change, already present, imminent, threatening, sometimes warmly anticipated ... everywhere from Balzac to Galdós. (Jameson, 2013: 146)

As a matter of fact, the influence of the new historical consciousness on the realist novel deepens along the nineteenth century as the latter adopts historiography as its fundamental model, incorporating, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, assumptions about history such as the notions of origin and end (“archaeology” and “teleology”), totality, underlying reason, progress, destiny, causality or meaning (Miller, 1974: 459). Indeed, according to Miller, this set of assumptions common to both the Western ideas of history and fiction form “a true system” of interlocking assumptions (1974: 460). As he puts it,

All the elements of this system of ideas about history may be transferred without distortion to the customary notion of the form of fiction. The formal structure of a novel is usually conceived of as the gradual emergence of its meaning. This coincides with its end, the fulfilment of the teleology of the work. The end is the retrospective revelation of the unity of the whole, its “organic unity” ... The end of the novel is the final exposing of the fates of the characters as well as of the formal unity of the text. The notions of narrative, of character, and of formal unity in fiction are all congruent with the system of concepts making up the Western idea of history. (Miller, 1974: 461)

Scott’s novels constitute a fundamental step towards a modern consciousness of reality, but Auerbach finds this new vision reflected for the first time in the novel in Stendhal, for whom reality was essentially dynamic, and whose characters and plots are tightly woven to contemporary socio-political conditions. Nevertheless, according to the German critic, Stendhal fails to recognize the importance of social forces and thus tends

to see “the individual man far less as the product of his historical situation and as taking part in it, than as an atom within it” (Auerbach, 2003: 465). Together with Stendhal—although outdoing him—Auerbach credits Balzac with the creation of modern realism. For the German critic, Balzac’s significance stems from his encyclopaedic ambition whereby no aspect of social life, high or low, may remain unseen (what we might call, in Lukácsian terms his calling for the rendering of totality); his commitment to the serious treatment of actuality disregarding decorum and showing its existentially problematic character and tragic potential for the first time ever since the consolidation of classical taste in Antiquity. Not least of all, Auerbach also underscores Balzac’s historical perspective, strongly influenced by Scott, which conceives the present as the result of history or, more precisely, as a temporary state in the course of historical development. This dynamic conception of history is central to the realist novel and, accordingly, its rise and decline run parallel to those of the genre. For Jameson, Balzac’s heightened historical awareness is partly the consequence of his coexistence with more than one mode of production in his lifetime:

It was Balzac’s historical luck to have witnessed not the later, fully evolved and finished capitalism of the time of Flaubert and Zola, but the very beginnings of capitalism in France; to have been contemporary with a social transformation which permitted him to see objects not as completed material substances but as they issued from human work; to have been able to apprehend social change as a network of individual stories. (Jameson, 1974: 203)

In contrast, Jameson refers to the way Zola’s narrative copes with an already consolidated capitalism perceived as eventless: “when Zola, impatient with this massive lifelessness, tries to breathe vitality into it, he can do so only by recourse to myth and melodramatic violence” (1974: 204). These considerations will be crucial in our discussion of Franzen’s novels, especially the early ones, characterized by a blocked historical vision which is a sign of the times of late capitalism.

In any case, it is no wonder that, as Peter Brooks quotes, Oscar Wilde declared that “the nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac” (Brooks, 2005: 21). For Brooks, “by conceptualizing, theorizing, dramatizing the new—all the while deploring it—he initiated his readers into understanding the shape of a century”

(2005: 22).<sup>43</sup> Generally speaking, it is difficult to overstate the cultural importance of the nineteenth-century novel, a literary genre which, in a process starting in the previous century, had turned into a staple form of middle-class entertainment. The consolidation of the novel would have hardly been possible in the absence of new phenomena such as middle-class leisure and the subsequent appearance of a relatively large reading public, which included to a great extent also women. Using Stanley E. Fish's term, the rise of the novel required (and also produced) a distinct *interpretive community* defined by shared interpretive strategies involving common assumptions about society and literature (Fish, 1976: 483). The novel's function thus is not limited to the reflection of a worldview but also plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of such a view. As J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, fiction imposes order on experience, and it is "performative" in that it brings about events in the real world: novels can shape the culture, make us more uniform as the "unostentatious, but therefore all the more effective, policemen of that culture" (Miller, 1990: 69). Of course, as Miller remarks, fiction may also challenge and demystify widespread cultural assumptions (1990: 69). In any case, from its very beginning as a genre, the novel was closely associated to the middle class and, accordingly, from the very beginning, it showed its middle-class roots in its use of gain or loss of money, fall or rise of social class as main plot turning points. In his classic study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt surveyed the close relationship between this art form and the also ascendant bourgeoisie, who found in it the perfect genre to satisfy, in Eagleton's words, "its relish for the sensuously material, its impatience with the formal and ceremonial, its insatiable curiosity about the self and robust faith in historical progress" (Eagleton, 2003: 4).

It becomes then clear that history and materiality are two central concerns for the nineteenth-century realist novel. In this regard, if Scott's ground-breaking approach to history soon became dominant in the genre, as the century unfolded other historical visions found their way into it. It is the case of Tolstoy, whose focus shunned the external side of great public events to concentrate in their private dimension and their

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<sup>43</sup> In spite of the fact that Balzac's own ideological preferences were rather more aristocratic than bourgeois, Lucien Goldmann saw the novelist's work as a perfect reflection of the values and aspirations of the bourgeoisie, a claim which would support the critic's notion of the novel as the literary embodiment of the bourgeois worldview. Goldmann suggests that « l'œuvre de Balzac ... constituerait la seule grande expression littéraire de l'univers structuré par les valeurs conscientes de la bourgeoisie : individualisme, soif de puissance, argent, érotisme qui triomphent des anciennes valeurs féodales de l'altruisme, de la charité et de l'amour » (Goldmann, 1964 : 53).

effects on small communities of private individuals, even during the representation of epochal conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars as in *War and Peace* (1869). According to Isaac Berlin, for the Russian novelist,

only history, only the sum of concrete events in time and space—the sum of the actual experience of actual men and women in their relation to one another and to an actual three-dimensional, empirically experienced, physical environment—this alone contained the truth. (Berlin, 1993: 12)

Yet Tolstoy disdains official, public versions of history that focus on political events and neglect its spiritual dimension. As Berlin puts it, for Tolstoy, it is “inner” events “that are the most real, the most immediate experience of human beings; they and only they are what life, in the last analysis is made of” (1993: 13). In general terms, this is a notion of history that may be perceived in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, where Franzen is concerned with tracing the effect of world-historical processes such as globalization or the Iraq war down to the intimate sphere of personal relationships, which is, ultimately, the realm where the only significant, true events take place.

As for the material element of reality, as Brooks shows in his exploration of realism (etymologically *thing-ism*), realist narrative relies on the visual accumulation of things, of details and particularities which are then metonymically reconstructed into a whole.<sup>44</sup> The rise of the realist novel has often been related to the spread of the influence of empiricist thought, reaching back to Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which emphasized the importance of visually acquired knowledge. Brooks underscores the visual component of realism, an art that seems intent on building small-scale models of the world, as if thus to make better sense of it, “getting both our fingers and our minds around objects otherwise alien and imposing”

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<sup>44</sup> Metonymy may be defined as a figure of speech whereby some entity or concept is referred to by the naming of something with which it is somehow associated. As is the case with other linguistic tropes, under a close examination metonymy proves a rather slippery concept to pinpoint—in particular, the boundaries with the notions of metaphor and synecdoche seem fuzzy-edged—and has therefore been characterized and classified in different ways. However, it seems to be the trope most commonly associated to realism by theorists. It is the case of Kenneth Burke, who listed metonymy as one of the four “master tropes” and saw it as a kind of semantic *reduction* (Burke, 1969: 503). For Burke, the basic strategy of metonymy is “to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible. It is therefore the trope of “poetic realism” (Burke, 1969: 506). Roman Jakobson identifies two general linguistic orientations: the metaphoric and metonymic “poles”, based on similarity and contiguity, respectively. For Jakobson, while metaphor is the fundamental trope of poetry, metonymy is central to realism: “Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in time and space” (Jakobson, 1990:130).

(Brooks, 2005: 1). This sense-making function of realist narrative acquires the utmost importance in view of the enormous transformations of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a function which also has an ideological dimension since, in Jameson's view, also involves a "programming" of people for their better adjustment to life in the new urban industrial environment under capitalism (Jameson, 2002: 138, 210).

One of the most important upheavals of the era was certainly the quick transformation of England and other European countries from mostly rural, agricultural societies into urban, industrial ones, with the subsequent uprooting of the peasantry and its transfer to the new towns to form a growing urban proletariat. In Tönnies's terms (Tönnies 2001), this involved the dissolution of a *Gemeinschaft* type of association, characterized by the *ascribed*—that is, given by birth—status of its members, shared goals and mores and relatively simple social institutions; and its transformation into *Gesellschaft*, an association of individuals linked by bonds of mutual self-interest, where the status of its members is theoretically *achieved*, rather than given, and there is a more complex division of labour as well as more elaborate social institutions. This is not to say, of course, that traditional, rural "knowable communities", as Raymond Williams (1973: 165)<sup>45</sup> defines them, lack division of labour and a distinct internal structure, which, as is discussed below, has important bearings in terms of what Lukács calls "perspective". In any case, it is significant to note, with Williams (1970: 11), how the concern with community, the exploration of its substance and meaning, becomes central to a whole generation of English novelists—including Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brönte, Gaskell and Thackeray—in the 1840s.

This social transformation explains, according to Brooks, the distinctively urban character of the nineteenth-century realist novel. The trend had been prefigured in the previous century by certain works such as Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), but it is now that the city becomes a common total novelistic environment. There appears a prototypical plot formulation: the newcomer provincial youth forced to make sense of the "overwhelming sensations" of the city; and the type of the urban stroller, the *flâneur* who wanders through the city and visually registers its puzzling environment, a

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<sup>45</sup> "Knowable communities" is the title of Williams' fundamental essay on George Eliot included in *The Country and the City* (1973).

“psychic space of dangerous drives and erotic temptations—as well as of exploitation and oppression” (Brooks, 2005: 147). Brooks argues that the realist vision often enters the realm of the visionary in its “quest” to know and show in detail the new and more intense experience of the city, to portray, in Williams’ words, that “unknown, perhaps unknowable, sum of so many lives” (Williams, 1973: 164). Indeed, a new and exciting kind of intensity is the distinctive mark of city life, and this quality, which is the result of spatial and—above all—social density, will bring about a transformation of the novelistic form. For Brooks, “the phenomenology of the city discovers that urban space produces a particularly concentrated and dramatic form of existence, an exacerbation, and exhilaration, of human forces” (Brooks, 2005: 147). Moretti has analysed in related terms the way in which the special intensity of the urban experience, and the concentration and verve of the personal and social interaction it affords have shaped the novel. For him, “[w]hat *distinguishes* the city—however, and this will find its way into the technique of the novel—is that its spatial structure (basically its *concentration*) is functional to the intensification of *mobility*: spatial mobility, naturally enough, but mainly *social* mobility” (Moretti, 2005: 111). Everyday life in the city may then easily achieve a kind of dramatic *critical mass* which renders traditional ways of triggering the necessary course of events that informs a novel unnecessary. If previously the uncertain journey and / or the monstrous understood as a *state of exception* of the symbolic system had been necessary to trigger a novelistic plot, in the nineteenth century, in Moretti’s words:

the urban narrative environment makes it possible, for the first time, to create an enthralling plot without having to resort to the freak ... with Balzac, the prose of the world ceases to be boring. It is precisely the very prosaic relationships of incipient capitalism that constitute his plots and confer on them their gripping syntagmatic—temporal—features. To arouse the protagonist and the reader is no longer necessary to embark on a journey: much better to stay in town. (Moretti, 2005: 115)

The urban experience also constitutes a challenge for readers and citizens alike from a different point of view. For Brooks, “encounter with the city is perhaps first of all a semiotic crisis: the discovery that there is a whole new sign-system that needs to be deciphered, and that it points to a social code yet to be learned” (Brooks, 2005: 132). As it turns out, this code deals in great part with the possession of *things*. Things become

signs, tokens of what we are in an environment where rank is no longer determined by birth or the possession of land, but rather by the possession of money. The realist novel reflects the increasingly pervasive commodification of all aspects of life, including identity itself, in a society held together by the “cash nexus” identified by Marx and Engels as the new basis for all human relationships (Marx and Engels, 2010: 23). The circulatory system of money feeds a libidinal economy of material desire to the extent that money, in Brooks’ words, “comes to represent representation itself: a system of signs for things” (2005: 14). The realist novel then both reflects and contributes to the rise of the economy to one of the main components of what Charles Taylor calls the modern (Western) “social imaginary”, namely:

The ways people imagine their existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor, 2004: 23)

Taylor argues that along the eighteenth century, people increasingly tended to understand and imagine society in terms of a market economy, as “an interlocking set of activities of production, exchange and consumption, which forms a system with its own laws and its own dynamic” (2004: 76), until it came to be “the dominant end of society” (2004: 74).<sup>46</sup> This line of thought of course found its canonical theoretical support in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Awareness of commodification is also present in the writings of Flaubert, as the pervading fetishization of objects in *Madame Bovary* (1856) shows: Emma is often defined by the objects she owns or desires, and she is finally undone by her inability to manage that material desire. More important, nevertheless, for the significance of the French writer is that he takes realism to a higher step in psychological description and linguistic awareness. Contrary to Stendhal and Balzac, Flaubert refrains from commenting on his characters’ personality or motives, limiting the role of the writer to a

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<sup>46</sup> In *The Long Revolution* (1961: 125), Raymond Williams also calls attention to the pre-eminence of the economy as a way of self-understanding, calling attention to the way in which England is conceptualized as a market—people being commodities—or as a large firm with other nations as competitors. This time-honoured conceptualization of the nation as a firm is a powerful ideological tool deployed by the ruling elite with self-legitimizing purposes, as is proved by its frequent current use in Spain in behalf of an alleged “Marca España”.

careful selection and organizing of significant details of characters' thought and impressions, which are presented in free indirect speech by means of a strenuous translation into language. Flaubert's technique, in which any part must be revealing of the whole of human existence, clearly relies on an intense faith in the capacity of language to represent the truth of reality, once the priest-like writer has been able to arrive, through laborious artistic concentration, to "the perfect expression, which at once entirely comprehends the momentary subject and impartially judges it" (Auerbach, 2003: 487). Flaubert presents a god-like, essential perspective of its characters, and one consequence of Flaubert's "mystical-realistic insight", as Auerbach puts it, is that any separation of styles according to the dignity of the subject is rendered meaningless, since "every subject in its essence contains, before God's eyes, both dignity and vulgarity" (Auerbach, 2003: 487). But if Flaubert's approach undeniably helps widening the scope of the novel, laying the foundations of modern realism, it also has a disturbing underside: such an intense linguistic quest for truth inevitably entails coming to terms with the limits of realism and ultimately of language itself. Indeed, a striking vision of language as a constraining and ultimately self-deconstructing entity is already present in *Madame Bovary* and it becomes even more evident in Flaubert's later work.

From a semiotic point of view, it should be noticed that the development of classic realism was attended by the formation of a new mode of verisimilitude: one that depended upon descriptive detail for the creation of what Roland Barthes has referred to as the *reality effect*. For the French thinker, descriptive discourse, which was already typified in classical rhetoric in genres such as the epideictic and ephrasis, takes on a whole new dimension in the realist novel. If previously description could be taken as a potentially estimable but structurally superfluous element that barely "fills up" the narrative fabric between structural turning points, in the realist novel descriptive detail becomes a token of reality itself. In Barthes' words, "by positing the referential as real, by pretending to follow it in submissive fashion, realistic description avoids being reduced to phantasmatic activity" (Barthes, 2006: 232). Unsurprisingly, the model for the novel becomes historical narrative, which has "reality" as its essential reference. In keeping with this, the ascendancy of literary realism is approximately contemporary, according to Barthes, with the rise of a number of artistic and cultural forms that rely on a new attitude towards the real:

the development of techniques, of works, and institutions based on the incessant need to authenticate the 'real': the photograph ... reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects, tourism of monuments and historical sites. All this shows that the 'real' is supposed to be self-sufficient ... that its 'speech-act' has no need to be integrated into a structure and the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient principle of speech. (Barthes, 2006: 233)

Barthes postulates a break between ancient modes of verisimilitude and modern realism, which he defines as "any discourse which accepts 'speech acts' justified by their referent alone" (2006: 233). For Barthes, the reality effect, which is the standard form of verisimilitude in modern literature, is based on the *referential illusion*, whereby the realist speech act pretends to bypass the signified of the linguistic sign "to the advantage of the referent alone" (2006: 234). This premise, of course, will be subject to the attack of post-structuralist thought in the second half of the twentieth century.

### **3.4. Symbolic artefacts: the social and psychological functions of the novel.**

As has been already advanced, the novel has historically played different symbolic social roles related to the extension of the mode of production whose development went parallel with its own. To begin with, the novel has functioned as an important generator of social unity which has to some extent counterbalanced the social and cultural fragmentation produced by capitalism. Eagleton has referred to this connecting effect of the novel:

As the anarchy of the marketplace grows in modern society, the need for unifying political and cultural forms is ever more keenly felt. The novel must provide a *lingua franca* for individuals who are growing increasingly solitary, and whose social relations with others are becoming more and more functional. (Eagleton, 2005: 102)

In other words, the novel played a significant part in the building of those "imagined communities", to use Benedict Anderson's concept, which are modern nations (Anderson 1987).

But it is in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* where the symbolic functions performed by the nineteenth-century novel are perhaps most deeply explored. For Jameson, the novel partakes in a historical process that constitutes a

properly bourgeois revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by another, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. (Jameson, 2002: 138)

For Jameson, the analytical, demystifying and thus corrosive function of the realist novel—already proposed by Bakhtin—is accompanied by a productive, “objective” role: that of supplying *reality*, making sense of the new secular, disenchanted environment of market capitalism, characterized by the contingency of the commodity system. In short, the novel becomes a powerful arbitrator of what is to count as real. Relatedly, the realist novel also plays a major part in the constitution of the essentially bourgeois ideology of the psychic unity of the subject or, in Lacanian terms, the centred subject. Jameson understands this ideological development as a reaction to the distinctive dynamic inherent to capitalism known as reification. This concept, advanced by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) on the basis of Weber's notion of *rationalization*, consists in the systematic breaking up of “natural” unities—all sort of social and cultural forms, even human relationships—into independent smaller parts which are later reconstructed in new “post-natural” processes so as to achieve a more efficient management. This brings about a permanent suspension of ends and amounts to a complete instrumentalization of the world. As a consequence, these now isolated pieces of older unities tend to assume a semi-autonomous character which, according to Jameson,

not merely [is] a reflex of capitalist reification and rationalization, but also in some measure serves to compensate for the dehumanization of experience reification brings with it, and to rectify the otherwise intolerable effects of the new process. (Jameson, 2002: 48)

As Jameson argues, in the new capitalist *Umwelt* in which older “organic” social groups are dissolved and individuals reduced to commodified, isolated and equivalent units in the anomie of the labour-power market, the constitution of the centred subject, “the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a

compensation” (2002: 140). This new subjectivity of the bourgeois monadic individual is textually institutionalized in narrative devices such as Balzac’s omniscient narrator, James’ point of view or Flaubert’ free indirect speech.

The novel’s reaction to reification, however, went further than its contribution to the development of bourgeois individuality. For Jameson, the roots of modernism itself are to be found in this process whereby the very senses—which for him are not straightforward natural functions but rather the consequence of a historical process of differentiation—assume a semi-autonomous quality under the effect of rationalization and, in a division of labour of sorts, are broken up and reorganized into ends in themselves. This leads to the intensified—reified—sensorial and linguistic perception which lies at the heart of both Romanticism and modernism. Then, for Jameson,

[t]he mission of this heightened and autonomous language of color [is] to restore at least a symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it, a world of extension, grey and merely quantifiable. Much the same can be said of the heightened experience of language in the modern world. (Jameson, 2002: 48)

Jameson’s exploration of the effects of reification in the novel is embedded in a broader view of the socially symbolic functions performed by narrative. For the critic, narrative—as indeed ultimately all cultural artefacts—can be interpreted as the symbolic resolution of unsolvable social contradictions. For example, according to Jameson, modernism is “an ideological expression of capitalism” and yet it “can at one and the same time be read as a Utopian compensation of everything reification brings with it” (2002: 225). Jameson analyses sensorial richness in Conrad’s novels as an “aestheticizing strategy” that rewrites the world in terms of semi-autonomous perception all the while hiding significant aspects of life under capitalism:

Seen as ideology and Utopia all at once, Conrad’s stylistic practice can be grasped as a symbolic act which seizing on the Real in all of its reified resistance, at one and the same time projects a sensorium of its own, a libidinal resonance, no doubt historically determinate, yet whose ultimately ambiguity lies in its attempt to stand beyond history. (Jameson, 2002: 226).

In this way, according to Jameson, seemingly incompatible modes of representation, such as realism and modernism, actually correspond to different stages

of the same general secularizing dialectics of reification which affects subjectivities, institutions and cultural forms, eroding their hierarchical or sacred content once their social and ideological preconditions have been substantially altered. Then, just as realism was replaced by modernist forms brought about by the strain of reification, for Jameson, the postmodern can accordingly be read as “a further intensification of the forces of reification” (Jameson, 1998: 148). The way in which narrative reflects this structural reification and at the same time adapts its readers to it is shown, for example, in the way in which today we un-problematically assimilate cultural products characterized by an unprecedented degree of disjointedness and non-referentiality. At this point, it will be noticed that the (essentially Marxist) view of the realist novel in some way as a product of a specific configuration of the mode of production casts a light over its emergence, but also posits difficult and far-reaching questions as to its viability after the subsequent evolutionary modification of the economic base of society. In other words, and drawing on Ernest Mandel’s classic periodization of capitalism, do the conditions of possibility for the realist novel, born and bred hand in hand with the expansion of free trade and monopoly capitalism, still obtain in the age of late capitalism? This question, which has been a long-standing concern of Jameson’s theoretical work, will be central in our study of Franzen’s novels.

Complementary to Jameson’s view is Moretti’s conception of the novel as a symbolic form. As such, the novel becomes a “means through which the cultural tensions and paradoxes produced by social conflict and historical change are disentangled or at least reduced” (Moretti, 2000: 243). For the Italian critic, the novel is a problem-solving device, both from a social and a psychological point of view, which tends to promote social reconciliation and the assuagement of conflicts. In Moretti’s view, the novel is “a form that reduces and ‘binds’ the tensions and disequilibrium of everyday experience. What makes literature symbolically necessary is precisely its capacity to mediate and compromise—to teach us how to ‘live’ disturbing phenomena” (Moretti, 2000: 160). Both critics, Jameson and Moretti, will be central in our ideological analysis of Franzen’s fiction. The theory of the former will be fundamental in ascertaining Franzen’s actual position vis-à-vis contemporary society and historical change. This examination will also be concerned with the compensational strategies for what are perceived by the novelist as insoluble social conflicts. In turn, we will be discussing how the same properties that Moretti predicates of the *Bildungsroman* as

regards reconciliation and compromise are deployed by Franzen through his work, and most conspicuously in his fourth novel, *Freedom*, where he closes the metanarrative he has inscribed in his own work.

### **3.5. Totality and fragmentation: realism and quest for meaning in the modern world.**

The complex relation of realism and modernism has been the subject of a significant amount of critical discussion. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach presents modernism as a natural next step in the evolution of realism towards a more adequate portraying of reality. Far from, as Eagleton (2003: n.pag.) puts it, “rapping Virginia Woolf sternly over the knuckles”, for Auerbach, Woolf’s explorations of consciousness are “attempts to fathom a more genuine, a deeper and indeed a more real reality” (Auerbach, 2003: 540). From what he ironically calls his “incomparable historical vantage point” (Auerbach, 2003: 553) the German critic discerns a world which has become so massed, so subject to constant transformation by technology, as well as to permanent social, economic, political and intellectual turmoil of a dimension hitherto unknown, that classic realist attempts to comprehensively organize and describe reality on a grand scale become almost hopeless.<sup>47</sup> Auerbach understands the typically modernist shift of emphasis in narrative from great exterior turning points to apparently aimless inward probing, since “there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can portrayed” (2003: 547), just as he sympathizes with the modernists’ reluctance to “impose upon life, which is their subject, an order which it does not possess in itself” (2003: 548).

Auerbach’s assessment of Woolf as a representative of a new kind of realism more true to its age is particularly relevant as it brings to the fore the widespread misinterpretation of literary postmodernism as a reaction against modernism. Actually, as Christopher Nash (1993) has most meticulously argued, postmodernist fiction (particularly that of the group of American novelists whose work Franzen’s early novels are usually related to) is, first and foremost, a reaction against realism (or, to use Nash’s own term, an *anti-Realism*). According to Nash, in spite of its penchant for formal

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<sup>47</sup> Auerbach, a German Jew, lived as an exile during World War II in Istanbul, where he wrote *Mimesis*.

experimentation, its new emphasis on the processes of consciousness and perception, or its insistence on distinctive thematic *topoi* such as time and memory, prototypical modernist novelists such as Woolf, Joyce or Proust still hold to realist notions of reality, character, and the centrality of character to experience. Nash then agrees with Auerbach's view of modernist fiction as ultimately a continuation of realism by other means. As he forcefully argues:

The fact remains that we don't find Modernists seeking to demolish, overturn or upset the course of Realism. Rather, it seems more economically in keeping with the evidence to say that Modernism is in some compelling or compulsive way a last-ditch effort to trace the figure in the carpet, to 'make do' with, to salvage some sense of order from the rubble and debris of Realism's own surviving materials. (Nash, 1993: 36)

In any case, Auerbach's understanding of modernism was not shared by his great contemporary theoretician Lukács, who was not alone among Marxists in his distaste. To grasp Lukács rejection it is necessary to go further into his conception of realism as he presents it in *The Historical Novel* (1937) and *Studies in European Realism* (1948). For the Marxist Lukács, literature has a social mission, that of fighting the alienation produced by capitalist society—a purpose which finds its best vehicle in the realist novel. The transformative potential of realism, as Lukács explains, stems from its capacity to fight the manifold alienation and fragmentation of capitalist society, projecting a richer image of ourselves and our place and functions in the social totality. To this aim, the latter is to be reflected in the novel in microcosmic, synthetic form, and dramatized by characters that are representative of what is “typical” of each historical moment, yet highly individual. Typicality is certainly a central concept in Lukács' theorization. For Lukács, typicality is not a matter of statistical averaging but of being able to bring to light the deepest, most revealing and significant characteristics of society at a given time. By typical is meant, from Lukács point of view, those social forces which reveal society's inner dynamics and contradictions, showing the relationships between its characters and society as a whole, nature and history. For the theorist, then “the central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations” (Lukács, 2006b: 383-384). To be sure, this complex rhetorical and cognitive practice is one of the defining traits of high realism. For the

Hungarian critic, the great realist writers attain such a synthesis overcoming the novel's innate tendency to favour solipsist individualism, portraying instead individuals as essentially social beings, showing the "inner dialectic of their social and individual existence" (2006a: 387). Certainly such attempt is by no means easy, as it demands a social vision which is both penetrating and comprehensive in a modern world characterized by fragmentation, as Lukács recognizes:

The point in question is the organic, indissoluble connection between man as private individual and man as a social being, as a member of a community. We know that this is the most difficult question of modern literature today and has been so ever since modern bourgeois society came into being. (2006a: 385)

As may be readily noticed, the realist vision advocated by Lukács requires an insight past the world of appearance that might be considered a transcendentalism of its own kind. Indeed, for Lukács, a true realist writer's goal is:

To penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not readily perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society. Since these relationships do not lie on the surface, since the underlying laws only make themselves felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous, since it has both an artistic and an intellectual dimension. (Lukács, 2007: 38-9)

Once the realist writer has been able to go beyond the epiphenomena of social life to grasp its essentials, it is her task to select and combine them into a total artistic form whose surface is transparent enough to allow that underlying essence to "shine through" (Lukács, 2007: 39). In support of this claim, Lukács puts forth a significant remark by Lenin, which he uses as a motto: "The inessential, the apparent, the surface phenomenon, vanishes more frequently, is less 'solid', less 'firm' than the 'essence'" (2007: 33).

Perhaps strikingly, in its quest for a social substance lying beyond the surface of things, realism recuperates part of the meaning it had in mediaeval scholastic philosophy, as Ian Watt observes in *The Rise of the Novel* (Watt, 2001: 11-2), when "realism" was a current of thought which postulated that true reality was to be found in

fundamental categories underlying the phenomenal world. In a review of *Mimesis*, Eagleton elaborates on this peculiar vocation of realism for the synthesis of social essence:

Realism in this Lukácsian or Hegelian sense means more than simple representation ... It means an art which penetrates through the appearances of social life to grasp their inner dynamics and dialectical interrelations. It is thus the equivalent in the artistic realm of philosophical realism, for which true knowledge is knowledge of the underlying mechanism of things.

Lukács's sense of realism, then, is cognitive and evaluative together. The more a work of art succeeds in laying bare the hidden forces of history, the finer it will be. In fact, there is a sense in which this kind of art is more real than reality itself, since by bringing out its inner structure it reveals what is most essential about it. (Eagleton 2003: 18)

Like Lukács, Raymond Williams also understood the synthetic vocation of the realist novel, its focus on what is more significant in the relationship between the individual and the social, as the product of the novelist's special vision. As he explains in *The Long Revolution* (1961):

In the highest realism, society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. The integration is controlling, yet of course is not to be achieved by an act of will. If it comes at all, it is a creative discovery, and can perhaps only be recorded within the structure and substance of the realist novel. (Williams, 2001: 314)

And similarly to Lukács, Williams realizes that this kind of realist synthesis can only be properly achieved on the basis of a type of community which is becoming increasingly rare:

The realist novel needs, obviously, a genuine community: a community of persons linked not merely by one kind of relationship—work or friendship or family—but many interlocking kinds. It is obviously difficult, in the twentieth century, to find a community of this sort. (Williams, 2001: 312)

Certainly, synthesis is a central characteristic of the realist novel, as is shown in its frequent microcosmic ambition. This is consistent, again, with the novel's mentioned aim to make sense of the world by building small-scale models. As Simon Denith argues in his study of realist synthesis, realism "represented for the nineteenth century a powerful explanatory device, which allowed societies to explain themselves to themselves in flexible and comprehensible ways" (Denith, 2010: 41).<sup>48</sup> This explanatory ambition is also evident in the objectifying emphasis of naturalism, the particular variety of realism which developed in the latter part the century. Naturalism brought to the novel a scientific-like attitude, very much influenced by the work of Darwin. Especially influential was also Taine, who claimed that human behaviour was conditioned by three main determinants: heredity, environment and historically produced social conditions, a thesis assumed by Zola in his manifesto *The Experimental Novel* (1880).

The novel's quest for synthesis and typicality calls attention to an old dilemma of realism, namely the conflict between realism and the exemplary. Thus, if a character or situation is to bring forth some underlying universal truth, then it must be properly dressed with what Henry James called "the air of the real", the distinctive contingent features that cumulatively convey an individuality, lest the whole narrative turns into plain allegory and therefore loses its realist credibility and thrust. Conversely, too much individuality entails the risk of losing any symbolic dimension. In Eagleton's words, "Exemplariness without realism is empty, whereas realism without exemplariness is blind" (Eagleton, 2005: 14).

To accomplish that synthetic "typicality", for Lukács it is fundamental that the artist should have a particular "perspective", a selective principle which enables her to choose and organize materials, the merit of the work heavily depending on the lucidity of the perspective. For Lukács this perspective is necessarily conditioned by the writer's own social class. As Williams shows, even a novelist as lucid as George Eliot, who restores the lower-class inhabitants of rural England to a novelistic landscape where they were absent in the work of previous novelists such as Jane Austen, is unconvincing in her portrayal, as these characters "emerge into personal consciousness only through externally formulated attitudes and ideas" (Williams, 1973: 168). Lukács' objections to

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<sup>48</sup> In this way, the contribution of the realist novel to the formation of the modern Western social imaginary, in Taylor's (2004) sense of the phrase, becomes patent again.

modernism are also related to the deployment of perspective. As the Hungarian critic explains in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957), Modernists replace this organizing principle with their own dogma of the *condition humaine*, with the result of what he calls a “naturalistic” style, an arbitrary presentation of reality whereby the difference between significant and irrelevant detail vanishes. Thus modernism for Lukács ultimately involves the unintelligibility of outward reality which in turn implies reinforcing a sense of inalterability. Under what he calls the ideology of modernism, human activity is rendered impotent and meaningless and all that is left is a “vision of a world dominated by angst”. For Lukács indeed, “Kafka’s angst is the experience *par excellence* of modernism” (Lukács, 2006a: 36). Against Modernist “distorted” social visions, Lukács sets “critical realism”, by which he refers to the great tradition of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism, characterized by its generally lucid attempts to illuminate the workings of society, with Thomas Mann as its best exponent. In spite of his praise, however, for Lukács critical realism falls short of attaining the depth of perspective of socialist realism. Since writers tend to portray from the inside only the class they belong to, critical realists are unable to “depict, from the inside, the social forces on which socialism is based” (2006a: 107). In contrast, a socialist perspective is characterized by “an awareness of the development, structure and goal of society as a whole”, and is able to “portray from the inside human beings whose energies are devoted to the building of a different future, and whose psychological and moral make-up is determined by this” (2006a: 96). Nevertheless, Lukács argumentation here is visibly impaired by his inability to present any work of socialist realism whose artistic merits can compare with those of the great critical realists he admires, and in an awkward sort of compromise he ends up claiming that critical and socialist realism share their fight of reactionary forces and any critical realist work is acceptable from a Marxist point of view provided it does not openly reject socialism (2006a: 107).

In contrast to Lukács’ and, to a certain extent, Williams’ positions, Bakhtin downplays the importance of the writer’s social stance, since for the Russian critic any social distance is susceptible of being bridged by what Dorothy J. Hale calls “an ethical act of the imagination” (Hale, 2006: 451), whereby a speaker can adopt the point of view of the other. In Bakhtin words:

The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the

understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's apperceptive background. (Bakhtin, 2006: 497)

Moreover, for the Russian critic, the perspective underlying any social discourse is always relativized by the dialogic character of any utterance and the *hereroglot* environment in which it lives and takes shape. From the very moment of its formation, an utterance is taken over, shot through with other people's intentions and accents. There is no such thing as a neutral language that can be aseptically put to use in pursuing our conscious intention. As Bakhtin famously put it, language is always populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. And in no literary form are the dialogic properties of language more evident than in the novel, whose author must be, in Bakhtin's view, a master of heteroglossia, able to voice different social discourses without being tied to any one, allowing thus her intentions to be *refracted* through the multiple lenses of discourse plurality. In this way, Hale's argues,

[t]he determining nature of social positionality, it seems, can be overcome by the self-consciousness and self-willed pursuit of social plurality. The novelist's self-consciousness about ideological pluralism, in other words, releases him from the social determinants of his own identity, allowing him to become first and foremost a "novelist" (rather than, say, a member of the middle class, or a resident of a certain town or a speaker of a particular national language). (Hale, 2006: 453)

This view attributes a certain transcendent character to the novelist's position which, while obviously open for criticism, in any case brings forth the important question of the treatment of alterity in the novel, the possibilities and limits to the knowledge of the other. It certainly posits a sympathetic ability as a central requirement for both writer and reader. The centrality of sympathy in the novel, and its communitarian potential constitute a prominent concern in Franzen's work, as we will be discussing later.

Thus far, the centrality of Marxist approaches in the analysis of the realist novel is surely clear. Actually, the importance of realism for Marxism was evident from the very beginning. Engels was concerned with realism and in a letter of 1885 to Mina

Kautsky, quoted by Eagleton, he offers his view, remarkably different from that of Lukács, of what revolutionary fiction should be:

A socialist-based novel fully achieves its purpose ... if by conscientiously describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, instils doubt as to the eternal character of the bourgeois world, although the author does not offer any definite solution or does not even line up openly on any particular side. (Eagleton, 1976: 43)

That is, realism should be revealing, but not necessarily overtly partisan. At the heart of this lies the concept—which would be developed later by Marxist critics—of *objective partisanship*, which implies that true illumination, beyond superficial appearance, of the significant forces at work in society is enough in itself and does not require the burden of any explicit political rhetoric. As Eagleton puts it, “partisanship, that is to say, is inherent in reality itself” (1976: 44). And, of course, in the Lukácsian sense of the term, any perspective will always be political in that it will lend itself more easily to one political agenda or other, and not necessarily in accordance with the author’s own conscious intentions.

We should bear in mind, however, that in spite of its confirmed subversive potential, important critics have identified an inherent conservatism in the realist novel. This circumstance was underscored by Lucien Goldmann, who saw the novel (not necessarily *realist*) as the literary embodiment of the bourgeois worldview. For Goldmann there was a relation of *homology* between significant aspects of bourgeois social life and the novelistic genre, to the extent that both could be considered as manifestations of the same structure on two different planes (Goldmann, 1964: 40). In this sense, for Goldman the novel is

*la transposition sur le plan littéraire de la vie quotidienne dans la société née de la production pour le marché. Il existe une homologie rigoureuse entre le forme littéraire du roman ... et la relation quotidienne des hommes avec les biens en général, et par extension, des hommes avec les autres hommes dans une société productrice pour le marché. (Goldmann, 1964 : 36, italics in the original)*

Although both have criticized Goldmann's thesis as simplistic, Jameson and Eagleton have also noticed an intrinsic conservatism of the realist novel. They analyse it, however, at an ontological level. As Jameson explains, an ontological realism is so committed to the solidity of the real—be it of concrete or abstract nature—that makes its substance, that “cannot but be threatened in the very nature of the form by any suggestion that these things are changeable and not ontologically immutable” (Jameson, 2006a: 113). This would explain, according to the critic, the inveterate satirical hostility that the realist novel uses with characters intent on social and political change. Eagleton has also observed the political implications of this contradictory quality of realism:

The avant-garde Leftists also found something sinisterly consoling in representational realism, which reassures us with images of a world we feel at home with. Bernard Shaw's plays may be radical in their content, but their stage directions portray a world so solid, familiar and well-upholstered, all the way down to the level of the whisky in the decanter on the sideboard, that it is hard to imagine ever being able to change it. In this sense, the realist form usurps the radical content. (Eagleton, 2003: n.pag.)

Paradoxically enough, this entails that romance, a narrative form sometimes scorned as naïve by readers searching for social critique may in some cases harbour a kind of critical potential which is constitutionally out of reach for the realist novel. As Northrop Frye explains:

Certain elements of character are released in the romance which make it naturally a more revolutionary form than the novel. The novelist deals with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks. He needs the framework of a stable society, and many of our best novelists have been conventional to the verge of fussiness. The romancer deals with individuality, with characters *in vacuo* idealized by reverie, and, however conservative he may be, something nihilistic and untameable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages. (Frye, 1971: 304-5)

It is no accident that the exposure of the conservative ideological bearings of the realist novel should have led Jameson's to take interest in science-fiction, a narrative genre which sometimes appears in association with romance and is particularly suited to the articulation of Utopian visions. Indeed, science-fiction's disregard for the actually

existing confers upon it a distinct allegorical power, and makes it a particularly suitable medium for the expression of the desire for radical change in an ideological climate characterized by what Jameson has called, as we have seen, “the disappearance of the negative”.

One of the main preoccupations of Jameson’s recent work on realism concerns its ontological status. In this regard, Jameson (in 2006b: 110-114 and 2013: 210-216) has advanced a narrative typology of the realist novel in terms of transcendence and immanence formed by four categories. The first one is the novel of *immanent immanence*, where, as Lukács claims for the epic, everything is inherently meaningful, achieving thus a “miraculous”—even if precarious—fusion of form and content. It is here where the American critic positions “great realism”. Then Jameson poses a novel of *transcendental immanence* in which ethical categories act as organizing devices, a narrative thus always under the threat of turning into mere allegory in the absence of a true inter-class perspective, as in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). A third category is formed by the novel of *transcendental transcendence*, to be found only in a space of otherness “freed of the weight of being and the inertia of the present social order” (2006: 110), that is, in the historical novel, such as *Salammbô* (1862), *Romola* (1862-1863) or *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); or in the novel that envisages the future and is thus confronted with the political and prospective change, a narrative where “the whole existing fabric of being is threatened by revolutionary and systemic overhaul and transformation” (2006: 114), even if revolutionaries themselves are usually dealt with in the satirical way above mentioned. Finally, Jameson proposes a fourth category, that of *immanent transcendence*, where the transformation of being is inherent to being itself, or, in other words, where transcendence is inherent to the sphere of immanence. This category is substantiated in the providential novel, as exemplified by Balzac’s *La Cousine Bette* (1846) or *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), the ultimate exploration of providential realism according to the critic.

It is clear that the ideological bearings of realism are controversial. If for Lukács realism was a prerequisite of any transformative potential of literature, this tenet was not shared by other intellectuals of the Left, notably Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht, which brought about a famous public controversy between the latter and the Hungarian critic

in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> Bloch, for example, argued that expressionism was more adequate, than realism to reflect the experience of the fragmentation of life under modern capitalism. As Esther Leslie points out, “[c]apitalist social relations prevent us being complete individuals. Modernist art, in re-mediating that fragmentariness, produces a historically authentic mirror of experience. To that extent, it is an art of the real” (Leslie, 2010: 144). Brecht agreed that art forms must change to adapt to changing realities, which required experimentation. In fact, Brecht anticipates the claims made by Jameson and Eagleton as to the inherent conservatism of realist narrative derived from its inevitable commitment to what is. For the German playwright, it was precisely the creation of the illusion of reality which reinforced social paralysis by portraying a solid, familiar world of unassailable substance. According to Brecht, Lukács’ fetishized, formalistic realism is actually nostalgically reactionary. In contrast, Brecht advocates a new conception of realism: one that is necessarily “broad and political, free from aesthetic restrictions and independent of convention” (Brecht: 1995, 190).<sup>50</sup> In Eagleton words, Brecht’s realism is still an art that “discovers social laws and developments, and unmasks prevailing ideologies”, but which just “need not involve *verisimilitude*, in the narrow sense of recreating the textures and appearances of things” (Eagleton, 1976: 67).

Lukács point of view seems especially constricted when he denies the critical potential of narrative forms that do not comply with his concept of realism. In this way, Michael Löwy proposes the term of “critical irrealism” to describe those works which do not follow the conventions of Lukácsian realism yet are critical of society. For example, Kafka’s “visionary power flows precisely from this subjective approach, which, without being either *realist* or *anti-realist*, illuminates social reality from the inside”, while criticism can take the form of “protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety or angst” (Löwy, 2010: 214). Only from a dogmatic position can be affirmed that realism is the only narrative form that can offer valuable social insight. In fact, realism’s obligatory reliance on a stable reality on the basis on which to perform its characteristic cognitive and rhetorical strategies imply a measure of blindness to the possibility of alternative

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<sup>49</sup> The most significant texts that gave substance to this lively critical debate, which also included contributions by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, were compiled in 1977 in a fundamental volume by Verso (see Works Cited).

<sup>50</sup> It is striking to notice how in spite of their apparently irreconcilable differences concerning artistic form, Brecht’s view of the social function of realist art is remarkably similar to that of Lukács: “*Realist* means: laying bare society’s causal network / showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators / writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems affecting human society / emphasizing the dynamics of development / concrete so as to encourage abstraction” (Brecht: 1995: 190).

realities, whether actual or prospective. In this sense, J.P. Stern has pointed out the limitations of realism when compared with symbolism:

[Realism] may require historical information. But once that has been provided, it establishes a self-explaining continuity—whereas symbolism insists on the enigmatic break—between the common norm *given* in the language and a contingent, *created* multiplicity of references. Realism's *making* of private meanings is subordinated to its *matching* of meanings against available common norms of usage ... Symbolical fictions [on the other hand] grow 'beyond the world of common indication'. This is why they occasionally contain prophetic insights which are denied to realism ... Just so their language displays an originality and a creativeness that leaves the common usage of a given age behind, though it may provide a later age and *its* realism with new linguistic forms. (Stern, 1973: 84)

Within a study devoted to Franzen's fiction, when it comes to discussing the critical potentialities and limitations of realism it is necessary to cast a contrasting view to their counterparts in postmodernist fiction. Even a superficial look at the task, however, reveals that it would readily demand a treaty of its own. Grossly simplifying we could draw a twofold division of critical positions of on the issue. There are those who, even acknowledging different degrees of complicity with the underlying socio-economic system, vindicate the subversive capacity of postmodernist fiction. It is the case, for example, of Hutcheon (1988), who underscores the destabilizing power of parody and the distrust of master narratives that characterize the typically postmodernist genre of *historiographic metafiction*. However, not only liberal-humanist thinkers, but also Marxist critics such as Jameson and Eagleton have been rather more sceptic about the critical or subversive leverage of a cultural form which has proved to be easily assimilated. In general terms, in the age of late capitalism is easy to see how avant-garde rapidly becomes conventional, reified and commodified. Postmodern culture immediately disarms and absorbs subversive attempts, not least by their transposition into the aesthetic domain. As Jameson argues:

As for the postmodern revolt against all that, however, it must be equally stressed that its own offensive features ... no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become

institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society. (Jameson, 1991: 4)

In fact, for the theorist, rebellious attempts at breaking with the rules actually fulfil a structural necessity of the system, just as there is a structural need for aesthetic innovation:

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods ... now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (Jameson, 1991: 4-5)

As has been shown, discussion of the critical potential of postmodernism has been a part of the critical debate on Franzen. At several points in this study I refer, for example, to the frequent contemporary perception of irony and self-referentiality, staples of postmodernist fiction, as co-opted by the system and ultimately conducive to political stasis. Certainly, accusations of defeatism on certain American postmodernist novelists are not rare.<sup>51</sup> However, if the results of a hypothetical contest between realism and postmodernism for political incisiveness must remain unclear, I believe with McLaughlin (2004) that any form of contemporary realism that aspires to relevance cannot overlook certain issues which have been addressed by postmodernist fiction, such as the linguistically constructed, ideologically mediated nature of our access to reality or history. This does not imply, of course, a renounce to referentiality, to the vocation to pointing to a reality outside the literary work and generating thus a knowledge of the world which, however necessarily precarious, may enable different forms of human agency.

In any case, what the polemic over realism seems to corroborate is the fundamentally destabilizing power of the novel anticipated by Bakhtin. Realism was inherent to the novel from the beginning and both mode and form went hand in hand for the greater part of their history. However, the novel's subversive power and its innate

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<sup>51</sup> We have already mentioned Jon Kucich's study of the attacks received from the margins of the American scene by "central" postmodernist novelists as DeLillo (Kucich 1988). From a different point of view, for example, in his essay "Slouching Towards Grubnet" (1996), Gerald Howard criticizes novelists such as Richard Powers, Martin Amis, Michael Chabon and Don DeLillo on account of complicity with the market.

multiplicity and protean quality simply make impossible for the genre to be exhausted by one narrative mode alone. It is conceivable then that realism will remain just one possible constituent of the novel, to be used in variable proportions.

### **3.6. *The cracked kettle: The bad reputation of realism.***

In his 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” John Barth declared his dismay at the sight of so many contemporary novelists following Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Balzac, “as if the great writers of the last sixty years or so hadn’t existed” (Barth, 1984: 66-7). It seems fair to say that in the debate over realism eventually it was the anti-realist thesis of Brecht that won the critical struggle. Indeed, the historical importance of realism, which we have summarized above, makes for a sharp contrast with its current critical status as a rather discredited narrative mode. With a few notable exceptions, realism has not ranked high as a subject of critical inquiry in the last decades. In fact, the scholars of the postmodern age seem to have often contemplated the realist novel as a rather rudimentary rhetorical artefact with its deluded reliance on the transparency of language and the possibility of reflecting a real world outside it. Consequently, the adjective *naïve* has appeared to be an inevitable companion of the term. Unfortunately, in the long run this has led to the generalized acceptance of un-reflexive prejudice and stereotypes on this important subject. The grip of misconceptions of realism has been undoubtedly compounded by the strikingly scarce critical treatment of the subject. In much contemporary critical work, realism only gets, if mentioned at all, a passing remark as the reference for a negative contrast with other narrative modes widely regarded as more interesting and less unsophisticated, such as, for example, Tom LeClair’s *Systems* novel (LeClair 1987), Linda Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1988), or, more recently, James Annesley’s *blank fiction* (Annesley 1998). On their part, complex categories of realism such as linear narrative and omniscient narrator are scorned as all but an embarrassment. These views are especially lame in their missing the historical significance of realism and its essential heterogeneity. As Rachel Bowlby puts it,

[t]his is to ignore the historical variability of aesthetic criteria, or that of criteria for considering the subversive or stabilizing effects, politically or psychologically, of particular kinds of art; the overlapping or separation of

these various criteria is also, of course, a matter of historical variation. It is also to ignore the multiplicity of realisms in realism's own primary time (as well as before or since). (Bowlby, 2010: xv)

Actually, I would go even farther than Bowlby and argue that, as this chapter has tried to show, to ignore realism in general, and the realist novel in particular, is to be blind to their fundamental contribution to the shaping of modern consciousness, including the modern concept of the individual.

The bad reputation of the realist novel on artistic grounds starts already in the nineteenth-century. According to Stern, for example, the literary men of the *fin de siècle* disdained realism as “the last and most absurd delusion of the gullible bourgeois” (Stern, 1973: 58). It is during the development of modernism, however, when repudiation of realism becomes a constant in the new literary scene. One of the landmarks in the anti-realist trend is Virginia Woolf's brilliant invective against Arnold Bennett's narrative in her essay “Modern Fiction” (1919). Woolf thus helped create the critical commonplace of the superficial, meaningless “materialism” of the realist novel, in contrast with the true significance to be found in the inward exploration of the new novel. However, Bowlby calls attention to the fact that Woolf's subjective recreation of the “myriad impressions” which—from the outside world—incessantly assail the mind, advocated by the novelist in the mentioned essay, is not essentially different from, for example, George Eliot's announcement in *Adam Bede* (1859) “I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind” (Bowlby, 2010: xix). In a similar way, George Levine argues that “realism always depends, more or less surreptitiously, on the mind as much as on *external nature*” (Levine, 2010: 15). After all, Auerbach saw Woolf's narrative work as a culmination of realism in its constant search for a more adequate treatment of reality. In fact, all new realisms have presented themselves in opposition to pre-existing ones as a truer, more faithful depiction of the real. This is one thing at least which Zola (*Le Roman Experimental*) and Woolf—even Franzen for that matter—have in common. Perhaps we should not dismiss the hypothesis that a metacritical study might reveal that the categorical, irreconcilable differences between artistic periods or modes often handled in critical discourse are after all conceptual constructions built in hindsight—conceptual filters which, once they have gained institutional currency, tend to be thrown over previously heterogeneous fields turning them into uniform critical assumptions. In this

way, postmodernism, modernism and realism are frequently seen as totally alien to each other; postmodernism, for one, being self-reflective as regards representation, and realism being “naïve”. But a look into the beginning of *Adam Bede*, quoted by Matthew Beaumont, casts doubt on the solidity of such premises:

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (Beaumont, 2010: 4-5)

Taking this paragraph into consideration, Alison Lee’s remarks seem almost redundant: “a Realist text in the sense that was, and is, defined by Realist critics, does not exist ... all major realist texts contain self-conscious moments which in themselves undermine Realist dictates” (Lee, 1990: 8). As Beaumont remarks using distinctive contemporary catchphrases, this paragraph “is remarkable for its self-reflectiveness: it emphasizes the materiality of writing; it foregrounds the illusionistic character of representation; and it directly, playfully, addresses the reader” (Beaumont, 2010: 6). In *The Realistic Imagination* (1981), George Levine was among the first critics to challenge widespread critical beliefs on the allegedly unsophisticated character of the nineteenth-century realist novel:

The great novelists of the nineteenth century were never so naïve about narrative conventions or the problems of representation as later realists or modern critics have suggested. If we now can detect the conventionality of their admirable struggles to get at truth without imprisoning it in conventions, we can also see that the attempt allies them with the very writers and critics who defined themselves by rejecting them ... No major Victorian novelist were deluded into believing that they were in fact offering an unmediated reality; but all of them struggled to make contact with the world out there, and, even with the knowledge of their own subjectivity, to break from the threatening limits of solipsism, of convention and of language. (Levine, 1981: 7-8)

In other words, Victorian novelists were driven by an ethical commitment to tell the truth about the world—sincerity being a paramount value in contemporary England—but they generally avoided what Darío Villanueva (2004) terms “genetic fallacy”, namely the assumption that realism is a matter of transparently reflecting reality. In this sense, for example, it is revealing to observe, with J. Hillis Miller in his essay “Narrative and History”, Henry James’s dismay at Trollope’s avowal to the reader of the fictional character of his fiction, deliberately shattering thus the illusion of substantiality which for James was paramount in the novel (Miller, 1974: 458). Indeed, in the same work Miller shows how Eliot’s *Middlemarch* deconstructs the same notions of stable, meaningful history that it takes at its premise, showing that the only possible “origin” is “an act of interpretation, that is, an act of the will to power imposed on a prior ‘text’, which may be the world itself seen as a text, a set of signs” (Miller, 1974: 468)

Reductive conceptions of realism then should be easy to avoid if we do not lose sight of the long and complicated historical way to realism as well as the arduous task that any attempt at representing reality entails. As Levine puts it, “realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer. It makes inevitable an intense self-consciousness, sometimes explicit, sometimes not” (Levine, 2010: 16). A similar claim is made by Peter Brooks: “Reading these novelists we are ever discovering both what it is like to try to come to terms with the real within the constraints of language, and how one encounters in the process the limits of realism, and the limits of representation itself” (Brooks, 2005: 20).

One way of escaping the usual simplifications about realism’s naivety is to see it as a pragmatic practice. Indeed, realism has been productively studied as a cooperative, pragmatic phenomenon which depends on the reader’s interpretation of a work as realist, on the basis of certain expected features, or “*réalèmes*”, in Itamar Even-Zohar’s coinage (discussed in Villanueva 2004), that are present in it, such as a clearly recognizable, stable spatial and temporal framework, or a consistent and identifiable cast of characters. Realism then, like any form of linguistic communication, is based on an implicit *contract* between reader and writer. In his valuable treaty on realism, Villanueva sets the preface of *Sotileza* (1885), by José María de Pereda, as an example of *good narrative practice* capable of overcoming the genetic fallacy: “El novelista confiesa su intencionalidad mimética de presentar casos y cosas de la vida humana en

los libros de imaginación” (Villanueva, 2004: 130). That is, the novelist forefronts the artifice and thus acknowledges its inherent relativity and arbitrariness. This *metafictional* quality, which is course a cornerstone of postmodernist fiction according to most critical accounts, was not difficult to find in Victorian realist novels, as has been shown. This character does not invalidate the novel’s claims to realism as long as the writer abides by this sort of contract with the reader. It is not then that realist writers were by definition unaware of the constructed, textual nature of all knowledge and representation. After all, as Bakhtin has shown, the realist novel has always been characterized by an acute textual awareness, ever ready to detect the inadequacy of narrative conventions and traditional texts and subvert them through parody. In Levine’s words, referred to Victorian novelists but extensible to all the great realist writers, these novelists “take the risk of believing in the possibility of fictions that bring us at least a little closer to what is not ourselves and not merely language” (Levine, 1981: 4).

It is difficult, then, to infer from the evidence supplied above that realism should necessarily be accompanied by narrative and linguistic naivety—or even *bad faith*—as certain contemporary critical opinion would have it. In fact, it seems that, especially in the overwhelmingly complex world of late capitalism, a degree of discourse and theoretical awareness is an obligatory part of a realist writer’s equipment if she is to perform that distinctive kind of synthesis of the socially significant past the realm of social epiphenomena with any success at all. In any case, what realism certainly requires is the determination to point outside language, even if by linguistic means. For the realist writer the world is not a text, even if we can only access it in textual form. Realism does believe in a referent, which can be understood as that which resists textualization, be it historical fact or death itself, as Jameson has argued (Jameson, 1991: 94).

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize that, even if it seems unavoidable to resort to binary oppositions in the diachronic study of the development of realism, as Jameson has acknowledged, we should not elevate them to absolute status. Especially when comparing realist and postmodernist fiction, distinctions are often blurred, as is implied by the recent proposal of critical categories such as post-postmodernism, already discussed, or previous similar ones such as Alan Wilde’s “midfiction” (Wilde 1987); or Amy J. Elias’ “postmodern-realism” (Elias 1993), also mentioned above.

Then, if within our somewhat narrower scope we have identified certain constitutive features that have accreted through history to shape the specific form of the realist novel, we should add the proviso that such a concept will remain a *prototypical* or graded category in the sense advanced following Wittgenstein by Eleanor Rosch (1973) and others, and not a closed concept defined by a finite set of necessary and sufficient conditions. As Stern has put it, quoting G.G. Hough, unalloyed realism is rare since realism itself is “an unstable compound”. In Stern’s words, “[o]nly among the realists of the nineteenth century and their heirs do we find a complete commitment to the mode, though even in their writings its instability is obvious” (Stern, 1973: 122). In fact, for Stern, realism is characterized by a singular kind of balance among writing modes: “neither the heightened meaning of symbols nor the sentient self nor language-consciousness in its several forms is a stranger to it” (1973: 164). That is, there is no realism that does not incorporate to some extent or other that which is most distinctive about symbolism, modernism or post-modernism. In this Stern is certainly right, though he could have also included in his statement those novelistic modes that were long ago superseded by the realist novel but which nevertheless tend to reappear as more or less significant ingredients of it: romance, melodrama, *Bildungsroman*, the Gothic novel.

### **3.7. The decline of totality: realism in our time.**

There is, then, a considerable degree of mystification in the arguments sometimes used to undermine the validity of realism from a post-structuralist point of view on linguistic and epistemological grounds. But there are, however, perhaps deeper reasons to question its current viability—reasons related with developments in the mode of production, as was anticipated above. Writing in the early 1970s, Stern was already aware of the difficulties that socio-economic and technological development entailed for realism: “The alienation of men from their social, natural and technological environment has now become so radical that those writing at the highest level of creative consciousness ... work on the assumption that a realistic account of this state is impossible” (Stern, 1973: 142). Once again, however, it is Jameson who has most thoroughly tackled these difficult problems. Following his thought, we may wonder as to how, if it was indeed the product of a specific complex of socio-economic circumstances, can the realist novel survive in what for many theorists is a whole new

stage of capitalism? If the global system of late capitalism is characterized by maddening elusiveness and complexity to a point which defies human-scale ways of conceptualizing it, can the distinctive synthesis of realism still be possible?<sup>52</sup> For the early Jameson, such possibility is rather dubious: in contrast with the transparent, self-contained worlds of immanent meaning of previous times, the modern world teems with objects, institutions, cultural forms, et cetera, which cannot be felt as the “results of immediate human activity” and thus become “foreign bodies within the work of art” (Jameson, 1974: 167-8). The solution to this sort of narrative sterility would be to enlarge the work of art’s point of view far enough so as to make the necessary connections between what appears as widely disparate phenomena and facts. In this way, according to Jameson, “the illusion of inhumanity would disappear: once again the content of the work would be completely comprehensible in human terms.” (1974: 168) However, for the American theorist this enlargement entails a level of abstraction which is irreconcilable with literature’s formal requisites (1974: 169).

Furthermore, we have seen that realism’s synthesis requires a sense of totality which for many is on the decline today, to the extent that the very existence of a social totality is put under question. In this regard we may remember Raymond Williams’ remarks on realism’s need for “knowable communities” to thrive on—communities which the pressure of reification erodes and finally destroys. It may be argued that Jameson took Williams’ point one step beyond: it is not only communities that are destroyed by capitalism’s rationalization processes; it is reality itself that vanishes under the new socio-economic conditions. Since reality is ultimately what a specific community agrees upon to be, in the increased anomie and fragmentation of late capitalism there may no longer be a reality for the realist writer to describe. In Jameson’s phrasing, “[o]bjective reality—or the various objective realities—are in other words the function of genuine group existence or collective vitality; and when the dominant group disintegrates, so also does the certainty of some common truth or being” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 178-9).

There is as well the thorny question of ideology. From the account of realism presented in this chapter it becomes clear that the epistemological function of the realist

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<sup>52</sup> As Jameson has frequently argued, this elusiveness is behind the development of the typically postmodern conspiracy novel, a generic category which will be central in our discussion of Franzen’s work.

novel, its traditional role as an interpretive and explanatory device is ideologically mediated. Selection of materials, perspective, synthesis, are clearly instances in which the role of the novelist's ideology is determinant. In fact, a similar statement can be made of the writer's belief in a grounding, intelligible reality waiting readily at hand to be analysed. More often than not, in consistence with the origins of the genre, this ideology is typically bourgeois, which includes, as we have seen, a bourgeois agreement on what is to count as socially significant, worthy of literary treatment or simply *real*. In this sense it can be said that, as Jameson compellingly puts it (reminding us of Goldmann):

realism is the most complex epistemological instrument yet devised for recording the truth of social reality, and also, at one and the same time, that it is a lie in the very form itself, the prototype of aesthetic false consciousness, the appearance that bourgeois ideology takes on the realm of narrative literature. (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 179)

With regard to these issues it is possible to discern an evolution in the on the whole impressively coherent theoretical work of Fredric Jameson. In his early writings Jameson acknowledged realism's ambiguous ideological status and highlighted its being a sort of literary false consciousness, as well as its inherent inadequacy to the times of late capitalism. Consequently, he favoured the work of then emergent novelists such as Don DeLillo or Sol Yurick, which he regarded as more appropriate to the new milieu conformed by the third expansion of capitalism (see Jameson 1984). However, in his subsequent work with focus on the culture of late capitalism it is possible to observe a shift of emphasis. In his best-known texts of the 1990s dealing with postmodernism, a phenomenon which he examines with an avowedly totalizing approach,<sup>53</sup> Jameson argues for the necessity of recuperating the pedagogical function of art (advocated, paradoxically, by both Lukács and Brecht), with the aim of fighting alienation and re-gaining acting capacity in a global system of well-nigh impossible complexity. For this, the critic insists on the necessity of developing better cognitive mapping, a practice which involves a sort of spatially conceptualized ideological repositioning, ultimately leading to a heightened understanding of the global system and of our place in it (see for

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<sup>53</sup> See for example Jameson: "It has not escaped anyone's attention that my approach to postmodernism is a totalizing one. The interesting question today is then not why I adopt this perspective, but why so many people are scandalized (or have learned to be scandalized) by it" (Jameson, 2009: 35).

example Jameson, 1991: 50-54). In this way, Jameson leaves open the possibility—and even the *necessity*—for new, even if still unimaginable, forms of representation.

Of course, Jameson does not advance a description of this prospective mode of representation. The fact, however, that in 2013 he was still engaged in the study of realism suggests that that radically new mode is yet to come, or else that maybe it is already here only not so radically different from realism. The question then inevitably arises as to whether there really is no way for narrative realism to be put to valuable interpretative-explanatory use in the age of late capitalism. Here a functional approach to narrative—adopting the sense which the term “functional” has been given in modern linguistics, that is, an approach focused on what the realist novel can do for its readers—may reveal itself helpful in order to come to terms with this rather daunting problem. This way, it is often argued that the transformations brought about by the development of multinational capitalism have rendered social reality so incomprehensible that is currently immune to realism’s traditional analytical ways. Leaving aside the fact that this argument presupposes the not unproblematic assumption that social reality has at some time been wholly amenable to such analysis, at this point, and without forsaking the relationship between cultural forms and the socio-economic base, we could ask ourselves if, in relative terms, the life changes involved by the expansion of late capitalism are qualitatively that different from those produced by the industrial revolution under whose shadow the realist novel was born. Not to mention, of course, that genuine industrial revolutions are ongoing processes in many areas of the world from Bangladesh to China. Similarly, we may wonder whether the transformations engendered by what we call globalization are actually perceived as more intense by those affected by it than were the changes attending the development of Western imperialism—changes which were partly coincident with the development of the realist novel. Anomie and fragmentation are certainly not exclusive of our age. The stratification of societies around the world may be more complex and fluid today than it was during the nineteenth century, but the fact is that social inequality has been steadily increasing on a global scale during the last decade, just as it has happened in previous historical moments. If one of the basic assumptions of this study, following Jameson and Moretti, is that the realist novel, as all narratives in fact, performs essential social, symbolical and psychological functions for its *users*, we may consider if the necessity that the inhabitants of postmodernity have to make sense of their own lives and the

world they live in, is substantially unlike that of the Europeans who saw the unbelievably fast transmutation of rural agricultural countries into urban industrial ones—a process which involved, needless to say, the eradication of whole communities and their way of life.

If our answer to the questions formulated above is (even if qualifiedly) negative, as Zygmunt Bauman's would most probably be, we can infer that realism can still play a part in the understanding of our world and our place in it.<sup>54</sup> This does not imply that such part is necessarily to be performed by the archetype usually referred to as the high realist novel: as we have stated before, realism is best understood not as a finite category but as an open-ended, prototypical set of practices. In turn, as protean a genre as the novel is likely never to stop amalgamating precisely to meet their readers' changing needs. What seems to be required, in any case, of any contemporary project aimed at realism, is the presence of up-to-date cognitive mapping. To be sure, this entails authorial awareness of the fact that our perception of the real is mediated by ideology and discourse (which does not entail that fore fronting this fact should be the main purpose of the work). This is to say, of course, that a degree of theoretical enlightenment on the novelist's part is a prerequisite for such realism. Indeed, against the recurrent argument of the shortcomings of realism to deal with an increasingly incomprehensible and elusive reality—sometimes posed by notable realists such as Philip Roth (1985), it may be argued that it is precisely that elusiveness that calls for the synthetic, illuminating power of a theoretically enlightened realism. There may not be an ultimate, unassailable social truth for us to grasp, but the quality of what we know can certainly use some upgrading. This circumstance, incidentally, makes Franzen's *rejection* of theory—if such thing is possible at all, and not the mere substitution of an implicit, undercover kind of theory for an explicit one—all the more regrettable. It may be added that recent socio-economic and cultural developments have brought about some elements which are likely to be in the benefit of the realist novel. As we argue in our discussion of *The Corrections*, a new, global kind of ideological awareness enabling improved cognitive mapping is being advanced by recent phenomena such as globalization and the still ongoing financial crisis, which, in drawing attention to the discontinuities of capitalism, have involved a sort of revival of totalizing thought (i.e.

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<sup>54</sup> In our analysis of *Strong Motion* we discuss Bauman's claims as to the pressing need for inhabitants of postmodernity for sense-making, orientational tools like the novel.

capable of advancing in the abstraction and systematization of the well-nigh unmanageable magma of social actuality), together with a recuperation of a sense of history that hitherto seemed all but lost.

If we conceive totality as a system made of differences which systematically produces difference, it becomes clear that totality as a whole will always remain out of our reach, but also that it can be *systematically* approached. Any work that aims at the representation of totality in too ambitious a way risks hypertrophy and failure, but it seems obvious that totality can be *implied* successfully by a literary work. It is not then a matter of recuperating nineteenth-century realism. As John Barth rightly states, “there’s no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens” (Barth, 1984: 202). It may even be that, as he claims following Evgeny Zamyatin, we have left behind a Euclidean world to enter Einstein’s universe with no possibility of going back (Barth, 1984: 202), but our necessity to understand and explain our world has not vanished in the process. If Tolstoy’s and Dickens’ insight would fail to explain our world is obviously because their analytical instruments were appropriate for their age, not ours. From this it does not follow that we should renounce to analyse an incomprehensible system of inhuman scale but rather that we should develop better analytical tools.

In any case, it is not this book’s intention to make any claims as to a putative superiority of realism over other artistic and narrative modes in terms of its potential for the advance of progressive politics (just as we do not aim to pass a moralistic judgement on Franzen’s political stance). On the contrary, as we have seen, part of my argumentation in this study assumes an intrinsic conservative component in realism, both in its purer high realist forms as in its frequent hybridization with elements from other novelistic traditions such as melodrama or romance. It is difficult not to feel however that, although the formal and thematic components used by the writer always carry—as Macherey shows—an ideological charge of their own which is never wholly amenable to her authorial intention, the role played by the novelist’s social perspective, ideological insight and in short her unique perceptivity will always be determinant in any narrative mode as regards the quality of her social rendering. This leads us to the parallelism between capitalism and realism, those intimately related cultural forms: both involved liberation from older hierarchies and rigidities, opening the door to a host of new and promising possibilities; and both share the character of constituting, so to speak, a kind of perceptual and conceptual horizon which is extremely difficult to

transcend. We know, after all, that reification and realism, as is already hinted at by their etymological closeness, went historically hand in hand. And, ultimately, what has been discussed above seems to suggest that, in contrast with the fears expressed by Franzen in the *Harper's* essay, there is a place for a realist social novel based on synthesis and totalization in the foreseeable future (albeit not necessarily for a *high* realist novel), as the genre, congenitally inclusive and hybrid, will keep evolving to suit its readers' changing social, psychological and symbolic needs.<sup>55</sup> It is unlikely, however, that we will need terms as ungainly as post-postmodernism to refer to such variations on the realist theme.

These are issues that we will trace in our analysis of Franzen's fiction. For now, we may succinctly summarise their status as an obvious tension between a theory driven-totalizing approach to social description that is particularly evident in his early novels on the one hand; and on the other hand an excessively restricted social perspective that does not match the comprehensive ambition of the attempt, a lack compounded by the impoverished sense of history corresponding to our contemporary ethos. Furthermore, as we can notice in Franzen's work from *Strong Motion* on, his increasing reliance on what we might call less unsettling novelistic forms entails a shift of emphasis from social analysis to symbolical enactments of individual salvation and social reconciliation which he puts at the service of that rhetorical strategy of self-justification that we have called his narrative of conversion.

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<sup>55</sup> This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by a look towards certain generic developments that can be recently observed in cinema—another narrative form with a potential for social explanation which appears since its inception to be inexorably condemned to crossbreed with romance and melodrama. It is the case of a number of so-called *ensemble films* which, by means of the connected stories of different characters, present society as formed by interrelated social groups. Totality is thus *implied* by works such as Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (1991), Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999). Especially interesting is *Babel* (2006), by Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga, which adds an exemplary global perspective. It is also interesting to notice that melodramatic touches are present, to different degrees, in all of them.

## 4. Knowable conspiracies: *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

*First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin*

—Leonard Cohen

### 4.1. Introduction: Striking up a conversation.

Jonathan Franzen's first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*,<sup>56</sup> published in 1988 at age twenty-nine, was a remarkably ambitious debut, with its bold story line, which makes use of multiple, relaying points of view; wide-ranging social and political critique; a concentrated narrative voice that is not afraid of linguistic experiment; and the obvious determination to take the stand in a literary room—the American postmodernist novel—already full of towering figures. In many ways, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, a novel which would probably alienate a considerable part of Franzen's current readership, remains a strange, grim piece of fiction with an undeniable compelling power.

As it has been already discussed, Franzen's career is marked by a stylistic evolution from a clearly postmodernist-influenced fiction to a more traditional, realist-oriented narrative. This transition, however, is a considerably more complex matter than what critical accounts tend to imply, as this study aims to demonstrate. In this sense, we will be examining how *The Twenty-Seventh City*, commonly taken as the most markedly postmodernist of Franzen's novels, presents certain distinctively realist attributes, namely an obvious topographic quality, a calling—even if not fully realized—for the rendering of the interconnection of different social groups, the description of the integration of the fate of small groups such as families into the wider social totality as a central aim, a worldview relentlessly based on contingency, and, not least of all, a reluctance to the staging of radical social change which may be regarded as nothing but realist. This makes for a remarkable, unresolved tension between the two different approaches to the novelistic form that coexist within *The Twenty-Seventh City*. These are characteristics that this novel shares to one extent or other with Franzen's second,

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<sup>56</sup> Hereafter we will be using the abbreviation TC when quoting from the novel.

*Strong Motion*. However, as we will be arguing in this chapter, there is an important circumstance that sets *The Twenty-Seventh City* apart from the rest of Franzen's fiction, namely the absence of the (individual) salvational perspectives that we find in the other novels. *The Twenty-Seventh City* therefore does not contribute in itself to that metanarrative devised by the novelist on his own fiction that we have called the narrative of conversion and which will be the object of discussion in the following chapters. However, of course, with its distinctive radicalness and gloomy, truly depressing conclusion, the novel sets the departing ground for the mentioned narrative, which will be presented as a way out of such dismal dead end.

From another point of view, the novel already shows some of the most significant concerns that will characterize all of Franzen's work: his interest in personal relationships at the domestic level—where according to critics such as Woods (2001a, b), he is at his deepest and best—goes accompanied by a preoccupation with larger socio-political issues. In this sense, however, *The Twenty-Seventh City* also stands out from the rest of Franzen's fiction as the only novel which is concerned with showing the inner workings of the political activity as it unfolds in the quarters where the significant decisions are made. Even more, the possibility for an alternative political vision taking hold of these centres of power is evoked. In contrast, as if in an implicit acknowledgement of impotence, in the subsequent novels political activity adopts the somewhat disguised form of activism (especially environmentalist), and takes place at a hopelessly remote distance from the decision-making circles.<sup>57</sup> In any case, at the heart of these two parallel concerns—the socio-political and the domestic—lies a deep yearning for a lost sense of community, and ultimately a wish for truer, closer personal relationships down to the most intimate circle of family, the realm that Habermas (1991) has called “the intimate sphere”. Thus, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* the conflicts and disorientation of a white upper-class Midwestern family—a recurrent motif in Franzen's novels—are embedded in an extravagant plot which affords Franzen his extensive socio-political critique. Franzen has referred to his use of “large, externalized

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<sup>57</sup> Franzen's subsequent avoidance of the exercise of politics as an overt novelistic subject may reflect what Badiou sees as the current disappearance of politics. The French philosopher regards politics as “all the processes by means of which human collectivity becomes active or proves capable of new possibilities as regards its own destiny” (Badiou, 2010: 5). For Badiou, politics as such has virtually vanished from our age, as it was also absent in other historical periods such as the reign of Louis XIV or the end of the Roman Empire. (2010: 4). In a similar way, Daniel Innerarity has argued that despite all the superficial agitation in the sphere of the media and the public opinion, “la política ha dejado de ser el lugar donde se promueven cambios y ha pasado a ser el lugar donde se administra el estancamiento.” (Innerarity, 2012: n.pag.)

plots” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.) in his first two novels as motivated by the influence of postmodernist novelists. Certainly, Franzen appropriates elements distinctly related to then already well-established writers, such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, with a remarkable easiness that is more suggestive of a certain imitative enthusiasm rather than the anxious sense of belatedness and the Oedipal rivalry described by Bloom (1973). In his interview with Donald Antrim, Franzen refers to his attempt in characteristically domestic terms which are an implicit denial of anxiety: just as he was a late kid with much older parents and was therefore often engaged in interaction with “serious grown-ups”, his first novel amounted to

a conversation with the literary figures of my parents’ generation. The great sixties and seventies Postmoderns. I wanted to feel like I belonged to them, much as I’d spent my childhood trying to be friends with my parents and their friends. A darker way of looking at it is that I was trying to impress them.<sup>58</sup> (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

In this sense, for example, *The Twenty-Seventh City* incorporates recognisably Pynchonesque motifs of conspiracy—and its obverse, paranoia—understood as constitutive features of contemporary life and acknowledges its indebtedness openly:

“What are you, paranoid or something?”

“Yeah. Paranoid.” He leaned back in the seat, reached out the open window, and adjusted the extra mirror. “My life’s gotten kind of weird lately”. He pushed the mirror every which way. “Do you know Thomas Pynchon?”

“No.” Luisa said. “Do you know Stacy Montefusco?” (TS 55)

This form of unembarrassed appropriation-as-a-tribute has become of course a common cultural practice. Indeed, it is arguably part of the “relief” brought about by postmodernism (Jameson, 1991: 317): a lightness that contrasts with the oppressive weight that used to invest the work of the great modernist figures. Be it as it may, Franzen’s identification with typically postmodernist themes was evident:

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<sup>58</sup> Franzen’s reasoning may also be regarded as a cunning way of acknowledging influence in a harmless, favourable way for the author. Perhaps not incidentally, among the general disparagement of critical theory that can be found in Franzen’s non-fiction work, he has referred to Bloom’s theory of poetic influence with special hostility. This is most evident in his essay “On autobiographical Fiction” (included in Franzen 2012). There even is an ironic allusion to Bloom’s ideas in *The Corrections*, realized in the ludicrous statements concerning influence made in a paper by one of Chip Lambert’s students (TC 55).

The result, in any case, was that I adopted a lot of that generation of writers' concerns—the great postwar freak-out, the Strangeloveian inconceivabilities, the sick society in need of radical critique. I was attracted to crazy scenarios. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

And in *The Twenty-Seventh City* the scenario is weird indeed: a cabal from India infiltrates St. Louis police force to gradually take control of the city's politics and economy. On its part, the social critique is certainly wide, ranging from the appropriation of institutions by groups of interest, the baneful effects of real estate speculation or the manipulative power of the media. This critique, however, focuses on a single city which is taken as a representative sample of countless other cities, and is thus by dint of this synthetic operation both real and symbolic. A city, furthermore, which is shown as the site where different forms of community are disintegrated under the dissolving effects of capitalism.

#### **4.2. Mapping “the inner city of fiction.”**

The city and its problems are a constant preoccupation in Franzen's work, present not only in all his novels but also in several of his essays. In this way, for example, in “First City” (1995, included in Franzen 2002), the novelist articulates his concerns with urban issues. He discusses the differences between European and American cities in the light of their respective historical, cultural and economic origins and different development patterns. With the acknowledged addition of some idealized nostalgia, Franzen laments the erosion of the open public space the city affords and the subsequent loss of the civic values it harbours.

The first decades of this century were the heyday of urban life in America. I generally resist wishing I'd live in an earlier era ... but I make an exception for those years when the country's heart was in its cities, the years of Lou Gehrig and Harold Ross, Automats and skyscrapers, trolley cars, fedoras and crowded train stations. (Franzen, 2002: 184)

Similarly, in “Lost in the Mail” (1994, included in Franzen, 2002), the writer carries on a factual journalistic essay on the decay of the Chicago postal service and its subsequent replacement by private courier companies, which is presented as a correlate

of the decadence of American cities, abandoned by the wealthy in favour of suburban or exurban locations. Interestingly, Franzen has occasionally drawn a parallelism between urban decadence and the waning importance of the novel in contemporary American culture. Thus, in “Why Bother?”, the refurbished version of the 1996 *Harper’s* essay, he argues:

The literary America in which I found myself after I published *The Twenty-Seventh City* bore a strange resemblance to the St. Louis I’d grown up in: a once-great city that had been gutted and drained by white flight and superhighways. Ringing the depressed urban core of serious fiction were prosperous new suburbs of mass entertainments. Much of the inner city’s remaining vitality was concentrated in the black, Hispanic, Asian, gay and women’s communities that had taken over the structures vacated by fleeing straight white males. (Franzen, 2002: 62)<sup>59</sup>

The parallelism is appropriate insofar as the development of the novel and the attainment of its classic form in the nineteenth century were so closely associated, as we have seen, to the growth of European cities. For Fredric Jameson, the novel performed a fundamental part in the insertion of individual experience into the larger social realm. In his words, “[i]n the already more distant horizon of the industrial metropolis and the nation-state, the realist novel has often been taken (e.g. by Lukács) as the classical moment of balance, in which the narrative of individual experience can still adequately map larger social boundaries and institutions” (Jameson, 1984: 116). Moreover, if we assume with Jameson the formative role the novel played in what he calls the great “bourgeois cultural revolution” (Jameson, 2002: 138), as realized for example in the constitution of ideological structures such as the *centred subject*, it seems logical to suggest for it, as Julián Jiménez Heffernan does (2007: 28-9), a shaping role in the consolidation of essentially urban concepts such as the civil society, a discursive construction involving “la designación filosófica del horizonte del reconocimiento civil: el lugar (físico y/o metafísico, en cualquier caso *inmanente*) de las transferencias (de derechos, de palabras, de dineros)” (Jiménez Heffernan, 2007: 28). This immanent site, in Franzen’s opinion, tends to get increasingly blurred, as *The Twenty-Seventh City*

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<sup>59</sup> Here Franzen overlooks the fact, which he recounts in other essays, that the St. Louis he grew up in was actually the comfortable white middle-class suburb of Webster Groves, also home to the main characters in *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

shows. It should be noticed, nevertheless, that the concepts of both city and novel which Franzen advocates are historically specific. Then, as Jiménez Heffernan suggests, such generally recognized relationship between the city and the novel may imply a twofold delusion:

Primero, que la ciudad compacta y centrada (la ciudad-estado del XV-XVI) sea la naturaleza y destino del hombre. Segundo, que la novela compacta y centrada (la novela “realista” desde el XVI al XIX) sea la naturaleza y destino del hombre. (Jiménez Heffernan, 2007: 35)

At this point, we should also remember, with Peter Brooks (2005: 132), the novel’s role in the working out of the “semiotic crisis” that the new urban experience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represents. But if the classic novel had the use of making sense of a disconcertingly new and chaotic environment for its new inhabitants, it seems of much less value for the dwellers of a place deserted by its potential—middle class—readers. In the same way, the increasing fragmentation of the “knowable communities” which Raymond Williams identified as essential to the realist novel cannot but limit the novel’s scope, drawing it towards the exploration of the isolated individual’s consciousness characteristic of the high modernist novel and the postmodern experimentalists; or alternatively to the confined, sheltered environment that forms the setting of much contemporary fiction such as the *campus novel*. As Franzen puts it:

I miss the days when more novelists lived and worked in big cities. I mourn the retreat into the self and the decline of the broad-canvas novel for the same reason I mourn the rise of the suburbs: I like maximum diversity and contrast packed into a single exciting experience. (Franzen, 2002: 80)

However, while there is a microcosmic quality to that reflection, the extent to which Franzen has attained—or aimed at—this kind of realist synthesis in his novels of white middle-class dysfunctional families is of course a different question. In any case, *The Twenty-Seventh City* is certainly the novel that dramatizes most clearly Franzen’s concern with the city. Thus, for example, the included map of St. Louis and its vicinity reinforces the actuality of the subject and points at a clear referential intention on the writer’s part. For Rebein, who defends that there was always a realist writer in Franzen, “hidden beneath all the Po-Mo machinery” (Rebein, 2007: 204), *The Twenty-Seventh*

*City* “offers up as earnest a depiction of place and regional mannerisms as anything we may find in Chopin, Joyce, or Faulkner”, evincing Franzen’s “abiding interest in place” (Rebein, 2007: 213), which for the critic already tells him apart from the postmodernist writers he was trying to join at the time. Franzen’s attempt in the novel, Rebein argues, is “not to *create* a fictional world but rather to *document* one that already exists—to demonstrate a mastery or ownership of place” (2007: 214). Certainly, the novel abounds in geographical references and visual accounts of the city and its suburbs, such as:

One fifteen in the afternoon. Jammu stood at the window of a twenty-second floor in the Clarion hotel and directed a yawn at the Peabody Coal and Continental Grain installations across the Mississippi. On the near side of the river, conventioning Jaycees in paper boaters straggled along the footpaths to the Arch. (TS 74)

And there is even a contemplative interlude in chapter eleven where the action is suspended for several pages (TS 253-57), and gives way to a panoramic overview of St. Louis on Christmas Eve. Here, the narrative past tense changes to the present and the reader is drawn to attend to different ongoing scenes in the city as an invisible witness. This kind of topographical referentiality, or, to use Even-Zohar’s term, this kind of *réalème* is of course a classic resource by means of which the realist novel attains what Barthes called *l’effet de réel*. As J. Hillis Miller has put it, “[l]andscape or cityscape gives verisimilitude to novels and poems. Topographical setting connects literary works to a specific historical and geographical time. This establishes a cultural and historical setting within which the action can take place” (Miller, 1995: 6-7). Besides, probably to a greater extent than in the rest of Franzen’s work, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* the city’s topography is integrated in the *texture* of the novel, including its political and emotional import and even the construction of its characters, as the symbolic identification of Martin Probst and the city clearly exemplifies. As Miller explains:

A novel is a figurative mapping ... This [novelistic] space is based on the real landscape, charged now with the subjective meaning of the story that has been enacted within it. The houses, roads, paths and walls stand not so much for the individual characters as for the dynamic fields of relations among them. This is a complex form of metonymy whereby environment may be a figure for what it

environs, in this case the gents who move, act, and interact within the scene.  
(Miller, 1995: 19-20)

In fact, the way in which Franzen manages to invest with symbolism his realistic rendition of St. Louis is truly remarkable, as we will be showing in this chapter. For a contrast, we may remember Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, another outstanding debut novel published as well in 1988. In the latter, the city is also a shaping total environment made tangible by precise topographical descriptions, but there is not an overt symbolic intention comparable to Franzen's.

In any case, the most significant aspect of Franzen's rendition of St. Louis is to be sure its decadence. In the novel, St. Louis is presented as an example of the seemingly unstoppable decay of formerly thriving American cities. The figure in the novel's title refers to the position, in terms of population, of St. Louis among American cities in 1980 (450,000, half the 1930 figure), in sharp contrast to its position as the nation's fourth city after New York, Philadelphia and Brooklyn in 1870.<sup>60</sup>

If, as Jameson has famously claimed, our age "has forgotten how to think historically" (Jameson, 1991: ix), Franzen seems to be consciously striving to attain "historicity", understood as "the perception of the present as history" (Jameson, 1991: 284). This perception, which was mainly the product of late eighteenth century socio-political and philosophical developments in Europe, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, was one of the constitutive features of the realist novel. City, novel and historical consciousness went then hand in hand, attesting to the fact that, as Guy Debord puts it, "[t]he city is *the focal point of history*, because it embodies both a concentration of social power, which is what makes historical enterprises possible, and a consciousness of the past" (Debord, 2009: 118).

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<sup>60</sup> The novel acknowledges the fact that, as newspapers from Chicago (a close fifth city according to the census) claimed at the time, the figures of the St. Louis' 1870 census had probably been manipulated. St. Louis' account stuck, however, attesting to the importance of image for cities, a recurring theme in the novel. As the narrator states, "all cities are ideas, ultimately, they create themselves and the rest of the world apprehends them or ignores them as it chooses" (TS 24). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, St. Louis was then the 58<sup>th</sup>-largest U.S. city with a population of 318,069. The Greater St. Louis combined statistical area's population was 2,878,255. The process of St. Louis' "white flight" to the suburbs, the subsequent "sprawl" and the ruin of the inner city had of course its parallel in many other American cities such as Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland or Detroit, whose decay nevertheless the narrator compares favourably with that of St. Louis (TS 26). 2013 saw the first case of bankruptcy of a major American city, that of Detroit. No federal or state plans for financial aid are in sight. For a truly shocking visual account of Detroit's abandoned sites see the photograph series by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre at their website: <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/index.html>

However, if Franzen's novel certainly shows a consciousness of the past, it also testifies to the tremendous difficulty for our age to perceive the present as part of *future* history, as its collapsing ending shows. Be it as it may, *The Twenty-Seventh City* goes to some length in the second chapter (TS 24-26) to trace the causes of St. Louis' decadence. Following the administrative segregation of the city of St. Louis and the surrounding St. Louis County, a number of historical, economic and legal circumstances going back to the nineteenth century converged to start the process whereby the white-upper and middle-class population and the businesses they ran, gradually left the city to set in the different municipalities that form the St Louis County along the central part of the twentieth century. Therefore the inner city was deprived of its tax base and was increasingly unable to provide services for its inhabitants. The process was not a large-scale deliberate scheme but the result of dynamics inherent to a capitalist economy: "Everyone worried about the city's schools, but it was an exercise in hand wringing" (TS 25). The novel emphasizes though that class and race prejudice were also determinant: the arrival of poor black families from the South hastened the migration of the white population to the suburbs, as white middle-class is characterized by a desire to avoid contact and share resources with the black community. As a member of the ruling elite of St. Louis cynically recognizes in the novel: "A big reason the white middle class moved out to the county is, as we all know, their desire for good schools and, more specifically, their fear of black areas. If the city comes back into the county, there won't be anyplace to run" (TS 290).

There were different initiatives to counter this process, nevertheless. St. Louis was the location of two important architectural attempts at urban regeneration of a marked modernist character. The first one, passingly mentioned in the second chapter (TS 25), was the Pruitt-Igoe project, a gigantic social housing scheme completed in 1956 which soon became notorious for its concentration of abject poverty and crime. The last buildings of the project, designed by Japanese architect Minoru Yamasaki, were demolished in 1976, an event which is sometimes held to mark the end of High Modernism in architecture.<sup>61</sup> The second was more successful, even if it did not achieve

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<sup>61</sup> The Pruitt-Igoe project, one of the most cited examples of failed publicly planned attempts at urban renewal, is also often used to decry the arrogance of a Modernist movement which frequently overlooked the real needs of people. The particular case of this project seems to be nevertheless more complicated, according to Katharine G. Bristol who, in her "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" (1991) characterizes its construction as a forced compromise under severely limiting economic, social and political constraints.

its ultimate goal as catalyst for the reverse of the city's decline by means of its iconic power: it was the Gateway Arch, so prominent in the novel, designed by Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen in 1947 and erected between 1963 and 1965. However, since these and other initiatives did not address the underlying structural economic problems of the city, no efforts at urban renewal seemed to succeed. Even the Arch, built to celebrate the prosperity of commerce and Westward expansion, being deprived of its reference, becomes an enigmatic, ambiguous sign in the novel. By the 1970s, the process was complete: "The seventies became the Era of the Parking Lot, as acres of asphalt replaced half-vacant office buildings downtown" (TS 26). The splendour of St. Louis, like that of Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia and a host of other now declining American (and European) cities was the product of modernity, the historical process which dissolved the structures of feudal society and in the nineteenth century brought about what Ulrich Beck (1992) has analysed as *industrial society*. However, as the German sociologist argues, this socio-economic configuration, which has been predominant in much of the Western world during the greater part of the twentieth century, is in the process of transformation—or dissolution—as the logic of its own immanent premises is carried through. As Beck puts it, "modernization today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being ... modernization within the horizon of the experience of pre-modernity is being displaced by *reflexive* modernization" (Beck, 1992: 10). For Beck then, we are immersed in the beginning of a new modernity "beyond its classical industrial design" (1992: 10). And under this new paradigm the destiny of St Louis seems inescapable: its ruins represent the fate of industrial society, while the vacant space left by depopulation at the heart of the city stands for the void left by the eclipse of the unfinished project of modernity.

#### **4.3. Vanishing city: The wasteland of vacant lots.**

The disappearance of the city's face is a central motif in Franzen's picture of St. Louis, which thus inscribes itself in an old tradition of sombre urban portraits.<sup>62</sup> If in Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) the face of the London is strangely altered by the houses closed and abandoned as a consequence of the disease, in St.

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<sup>62</sup> The mentioned texts by Defoe and Smollett are discussed by Jiménez Heffernan in his essay "Campos de Londres: Tópica del monstruo de Defoe a Amis", included in Jiménez Heffernan 2007.

Louis' "cratered streets" (TS 389), gloomy vacant lots and tracts of empty asphalt quickly disfigure the physiognomy of the districts infected by the "blight", a common, fearful metaphor for urban deterioration. On the other hand, if in Smollet's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771) London becomes an "overgrown monster" (Smollett, 1983: 82) on account of its unrestrained, cankerous growth, St. Louis' monstrosity is a deformity caused by amputation and absence. A scary deformity which, like a leper's, only speeds up the hurried flight of those who can. The sprawl becomes thus also an escape from the monster. The result is a literally *fantôme* city:

The question, if it arouse at all, arouse in silence, in the silence of the empty city's streets, and more insistently, in the silence of the century separating a young St. Louis from a dead one. What becomes of a city no living person can remember, of an age whose passing no one survives to regret? Only St. Louis knew. Its fate was sealed within it. Its special tragedy special nowhere else. (TS 26)

In *The Invisible City* (1972), Italo Calvino imagined the city as a pattern of threads signalling relationships. The image points to the *textual* (i.e. *knitted* in its etymological sense) character of any city, a quality also suggested by Brooks, for whom, as we have seen, the city can be regarded as a system of signs (Brooks, 2005: 132).<sup>63</sup> But as the fabric of St. Louis is undone by multiplying holes there is no longer any sense to be made of it. The disintegration of St. Louis due to the multiplication of empty spaces destroys what in his classic study on urbanism Kevin Lynch called the "legibility" of its cityscape: "the ease with which its parts can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern" (Lynch, 1960: 3). The city then becomes unintelligible beyond the aid of any map, or any novel for that matter. And just as a city needs some kind of linear pattern to come into being, so does the novel, or at least the (nineteenth century-influenced) kind of novel that Franzen seems to favour. This is afforded by a *plot*, a term which, as Brooks has observed (Brooks, 1992: 11), has the primary sense of a bounded piece of ground; and also the senses of a ground plan, as for a building; a sequence of events forming the outline of a narrative; and a plan made in

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<sup>63</sup> In "The Right to the City", Henry Lefebvre uses textual metaphors in a similar way to discuss the problems of the city in terms of intelligibility: "The object, the city, as consummate reality, is falling apart ... As social text, this historical city no longer has a coherent set of prescriptions, of use of time linked to symbols and to a style. This text is moving away. It takes the form of a document, or an exhibition, or a museum. The city historically constructed is no longer lived and is no longer understood practically ... Yet the *urban* remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality" (Lefebvre, 1996: 148).

secret by a group of people: a conspiracy. Brooks remarks that “[c]ommon to the original sense of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order” (1992: 12). In the previous chapter we have discussed the way the development of the urban experience helped shape the novelistic form in the nineteenth century. We have seen how, according to Brooks (2005) and Moretti (2005), the sheer spatial and social density of the city made for “a particularly concentrated form of existence, an exacerbation, and exhilaration, of human forces” which afforded the novelist with “the primary stuff of the novelistic” (Brooks, 2005: 147). It is not hard to see then what the decay of the inner city and its abandonment for low density and homogeneous suburban settings entails for the novel: a most un-novelistic state of *eventlessness*. Thus, if Franzen’s plea for the city is then also an entreaty for the novel, he introduces his plot of conspiring Indians to buttress both—as if seeking to resolve, to use Moretti’s phrase, “the spatial in terms of the sequential” (Moretti, 2005: 112).

Not all the emptiness in Franzen’s St. Louis is the consequence of the blight, however. The inner city is also affected by a massive clearance process engineered by the newly appointed police chief S. Jammu, which is part of a real estate speculative operation involving the gentrification of downtown areas. Clarence Davis, whose own sister will also be expelled from home by gentrifying pressure (TS 456), her rented house sold to a white family, drives down the now deserted poor (black) districts of the downtown at night: “But Clarence is scared, scared in a mental way nothing like the gut fear of murder he once might have felt down here. It’s the scope of the transformation; square *miles* fenced and boarded. Not *one* man visible, not *one* family left” (TS 256).

This dispossession is the last step of a process that has configured a truly *absent* city which no longer belongs to its inhabitants, any trace of community already erased. As Singh, of one of the conspirators puts it:

I like St. Louis ... Buildings sit well here. Almost too well, if you know what I mean. The city is such a physical ramification—the brick, the hill, the open spaces—that the architecture and the landscape completely dominate. I don’t say there aren’t people, but for some reason they seem to get lost in the larger visuals. (TS 241)

The whereabouts of the inhabitants of the cleared areas does not seem to be the concern of the wealthy citizens who form the majority of the novel’s cast, while in turn

everybody appreciates the sharp fall in crime rates achieved by the new police chief. It is only at the end of the novel when we learn that St. Louis' poorest inhabitants have been secretly—and forcibly—driven across the river by the police to the wholly forsaken ghetto of East Saint Louis. The novel thus reflects several phenomena which according to Zygmunt Bauman (2001) accompany the process of “ghettoization”. These include the institutionalization of urban fear and the criminalization of poverty. This in turn leads to a reshaping of public spaces according to the safety concerns of the wealthy. Ghettos then become prison-like places from which their insiders cannot get out: as Loïc Wacquant defines them, they combine spatial confinement with social closure (Bauman 2001: 116). For David Harvey, this process of dispossession and ghettoization is inherent to the general dynamics of capitalism in the city:<sup>64</sup> “A process of displacement and dispossession, in short, also lies at the core of the urban process under capitalism. This is the mirror image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment” (Harvey, 2012: 18). It is to be noted, besides, that, as Bauman points out, “ghetto life does not sediment community”, but rather “dissolves solidarity and mutual trust”, turning into “a laboratory of social disintegration, atomization and anomie” (Bauman, 2001: 122). This kind of anomie is a crucial circumstance that prevents the inhabitants of the ghetto from becoming a cohesive social group that might eventually become what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) term a *subject position* in the general picture of social antagonism. Rather, these people are closer to what classical Marxism viewed as lumpenproletariat. Slavoj Žižek has reflected on the factors that tell the inhabitants of the ghetto apart from what is usually known as working class. With this aim he draws on Giorgio Agamben's analysis of *homo sacer* (1998), a legal figure

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<sup>64</sup> In his argumentation, Harvey follows Engels who, already in 1872, compellingly describes the process of dispossession and displacement of working-class urban dwellers. The relevance of Engels' argumentation to the novel's contemporary account of very much the same process makes the passage, taken from *The Housing Question*, worthy of quotation at length: “In reality, the bourgeoisie has only one method of solving the housing problem after its fashion—that is to say, of solving it in such a way that the solution perpetually renews the question anew. This method is called “Hausmann” ... [by which] I mean the practice that has now become general of making breaches in the working class quarters of our big towns, and particularly in areas which are centrally situated, quite apart from whether this is done from consideration of public health or for beautifying the town, or owing to the demand for big centrally situated business premises, or, owing to traffic requirements, such as the laying down of railways, streets (which sometimes seem to have the aim of making barricade fighting more difficult) ... No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is always the same; the scandalous alleys disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-praise by the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success, but they appear immediately somewhere else ... The breeding places of disease, the infamous holes and cellars in which the capitalist mode of production confines our workers night after night, are not abolished; they are merely *shifted elsewhere!* The same economic necessity that produced them in the same place produces them in the next place” (Harvey, 2012: 16-17).

of Ancient Rome whereby a man could be dispossessed of his rights as a citizen and thus be legally banned from social existence:

Of course, there is a crucial difference between the slum-dwellers and the classical Marxist working class: while the latter is defined in the precise terms of economic “exploitation” (the appropriation of surplus-value generated by the situation of having to sell one’s own labor power as a commodity in the market), the defining feature of the slum inhabitants is socio-political, it concerns their (non-)integration into the legal space of citizenship with (most of) its incumbent rights—to put it in somewhat simplified terms, much more than a refugee, a slum-dweller is a *homo sacer*, the systematically generated “living dead” of global capitalism ... In contrast to the Foucauldian micro-practises of discipline, with regard to slum-dwellers, state power renounces its right to exert full control and discipline, finding it more appropriate to vegetate in the twilight zone. (Žižek, 2008: 425)

From another point of view, St. Louis’ ghetto, whose destitution and rampant crime—urban crime is a figure for class struggle, according to Jameson (1991: 273)—embodies the necessary underside of capitalism, also becomes a sort of Lacanian Real for the city, the terrifying site of what cannot even be thought, if its respectable, well-to-do citizens are to keep placidly pursuing their own affairs. It is precisely the ruthless chaos of the ghetto that will bring about Barbara Probst’s absurd death, in what Žižek might explain as “an irruption of total contingency” characteristic of the Real (Žižek, 1989: 191). With the shock of encounter enhanced by unexpectedness, Franzen depicts East St. Louis as a murky hell where one can only dimly discern the menacing figures that mill around, all the more horrible because of a featurelessness that prevents orientation: “She was lost in the place of her nightmares, of the nightmares of every citizen of Webster Groves”( TS 497). If any city, as we have seen, may be regarded as a text, then the speculative “renewal” process taking place in St. Louis’ inner city can be taken as its re-textualization or, in other words, a re-symbolization. It is not surprising therefore that East St. Louis acquires some of the qualities Žižek predicates of the Real: “the product, remainder, leftover, scraps of this process of symbolization, the remnants, the excess which escapes symbolization and is as such produced by the symbolization itself.” (1989: 191) The ghetto is then both the result of the dynamics of capitalist development prevailing in the city, and an intractable entity that resists any attempts at

rational management. Against this dark urban vortex, the novel contrasts the peacefully dull suburban security of Webster Groves, home to the Probsts and the very place where Franzen grew up:

Although the streets of Webster Groves connect with those of its neighbours, and aside from Derek Creek in the north the town has no natural boundaries, its residents experience it as an enclosure, an area where Christmas can occur in safety. It's a state of mind ... There are no open fields, no high-rises or trailer parks or even shopping malls, no zones of negative potential into which spirit can drain ... Born lucky, residents guess. This is a home that feels like home. (TS 264)

This psychological as well as topographical rendition of Webster Groves as a protective, homely environment recalls Gaston Bachelard's exploration of the literary reflections of the typical three-story bourgeois house which has traditionally protected and nurtured the childhood of its infant dwellers (Bachelard, 1994). In the following chapters—especially in the one dedicated to *The Corrections*—we shall have the opportunity to use Bachelard's theoretical framework to analyse Franzen's emotionally charged allusions to suburban family houses. But moments of relative (and guilty?) fondness such as this notwithstanding, the overall tone of Franzen's depiction of both city and suburbs is one of spiritual dryness and meaningless repetitions in the absence of real events. Appropriately then, in his rendering of a disjointed, fallen city, Franzen often invokes—in another act of appropriation as tribute—the famous poem by St. Louis' native T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922). Franzen especially resorts to the elements Eliot took from Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), with its theme of death and regeneration. In his monograph, Burn (2008) traces the numerous allusions to the poem in the novel. These range from mere textual playfulness to more substantial, if also ironic, parallelisms.<sup>65</sup> This way the city, whose “air smells like tar” (TS 254), becomes a parched wasteland: “a city gone dead”, a “dry river” (TS 201, 203). In short, “[t]he land needed rain” (TS 160). Martin Probst, the self-made businessman whose company built the Arch, and a model of *probity* as his

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<sup>65</sup> For example, although Eliot or his poem are never mentioned in the novel, S. Jammu's mother is called Shanti, which evokes the Sanskrit mantra of the poem's ending; and Jammu's second in command, Balwan Singh, exhorts the chief to action saying “[t]his is the time for objective correlatives” (TS 392) in obvious allusion to Eliot's critical theory.

name suggests, becomes a Fisher King of sorts whose inner turmoil mirrors the agitation in the city's body politic: "What if he was the city? ... He was sick and the city was sick on the inside too" (TS 216-217). However, although his sexual intercourse with Jammu brings the long-awaited rain to the city (TS 453) in April ("the cruelest month" according to the poem and also the time of Barbara Probst's death in the novel), in the end he is unable to cure its ills.

#### **4.4. City of boredom: highways, malls and the hunger for the Event.**

If the novel's rendering of St Louis is ironically consistent with *The Waste Land*, it is also attuned to Debord's remarks on urban life in the contemporary "society of the spectacle". Debord's observations seem particularly relevant to a novel whose characters spend significant time driving in solitude down the highways that have emptied a formerly lively public urban space, only to arrive home to consume the images that reinforce their alienation:

[T]he general trend toward isolation, which is the underlying essence of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. This reintegration into the system means bringing isolated individuals together as isolated individuals. Factories, cultural centers, tourist resorts and housing developments are specifically designed to foster this type of pseudocommunity. The same collective isolation prevails even within the family cell, where the omnipresent receivers of spectacular messages fill the isolation with the ruling images—images that derive their full power precisely from that isolation. (Debord, 2009: 116)

There is certainly a feeling of drabness to images such as: "Stopped at the Sappington Road intersection, by a Crestwood Plaza just lately closed for the night and tomorrow, drivers in neckties smile at other drivers in neckties, or do not, depending" (TS 264). Similarly, the expression of Barbara Probst's weekly routine as an enumeration enhances the sense of vapidness:

In an average week she made five breakfasts, packed five lunches and cooked six dinners. She put a hundred miles on the car. She stared out windows for

forty-five minutes. She ate lunch at restaurants three times ... She spent six hours at retail stores, one hour in the shower. She slept fifty-one hours. She watched nine hours of television. (TS 89-90)

And Franzen leaves no doubt about the tedium that dominates the life of Luisa, the Probsts' teenage daughter: "She [Luisa] had been bored in August, bored in September, and bored in October now, too" (TS 49). Even more, "[d]epression is the challenge of the eighties", proclaims a pop psychologist interviewed on St. Louis radio station KSLX (TS 88). Actually, *ennui* seems to be the fate of the suburbs, according to Debord. For the French thinker, the destruction of urban environment and its replacement by a formless spread of semi-urban tissue "governed by the imperatives of consumption" (Debord, 2009: 116) entails the creation of an artificial, ahistorical "neopeasantry" which is totally alien to the traditional relations between country and city, and is characterized by a "historically manufactured apathy". For Debord, these pseudocities' motto could be: "Nothing has ever happened here and nothing ever will." The forces of *historical absence* have been able to create their own landscape because historical liberation, which must take place in the cities, has not yet occurred" (2009: 118).

Theodor Adorno has been concerned with boredom as a distinctive sign of bourgeois society. For him, "unfreedom is gradually annexing 'free time' and the majority of unfree people are as unaware of this process as they are of the unfreedom itself" (Adorno, 2001: 188). This is so because the pervading reification that is characteristic of the world of labour under capitalism has colonized the realm of "free time", which has become just a continuation of other profit-oriented forms of social life (2001: 189). This circumstance has political implications, as Adorno relates boredom and apathy. Ultimately, what this kind of generalized dullness reveals is an induced and generalized impoverishment of the imagination which logically tends to prevent any socially transformative actions, as these are rendered not only unfeasible but even unthinkable. As we will see, Adorno's remarks seem particularly pertinent to *The Twenty-Seventh City*. As the theorist argues:

Boredom is the reflection of objective dullness. As such it is in a similar position to political apathy. The most compelling reason for apathy is the by no means unjustified feeling of the masses that political participation within the sphere

society grants them ... can alter their actual existence only minimally. Failing to discern the relevance of politics to their own interests, they retreat from all political activity. The well-founded or indeed neurotic feeling of powerlessness is intimately bound up with boredom: boredom is objective desperation. It is also, however, symptomatic of the deformations perpetrated upon man by the social totality, the most important of which is surely the defamation and atrophy of the imagination (Phantasie). (Adorno, 2001: 192)

From another point of view, it may be argued that the different representations of life under capitalism in Western culture fall into two general types. The first one focuses in its inherent constant social and psychological dislocation, and derives from the classic view of capitalism offered by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, which can be summarized in the famous phrase “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx and Engels, 2010:25). The other view is common in descriptions of bourgeois life: capitalism as tedium, as soul-destroying stagnation. There can be little doubt as to which type Franzen’s first novel belongs. Indeed, the dreariness that pervades both city and suburbs, which is most clearly embodied in the characters of Barbara and Luisa Probst, has become so unbearable that it would seem that anything happening, even a nightmare, would come as a welcome relief. There is in the novel a perceptible “hunger for the sheer event” (Jameson, 1991: 309) which reminds us of the mood identified by Jameson in Kafka’s portrait of life under the bureaucracy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>66</sup> A tacit longing for something to happen that goes beyond its characters and setting to stand for a deeper yearning in the culture—a vague, not well understood but generalized discontent that certainly carries a Utopian potential.<sup>67</sup> In the same way, there is also a parallelism between the novel’s determined march into an increasingly darker territory, and what Jameson discerns in Kafka’s embrace of the “pleasures of the nightmare”: an “appropriation of the negative by a positive, indeed Utopian force that wraps itself in its wolf’s clothing” (1991: 309). This Utopian longing for an event to come may be interpreted from the point of view of Badiou’s philosophy. Thus, for the French thinker an Event is “something that brings to light a possibility that was

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<sup>66</sup> This correspondence is consistent with the parallel between the protagonist of Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), Joseph K., and Martin Probst who, suddenly and for no visible reason, is the victim of a conspiracy that seeks to ruin his life; an affinity acknowledged by Franzen in his interview with Burn (Burn, 2010: 53).

<sup>67</sup> As Žižek has remarked, “[I]n the developed West, frantic social activity conceals the basic sameness of global capitalism, the absence of an Event” (Žižek, 2002: 7).

invisible or even unthinkable ... It indicates to us that a possibility exists that has been ignored” (Badiou and Tarby, 2013: 9). In this sense, the possibility of an organized political group taking control of the power structures of St. Louis and its county, determined to radically modify them with the final aim of the common good would be such an Event, and it is precisely this possibility that is evoked by Franzen and left hovering for a considerable part of the novel. Of course, as we read on we learn that in fact such possibility never existed, which constitutes a conspicuous denial of the very Event that the novel had suggested, and a gesture whose ideological implications we discuss below.

Meanwhile, in the tedious wait for something to happen, money—its circulation—makes the novel’s world go round. In this consumption-g geared, automobile-based suburban environment, the substitute for the downtown is the mall. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, an ailing, anxious Martin Probst visits Plaza Frontenac mall and is gradually soothed by his purchases: “Buying, he was calming down” (TS 218).<sup>68</sup> This scene has a close precedent in DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984), where professor Jack Gladney turns to furious shopping after a dispiriting encounter at the mall with a colleague whose remarks undermine his self-esteem (DeLillo, 1984 83-4). As Bauman puts it, compulsive shopping is “the daytime ritual to exorcize the gruesome apparitions of uncertainty and insecurity which keep haunting the nights” (Bauman, 2000: 81). Furthermore, in both novels the fact of being recognized as the subject of an act of consumption is presented as the ultimate buttress for an individual’s identity. It is capitalism itself which grants Jack Gladney and Martin Probst such identity. Thus, in *White Noise*:

I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request ... Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval ... I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not of money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. (DeLillo, 1984: 46)

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<sup>68</sup> In “First City” there is a similar account of the soothing effect of consumption. In this article Franzen characterizes the mall as an opium den of sorts: “For my part, I’m willing to admit to an almost physical craving for the comforts of the suburban mall. Natural opiates flood my neural receptors when I step from the parking lot into the airlock. Inside, the lightning is subdued, and every voice sounds far away ... I have cash in my wallet, my skin is white, and I feel utterly, utterly welcome. Is this a community? Is the reality artificial, or am I part of a genuine promenade? I don’t know ... I’m too busy enjoying the rush of purchase to pay much attention” (Franzen, 2002:190).

In a similar way, *The Twenty-Seventh City* shows us Probst's signature, a token of his identity (in an insertion of actual handwriting amidst the novel's printed text), as he signs his American Express purchase (TS 218). As Chip Lambert discerns in *The Corrections*, the only subject certified as valid by the system is the subject of consumption. The act of purchase (or that of electronically checking one's account as Gladney does for that matter) becomes then a ritual of ideological recognition of the kind described by Althusser (2008: 46), whereby we are granted our status as (*always already*) subjects. In this way, capitalism takes the place of the "Unique and Absolute Subject" which *interpellates* individuals, thus constituting them as subjects. This Subject (with capital S) secures mutual recognition by means of a double mirror connexion in which the subjects (with small s) *subject* themselves to the Subject where in turn they contemplate their own image (Althusser, 2008: 54). It is to be noted that Althusser illustrates the working of ideology with the case of Christian doctrine, where God takes the place of the absolute Subject. In any case, in obvious reference to post-structuralist views of the subject, Franzen goes one step further to suggest the precarious nature of such an identity, which for Probst seems to be destabilized, right as he stares at his signature, by the effects of a bad cold and increasing paranoia. It is also significant that, by means of the momentary presence of the excluded from society, both writers insert in the mentioned scenes a glimpse of the necessary obverse of the apparently smooth functioning of the system. In this way, at the bank, Jack Gladney contemplates how "A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with" (DeLillo, 1984: 46). Similarly, Martin Probst shares a bench at the mall for a while with a disturbing old woman who seems to be mentally ill (TS 217). Two examples of what Althusser characterizes as those "'bad subjects' who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus" (Althusser, 2008: 55).

#### **4.5. Visions of (second) nature: songbirds and concrete.**

An inevitable side effect of consumption, and a lasting concern for Franzen, as shown not only in his novels but also in essays such as "Scavenging" (1996, included in Franzen 2002), is rubbish. Paula Martín Salván (2009) has studied the prominent place

occupied by rubbish in DeLillo's narrative, as one of the main tropes used by the novelist to explore our contemporary condition, much as a detective finds out about a family's habits by looking at their trash can. In Franzen's novels, garbage has a conspicuous presence mainly in two ways: as the industrial by-product of an economic activity which degrades the environment and endangers life (e.g. chemical waste in Boston in *Strong Motion*, radioactive cinderblocks in Lithuania in *The Corrections*); and, at a more domestic level, as the suffocating accumulation of useless junk that becomes a symbol of the enslavement entailed by consumption. Significantly, both Martin Probst and Alfred Lambert in *The Corrections* are relentless accumulators of trash, much to their wives' vexation: "She [Barbara Probst] envisioned a life untyrannized by objects, a life in which she and Martin would be free to leave at any time and so by staying prove the choice was freely made" (TS 280).

Consumerism, suburban development and environmental damage are closely related in Franzen's novels. It is noticeable how the emptying of the inner city contrasts with the seemingly endless expansion of its suburbs, an ever farther-reaching pouring of concrete over former woodland that inevitably recalls the "eclipse of nature" that, in Jameson's words (1991: 35), attends the expansion of capitalism. Debord defined urbanism as "capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment" (Debord, 2009: 115), a statement that seems to be confirmed in Franzen's novels. Thus, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and also *Strong Motion*, are novels where the characters may notice from time to time a metallic taste in the tongue; novels impregnated by "the smell of infrastructure" (Franzen, 1992: 191) which is a distinctive mark of the kind of environment that has become our actual nature. In this sense, the defining trait that characterizes contemporary human environments, as Beck (2000) has argued, is their potential toxicity, the disturbing and ever-present possibility of being poisoned by the by-products of industrial processes.<sup>69</sup> From a different point of view, artificial milieus, like technology itself, according to Jameson, also stand for "that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery" (1991: 35). As Burn has noted (Burn 2008: 65), even Mohnwirbel, the Probsts' gardener, seems to spend most of his time raking concrete, instead of tending to nature (TS 87). To be sure, this bleak vision is consistent with *The Waste Land's* theme. However,

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<sup>69</sup> The issue of industrially-produced hazards becomes central in *Strong Motion* and is thus discussed in the corresponding chapter from the point of view of Beck's formulation of *risk society*.

contrary to the Grail legend, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* no regeneration of nature can be discerned, and the “Era of the Parking Lot” seems to be here for good. It is possible, nevertheless, to perceive a non-explicit Utopian element inscribed in the novel in the prospective, inevitable even if distant in time, regain by nature of the abandoned concrete foundations of the Westhaven development, just as large areas of cities such as Detroit or St. Louis itself have been left to revert to nature as “urban prairie” over the last decades (as an example, an estimate 36 to 40 square miles of Detroit, a third of the city’s surface, were vacant land as of 2012). The possibility of nature taking over what was once its own is already suggested by the birds that colonize the empty downtown:

No part of the city was deader than downtown. Here in the heart of St. Louis, in the lee of the whining all-night traffic on four expressways, was a wealth of parking spaces. Here sparrows bickered and pigeons ate. Here City Hall ... rose in two-dimensional splendour from a flat, vacant lot. The air on Market Street, the central thoroughfare, was wholesome. On either side of it you could hear the birds both singly and in chorus—it was like a meadow. It was like a backyard. (TS 7-8)

In fact, the novel does include an actual instance of land regained by nature in the former cornfields where Buzz Wismer built his atomic bomb refuge, a vast enclosure left untouched for many years over which nature holds sway again:

The land was beautiful. Secondary growth, the scrub oak and cottonwood, sycamore and sassafras, hawthorn and sumac had crept from the safety of the ravines and vaulted, annually, ever farther into the old cornfields, converging and rising. (TS 155)<sup>70</sup>

Nature and its degradation will become major concerns in Franzen’s subsequent novels, especially in *Strong Motion* and *Freedom*, gradually replacing the more specifically socio-political preoccupations of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. However, the dirge for a ravaged nature is already present here. There are references to the former inhabitants of the territory, the disappeared Cahokia people (TS 154), whose way of life in presumed harmony with nature contrasts with the current advance of asphalt. In

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<sup>70</sup> A vast enclosure of land left solely to nature, untouched by human hands, is the objective of Walter Berglund’s environmental project in *Freedom*.

Probst's dream, a fleeting bird overflies the expanse of concrete: "A skin of rainwater covered the concrete, mirroring the blue sky, but the sky wasn't blue; it was the colour of concrete. A purple bird flew across it, heckling and jeckling in its spiny tongue" (TS 143).

#### **4.6. Suburban sprawl and the quest for orientation.**

The replacement of urban tissue by an amorphous suburban spread, no less monstrous in its own way than Smollet's city, has also entailed a high degree of homogenization, putting an end to the former autonomy of the provincial town. In Jameson's words, "What was once a separate point in the map has become an imperceptible thickening in a continuum of identical products and standardized spaces from coast to coast" (Jameson, 1991: 281). This is a territory devoid of what Lynch termed "imageability": the ability to evoke a strong mental image in an observer (Lynch, 1960: 9). This uniformity partly explains the constant need for cities to market themselves, emphasizing their difference from competitor cities by means of recognizable, iconic structures frequently assigned to celebrity architects, or generating (usually ephemeral) enthusiasm and media hype by means of contrived public celebrations—or pseudo-events—such as the St. Louis Night promoted by Jammu in the novel. Real image is thus replaced by a spectacle of commodified images.<sup>71</sup> Even the very appointment of the young female police chief of Indian background is presented as a fresh form of attracting valuable attention to the city: "Jammu became the star of a hitherto glamourless city" (TS 326). The bemoaning of reductive cultural homogenization has a longer tradition than what is usually acknowledged, as the case of Henry James exemplifies, but it has certainly become a distinctive contemporary complaint. In the *Boundary 2* interview, Franzen refers to this contemporary standardization: "Things are neither Midwestern nor American anymore. It's all sort of mush. Things are neither urban nor rural, it's all exurban mush" (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 45). Hence the playful allusion to *Anna Karenina*: when Jammu's plan is apparently succeeding and the city seems on the path of prosperity again, "St Louis was just another success story, happy in the one-dimensional way that all thriving cities

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<sup>71</sup> In Lefebvre's words, the city becomes "an object of cultural consumption for tourists, for an estheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque" (Lefebvre, 1996: 148).

are”.<sup>72</sup> For the novel, a genre which, as Henry James observed, feeds on “manners, customs, usages, habits, forms”,<sup>73</sup> cultural homogenization certainly means an impoverished soil. In the *Harper’s* essay, Franzen famously laments this loss of diversity, which together with the widespread substitution of mere consumer complains for true dramatic conflict he takes as signs of doom for the novel. It is remarkable nevertheless how Franzen manages to portrait that kind of conflict as arising out of sheer drabness and boredom, as exemplified by Barbara and Luisa Probst.

If cultural uniformity involves a loss of vitality for the novel, for the inhabitants of the city, on the other hand, the aftermath of the formlessness and lack of distinct and significant features of contemporary urban areas—environments which can no longer be made sense of—is of course a heightening of their alienation. Jameson, following Lynch, argues the necessity of regaining a sense of place in the city:

Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves ... Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves a practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the movements of mobile, alternative trajectories. (Jameson, 1991: 51)

As Jameson explains, Lynch’s notion of a mental representation of the city may be taken as a spatial analogue of Althusser’s famous redefinition of ideology as the imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her real conditions of existence. As is known, Jameson has elaborated on Lynch’s concept, extrapolating it to “that mental plan of the social and global reality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 282): an aid to orientation in a multi-dimensional and constantly changing totality, which is the product of a set of aesthetic, theoretical and political practices, known as cognitive mapping. Franzen seems intent on such a task in the novel. Not just because he provides us with an actual map of the city and its surroundings—which the reader is bound to often resort to along the

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<sup>72</sup> See the famous beginning of Tolstoy’s novel: “All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy, 1999: 1).

<sup>73</sup> In Ruland, Richard and Bradbury, Malcolm. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. Penguin: New York, 1991. p. 213.

novel—but also because he does try to map St. Louis’ power relations. Relations which he depicts as an obscure, unstable network of clientelism linking local businessmen and city officials, with the latter generally serving the interest of the former, to the extent that even respected leaders of the black community such as alderman Struthers are revealed as mere collectors of votes to feed the power schemes of the elite.

#### **4.7. Conspiracy or the end of the public sphere.**

The notion, present throughout the novel, of power being in the hands of a clique—a concept characterized by distinctive conspiratorial overtones—is vividly dramatized, for example, in the meeting where the members of Municipal Growth discuss the financial and political consequences of a possible merger of the city and the county (TS 283-97). Franzen shows clearly how such association of local notables (“a benevolent organization ... [that] was a model of efficacy and an object of almost universal reverence” [TS 20]), together with its new competitor, Urban Hope, both supposedly devoted to promote the city’s common good, are nothing but business lobbies intent on pursuing their own interest, which is more often than not the opposite of the city’s. Franzen also takes advantage of the somewhat bizarre character of actually existing St. Louis’ institutions, namely the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan,<sup>74</sup> to highlight the occultist configuration of power in the city: a shadowy, coterie-like circle whose power depends on the handling of privileged information. This kind of information is of course the constituent stuff of a conspiracy, and thus the concern with information is constant throughout the novel: it is gathered by espionage, it is deciphered and interpreted by analysts, it is broadcast, conveniently manipulated, by the media, or ultimately, is kept secret. And when secrecy is the means of access to power, the logical outcome is paranoia. As Paula Martín remarks (Martín Salván, 2009: 31), conspiracy and paranoia are not synonym terms, but complementary. Paranoia then becomes the natural state of those excluded from the circle of information:

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<sup>74</sup> The Veiled Prophet Ball is annual celebration established in St. Louis in 1878 by the local elite in which a masked prominent citizen, elected by the secret society of the Veiled Prophet, presides over in such capacity, dressed in a sheikh-like garb. The ceremony has long been criticized on account of its secrecy and as a classist expression of social exclusion.

Probst trusted no one. He had no knowledge of anyone's motives. How could he be central when he was so abysmally ill-informed? Was he uninformed *because* he was central? If so, then the conspiracy was working both ways, excluding him from the news and the news from him. (TS 216)

Then in the novel St Louis is obviously a real city, presented with all the trappings of realistic referentiality, but it also becomes an ideal: the correlate of that realm of rational public intervention aimed at influencing executive decisions in matters of public consequence which was defined by Habermas (1991) in his classic study as *the public sphere*:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public ... [a sphere] regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. (Habermas, 1991)

For Habermas, this ambit of unmistakably bourgeois origin coalesced in the eighteenth century—approximately at the same time as the novel, another invention closely associated to the urban bourgeoisie. In fact, Habermas suggests that the appearance at that time of a relatively numerous reading public was a necessary condition for the development of what is now known as public opinion and the public sphere. As *The Twenty-Seventh City* shows, for Franzen this public realm has fallen prey to small, closed and unaccountable groups of interest which secretly manage public affairs for their own private benefit, while they manipulate public opinion and conceal information in order to obtain the public's passivity or support. If we follow Habermas' analysis of the disintegration of the public sphere in contemporary mass culture, we may observe that the public sphere is the concept where Franzen's concerns with politics, social fragmentation, the benumbing effect of consumerism and mass media, and, not least of all, with the growing cultural irrelevance of the novel as famously expressed in the *Harper's* essay, all converge. The German philosopher attributes the undergoing dissolution of the public sphere to its commercialization, which brings about a mutual infiltration of the public and private spheres that distorts both, together with a widespread decrease in people's critical capacities which is the result of the loss of contact—also due to its dilution through commercialization—with the realm of

literary experience which helped produce critical conscience in the first place. The decline of the public sphere and the decrease in numbers of the reading public are then two sides of the same process. In this sense, the closeness of Habermas' and Franzen's stances is remarkable<sup>75</sup> and makes the long quotation pertinent:

The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. By the same token the integrity of the private sphere which they present to their consumers is also an illusion. In the course of the eighteenth century, the bourgeois reading public was able to cultivate in the intimate exchange of letters (as well as in the reading of the literature of psychological novels and novellas engendered by it) a subjectivity capable of relating to literature and oriented towards the public sphere ... The experience of privacy made possible literary experimentation with the psychology of humanity common to all, with the abstract individuality of the natural person. Inasmuch as the mass media today strip away the literary husks from that kind of bourgeois self-interpretation and utilize them as marketable forms for the public services provided in a culture of consumers, the original meaning is reversed. On the one hand, the socialized patterns of eighteenth-century that are used to serve up twentieth-century affairs for human interest and the biographical note transfer the illusion of an untouched private sphere and intact private autonomy to conditions which have long since removed the basis for both. On the other hand, they are also imposed on political matters of fact to such an extent that the public sphere itself becomes privatized in the consciousness of the consuming public; indeed, the public sphere becomes the sphere for the publicizing of private biographies, so that the accidental fate of the so-called man in the street or that of systematically managed stars attain publicity, while publicly relevant developments and decisions are garbed in private dress and through personalization distorted to the point of unrecognizability. The sentimentality towards persons and cynicism towards institutions which with social psychological inevitably result naturally curtail the subjective capacity for rational criticism even where it might objectively still be possible. (Habermas, 1991: 171-2)

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<sup>75</sup> In his 1998 essay "Imperial Bedroom," cued by president Clinton's Lewinski scandal, and by the way in which the affair became an all-important political issue in the United States, Franzen argues for the necessity of keeping the public and private spheres separated (Franzen 2002).

In this way, the novel shows how the public debate concerning the administrative merging of the city and its county becomes a personalized choice between the charismatic images of chief Jammu and Martin Probst. We could argue then, using Debord's concept, that the public sphere has been replaced by an empty spectacle which conceals the fact that all the important decisions concerning public matters are taken outside the heed of the public, which is occasionally summoned to provide assent—in the novel's case, by means of a referendum—after pertinent informative and ideological manipulation. The real factors that are involved in the decision, such as the current transfer of capital and resources from the city to the county, or the intended speculative real state operation in inner St. Louis never become apparent. As Habermas argues:

The process of politically relevant exercise and equilibration of power now takes place directly between the private bureaucracies, special-interest associations, parties and public administration. The public as such is included only sporadically in this circuit of power, and even then is only brought in to contribute its acclamation. (Habermas, 1991: 176)

And when the exercise of power takes place outside the public sphere, because the latter has become blurred and is in the process of disappearing, power itself turns into something arcane. In characteristically postmodernist fashion, Franzen's mapping of power gets fuzzy in the curious allegory of power he advances, coached in esoterically scientific language: a curious, Middle Ages-inspired, hierarchical division formed by three spheres in which power gets increasingly rarefied and enigmatic, going from the lower realm of basic regulations, such as traffic laws, and the second sphere ("mezzanine") of common politics and public opinion to the highest, celestial sphere where power is an elusive, incomprehensible entity akin to quantum particles:

Call it power, call it plasma, call it cryogenic circuitry. Agencies, in any event, no longer obeyed constitutional dictates or the inertial tuggings of the policy dynamics, but flowed without resistance, the energy of reason but a corollary of the deeper quantum mechanical numen and free to run backwards in time. (TS 328)

There is a certain inconsistency between this account of power as an elusive force which is characteristic of the Systems novel, and Franzen's previous,

demystifying depiction of it in terms of ruthless pursuit of interest by an oligarchy which has taken control of public institutions for its own profit; an inconsistency which can be seen as part of the tension between the different novelistic paradigms that are represented in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Of course, the choice of one or other concept of power would be crucial for the political import of the novel, but in this respect Franzen seems undecided. Different conceptualizations of the nature of power determine different requirements for viable agency and resistance. As Jameson has argued, certain apparently unassailable theoretical conceptions of power, such as Foucault's pervading, inescapable grid, actually work to fence off any attempt to come to grips with such power (Jameson, 1991: 5-6). In a similar way, although for opposite reasons, Franzen's vision of an intangible, indescribable power, which is seemingly subject to a sort of Heisenberg principle and defies the known laws of causality, also renders any kind of political agency very unlikely. Franzen's latter depiction of power could be described in Derridean<sup>76</sup> terms as "disseminated", and may be understood as a typically postmodernist extrapolation of the *undecidability* of the sign in post-structuralist linguistics—or of the intangibility of capital in modern financial products for that matter—but it could also be regarded as faulty cognitive mapping: an allegorical representation of an otherwise ungraspable reality, much in the same way as Medieval theology made use of allegory to represent a properly non-representable divinity. It would be a similar case to the popular postmodern motif of conspiracy, which forms the skeleton—the plot—that sustains the novel.

Conspiracy has been defined by Jameson as a substitute for an adequate mapping of an all too complex totality; a soothing imaginary tracing of the mysteries of an often incomprehensible reality to a single source of power, which explains its

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<sup>76</sup> The concept of undecidability is present in Derrida's philosophical endeavour from the beginning. In his seminal *De la Grammatologie* (1967, English translation 1976), he shows it as a phenomenon inherent to the process of writing whereby the binary oppositions and repressed meaning present in the author's intention are violated and uncovered, respectively. The political extrapolation of this influential concept has often involved different degrees of misreading. In his later work, more explicitly concerned with politics, Derrida incorporates the notion of undecidability into his political theory as a necessary stage previous to the decision, indeed a precondition to it, since there is no decision without the possibility to decide in different ways. Thus, decision is bound to be a perilous and contradictory experience, but what should not be inferred from Derrida's concept of undecidability is a situation of total indeterminacy that actually impedes decision: "Undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities ... These possibilities are highly determined in strictly defined situations ... I say 'undecidability' rather than 'indeterminacy' because I am interested in relations of force ... in everything which allows, precisely, determinations in different situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and speech" (Derrida, 1988: 148).

success in contemporary popular culture. The *Twenty-Seventh City* acknowledges this *pop* character of conspiracy theories with an often parodic enacting of the notion. The novel satirizes typically American fears of infiltration dating back to the post-war period, evinced by McCarthyism and thinly disguised in countless B-series science-fiction films of the era. Thus, for example, there is a deliberate inconsistency in the way the conspiratorial head, S. Jammu, is sometimes characterized as an uncannily omniscient female Fu Manchu; sometimes as a latter-day *femme fatale* intent on seducing the naïve Martin Probst; and some others as the typical overworked police officer with a messed-up private life of a Hollywood action thriller. Similarly, some of her methods reproduce those which are popularly attributed to certain governmental agencies, and are generally regarded as proper to what, especially since the inception of 1960s counter-culture, has been derogatorily called “the system”:

Duane took it from her. “Looks like a bug.”

“What?”

“A bug, don’t you think? The FBI or somebody. This was always a student place. Maybe there used to be some radicals here.” (TS 276)

Paula Martín (2009: 43) observes how for many critics conspiracy has occupied a central place in American culture. As the novel reflects, these fears evince generalized, deep anxieties of vulnerability which certainly read somewhat different in the post 9/11 era. It would seem that America’s (mostly) triumphant history and global pre-eminence breed a particular propensity towards this kind of apprehension. In the 1980s, a decade which began with an intensification of Cold War on account of the setting up of nuclear weapons in Europe by both superpowers, and before the relief brought by the Gorbachev era, the defining dread is certainly nuclear annihilation. As Duane Thompson reflects in his diary: “The whole world could die like a single person used to. That’s what the nuclear age is: the objectification of the terror of total subjectivity. You know you can die any day. You know the world can die” (TS 272). Similarly, Buzz Wismer imagines nuclear warheads falling on St. Louis (TS 360). Fear is indeed a constant presence in the city: from the fear of a nuclear war to the fright of the bombings by mysterious Native-American terrorists, fear of urban crime and “fear of black areas” (TS 290). This fear of death or physical harm fuses in the novel with the secret dread of the wealthy for the security of their position. Therefore, Buzz Wismer’s

fear of nuclear destruction is not so distant from Luisa and Duane's fear of a flamboyant black youth at the Laundromat (TS 234); or from that of the KSLX's employees harassed by "street people"—again class struggle in disguise (TS 483).<sup>77</sup> On a deeper level, these anxieties may well stand for fear of Utopia, as is discussed below. Be it as it may, fear, and especially the propagation of a sense of emergency, has long been known to be an invaluable factor in the manipulation of public opinion by those in power. In this sense, with a vision strikingly anticipatory of the post 9/11 years, the novel presents how the panic created by alleged Native-American terrorists is used by chief Jammu to compel public assent for her heavy-hand policies. It also shows how our culture has long assumed the possibility of being killed in a terrorist attack as one more hazard in the contemporary *risk society* (Beck 1992) we inhabit. As the scene of the bombing of St. Louis Arena during a baseball match vividly evinces, this is a concern that Franzen shares with Don DeLillo: a preoccupation with "the iconic fears of the moment—trampling crowds, psychic unravelling, organized terror ... isolation and death", as Vince Passaro (1991, n.pag.) recounts in a discussion of DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991).

From a different point of view, in postmodernist novels, such as the ones by Pynchon and DeLillo which were so influential upon Franzen's work, conspiracy is also an instrument of metanarrative investigation. In Paula Martín's words, "La conspiración es un tropo para toda actividad narrativa" (2009: 55). In this way, the use of a plot / conspiracy always involves a reflection on the construction and organization of a narrative. Similarly, all interpretation of a narrative is in a sense a conspiracy theory which attempts a reconstruction of events or, as Brooks puts it using Barthes' terms, "an overcoding of the proairetic by the hermeneutic" (Brooks, 1992: 18) . In this way, the reader of *The Twenty-Seventh City* makes sense of the novel as she accompanies Colonel Norris trying to make sense of the conspiracy (TS 328-30). After all, both narrative and conspiracy share a reassuring quality for the reader: both imply a fundamental assertion of the principle of causality and its capacity for bestowing meaning on events.

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<sup>77</sup> The image of class struggle becomes more explicit in the novel in the case of the nine black families who, holding firearms, have barricaded themselves in tenements set for demolition. They are led by a member of the Socialist Workers Party (TS 443). With this allusion the novel recalls the several cases of revolutionary black groups that formed in the 1960s in the United States, such as the Black Panthers Party, founded in Oakland, California in 1966, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, formed in Detroit in 1969.

From a different point of view, as Brooks recognizes, clandestine schemes and machinations for the accomplishment of an objective understood as hostile to the establishment have certainly become a frequent organizing principle in modern narrative. They provide a driving force for the narrative and direct it to a closing. Since “[p]lots are not simply organising structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward moving” (Brooks, 1992: 12), this kind of plot tends to require a certain closing, which is usually death. Thus, in DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Jack Gladney reflects: “All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots” (1984: 26). In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Barbara Probst is of course the clearest victim of this fatal tendency of plots, although her death does not actually close the novel, which is followed by an anticlimactic finale. Jammu, the plot’s mastermind, does kill herself, attesting thus to its failure.

It is easy, however, to observe certain particularities in Franzen’s use of conspiracy which differentiate it from classic postmodernist references. As was advanced above, rather than as an allegorical rendering of totality of the kind studied by Jameson, the novel’s Indian cabal can be taken as a mere narrative device. It may be noticed that the mysterious workings of the system evoked by the classic use of conspiracy in postmodern cultural artefacts are mostly absent from the cabal’s machinations: there is not much room for mystery since we are shown both sides of the conspiracy, that of the schemers and that of their victims, while in turn the curtain on its true motives and objectives is gradually lifted along the novel. For Franzen, conspiracy is here rather an instrument for his critical intentions. His “large, externalized” plot (taking the term in two of its senses: a sequence of events and a hidden scheme), offers him the opportunity to cast his satiric look upon the widest possible spectrum of social, cultural and political springs, addressing thus “the sick society in need of total critique” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.). Thus, the panopticon-like surveillance network set up by Jammu is a narrative means used by Franzen to pry into different power hubs of St. Louis and in this way widen the scope of his vision in the novel. As such, the novel’s conspiracy performs an analytic function which is one of the main attributes of classic realism. If in much postmodernist fiction the conspiracy is a manifestation of *undecidability*, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* Franzen uses it to make us *listen* and *see*. This is confirmed by Franzen in his interview with Burn, where he recognizes his debt to Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) but also recounts his intention, at the time of writing his first

novel, to offer his own version of the conspiracy theme: “I saw that I might be able to go beyond the unseen conspiracy to a *seen* conspiracy, inhabited by complicated characters with whom we might, moreover, sympathize” (Burn, 2010: 62). In a way, then, we could speak, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, of a *knowable* conspiracy, and one that is intended to increase the reader’s social and political awareness.

#### **4.8. The (non-)politics of irony: agency and apathy.**

There are some interesting peculiarities as well in the conspiracy shown in the novel. Its sheer unlikeliness and the suspension of disbelief it requires are revealing of the difficulty of conceiving radical change in a contemporary American society which not only has lost trace of the relations of production but also the memories (or knowledge) of any other modes of production. Hawkins argues that choosing a foreign origin for the conspirators enables Franzen to “render literal the xenophobia that is the byproduct of the exceptionalist nature of American nationalism” (Hawkins, 2010: 65). It seems more likely though that what the Indian origin of the plot really affords Franzen is the possibility of bringing forth a group of people who, following that old Mao’s motto sometimes cited by Badiou “Dare to fight, dare to win”, seem genuinely capable of transformative action, subversion, potentially revolution. It is significant that such people must come from the Third World, a locus which for a long time has evoked in the Western imagination an “outside”—to use Jameson’s term—still unassimilated by totalizing systems. It seems certainly impossible to conceive of any such capacity for agency as originating in an American soil that seems to be completely refractory to effective radical political movements. The (dubious) revolution will have to be imported then, smuggled in, under suspicious certificates of verisimilitude, from what Žižek has called “the mythical Other Place where the authentic happens ... and for which Western intellectuals have an inexhaustible need” (Žižek, 2008: 108). The system, however, will prove unassailable. The conspiracy fails mainly due to generalized, endemic apathy. In the novel, the only foreseeable event of consequence would be nuclear war, a possibility which does not seem to change the widespread torpor either, perhaps because after all an impending apocalypse renders any prospective change pointless. Thus the novel ends with a suffocating atmosphere of stagnation which has earned Franzen hard-hitting

criticism from otherwise perhaps not so distant ideological quarters. In order to fully grasp the nature of this critical animosity, we need to briefly examine the novel's plot.

*The Twenty-Seventh City* is a novel in which a group of people, the Indian conspirators led by chief S. Jammu, are intent on carrying out a large-scale political and financial operation aimed at the reversion of the flow of capital from the increasingly derelict inner St. Louis to the affluent municipalities of the surrounding St. Louis County. This operation, involving the administrative merger of the city county and the subsequent redistribution of wealth via taxes and business relocation, is presented as eminently reasonable and fair, a last chance for a city in a shambles. However, Franzen proceeds to undermine this apparently desirable move from the very start. To begin with, the operation is to be carried on by a rather unlikely outfit, which cannot but weaken the credibility of the novel's investment in the actual viability of change. Then we learn that the conspirators, former Marxists whose methods are rather iniquitous, are actually after spurious objectives: moneymaking by means of a large speculative operation involving real estate in the inner city. To make things worse, we are shown that the process is causing great social damage through gentrification and forced relocation to East St. Louis. Finally, after a considerable build-up of expectation, the whole enterprise fails because people just cannot be bothered to vote on the referendum on the merger. The plot self-deconstructs, and the novel seems to collapse in what Hawkins has called "an act of novelistic bath faith" (Hawkins, 2010: 67). Apathy reigns triumphant and any chances of intervention to change the status quo are rendered futile:

America was outgrowing the age of action ... With a maturity gained by bitter experience, the new America knew that certain struggles would not have the happy endings once dreamed of, but were doomed to perpetuate themselves, metaphorically foiling all attempts to resolve them. No matter how a region was structured, well-to-do white people were never going to permit their children to attend schools with dangerous black children ... Taxes were bound to hit the unprivileged harder than the privileged ... The world would either end in nuclear holocaust or else not end in a nuclear holocaust ... All political platforms were identical in their inadequacy, their inability to alter the cosmic order. (TS 503-4)

This and the accompanying paragraphs, whose bitter pessimism as to the possibility of true progressive reform in an advanced industrial society seems inspired by Marcuse's classic *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), have caused dismay in Franzen's critics.<sup>78</sup> In this way Hawkins deplores that the novel, instead of offering a prospect for change, "extends an olive branch of irony to the reader, who is encouraged to join Franzen in shaking his or her head in mutual understanding of the nation's intractable awfulness" (Hawkins, 2010: 70). From a similar point of view, Hutchinson summarizes the novel's ending: "Historical forces grind on, crushing all agency and resistance" (Hutchinson, 2009: 194), although it rather looks like it is the *end* of history what actually makes agency futile, as we argue below. At any rate, for Hutchinson the novel invokes "a tired sense of defeatism" (Hutchinson, 2009: 192) and already shows the dominant political tone in Franzen's novels:

one that both accepts and regrets the apparent draining of all possible resistance, conflict or meaningful difference. "Unideological" in this sense is not the true absence of ideology, but rather a complete surrender to the power of the prevailing ideology. (Hutchinson, 2009: 193)

And he finally summarizes:

although the novel's categorical and ethical reversals make it aesthetically pleasing, they compromise Franzen's professed project of writing a social novel that combines aesthetic achievement with progressive engagement, in that the work's subversive intent falls victim to a content that emphasizes capitulation and quietism. (Hutchinson, 2009: 194)

Hawkins and Hutchinson are representative of a current of academic criticism of Franzen informed by an ambivalent mixture of hopeful excitement at the possibility of a successful socially engaged novel, raised precisely by Franzen's work (more precisely by the success of *The Corrections* in 2001) and disappointment at what they regard as a

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<sup>78</sup> Marcuse's ideological critique of advanced, affluent industrial society seems an essential influence in Franzen's thought, especially as expressed in his two first novels and the *Harpers's* essay. The following excerpts from *One-Dimensional Man* are but a few of many possible examples that might illustrate Franzen's Marcusean leaning: "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress ... Independence of thought, autonomy and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function of a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the individuals through the way it is organized. Such a society may justly demand acceptance of its principles and institutions, and reduce the opposition to the discussion and promotion of alternative policies *within* the status quo ... non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless" (Marcuse, 1964: 1-2).

failure in satisfactorily producing such a novel. It is then a judgement drawn upon Franzen by his own declared social preoccupations, as no one seems to have levelled similar rebukes on, for instance, David Foster Wallace on account of any lack of a valid articulation of agency in *Infinite Jest*. At any rate, it is a criticism informed by a tacit Lukácsian view of what a socially critical novel should be like, to the point that its reproaches to Franzen's shortcomings powerfully recall the Hungarian critic's decri of Modernism in the 1950s. For Lukács, the ideology of Modernism "asserts the unalterability of outward reality", while "human activity is, a priori, rendered impotent and robbed of meaning" (Lukács, 2006: 36). The result for Lukács is *angst*, the basic disposition informing Modernism. As an example, Lukács brings forth the "mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of the circumstances" in Kafka's *The Trial*. (2006: 36) Hutchinson and Hawkins' demand of effective agency in the novel may be seen then as an unacknowledged Lukácsian requirement that the (realist) writer should select his materials so as to illustrate what's most *typical* of a certain historical time. And by "typical", Lukács means, in Terry Eagleton's summarizing, "those latent forces in any society which are from a Marxist viewpoint most historically significant and progressive, which lay bare the society's inner structure and dynamic" (Eagleton, 2002: 26). This view of course implies an at least questionable denial of any critical power to dystopian social pictures that do not offer effective instances of opposition to the state of affairs, and involves an equally contentious dismissal of any subversive or critical thrust that might lie in the expression of disgust, anxiety or angst.

At this point, it seems best to avoid moralizing judgements and try instead to ascertain whatever factors drive Franzen to undermine and ultimately deny the possibility of a change that he obviously regards as desirable, in an admittedly political novel written with the intention of "bringing news to the mainstream" (Franzen, 2002: 95). As Hawkins has noticed, the way in which the novel abruptly denies the possibilities of socio-political change that it has previously evoked is essentially ironic. This reversal may be seen in turn as determined by the pervading irony that permeates our postmodern culture and which has become a distinctive feature of much postmodernist fiction. In her influential *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon celebrated the critical power of irony in postmodern art (including that quintessentially postmodern form of fiction which she describes as historiographic

metafiction), mostly deployed through what she identified as one of the most distinctive postmodernist modes: parody. For Hutcheon, thus, parody involved an ironic rethinking of history which critically illuminated both past and present (Hutcheon, 1988: 39). From a different point of view, however, irony may be regarded in the first place as a symptom of the impossibility of achieving what Jameson has called “critical distance” in current postmodern culture, of articulating a position of one’s own outside “the massive Being of capital” (Jameson, 1991: 48) from which to criticize it, in a system which furthermore seems to instantly reabsorb and disarm any radically critical intervention. Irony is then an acknowledgement of the inevitable, ineradicable ideological infection that one shares with everyone else.<sup>79</sup>

It is to be noticed that Hutcheon has later engaged in a much more nuanced exploration of the implications and potentialities of irony, one that acknowledges the inescapable pitfalls of its essential ambivalence. Thus, in *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Hutcheon points at a “transideological” nature of irony (Hutcheon, 1994: 10) which inevitably works to undercut the ironist’s stance. Indeed, it seems clear that if irony does have an obvious subversive potential, it can also work as a powerful deterrent of engagement. As Moretti has put it,

[A] culture that pays tribute to multiple viewpoints, doubt and irony is also, by necessity, a culture of *indecision*. Irony’s most typical feature is its ability to stop time, to question what has already been decided, or to re-examine already finished events in a different light. But it will never suggest what should be done: it can restraint action, but not encourage it. (Moretti, 2000: 121)

In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” (1997), David Foster Wallace traces the origins of postmodernism in the United States back to a rebellion, by means of irony, against the hypocritical myth of America spread by television and advertising.<sup>80</sup> However, Wallace explains, postmodern tools such as irony

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<sup>79</sup> Franzen’s remarks in his *Boundary 2* interview seem to endorse this last view: “I think irony is the cultural flip side of American supremacy ... It’s a fundamentally moral response to being a citizen of the crushing, hegemonic U.S. Like, how can you look in the mirror with all the privilege you have and all the power that is wielded around the world to sustain that privilege? Everyone’s laughing about stuff here. Everything is real flip, real ironic” (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 40).

<sup>80</sup> McLaughlin discusses Wallace’s essay in relation to Franzen’s work in his 2004 essay “Post-Postmodern discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World”. In his piece, McLaughlin poses Wallace and Franzen as the most significant representatives of a current reaction against postmodernism’s perceived dead end which he and other critics identify as post-postmodernism.

and self-referentiality were gradually co-opted by TV and have since become agents of despair and political paralysis, in a culture characterized by a weary cynicism:

I want to convince you that irony, poker face silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionist they pose terrifically vexing problems. (Wallace, 1997: 171)

As Wallace observes, not only is irony “singularly useless when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (1997: 183), but it also “tyrannizes us” (1997: 183) posing the threat of ridicule over any proposition that presents itself as meaningful. Certainly, in a cynical environment, shedding one's shield of irony renders oneself vulnerable. In this sense, it is easy to relate the novel's general low emotional temperature with that pre-emptive power of irony. However, Wallace's suggested way beyond postmodernist sterile irony points in that way: a return to a plain, convinced treatment of human troubles and emotions, in defiance of the hip ironist's scorn. It is tempting to suggest that Franzen pre-emptively deconstructs the novel himself before he can be charged with naivety. In the same way, it may be argued that an important part of Franzen's narrative evolution after *The Twenty-Seventh City* has consisted of an ever more determined adoption of Wallace's injunction, as he has come to renounce certain postmodernist tenets. In his 2002 essay for *The New Yorker*, “Mr Difficult”, where he disavows the most self-referential trends in postmodernism, Franzen seems to acknowledge postmodern irony as a sort of defence mechanism:

Indeed the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony. The theory is compelling, but as a way of life it's a recipe for hate. The child grows enormous but never grows up. (Franzen, 2002b, n.pag.)

From a different stance, Richard Rorty has also discussed the political implications of irony. For Rorty, irony is an inherently private—as opposed to political—affair, and he defends it as an essential means to create a self-image. Like Franzen, Rorty suggests its defensive properties: “Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful,

at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about. Something from which to be alienated” (Rorty, 1989: 88). He also recognizes irony’s uselessness for progressive action:

There is no reason the ironist cannot be a liberal, but she cannot be a “progressive” and “dynamic” liberal in the sense in which liberal metaphysicians sometimes claim to be. For she cannot offer the same sort of social hope that metaphysicians offer. She cannot claim that adopting her redescription of yourself or your situation makes you better able to conquer the forces which are marshalled against you. (Rorty, 1989: 91)

#### **4.9. Systemic paralysis and Utopian drives.**

Together with the political ineffectiveness of irony, there’s a quality in the lineage of postmodernist fiction in which *The Twenty-Seventh City* seeks to inscribe itself that works as well against the assertion of agency. In other words, there seems to be a problem with the chosen form. Jameson has shown how “an already constituted ‘narrative paradigm’ emits an ideological message of its own right without the mediation of authorial intervention” (Jameson, 2002: 73). In “Mr Difficult”, Franzen refers to *The Twenty-Seventh City* as his “own Systems novel of conspiracy and apocalypse”. Such a distinctively postmodernist genre was defined by Tom LeClair, in his study of DeLillo’s narrative *In the Loop* (1987) as a scientifically informed variety of fiction, strongly influenced by systems theory, distinctively concerned with the workings of “the System”, which is conceived as an intricate network of systems of all kind: economic, ideological, etc. As it is to be expected in an age obsessed with language, the ultimate model for any system is language itself, which in our post-structuralist era means of course a bottomless play of free-floating signifiers in which the referent is forever out of reach and subject positions always precarious. This implies the rendition of an ultimately incomprehensible society which certainly, like Foucault’s theorizing in its own way, makes little room for assertions of agency.<sup>81</sup> In Hawkins’ words:

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<sup>81</sup> There can be little doubt that the influence of the current of philosophical anti-humanism which developed in France in the 1960s has been often invoked to explain what is perceived as political ineffectuality on the part of the left today. This is the case, for example, of Althusser’s famous notion of

*The Twenty-Seventh City* is a Systems novel, a text that attempts to expose the workings of the System that is consumer capitalism, even as it reinforces the System's power by replicating many of its structures without submitting an alternative vision of human relations. In this way, the System looks all-consuming and inescapable except for those, such as the author himself, who have armed themselves with the theoretical tools capable of naming it and thereby withdrawing from it. (Hawkins, 2010: 65)

That theoretical knowledge may allow anyone to “withdraw from the system” is a questionable proposition indeed. However, Hawkins' remarks on the systems novel are pertinent inasmuch as they point to the fact that, as Jameson has frequently observed, successive advances in the systematization of totality may paradoxically lead to a feeling of impotence before the immense “global system of domination and exploitation” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 24) formed by late capitalism. More specifically, he has called attention on “the dangers of an emergent ‘synchronic’ thought in which change and development are relegated to the marginalized category of the merely ‘diachronic’” (Jameson, 2002: 76). Jameson exemplifies the political implications of such a view with Baudrillard's suggestion of a “total-system” concept of society which reduces all possibility of resistance to “anarchist gestures, to the sole remaining protests of the wildcat strike, terrorism and death” (2002: 76). From a different point of view, Beck has examined the ethical implications of overplaying the concept of system, which

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history as a process without a subject or goal, conveyed in his “Lenin Before Hegel” (1971), a concept which seems to undermine the possibility of agency. This perception of the political import of (broadly speaking) post-structuralism is a matter of controversy within the political left. We may remember, however, that Badiou has vehemently defended that the demystifying work of Lacan, Foucault or Althusser constitute a fundamental advance for emancipatory politics (Badiou, 2002: 4-7). In a similar way, Laclau has argued that as a result of the work of thinkers such as Derrida the metaphysical discourse of the West is coming to an end, opening thus the way for new and radical political possibilities. (Laclau, 2007: 123) In any case, the relation between structures and power is a key issue for the Marxist tradition. Structures may be seen as limits that curtail the individual's range of action or that which precisely enables such action. As is known, Marxism privileges the relations of production as the most important single social structure. In this sense Callinicos (2004), following Cohen, sees those relations as constituting relations of power over individuals and productive forces. For Callinicos, this conceptual position “accords causal powers to structures without falling into the kind of Althusserian structural determinism that treats individuals as the ‘supports’ of the relations of production. It can therefore accommodate the rational-choice Marxists' demand that social explanations have ‘microfoundations’—that is, that they show how the existence of social mechanisms and structural tendencies depends on the incentives and interests they give individual actors—while rejecting the methodological-individualist reduction programme that this requirement is used to support. In general spirit, it is close to Giddens's theory of structuration, which conceives humans as knowledgeable actors that are both enabled and constrained by the social structures that are at once the consequence and condition of their actions” (Callinicos, 2004: 22).

ultimately amount to the dissolution of responsibility and agency. For the German sociologist, in a highly systemized environment, “corresponding to the highly differentiated division of labor, there is a general complicity, and the complicity is matched by a general lack of responsibility. Everyone is cause *and* effect, and thus *non-cause*” (Beck, 1992: 33). As a consequence, “one acts physically, without acting morally or politically. The generalized other—the system—acts within and through oneself” (1992: 33). Žižek, on his part, has related these circumstances with an abandonment of the Hegelian notion of *determinate negation* and the generalization of the “wholly Other” as the Utopian prospect of overcoming the global techno-capitalist system. In his words:

The idea is that, with the “dialectic of Enlightenment” which tends towards the zero-point of the totally “administered” society, one can no longer conceptualize breaking out of the deadly spiral of this dialectic by means of the classical Marxist notion according to which the New will emerge from the very contradictions of the present society, through its immanent self-overcoming: the impetus for such an overcoming can only come from an unmediated Outside. (Žižek, 2008: 337)

Such perceived deadlock may easily involve a certain feeling of despair which was surely not uncommon in a decade marked for its greater part by an escalation of Cold War (whose approaching end apparently no one seemed able to foresee), while conservative governments in different countries seemed intent on removing all previous legal restraints on capitalism. Significantly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, that great historical turn beginning in 1989, paradoxically only added to the generalized feeling of history coming to a halt which would be sang triumphantly by Fukuyama (1992) and others. An age characterized, in Jameson’s words, by an “inverted millenarism” (1991: 1) that predicates the end of politics, art or history itself. In 1988, some twenty years after his *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord sees the process of spectacular transformation of society as having achieved completion in the state of “integrated spectacle,” characterized by a complete destruction of history which suggests a closed future:

The society whose modernization has reached the state of the integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features:

incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies; an eternal present. (Debord, 1998: 11-12)

It seems likely that Debord would have received criticism similar than the one levelled at Franzen by critics such as Hawkins, Hutchinson or Annesley, as *The Twenty-Seventh City* obviously chimes in with such depressing pictures. Perhaps, however, it is time now to complicate the picture of the novel's disavowal of its own investment in the perspective of radical political change, by recalling the fact that it is not only the postmodern genre of the Systems novel that is characterized by conceiving of the status quo as basically unchangeable. On the contrary, as we have seen in our discussion of realism, the latter is characterized by a distinctive kind of inherent conservatism which Jameson has described as an "ontological commitment to the status quo as such" (Jameson, 2013: 145). For Jameson,

realism requires a conviction as to the massive weight and persistence of the present as such, and an aesthetic need to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order. To posit the imminence of some thoroughgoing revolution in the social order itself is at once to disqualify those materials of the present which are the building blocks of narrative realism. (Jameson, 2013: 145)

From this point of view, the novel's final vision of social stasis would be in keeping with its realist affiliation, and yet one cannot discount its postmodernist drive to provide a mimetic account of a postmodern society. Another important aspect that the critics mentioned above seem to overlook in their account of Franzen's fiction is that, as Jameson has consistently argued following Ernst Bloch, although our impoverished sense of history may atrophy our Utopian imagination, our ability to envision future alternatives to the present, Utopian drives will inevitably find their way in every future-oriented elaboration, whether consciously or not, and most likely in disguise.<sup>82</sup> For Jameson, Utopian text is usually non-narrative and "somehow without a subject position" (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 384). Even more, there is always something to be learned from the failure of Utopian thought, from the flaws and elusions of Utopian vision, since they may negatively define the limits of our imagination and representation

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<sup>82</sup> Marcuse (1964: 6) argues in the same way. For him, "[t]he more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more *unimaginable* the ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation" (my italics).

abilities—which is to say our capacity to map the totality—as they are inevitably shaped by the present state of affairs. In Jameson's words, “the best Utopias are those who fail the most comprehensively” making us then more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (Jameson, 2007: *xiii*).

A great deal of Utopian impulse involves a desire for true community and more authentic human relationships, which means an escape from the ruthless anomie and contingency imposed by capitalism on virtually any realms of life, freedom from the tantalizing psychological dynamics of consumerism, and ultimately a liberation from the prison-house of ideology and the constraining slots into which it makes us fit—those traumatic strictures that reach to our very self-perception. Such liberation is often symbolized by a different relation to a nature that used to be our other, but also a nurturing mother. Such harmonic relationship with nature is inscribed in the novel by the allusions to the old Cahokia people. Likewise, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* we can find visions of nature reigning again over old cornfields and expanses of concrete. In the same way, nature is heralded by songbirds—so present in the novel, but especially central in *Freedom*—who migrate of their own accord following natural rhythms, and represent a realm still uncolonized by capitalism. This is also the case, by the way, with certain spheres of the Third World invoked by the novel, such as the Indian Marxist circles of Jammu's youth. But if these longings for an outside are obviously palpable in the *The Twenty-Seventh City*, so are the anxieties that can also accompany the envisioning, even if disguised, of change: a fear of Utopia, which we have already identified above, defined by Jameson as “a throughgoing anxiety in the face of everything we stand to lose in the course of so momentous a transformation that—even in imagination—it can be thought to leave little intact of current passions, habits, practices and values” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 388). The fact that the possibility of nuclear warfare looms in the novel is also revealing, for what is apocalypse itself (be it nuclear or environmental), but the ultimate, global expression of the resistance to change of a system which is willing to follow its set path to the end, rather than engaging in any effective self-questioning and rethinking? As Jameson has put it, “[i]t seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imagination” (Jameson, 1994: *xii*). From a different point of view, that of Badiou's ethics, it is not difficult to interpret Jameson's concept of fear of Utopia as a

non-readiness for the Event which is the product of a loss or *absence of fidelity* to a previous one.

But the mechanisms of ideological resistance at work in the novel cannot conceal the fact that the corrupt, failed conspiracy of Jammu and her followers furnishes a flickering blueprint of the possibility of public officials acting as revolutionary leaders determinedly taking effective action in the benefit of the needy, deftly reversing the commonly taken as irresistible forces of capitalism, successfully fighting them with their own (financial) weapons.<sup>83</sup> This is a prospect which would have hardly been acceptable in the novel, but rather dismissed as foolish wish-fulfilment, had it been textually dramatized *in good faith*. As Jameson argues apropos of Olaf Stapledon's novel *The Last and the First Man* (1968), "[a]t this point the expression of the Utopian impulse has come as close to reality as it can without turning into a conscious Utopian project" (Jameson, 2007: 8). To this Utopian charge, furthermore, we may add the implicit communitarian element that, according to Paula Martín, can be found in the *topos* of conspiracy, since even a criminal circle entails the creation of interpersonal bonds (Martín Salván, 2013: 225). After all, conspiracy etymologically means "to breathe together". To conspire is then to create a community: the community of those who share a whispered secret.

So far, readers of the novel are likely to have wondered why a novel so ostensibly concerned with the workings of the system can dedicate such a good deal of its most brilliant pages to splendidly dramatize the problems of communication and disenchantment of a white upper-class family who lives in Webster Groves. In his seminal *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson defends that all narrative acts are symbolic acts which address an unsolvable social contradiction. It would be logical to add that they also seek to symbolically mend their author's ideological and psychological contradictions. Then it would make sense to ask what is the novel trying to do for his author with its "swashbuckling, Pynchon-sized megaplot" (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.). To which question it could be answered that what the novel is trying to compensate for is the fact that it is a novel about an upper-class white family who lives

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<sup>83</sup> The fact that the whole operation has an Indian origin, with even the financial support to set it in motion coming from Jammu's Indian mother, is a sign of Franzen's early interest in global processes (not yet known as globalization), which would become a major concern in his narrative, as is shown by *The Corrections*. The image, even if fleeting, of Third World money helping the reverse of the decay of an American city projects, by the way, a curious negative image of the usual process whereby industrial relocation to Third World countries has damaged so many American cities.

in Webster Groves (and by no less than a middle-class white writer who happened to grow up in Webster Groves). Previously we alluded to the difficulties inherent to the form chosen by Franzen for his novel, when it comes to articulate positions of resistance and effective agency. It is interesting, however, to inquire as to the available choices for Franzen to choose from, or, to put it other way, what is that which makes the postmodernist Systems novel the genre of choice for so many American white straight male novelists with social concerns. The answer is likely to be found in the current compartmentalization of an identity-based literary scene which turns around the margins, especially as regards socio-political criticism—those same margins, by the way, which according to Franzen form the last vestiges of vitality in “the inner city of fiction”. It is plausible then that the difficulties involved in articulating a critical position of one’s own in the middle of *mainstream America* are a factor that contributes to drive these writers’ focus towards the system at large, a circumstance to which we shall return in the chapter dedicated to *The Corrections*.

#### **4.10. Nostalgias of the industrial age.**

In any case, there is in *The Twenty-Seventh City* an undeniable vindication of the middle class that transpires in its characterization of the Probst. This vindication, which will be recurrent in Franzen’s fiction, is of course utterly justified in the framework of Franzen’s general apology of the novel, given the middle-class roots of the genre. Any objections as to Martin Probst’s class affiliation in sight of his (self-assigned) hearty income of \$190,000 a year should be dismissed in the face of his congenially drawn middle-class funny little ways. Probst is after all a self-made man, only one generational step removed from actual poverty, a firm believer in hands-on work with a built-in abhorrence of speculative operations possibly inherited from parental experiences previous to the Depression. But, as Jameson reminds us following Bakhtin, class discourse is essentially dialogical in structure and mostly antagonistic, so that “the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic confrontation between the classes” (Jameson, 2002: 70-1). The antagonistic class in *The Twenty Seventh-City* is certainly an oligarchic upper class represented by actually rich, conspiring or contra-conspiring elements whose aristocratic debauchery—as in the case of Probst’ brother-in-law Rolf Ripley—or whose politically reactionary

stand—as in the case of Colonel Norris—contrast vividly with Probst’s integrity and paternalist entrepreneurship.

Probst, the builder of the Arch, stands, like Alfred Lambert in *The Corrections*, or Walt Kowalski, Clint Eastwood’s character in *Grand Torino* (2008), for a classic tradition of American productiveness, of proud, solid, hands-on work which has all but vanished before the intangibility of modern financial industry.<sup>84</sup> In this sense, his symbolical identification with the city is apt enough, as both seem destined to irrelevance and decay in the elusive, speculative times of what Bauman (2000) has described as liquid modernity or light capitalism. It is surely not hard to perceive a certain authorial identification with Probst, which can also be interpreted as an expression of nostalgia for American industrial society, in Beck’s sense of the term. Franzen thus seems to feel that the latter, in a way the golden age of American middle class, was more promising community-wise than the ongoing phase of late capitalism in spite of the inescapable ideological and environmental contradictions it entailed and which the novel also shows. Indeed, in this respect there seems to be an irremediable ambivalence in Franzen’s stance. There is a nostalgic yearning for a time in which American inner cities thrived and harboured vibrant communities, together with an idealized vision of the city as the agora-like actual site of the public sphere. In the following chapters we will observe how public utilities and infrastructure itself become a symbol of a planned, collective vision with obvious communitarian implications. However, Franzen is also aware that industrial society, the classic urban model, was no less dependent on social inequality than the present times are: the ghetto of East St. Louis was not created by Jammu—it was already there for her to fill it with the human refuse of gentrification. In the same way, the novelist reflects that it is that same industrial society, or heavy modernity, in Bauman’s expression, that initiated the unending expansion that has led to what Jameson describes as the abolition of Nature and the disappearance of the Outside: it is Probst himself, after all, who has covered in concrete enormous expanses of former woodland as part of the relentless suburban expansion. Bauman has referred to the era Franzen seems to long for in the following oppressive terms:

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<sup>84</sup> From a different point of view, it is significant that the three mentioned characters share a paternalist attitude towards women, as if attesting to the patriarchal quality of industrial society.

That part of history, now coming to its close, could be dubbed, for the lack of a better term, the era of *hardware*, or heavy modernity ... the epoch of weighty and ever more cumbersome machines, of the ever longer factory walls enclosing ever wider factory floors and ingesting ever more populous factory crews ... To conquer space was the supreme goal—to grasp as much of it as one could hold, and to hold to it, marking it all over with the tangible tokens of possession and ‘No trespassing’ boards. (Bauman, 2000: 113-4)

It turns out then that the seeds of what is lamented today lay within the past one idealizes. We may notice a similar circumstance in *The Corrections*: when Franzen sets the solid, productive world of Alfred and Enid Lambert’s youth against the evanescence of life under contemporary late capitalism as experienced by their offspring it becomes apparent that the latter world is nothing but the product of the former. Franzen’s nostalgias are then irremediably conflicted. Ultimately, what is highlighted is just the obvious point that postmodernity was contained in modernity. Last but not least, there is the unavoidable fact that Probst’s paternalism is inseparable from the patriarchal character of industrial society. As Beck argues, industrial society is based upon a specific distribution of gender roles which, insofar as they are ascribed to the individual by birth, confers upon it a certain feudal character. For Beck, this distribution of roles between the sexes is “both the *product* and the *foundation* of the industrial system, in the sense that wage labor *presupposes* housework, and that the spheres and forms of production and the family are separated and *created* in the nineteenth century” (Beck, 1992: 106). Needless to say, this separation of the spheres of production and family involves male ascendancy. This configuration of roles and the distinct kind of antagonism between the sexes that it causes is visible in the Probst family. For Martin, home is the haven of well-earned tranquillity where to daily retire, always in command, after the exertions of an exhausting but comfortingly structured, reassuring world of work where a man can find “the consolations of pure activity, pure work, the advancement of physical and organizational order” (TS 461). Not incidentally, if for Bauman classic modernity—a concept comparable to Beck’s industrial society—was the era of hardware, here we see how Probst embodies such modernity by his own visualization as machinery:

Of course, he could also see that for thirty years he’d worked too hard, could see himself in hindsight as a monstrosity with arms and hands the size of

Volkswagens, legs folded like the treads of a bulldozer ... He'd failed as a father and a husband. But if anyone had ever tried to tell him this he would have shouted them down, since the love he felt for Barbara and Louisa at the office had never waned. (TS 461)

In his longings, however, Probst seems again as outdated as the city itself. As Beck explains, reflexive modernity and its dynamic of individuation do not stop "at the gates of the family, marriage, parenthood and housework" (Beck, 1992: 106). Individuals are liberated from traditional forms as well as from ascribed roles "in the search of 'a life of their own'" (1992: 105). Thus, he ends up in baffled estrangement from his wife and daughter, who flee from the suffocating positions allocated to them in the realm of the family.

#### **4.11. History, form and ideology.**

In Jameson's theory the conditions of possibility for realist or modernist praxis are historically determined, and are therefore not equally accessible for writers inhabiting different socio-historical circumstances. In the same way, certain forms of political and ideological resistance seem not to be readily available for Franzen, as resistance against the mainstream is always best deployed from the margins, which is especially true in a postmodern theoretical environment that tends to focus on the "ex-centric" (see Hutcheon, 1988: 59). Realism, that long-standing way of investigating reality and using it to back up one form or agency or other, is another not easily accessible (not to mention disreputable) tool for a postmodern novelist. It is not just a question of "Po-Mo machinery", it is that realism is certainly incompatible with a worldview informed by the notion that history has come to an end. Indeed, within that paradigm a Systems novel would be more *mimetic*. Without a sense of history there can be no "perspective", a notion which for Lukács implied not only a social point of view but also a diachronic vision of evolutionary unfolding in history. Obviously, certain key elements of classic realism are here absent: Lukács' class consciousness has succumbed to social entropy; and Auerbach's "social forces" pale in the face of the overriding, hegemonic force of capital (although they are not totally absent, as the figures for class struggle we have discussed show). And what Balzac, for example, was bound to perceive as a merely contingent arrangement of the status quo, a temporary state in an

apparently teleological flow of history, seems quite naturally to Franzen an intractable, elusive and consequently unassailable “system”; not the least because, if “our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production” (Jameson, 2007: xiii), Balzac’s contemporaneity with more than one of such modes is very different from our own total immersion in liquid modernity, to use Bauman’s term. Jameson, always preoccupied with the ways in which specific socio-historical configurations determine the conditions of possibility for specific literary forms, provides us with valuable insight into two issues that are central to this study: the reasons—common to his contemporaries—behind Franzen’s use of weird plot arrangements in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*; and the narrative way out which he finds in the latter novel to escape the ideological and literary deadlock of the former, namely the narrative structures of romance and melodrama. Already in 1971, the American critic argued in a way that is particularly relevant to the discussion of Franzen’s narrative:

For the realistic mode of representation, the possibility of narration itself, is present only in those moments of history in which human life can be apprehended in terms of concrete, individual confrontations and dramas, in which some basic general truth of life can be told through the vehicle of the individual story, the individual plot. Yet such moments have become relatively rare in modern times: and there are others in which nothing real ever seems to happen, in which life is felt as waiting without end, perpetual frustration of the ideal (Flaubert); in which the only reality of human existence seems to be blind routine and the drudgery of daily work, forever the same day after day (Zola); in which, finally, the very possibility of events seems to have disappeared, and the writer seems relatively reconciled to a framework in which the truth of the single day can stand as the microcosm of life itself (Joyce). In these historical situations, even when the literary work itself seems violent and agitated, such explosions will turn out on closer inspection to be mere imitations of events, pseudoevents, imposed from above by the novelist, who despairs of evolving any genuine events from the colorless stream of experience itself. Indeed, melodrama (as in Zola) is one of the principal devices by which modern literature has sought to conceal its contradictions” (Jameson, 1974: 200-201)

These difficulties notwithstanding, it is evident that Franzen strives for historicity: he investigates the city’s past; traces Martin Probst’s background to Dust

Bowl Oklahoma (which, by the way, by bringing up the remembrance of the financial turmoils of the Great Depression, implicitly inscribes the inherent instability and contradictions of a perhaps not so imperishable system); and he even provides a substantial account of the personal origin of the Indian plotters. There actually is a clear microcosmic quality to *The Twenty-Seventh City*, in that the socio-political and economic workings of St. Louis are intended to be representative of those of the nation and indeed the wider world of Western capitalism, much in the same way as Baltimore is presented in David Simon's series *The Wire* (2002-2008), another fictional artefact which relies on wiretapping both as a framing narrative device and as a way to show a certain perspective on social totality. Nevertheless, Franzen's attempt falls short of a Lukácsian synthesis in which characters are both individual and representative of the most significant features of a historical period. Furthermore, although we are shown the overall dynamics of St. Louis' economy and we are informed of the unfairness of its social consequences, the actual narrative focus is as unevenly distributed as the city's wealth. It is not necessary, for example, to compare *The Twenty-Seventh City* to Eliot's *Middlemarch* to notice that, apart from the police chief, only one of the characters actually lives in the city that is the concern of the novel, namely RC White, the only significant black character in a novel about a mostly black city. He forms the only counterpoint to the wealthy suburbanites and conspirators who form the *dramatis personae* of the novel. In any case, it gives us a measure of Franzen's attempt that—even though in somewhat tepid scenes—we follow White through the novel, from his employment in menial jobs to his appointment as a police officer, and eventually his ouster from his house due to triumphant gentrification. This is something that tells *The Twenty-Seventh City* apart from the rest of Franzen's novels: we will not find a similar case of sustained concern with the fate of a lower or working-class character in Franzen's subsequent fiction, in which the perspective is exclusively upper-middle class. But there is yet another important circumstance related to realism that is exclusive to *The Twenty-Seventh City* within the whole of Franzen's novelistic production, namely the virtual absence of rhetorical strategies and proairetic schemata derived from genres such as romance, *Bildungsroman* or melodrama to *soften* the hard edge of realism or symbolically make up for unsolvable social contradictions, as is increasingly the case in Franzen's subsequent novels. Unlike in those novels, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* there are no individual perspectives of salvation, and no comforting retreat to the more manageable, small communities of family and lovers to compensate for the

intractability of the system and the decomposition of the public sphere. On the contrary, the novel's central family, the Probsts, is as beset by disintegration as the city itself and their house ends up burnt to the ground. The end of the novel is marked not only by the failure of Jammu's plan to merge the county and the city due to generalized apathy and reluctance to change, but also with Barbara Probst's absurd death, Jammu's suicide, and Martin Probst's bewilderment at such a relentless display of pure contingency. These grim circumstances, which powerfully contrast with the Austen-like kind of epilogue that the rest of Franzen's novel ends with, suggest a kind of hard core of realism in *The Twenty-Seventh City* which is diluted in Franzen's subsequent work. According to Eagleton, "realism is calculated contingency" (Eagleton, 2005: 10). And, as the critic has put it elsewhere, "[y]ou cannot marry everyone happily off in the last ten pages and claim that this is how life is" (Eagleton, 2003: n.pag.). Moretti has also identified unhappy endings as a distinctive feature of realism, which he discusses in terms especially relevant to our analysis of Franzen's novels:

The identification of real and rational, of legality and legitimacy, so characteristic of the classical *Bildungsroman* and of Hegel philosophy of history, has fallen apart. Reality's essence lies not in embodying a society's professed values, but in its violent rejection and open derision of anyone who tries to realize them.

This is why realistic narrative does not tolerate happy endings: these portray the harmony of values and events, while the new image of reality is based on their division. There must be no justice in this world: a realistic story must be *meaningless*, 'signifying nothing'. Even though it comes at the end, the unhappy ending proves here to be the rhetorico-ideological *foundation* of nineteenth-century realism: narrative verisimilitude itself is initially sacrificed by the compelling *need* of these novels to finish unhappily. (Moretti, 2000: 120)

In a way, this takes us to where we started, to that striking tension between two novelistic paradigms, the postmodernist and the realist, coinciding within the same novel. The first one is embodied in the chosen topic and form: the workings of late capitalism are explored by the typically postmodernist subgenre of the Systems novel. To the influence of that paradigm we can also ascribe the use of a conspiracy as a fundamental narrative resource. This is also the case of the pervading irony, an irony

which we can describe as *structural*, since it may be perceived across different dimensions of the novel, such as the detached narrative voice, the tricky plot itself and its perplexing conclusion. At times, we can perceive as well a certain affinity with the linguistic experimentalism of the likes of William Gaddis and John Barth. Not least of all, there is an evident influence of post-structuralist theory—a cornerstone for much postmodernist fiction, probably the narrative mode most clearly informed by critical theory—such as that of Derrida or Althusser. Not incidentally, as we know, a rejection of critical theory will eventually play a part in Franzen’s subsequent politico-literary disavowal. In any case, set against this stance of postmodernist influence we find a decidedly referential impulse and—crucially—an explanatory vocation which is a sure mark of the realist novel. This is apparent in Franzen’s interest in showing the mechanisms of different spheres of political and economic power in a St. Louis which is representative of many other American and Western cities. But perhaps Franzen’s referential intention is nowhere more evident than in the topographic quality of the novel realized in abundant locale description and reinforced by the inclusion of an actual map. In this sense, the novelist honours a central aspect of the realist tradition which is, as we have seen, the attempt to recreate a typically urban world perceived as actually existing in a synthetic, small-scale model-like way, in order to analyse it and thus make better sense of it. This takes Franzen’s first novel close to what McLaughlin posits as “the agenda of post-postmodernism” (2004: 67): the production of a socially engaged fiction that is theoretically aware enough to lay bare the language-based nature of many oppressive constructions, thus opening our eyes to the fact that other realities are possible. Be it as it may, the aforementioned strain between two different approaches to narrative that characterizes *The Twenty-Seventh City* will decrease visibly in Franzen’s following novels. Certainly, it is still noticeable enough in *Strong Motion*, but we will have the opportunity to discuss how at the end of that novel Franzen introduces the crucial salvational elements around which he articulates his metanarrative. None of this is present here, but this does not mean that the novel is unrelated to Franzen’s *conversion*. As Franzen argues in the *Harper’s* essay, precisely writing this kind of fiction was a factor in the depression he underwent in the early 1990s, which in Franzen’s metanarrative constitutes (as we discuss elsewhere in this study) a fundamental source of justification for his act of political and literary recantation.

## 5. *Strong Motion*: Activism of the private sphere.

*Se querían de noche, cuando los perros hondos  
laten bajo la tierra y los valles se estiran  
como lomos arcaicos que se sienten repasados*

—Vicente Aleixandre

### 5.1. Introduction: reassessing Franzen's disavowal.

As it has already been advanced in this study, Franzen's career up to *The Corrections* is often viewed in the light of a well-established narrative mediated by Franzen's own account of his work in the *Harper's* essay and other pieces, and subsequently accepted by most critics after the attention-calling success of that novel. Such narrative is a sort of confessional story with obvious religious overtones redolent of the conversion to a new faith: that of character-focused realism. Within that critical framework, Franzen's second novel *Strong Motion*<sup>85</sup> is seen as still a product of Franzen's old beliefs—a novel which is mainly intent on a postmodernist-influenced, “systemic” socio-political critique on a grand scale. According to Franzen, in *Strong Motion* such critique was more radical and straightforward than in his first novel: “this time, instead of sending my bombs in a Jiffy-Pak mailer of irony and understatement, as I had with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, I'd come out throwing rhetorical Molotov cocktails” (Franzen, 2002: 63). This attempt, following common critical opinion, was carried out once again relying on one of those Pynchonesque “externalized plots”, at the expense of the deeper sphere of character and dramatic conflict. Such was the contention, for example, of Rebein (2007), one of the main promoters of “the conversion view” together with Green (2005), as has been discussed. For Rebein, even though *Strong Motion*'s characters were “more rounded” than those in Franzen's first novel, they were still trapped by “the squirrel cage of his plot” (Rebein, 2007: 204). The critic goes as far as to claim that “these characters exist for the sole purpose of turning the wheel of the plot” (2007: 214). A similar assumption seems to lie in James

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<sup>85</sup> Hereafter we will be using the abbreviation SM when quoting from the novel.

Wood's influential review of *The Corrections*, where he welcomes Franzen's third novel as "a correction of DeLillo in favor of the human" (Wood, 2001a: n.pag.).

However, as we argue in the present chapter, that view of Franzen's narrative is an obvious over-simplification with important inconsistencies, which is perhaps not surprising since in most of the critical literature on Franzen to date *Strong Motion* has deserved but a passing account before turning to the study of *The Corrections*, the commonly agreed-upon landmark in Franzen's evolution towards realism. This neglect is certainly unfortunate, as the study of Franzen's work as a whole shows that virtually all the identifiable concerns that may be found in *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are already contained in *Strong Motion*. Indeed, in Franzen's second novel we can find the most significant political issues that will mark his subsequent fiction: the preoccupation with the environment, the exploration of the possibilities of activism, the despair of the public sphere and the globalizing scope. Similarly, the more *individual* issues that will be central in *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are also here: *Strong Motion* deals with themes that will be elaborated on in the subsequent novels, namely unhappiness and depression, the economy of family bonds (which is rather bleakly presented with *competition* as its fundamental driving force), and the pitfalls and promises of the relationships between the sexes. But perhaps the most relevant token of the significance of *Strong Motion* within Franzen's work is the fact that in it we are presented with the blueprint of an authorial rhetorical device of self-legitimation which, after the necessary cornerstone of the *Harper's* essay, will be re-enacted in *The Corrections* and, having then accreted into a metanarrative, will achieve closure in *Freedom*—a metanarrative that we have called, drawing on Rebein's analysis, the narrative of conversion. This rhetorical strategy involves the escape from the insoluble ideological contradictions and political dead end arrived at in *The Twenty-Seventh City* by displacing them to what Habermas (1991) calls the intimate sphere, where, transformed into personal problems, they are susceptible of being worked out as individual perspectives of salvation are opened. This way, the end of *Strong Motion* suggests that all attempts to change an essentially unfair status quo are destined to fail before the intractability of the system, but the individual may be saved through self-amelioration, always after being taught humility by painful, sobering blows. In all subsequent novels, the salvation of the main characters from impending abysses of depression, loneliness, self-deception, entanglement in webs of corruption or sheer stupidity, involves a sort of epiphanic

recognition which is followed by a variety of acts of renunciation—to different kinds of pretension, pride, greed, sexual fantasy or intellectual radicalness—and the acceptance of what the individual finally perceives as his true self and the true nature of its relation to its closest others. The salvation process culminates with the individual’s ethical and / or amorous commitment to the other within the ambit of the intimate sphere, which opens the way to the possibility of happiness. This pattern is inaugurated in *Strong Motion* with the personal trajectory of Louis Holland and is confirmed by the vicissitudes of Chip Lambert in *The Corrections*, as well as those of the Berglunds—including their son Joey—in *Freedom*. In these novels it becomes clear that these characters’ individual stories strikingly resemble the confessional account provided by Franzen in the *Harper’s* essay. In fact, in combination with the latter these biographical narratives can be interpreted as so many acts of self-justification of Franzen’s politico-literary decisions, in a trajectory which is inevitably marked by a publicly staged act of renunciation.

There is also an obvious problem with the common critical opinion that unreflectively classifies *Strong Motion* together with *The Twenty Seventh City* as Franzen’s second postmodernist novel on account of the alleged weak making of its characters—constructions that are seen as all but a lame excuse for Franzen to launch his systemic critique. It is hard indeed to reconcile these views with the evidence of the novel devoting the greater part of its extension to develop and explore the personal conflicts of a small group of characters; and even harder in sight of the remarkable affinity of concerns that *Strong Motion* shares with prototypical realism, as we will see.<sup>86</sup> What is true, nevertheless, is that Franzen’s socio-political critique is here conveyed in a more external, arguably more obtrusive way than in his first novel. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the critical content was more evenly distributed and integrated in the plotline, paradoxically through the deployment of an unlikely conspiracy which aimed to take control of the city’s power hubs. This enabled Franzen to pry into a variety of domestic, political and economic quarters in a way that was incorporated in the structure of the novel. In contrast, *Strong Motion* relies on more obvious digressions

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<sup>86</sup> In his interview with Burn, Franzen argues for the substantiality of the main characters in his first two novels. For him, it is only the minor ones that have a merely instrumental role: “Going into my first two books, I did have several characters firmly stuck in my head, but many of the smaller characters were invented to serve the systems. Whereas, in my last two novels, the systems are there to serve the characters. There are lingering elements of the old method in *The Corrections*” (Burn , 2010: 63).

which are in charge of the narrating voice or are assigned to the character of Bob Holland, a Marxist history professor. This political explicitness, as has already been discussed, earned Franzen upon the publication of the novel harsh accusations by certain reviewers of lecturing and sermonizing readers.<sup>87</sup> As regards the scope of Franzen's socio-political critique, we may succinctly advance here that the target is again on the economic, social and ideological workings of capitalism. It is worth noting nevertheless that if in his first novel Franzen focused on economics, politics and their interrelationship, here he diversifies his critical strategies by openly addressing the environmental effects of our mode of production while bringing in as well the critical power of feminism and even postcolonial theory, if we may regard as such the novel's explicit discussion of the European colonization of North America.

The novel's plot itself, which revolves around the wrong-doing of an evil corporation, is sure to have drawn upon it the charge of political crudeness, summarized with both irony and oversimplification by Josh Rubins in the title of his review for *The New York Times*: "How Capitalism Causes Earthquakes" (Rubins 1992). This plot is worth summarizing here: Louis Holland, a twenty-three year-old radio technician from Evanston, Illinois, relocates to Somerville, near Boston, to work at a financially troubled radio station. There he finds out that his mother has inherited 22 million dollars' worth of stock from Sweeting-Aldren, a large chemical concern. However, his mother mysteriously refuses to offer him any financial support. Subsequently Louis meets and then moves in with Renée Seitchek, a thirty-year-old Harvard seismologist. Renée finds out evidence suggesting that Sweeting-Aldren may be responsible for the chain of small earthquakes that have been taking place lately in the Greater Boston's area, since apparently the corporation has been getting rid of dangerous chemical waste by secretly pumping it down an injection well in Boston's vicinity. Louis leaves Renée after Lauren Bowles, a psychologically unstable girl from Houston who had previously rejected him, tracks Louis down and offers him her love. Renée, who is pregnant—a circumstance unknown to Louis—and in emotional turmoil, has her pregnancy terminated and is subsequently shot by either Sweeting-Aldren employees or anti-abortion militants (the novel is ambiguous about this circumstance). Learning of that,

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<sup>87</sup> See for example *The Entertainment Weekly's* review: "Franzen, however, finally succumbs to the American novelist's most irresistible temptation and mounts a pulpit" (Klepp, 1992: npag.). In similar terms, for *The Washington Post*, Franzen "indulge[s] himself in a small orgy of sermonizing" (Yardley, 1992: n.pag.).

Louis comes back to Renée (being accepted by her) and devotes himself to assist her in her painful recovery. At the end of the novel, a stronger earthquake caused by Sweeting-Aldren practices produces dozens of casualties and important damage, although no executive from the company can be brought to justice.

It should be noticed that the first of the more obviously external to the plot critical asides only arrives after three hundred pages (an extravagant *excerpt* from a computer program which claims to simulate the average American intelligence by means of 11,000 lines of software, a passage of obvious postmodernist, Systems novel-like filiation). It can be argued then that if *Strong Motion*'s "Molotov cocktails" may appear as more intrusive than in Franzen's first novel it is precisely because they become readily noticeable next to what the reader perceives as the novel's main interest: the story of Louis Holland, Renée Seitchek and their troubled relationship to each other and their families. Against Rebein's opinion then, the novel's extensive social critique is rendered to some extent ancillary because of the very centrality achieved by its two troubled main characters. Actually, if *The Twenty-Seventh City* already pointed at Franzen's concern with the conflicts of Midwestern middle-class families, *Strong Motion* confirms this preoccupation as a fundamental theme in Franzen's work. Actually, Franzen's study of family and love relationships in his second novel prefigures the further examination that he carries out in his subsequent novels, and especially in *Freedom*, the novel with which *Strong Motion* shares perhaps the most concerns, as I discuss below.

## **5.2. Family affairs and ideological pressure.**

The family that Franzen studies in his novels is, needless to say, a flawed, conflicted one. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the Probsts are afflicted by the (system-induced) apathy of a routine that leads to lack of communication and empathy, but their troubles pale before the bitter estrangement between the next novel's young protagonists and their families. In the case of Louis and Renée, both families respond to a frequent pattern in Franzen's novels: the presence of a self-absorbed, non-nurturing mother and a withdrawn, ineffectual father. The motif of selfish parenthood was already present in *The Twenty-Seventh City* in the parents of Duane Thompson and it will return more clearly in *Freedom* for most of its main characters. In *Strong Motion* it is evident

in the case of Peter Stoorhuys, permanently angry at his dishonest father, an executive of Sweeting-Aldren, and at his acquiescent mother. The extreme case, however, of the damage that such parenting may inflict on children is represented in the novel by the emotionally disturbed Lauren Bowles, an adopted though paradoxically unwanted child. As her guilt-ridden adopting mother reflects:

“The worst thing was that Lauren knew. Even when she was tiny she could feel me doubting myself. She could feel how I didn’t really believe I was her mother. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get us to believe in me. And how could I blame her then for all the things he did to me? For biting me like an animal? For the gutter language? ... How could I feel anything but guilt?” (SM 69)<sup>88</sup>

For Louis and Renée, the result of their lack of adequate parental support is a perceptible low self-esteem. This is evident in Louis’ going nowhere through menial jobs (always asking for “minimum wage and no benefits” [SM 507]); while in the case of Renée it is disguised by her fierce competitiveness at her Harvard’s department (Renée is in this respect a forerunner of Patty Berglund, competition being a central issue as well in *Freedom*). Low self-assurance also generates other lateral effects in the form of mechanisms of defence, such as Louis’ obduracy, or Renée’s self-righteousness and exaggerated pride. Both are certainly angry people, prone to irate ranting:

“And I can’t help mentioning” she went on entirely to herself, “something else I forgot the other night, when you asked me what my problem is with Boston, I forgot to mention the way people call the subway the T. The people, I mean the implicating people, don’t say ‘I’m going to take the subway,’ they say ‘I’ll take the T.’ What’s sick—to me; what I consider sick—is that it’s like this code word, which every time I hear I become angry because I can hear the whole story, all these kids learning to say the T. instead of ‘subway.’” (SM 154)

The feeling of worthlessness, in any case, is certainly a hindrance for the attainment of any form of happiness, and a crippling obstacle for the establishment of satisfactory human relationships, as the novel illustrates. Ultimately, it is the very doorway for depression, which is, as we know, another basic preoccupation in Franzen’s narrative, again especially prominent in *Freedom*. In “Why Bother?” Franzen

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<sup>88</sup> In *Freedom* we can find several examples of characters psychologically damaged by bad parenting: Patty’s best friend at college Eliza, Patty’s aspiring actress sister Abigail and, of course, Patty herself.

acknowledges having been depressed during the early nineties, which suggests an autobiographical component in *Strong Motion*. His remarks on the nature of depression are consistent with the rendering of Louis' ailing through the novel. From another point of view, he interestingly relates realism with anger and depression:

Depression presents itself as a realism regarding the rottenness of the world in general and the rottenness of your life in particular. But realism is merely a mask from depression's actual essence, which is an overwhelming estrangement from humanity. The more persuaded you are of your unique access to the rottenness, the more afraid you become of engaging with the world; and the less you engage with the world, the more perfidiously happy-faced the rest of humanity seems for continuing to engage with it. (Franzen, 2002: 87)<sup>89</sup>

Franzen then draws a convenient analogy between realism and depression, both of them leading to a literary and vital dead end which he will transcend by means of the exhilaration of melodrama and the salvational perspectives of romance, as we will see. Be it as it may, *Strong Motion's* emotional landscape seems overcast with lingering sadness, a sadness which has a reflection in the rather wearying urban environment that constitutes the main setting of the novel. For example, in chapter three Louis argues with his mother over what he feels as a protracted unfairness and lack of support on her part and then he feels depressed, depression being, according to the narrating voice, "an isotope of anger: slower and less fierce in its decay but chemically identical" (SM 58). Later in the novel, after being let down by Louis, Renée takes to lie on the floor for hours on end (SM 238-239; 341); a behaviour which Franzen's characters tend to observe in states of dejection. Both characters are aware of the familial roots of their unhappiness. A parental neglect which in the case of Louis is compounded by the sight of the spoiling of his sister Eileen, and in the case of Renée by her being brushed aside and not considered a proper adult by her own family, being single and childless, in contrast with the status granted to her vacuous, child-bearing sisters-in-law. This way, Renée argues:

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<sup>89</sup> Depression reappears as a central issue in *Freedom* and, again, the relation between anger and depression deserves special attention. Thus, a Walter Berglund who seems to be modelled to a certain extent on the Franzen protagonist of the *Harper's* essay reflects on the apparently inextricable relation between anger and depression: "He was aware of the intimate connection between anger and depression, aware that it was mentally unhealthy to be obsessed with apocalyptic scenarios, aware of how, in his case, the obsession was feeding on frustration with his wife and disappointment with his son" (*Freedom*, 315).

“These women, it’s like they’ve been waiting all their lives for a chance to ignore a person like me, and now that they have their babies they’re allowed to. They’re allowed to be totally self-absorbed and totally rude to me, because they have *children*. As soon as you have children you’re allowed to close your mind. And no one can say you’re not grownup. And any kind of life, any kind of life that *I* might have, any kind of life that could be envied—it’s obviously not working, because I’m just this incredibly embarrassing adolescent. I can’t possibly compete with these twenty-four-year-old parents, all their narcissism and basic human decency. There’s just no contest” (SM 242-3).

Hurt pride and resentment at failing to compete are patent in Renée’s bitterness. In this way, the novel introduces the issue of in-family and (especially) sibling rivalry that will be so relevant in Franzen’s subsequent fiction, a competition which often amounts to a struggle between siblings for the recognition and approval of their parents.

It is safe to affirm that the disregard suffered by Renée’s need of recognition is behind her competitive drives in a kind of feedback loop. But if Renée’s competitiveness is the expression of a childlike demand for attention, a sublimation of frustrated desire, eventually it seems to acquire the form of neurosis. At a certain point in the novel it is surely not difficult to predicate such condition of Renée, stressed and pregnant, after she has been painfully abandoned by Louis. At that moment she engages in frantic—and not wholly consistent—activity, including unravelling a corporate conspiracy, mounting a complex environmental case against Sweeting-Aldren, cunningly using her scientific insight to extract a large amount of money from Melanie Holland, abundant flashy shopping, radically changing her looks and, not least of all, making advances on the anti-abortionist Reverend Stites; all of which taken together could easily be regarded as neurotic symptoms.

As for Louis, it seems clear that his neglected need for support is the cause of his anger and concomitant depression. It is the case besides that Louis refuses to admit to his childlike need—which is material as well as emotional—both to himself and his family. This repression, which is slyly used by his mother to keep her unyielding stand, is one reason behind Louis’ remarkable austerity, but only adds to a bitter resentment that he does not wholly understand. It is only after he has cried openly in the arms of his father (SM 317), relieving thus repressed emotions by acknowledging his need that

Louis can begin to focus properly and move forward. In any case, it becomes apparent that the gist of both Louis's and Renée's conflicts is rooted in frustrated childlike desire. It is noticeable then how many of Franzen's adult characters are haunted by similarly unresolved conflicts with their parents, in such a way that they seem to get "stuck" in childlike situations in all matters concerning their relationship with them, and then live a sort of perennial adolescence. Significantly, there is a time for all of Franzen's important characters when, for a variety of reasons, they temporarily go back to their parents' house and sleep on their childhood's bed. For all of them, this coincides with a time of soul-searching and personal crisis.<sup>90</sup>

Situated at the juncture of the individual and the social, the institution of the family can be suggestively observed in the light of Althusser's work on ideology. According to the French thinker, all states—and their characteristic relations of production—are supported by a Repressive State Apparatus and by a number of Ideological State Apparatuses. The former relies primarily on the possibility of exerting physical violence and secondarily on ideology, as is the case for example of the police or the army. The latter on the other hand "*function by ideology*" (Althusser, 2008: 19). Althusser proposes a number of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which include, among other, the religious ISA, the political ISA, the legal ISA, the educational ISA (the dominant one according to Althusser) and, unsurprisingly, the family ISA (2008: 17). For the French philosopher, ideology constitutes individuals as subjects by means of series of material practices which become rituals of ideological recognition. One of the tenets of Althusser's theory is the character of the subject as *always-already*, that is, in a way *pre-shaped* by the expectations of a large and pre-existing institution which grants it its individuality in exchange of its submission to the law. In few realms is this condition more visible than in the family. The process whereby the subject is constructed along previous ideological lines is not necessarily a straightforward mechanism, however, and in the case of the protagonists of the novel it is easy to predicate a malfunction in the procedure, a certain resistance to ideology and the identity allotted by it in Louis and Renée. In fact, they become quite literally *misfits* in their failure to comply with the dominant ideological requirements in operation within their familial and social environments. This is perhaps most evident in the case of

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<sup>90</sup> In "House for Sale", the opening piece for *The Discomfort Zone* (2006), Franzen shows himself in the same situation. Special poignancy is added by the reason of his visit to his parents' house: he is in charge of the sale of the now empty family residence after his mother's death.

Renée, as her status as a single, childless woman devoted to what is perceived as professionally rather dubious tasks is an infringement of the mandate to *be fruitful and multiply* which is held as paramount in her family. In this sense, Judith Butler has complemented Althusser's theory, by questioning the power of the ideological interpellator on the interpellée. For Butler, Althusser overlooks the possibility of a degree of resistance on the part of the subject, which would turn the interpellation into what we might call an "infelicitous performative", according to Austin's speech act theory (Austin 1975):

Although he [Althusser] refers to the possibility of "bad subjects," he does not consider the range of *disobedience* that such an interpellating law might produce. The law might not only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation. (Butler, 1993: 122)

Renée and Louis' estrangement from their families, their tortuous relationship to them and the acrimonious reproach that they level at their parents may then be viewed as a manifestation of this resistance, an attempt to rearticulate the terms of the law. As we have seen, ideological pressure is especially obvious on Renée, who bears the burden of not conforming to the female gender roles dominant in her family, or in much of the rest of society for that matter. Franzen even seems to suggest the constructed nature of what is commonly regarded as natural constituents of female identity—such as motherhood—by his selection of the character's name, phonetically identical to its masculine counterpart with a silent letter added. At any rate, as the cases of Louis in *Strong Motion*, Denise and Chip Lambert in *The Corrections*, or Patty Berglund in *Freedom* movingly show, Franzen is well aware that in spite of all possible acts of resistance, or even the build-up of anger and hatred, there is no escaping what in an interview Butler has called "the humiliation of all humans: that we love these beings who happen to be our parents or who happen to be our caregivers, and it's terrible to find that we have absolutely no choice but to love them and that the love is absolute" (Butler and Salih, 2004: 341).

In fact, for Franzen there seems to be no escaping from family heritage in any way, and thus the novel introduces another of the themes that will remain constant in Franzen's following fiction. Even though Franzen's embittered fictional children try to

lead lives that are very different from their parents' lives, mostly by leaving the Midwest for the East Coast, the particular determinism of family never fails to track them down: "A man hates in his wife those traits that he hates in her family; he hates the proof of how deeply the traits are rooted, how ineluctable heredity" (SM 388). Indeed, the weight of one's upbringing can become unbearable, as Renée realizes going through the memorabilia kept in her room at her parent's home: "Even if I throw it away, it's like this tremendous weight of implication, which I can ever, ever, *ever* escape?" (SM 241) Indeed, family's imprint may be truly indelible and Franzen's characters are often horrified to realize how they come to replicate those very traits and dispositions that they sourly resent in their parents. It is the case of Gary Lambert, Patty Berglund and, of course, Renée Seitchek:

Meanwhile she was too selfconscious to fail to see the ironies: That even as she was being vigilant about not turning into a superficial person like her mother, she was spending huge amounts of time worrying about décor, clothes and cooking ... And that the intelligent and confident female types towards whom she felt a virulent, defensive animosity were precisely the types towards whom her mother also felt an animosity, though not as virulent and defensive as her daughter's, since she had her sons and grandchildren to distract and comfort her. (SM 269)

Then, as the novel illustrates, ideological demands can also become acute in adolescence through the torments of peer pressure, especially for such *uncool* characters as Louis and Renée. Teenage traumas also account for the feeling of lingering adolescence over many of Franzen's characters. Accordingly, for example, the novel opens with the image of Louis being viciously beaten by another kid at his high school's gym, in contrast with the *popularity* enjoyed by her sister, much better-adjusted to meet familial and social demands. Louis is characterized by that distinctive kind of stoical endurance developed by neglected and socially unsuccessful children. Few images can evoke neglect and non-belonging as clearly as the sight of teenage Louis walking alone down endless suburban streets and roads which are obviously not meant to be walked: "Even in the middle of a jammed and laughing back-seat she [Eileen] would glance out a window just in time to see her brother striding along the trashy shoulder of some six-lane suburban thoroughfare" (SM 4). Even his rather *uncool* interest in amateur radio, which is presented as an uncertain search across the radio waves for the resonance of a

distant intelligible voice among the labyrinth of languages, suggests a lonely person seeking companionship in an incomprehensible world. In this sense, Louis' dubious search for companionship through the uncertainty of radio frequency inevitably recalls Franzen's predication of a community of readers and writers—described as “matching diasporas” (Franzen, 2002: 89) in “Why Bother?”. In that essay, the novelist follows anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath in finding the purpose to literature in “a sense of having company in this great human enterprise” (2002: 33).

Both Louis and Renée share an obvious lack of social skills which is apparent, for example, in their clumsy ways at Eileen's party in chapter six. However, for all the pain which that marginal position may entail, it also affords them a certain potential for critique and action that the more socially fortunate Luisa Probst and Duane Thompson did not even contemplate in Franzen's first novel. It could even be argued that, within such an acutely capitalist worldview as the American, Louis and Renée are truly subversive in their literally and notoriously not caring about money: Renée first destroys an advantageous contract with Louis' mother and later burns a check worth \$600,000, while Louis, as we have already pointed out, is characterized by unfaltering austerity and lack of ambition. This circumstance recalls Franzen's praise of marginal literary characters in the *Harper's* essay:

[S]ince the making of money has always been of absolute centrality to the culture, and since the people who make a lot of it are seldom very interesting, the most memorable characters in U.S. fiction have tended to be socially marginal: Huck Finn and Janie Crawford, Hazel Motes and Tyron Slothrop. (Franzen, 2002: 89-90)

It is difficult not to sense some nostalgia or yearning in Franzen's fondness for troubled adolescence as a novelistic subject. Not only are we informed of the characters' problematic teenage years, but we can see that unresolved problems of adolescence—concerning filial complaints, conflict among siblings or unsatisfactory social integration—still plague many of Franzen's adult characters: Louis and Renée, the younger Lamberts, Walter and Patty Berglund. It is possible then to relate this fixation with Franzen's calling for romance. In this sense, Ian Duncan has identified in Dickens' vision of childhood in *Dombey and Son* (1848) a kind of manifesto for romance. For Duncan, the latter would be:

a mode of imagining in which desire is disconnected from 'reason', that is, from an economy of definite objects endlessly attainable and exchangeable, for a pure receptivity of pleasure that seems to consist in the contemplation of an image of one's own simplicity and vulnerability in childhood. (Duncan, 1992: 250)

We have seen that, for Frye, romance is a kind of wish-fulfilment that aspires to transform the world of everyday life in an attempt to restore a lost Edenic state. If we accept this notion, we may wonder as to the specific characteristics of the Eden wished for by Franzen. The novelist has often referred to his current literary views as a sort of maturity or adulthood, but the cast of teenagers afflicted by the agonies of misfit adolescence, or else adults still stuck in the mesh of adolescent relationships which populate his novels suggests that, as Duncan predicates of Dickens's novel, that longed-for realm could be the uncomplicated world of childhood, a world yet untroubled by unsolvable social problems and vexing ideological contradictions: That would be a world lacking conflicts that refuse to be solved by means of well-meaning, scientifically enlightened thought. A world that is there to be theorized and where one is free from the suspicion of occupying a place in a chain of oppression. A world where one can affirm one's self by drawing a line before one's parents. A world where the young can attain the bliss of belonging to small community right behind the back of the adult world. This is the world, in sum, from which Louisa Probst and Duane Thompson, Louis Holland and Renée Seitchek, or Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield for that matter, resist being expelled, unknowing that they have already been.

### **5.3. Geophysics of the Other.**

In the formation of the widespread critical opinion that Franzen only begins to *really* worry about the private world of his characters with *The Corrections*, his widely read 2001 interview with Donald Antrim is likely to have played a part. In that interview, commenting on his third novel, Franzen admits to a shift of focus as concerns the analysis of the forces driving his characters, a turn to "interior urges and anxieties, rather than outward plot elements" (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.). Franzen sees himself as taking part in a generational shift of emphasis from an "outward-looking fiction" to a more domestic-oriented novel:

Within American literature you find the venturing-forthness in Twain and Hemingway, the at-homeness in Wharton and O'Connor. The dichotomy is gender-specified to some extent. But I feel like I'm essentially participating in one of those swings, a swing away from the boys-will-be-boys *Huck Finn* thing, which is how you can view Pynchon, as adventures for boys out in the world. At a certain point, you get tired of all that. You come home. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

These remarks on American fiction are consistent with Leslie Fiedler's views, expressed in his classic study *Love and Death in the American Novel*. For Fiedler, the impulse to escape from society into nature, or even into nightmare if it needs be, which is so characteristic of American fiction and was memorably represented by Huck Finn's invitation to "light out for the territory", actually amounts to an urge to avoid "the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage and responsibility" (Fiedler, 1966: 26). It is striking then to notice how *Strong Motion* is also conspicuously about the confrontation of a man and a woman, a fact which overtly contradicts the commonly agreed-upon view of the novel and the position assigned to it within Franzen's trajectory.

It is obvious that the relationship between Louis and Renée is one of the main concerns of the novel. Through their story Franzen conducts a rather unsentimental exploration of love relations. As in his subsequent novels, especially in *Freedom*, Franzen portrays love as a tectonic-like slow and painful process of accommodation of two radically different subjectivities, until they are finally driven together to an always unstable match by the forces of mutual need. In *Subjects of Desire*, Judith Butler discusses this necessity of the other in the light of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* in terms consistent with Franzen's view:

The reflection of the subject in and through the Other is achieved through the process of reciprocal recognition, and this recognition proves to be—in the terms of that section—a satisfaction of desire. Our task is to understand the project of desire—the negation and assimilation of otherness and the concomitant expansion of the proper domain of the subject—in the encounter with another subject with a structurally identical set of aims (Butler and Salih, 2004: 73).

According to Butler, the subject embarks in a narcissistic seek of recognition in the other, as it discovers that implicit in its own identity as a desiring being is the

necessity of being claimed by another. However, the project is full of traps and perils, since the other is always a potential site of enslavement and engulfment for the subject. Thus, at the beginning of their affair Louis suffers from the pangs of non-recognition:

He wondered why he had to feel so alone when they made love, so alone with her pleasure as he propelled the long wave train that led to her satisfaction (on the green plotting screen in the computer room she'd shown him what a large and distant earthquake looked like as it registered on the department's digital seismograph ... It wasn't that they didn't fit together or come enough; it just seemed as if at no point, not even in this most typical of acts between sexes, did she ever present herself or give herself or even let him see her as a woman. (SM 209)

In order to escape this kind of trap, the subject proceeds to adopt what Hegel views as the role of the Lord, while the other must in turn be reified to become a bondman if the Lord is to prevail. The urge of the subject is actually to annihilate the other that threatens the subject's identity but, since as we have seen this identity is already compromised in the other, its destruction would wreck the subject's project. Domination then appears as a substitute for the death of the other. This entails the obscuring of the sameness of the other and of the mutual dependency that holds them together. This game certainly requires a dose of cruelty which the subject disguises both to the other and itself:

He was perplexed by her stubbornness. He honestly believed that she'd be a happier person if she could loosen up a little; but all he got for his pains was the feeling that he was an odious Male. Of course, maybe he *was* an odious Male. The odious Male seeking control over a virtuous and difficult woman won't scruple to exploit whatever weakness he can find in her—her age, her mannerisms, her insecurity, and her loneliness above all. He can be as cowardly and cruel as he wants to as long as logic is on his side. And the woman, yielding to his logic, can do no more to save her pride than demand his fidelity. She says: "You've humiliated me and won me now, so you'd better not hurt me." But hurting her is precisely what the man is tempted to do, because now that she has yielded he feels contempt for her, and he also knows that if he hurts her she'll become virtuous and difficult again ... These archetypes forced entry to the

apartment on Pleasant Avenue like vulgar relatives. Louis wanted to turn them away, but it's not so easy to slam the door in your relatives' faces. (SM 194)

And, of course, Louis does hurt Renée, leaving her for a younger, prettier girl. When Lauren finds him, Louis joins her as if compelled by an irresistible urge. It is partly the overwhelming impulse, shared by other Franzen's characters, to have an old debt from adolescence repaid. But there is also the titillating intoxication of domination and cruelty: "He was aware of making a mistake, but he had no control. He was fascinated by the pain in Renée's face. He was finally seeing her. She was finally naked" (SM 215).

However, as Louis painfully discovers, maddening Lauren, troubled by psychic—also family-rooted, as we have seen—problems of her own, is not available for recognition; and when he learns that Renée has been shot almost to death he finds himself literally undone. Circumstances lead him then to what Butler describes as an understanding of the Other as co-author of the self (Butler and Salih, 2004: 77), and even to abjectly reclaim a bondman's role for himself. Louis then begins a process of atonement as Renée's caregiver during the recovery of her wounds, discovering a sense of purpose in being needed, finding the solace and strength bestowed by self-denial and sacrifice:

[Three months ago] He would have sneered at a person who said that love could teach him the many specific skills that constitute patience and grace, and certainly at the person who said that love was a gold ring which if grasped carried you upward with a force comparable in strength to the forces of nature. But this is exactly what he felt now, and the only question was why, when he was by himself or outside the apartment, his life with Renée still felt like such a sorrow. (SM 486)

It is remarkable how often in Franzen's novels the yearned-for recognition of the self by the other, the relentless need it seeks to satisfy in the encounter, ultimately boils down to the modest, but nonetheless indispensable reassurance of being needed. When confidence and self-esteem falter, we absolutely need to feel needed. However, the consolation obtained in such circumstances will obviously always feel precarious. Indeed, the fear of otherness is still there for Louis, now literally at Renée's mercy:

She wasn't someone he knew, this underweight woman with the hectic face and overgrown hair and wire-frame glasses. A deft change had been effected, and no fraud was involved—the woman was clearly who she seemed to be. She just wasn't the ghost made of memories and expectations that he had seen at breakfast. (SM 494)

Albeit reluctantly, Louis is finally accepted back by Renée, since after all her need for recognition is also still there, even more demanding than before after the insecurity brought about by Louis' defection and the sequels of her wounds. As in the end of *Freedom*, there is room for a disenchanted kind of hope in the state arrived at by Louis and Renée at the end of the novel. It has taken painful upheavals but finally Renée and especially Louis have reconciled with both the radical alterity of the other and the power of that other over the self. In such a state, as Butler argues, “desire here loses its character as a purely consumptive activity and becomes characterized by the ambiguity of an exchange in which two self-consciousnesses affirm their respective autonomy (independence) and alienation (otherness)” (Butler and Salih, 2004: 77).

*Strong Motion* is perceptibly constructed upon a set of analogies relating the self and the earth. In this way, the ultimately non-cognizable character of the other is invoked in the novel by the repeated allusions to seismic activity as a process “not well understood” (SM 476). “The science of earthquakes is a science of uncertainties”, Renée acknowledges (SM 211). And just as scientists can never be wholeheartedly sure of what goes on under the surface of the earth (which, by the way, constitutes Sweeting-Aldren's line of defence to deny responsibility for the tremors), we can never be certain as to whatever processes are taking place in the other or, perhaps even more disquieting, under our own outer crust. Even our memory may be affected by seismic-like alterations in its configuration:

Similar upheavals and subsidences were occurring in the landscape of his memory, familiar landmarks dropping out of sight, replaced by remembered scenes of a nature so radically different that he was almost surprised to realize that these things, too, had had a place in his life. (SM 180)

In this analogical system, a central symbolic part is played by the well drilled by Sweeting-Aldren. The well thus transcends the more obvious allusion to the environmental damage caused by capitalism that may have made reviewers frown, to

become a symbol of the self's relation to the other. The well was at first an oil prospect exploration, just as most initiatives upon the other seek to satisfy a subject's need, and subsequently it comes to represent the channel for the destabilizing, unpredictable intrusion of the other into the self. An encroachment which cannot but cause inner commotions and rearrangements. Sweeting-Aldren's injection well becomes then a particular instance of what J. Hillis Miller has described as the *anastomosis* of human relations, the pervading linear imagery in the depiction of interpersonal connection which, according to Miller, is always implicitly sexual since, indeed, "[i]n one way or another it refers, however obscurely, to the act of coupling copulation" (Miller, 1992: 147). In the same way, linearity is also characteristic of the seismic waves produced by the inner tremors that accompany the confrontation with the other—tremors which for Louis, as we have seen, reach a peak during sexual interaction (SM 209). However, ultimately there seems to be little to be learned from such personal upheavals, since the other must remain fundamentally unknown: "You can make recordings of strong motion, though unfortunately everything's so complicated by the local geological context that it's hard to extract much information about the earthquake itself" (SM 184). And since the novel tends to adopt Louis' perspective in the presentation of his relation to Renée (a position of "default gender" acknowledged in the title of its first section), in *Strong Motion* that unknown other is fundamentally female: the enigmatic target for male analytical discourse engaged in a debate in which women are denied a stake. "Women, Science's Unknown," as Luce Irigaray famously points out at the beginning of *Speculum of the Other Woman*.<sup>91</sup>

Telluric analogies are thus evident in the novel's depiction of sexual intercourse, that most evident site of encounter with the other. As if he were sticking to Fiedler's catalogue of traditional neglects of the American novel (and by the same token rebutting his commentators), Franzen grants sex a central part in *Strong Motion*. Sex is another battlefield for the subjugation and self-satisfaction struggles described above:

Always it seemed to suit some obscure purpose of hers to have the two of them be the same sex, excitable through matching nerves and satiable through

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<sup>91</sup> In her essay, Irigaray challenges Freud's male-oriented approach to femininity: "So it would be a case of you men speaking among yourselves about woman, who cannot be involved in hearing or producing a discourse that concerns the *riddle*, the logograph she represents for you. The enigma that *is* woman will therefore constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate about men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which, ultimately, she is not supposed to know anything about" (Irigaray, 1985: 13).

matching stimulation. Some principle of seduction, some acknowledging of difference was missing. And it seemed as if whenever she sensed that he felt an absence she started talking, in a voice orgasm-drunk and lulling—pro him, pro them, pro-sex. (SM 210)

Franzen also draws a parallelism between earthquakes and the personal upheavals that sexual intercourse may unleash: “It was still dark when he woke up DR. RENÉE SEITCHEK, whose internal anatomy he imagined had been rearranged in the escalating violence of their union” (SM 133). Similarly, as if in response to the conspicuous hunger for actual events that transpires in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, discussed above, in *Strong Motion* the exhilaration produced by the experience of a tremor is more than once attributed orgasmic qualities. Thus, Renée recounts a seismic episode in terms that recall the “cosmic libido” attributed to women by Hélène Cixous (Cixous, 1976: 889): “That’s exactly what this event was like. It was this *thing* coming across the mountains, this visible rolling wave, and then suddenly we were in it” (SM 133); or, in Bob Holland’s explicit words, “And just when I thought it was over, it all *intensified*, wonderful, wonderful, this final climax—Like she was coming! Like the whole earth was coming!” (SM 83)

#### **5.4. Natural history and historical nature.**

In accordance with the novel’s analogy between the earth and the self, its environmental concerns are matched by an obvious interest in the human body. Indeed, Franzen seems to unabashedly revel in corporeality. This interest is not only apparent in the novel’s sex scenes, which are characterized by a matter-of-fact, T.S. Eliot-like ironic tone that is the result of the abrupt juxtaposition of the abstract and the explicit. Franzen’s concern is also evident in his focus on Renée’s physical pain and her wounded body that eventually comes to stand for the ravaged body of the earth. A body which, like Renée’s, has been forced to barrenness by (male) iniquity. In this way, in the course of his process of atonement for the wound inflicted to her, Louis kisses Renée’s geological, fault-like scars like a saintly penitent (SM 497). Physicality is also conspicuous in the presentation of Renée’s abortion, also characterized by a grim, disturbing mixture of matter-of-factness and dark irony:

In the adjacent room the table had been set for her, with a smaller side table for Dr. Wang, the essential stainless flatware gleaming on a paper placemat. No fish knife, no soup spoon—it was a one course meal ... The speculum was inserted; it said: “This may pinch a little.” The tenaculum was applied, chlorprocaine hydrochloride administered by needle. With her slender, nimble fingers Dr. Wang tore the sterile paper wrapping from a 6-millimeter cannula.

K-Y jelly applied. Vacuum cleaner activated, hose attached. In and out the cannula went. In and out, up and down. A revelation was the scraping sound it made. It wasn’t a sound you expected from a body; it was the sound of an inanimate object, a trowel scraping the side of a plastic bucket, the last drops of milkshake being sucked from a waxed-paper cup. In and out the cannula went. Ruff, ruff, said the uterus. (SM 349)

The abortion is really the last straw for Renée, who during the last frantic weeks has had to endure the shock of Louis leaving her, the relentless harassment of antiabortionists and the threats of Sweeting-Aldren employees. Outside the clinic after the operation, a shaken Renée addresses a crowd of protesters with a loudspeaker and acknowledges her abortion. Just as Cixous exhorts women to do, she defies discourse restrictions on women’s speech in the male-dominated public space and makes an impassionate defence of women under such circumstances.<sup>92</sup> Soon afterwards, she has a moment of mystic-like communion with nature on occasion of a thunderstorm:

Behind her, in a part of the sky that she was too enervated to turn to see, an eclipse-like darkness gathered. The trees were in constant motion, all the sounds from Oxford Street landing in pieces well to the north, but still the ground was dry, and people in dry clothes were in the sidewalk, and the air was warm and filled with petals and green leaves. She thought she’d never breathed more beautiful air. She felt badness draining out of her. The weather, which was nature’s, had taken over the green spaces and paved spaces between buildings.

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<sup>92</sup> There is a perceptible resonance between Renée’s speech and Cixous’ urging in *Laugh of the Medusa*: “It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence ... Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn’t painfully lost her wind). She doesn’t “speak,” she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the “logic” of her speech. Her flesh speaks true” (Cixous, 1976: 881).

The air smelled of midsummer and late afternoon and love, and the temperature was so exactly the temperature of her skin that being in it was like being in nothing, or meeting no boundary between herself and the world. (SM 350)

Mysticism in women has been the concern of feminist theory, where it has sometimes been regarded as a sign of resistance to hegemonic male-oriented ideology. For critics such as Luce Irigaray (1985), the mystic experience amounts to an escape from the constraints imposed by male-dominated discourse; an expression of the yearning for an access to the self, the body, and hence nature—of which the body is seen as a part—that is not mediated by the limiting, repressive structures of what Cixous has referred to as *phallogocentrism*.<sup>93</sup> This is not the place to examine the feasibility of such unmediated experience but, in any case, Renée's rationalist mind is not suited to mystic abandon. Inevitably then, the episode must be short-lived, although apparently the longing for wholeness is bound to linger on:

She wanted to embrace it all by breathing it, but she felt that she could never breathe deeply enough, just as sometimes she thought she could never be close enough physically to a person she loved.

She wondered: what exactly did she love here? Thunder echoed and leaves followed spiral tracks into the dark green sky. Watching her mind from a safe ironic distance, she formed the thought: *Thank you for making me alive to be here*. It rang false, but not completely false. She tried again: *Thank you for this world*. (SM 350)

In the identification of Renée's body with the earth, and her predicament with environmental damage, the novel seems to specifically address the concerns of ecofeminism, a heterogeneous intellectual movement which underscores the connections between women's subjection and environmental destruction. For ecofeminism, a trend which has been acquiring visible academic presence since the 1990s, both women and the environment suffer from oppression by Western patriarchal society. This movement also argues a special relation between women and nature which

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<sup>93</sup> Renée Seitchek's experience has a strikingly similar precedent in the unnamed narrator of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972). In this novel, after an accumulation of painful and stressing circumstances that also include a traumatic abortion, the narrator undertakes a process of withdrawal from social and ideological conventions which are seen as fundamentally repressive and sexist to gradually approach a state envisioned as of communion with nature.

is founded on traditional interactions and holistic modes of thought that are considered typically feminine. For ecofeminists, this relation is repressed by a patriarchal ideology which relies on male-oriented concepts of logic and reason supporting a whole system of domination and exploitation. Allusions to this oppressive form of discourse are explicit in an already discussed excerpt (SM 194). However, to limit Franzen's environmental views to this consonance with ecofeminist tenets, as Burn (2008) implies, is to offer an incomplete picture.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, from the analogy drawn in the novel between the earth and the female body we should not infer an actual endorsement of any essentialist or mystic-like positions such as those present in the ecofeminist movement, or more conspicuously in the Gaia theories advanced by James Lovelock. Rather, Franzen's use of these symbols is fundamentally aimed at the creation of an aesthetic resonance, a hermeneutic richness, as is the case with the play of parallelisms between *The Twenty-Seventh City* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Then, just as in his first novel Franzen strived for historicity in his account of the decay of St. Louis, in spite of the numerous allusions to the legend of the Grail, in *Strong Motion* he is also decidedly historical in his view of ecological transformation. In fact, it is easy to see the novel's mockery of New Age esoteric visions of nature, represented by the character of Rita Kernaghan and her followers, as a way of dismissing ahistorical approaches. In marked contrast, Franzen's approach to nature is consistent with Raymond Williams' views on the subject: "A considerable part of what we call natural landscape ... is the product of human design and human labour, and in admiring it as natural it matters very much whether we suppress that fact of labour or acknowledge it" (Williams, 2005: 78). Franzen even seems to follow the British thinker in conceiving of economics and ecology as one single discipline, as Williams proposed (2005: 84). In any case, as Franzen declares in the acknowledgements to the novel, the environmental views expressed in *Strong Motion*, most explicitly in chapter thirteen through the speech of Bob Holland, are basically informed by the work of the environmental historian William Cronon. In his classic *Changes in the Land* (1983), Cronon analyses the way in which New England's environment, and subsequently the rest of what was to become

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<sup>94</sup> In his monograph, Burn pertinently identifies the affinities between ecofeminist positions and the novel's concerns. He is also right in noticing that the essentialism of ecofeminism—what he describes as "the very neatness of the dualities outlined by ecofeminism" (Burn, 2008: 74)—matches very uneasily Franzen's more complex vision. For Burn, Franzen complicates the linearity of ecofeminism with his "use of chaos theory and the systemic form of *Strong Motion*" (2008: 74). What Burn seems to overlook, in any case, is the key element of the *historicity* of Franzen's environmental approach.

the United States were dramatically transformed by the new (capitalist) patterns of economic activity brought by European colonists. Cronon contrasts the different conceptions of property held by Native American and colonists, and their respective environmental effects. Contrary to what is usually believed, Cronon shows how before the arrival of the Europeans, Native Americans took an active part in changing and shaping New England's ecosystems to their benefit. However, being alien to the concept of property over the land, their use of it was characterized by communality and sustainability, in contrast with the capitalist system of ownership followed by exploitation until exhaustion practiced by Europeans. As Raymond Williams puts it, "Once we begin to speak of men mixing their labour with the earth, we are in a whole world of new relations between man and nature, and to separate natural history from social history becomes extremely problematic" (Williams, 2005: 76). Accordingly, Bob Holland's free indirect speech rendering of the story has an unsurprising Marxist character: it is the story of the transformation of New England's natural resources into private wealth by exploited labour. A tale, in short, of reification:

If you'd look very closely, though, you would have seen that the wealth had merely been transformed and concentrated. All the beavers that had ever drawn breath in Franklin County, Massachusetts, had been transmuted into one solid-silver tea service in a parlor on Myrtle Street in Boston. The towering white pines from ten thousand square miles of Commonwealth had together built one block of brick town houses on Beacon Hill, with high windows and a fleet of carriages, chandeliers from Paris and settees upholstered in Chinese silk, all of it occupying less than an acre. A plot of land that had once supported five Indians in comfort was condensed into a gold ring on the finger of Isaiah Dennis, the great-uncle of Melanie Holland's grandfather.

And when New England had been fully drained—when its original abundance had shrunk into a handful of neighbors so compact that a god could have hidden them from sight with his fingertips—then the poor English farmers who had become poor American farmers flocked to the cities and became poor workers in the foundries and cotton mills that the holders of concentrated wealth were building to increase their income. (SM 381)

It can be argued that just as *The Twenty-Seventh City*'s critical investment was ironically undermined by its collapsing plot, the credibility of Holland's views is to some extent weakened by his portrait in the novel: another withdrawn, non-supporting father with a dominant wife, and a classic example of an ineffective intellectual of the Left. However, rather than suggest a fundamental disagreement between Holland's ideas and the novelist's own views, this characterization seems to attest to Franzen's will to endow all his characters with a significant background, giving them complexity and depth. In addition, the character of Professor Holland affords Franzen the opportunity to make a few points on the current condition of the political Left and certain ideological trends in American university quarters. Holland is part of what the rest of the faculty and students call "the Old Drones", a rather unimportant group of Marxist professors forever nostalgic of the 1960s and wholly displaced from all academic decision-making now. It is significant that the childishly rebellious Old Drones are an exclusively male bunch, and their marginalization is a telling sign of the current balance of power in American colleges, changed by the rise of identity-based studies. Be it as it may, Bob Holland's historic-environmental reflections are determinedly endorsed by the narrating voice. In this way, for example, Samuel Dennis' office in Boston is thus described:

It was the terminus of various income streams rising in the mill towns—streams that by 1920 were showing a propensity to silt up and run dry—and was the depot of old, old dollars: dollars with beaver blood on them (and mink blood and cod blood), dollars that smelled of black pepper and Jamaican rum, piney dollars from clear-cut Dennis landholdings, rusty war dollars, dollars damp and sour with the sweat of female loom operators, odd dollars of obscure provenance which at some point had decided to come along for the ride, all the dollars encrusted with long-compounded interest and no dollar, no matter how musty, any less a dollar than all the rest. Certainly a democratic nation's stock market made no distinction between old wealth and new. (SM 383)

Through chapter thirteen, similar disquisitions by the narrating voice are subtly juxtaposed and intertwined with Bob Holland's concurring explanations, to the point that it requires an attentive reading to extricate each one's contributions. Thus, argumentations by the novel's narrating voice are continued in corroborating way by Holland's exposition:

Every market has its winners and losers; sadly for the Indians, the sterling turned out to be a better investment than the wampum. And in the course of attaching abstract sterling prices to abstract parcels of real estate, the smartest of the Englishmen learned to live off the land with even less labor than the king-like Indians had: by buying low and selling high.

“A major question about the seventeenth century,” Bob said, “is whether the economy was subsistence-oriented, or whether there was already a capitalist mentality, and if there was capitalism, then how sophisticated was it.” (SM 377)

This practice certainly produces a conflation of narratorial and character speech which is noticeable through Franzen’s novels. Bob Holland—a man for whom “driving a car was an act of personal immorality” (SM 33), and a clear forerunner in his environmentalism of Walter Berglund in *Freedom*—extrapolates New England’s unsustainable development to a world-wide scale economics. In this move we notice Franzen’s interest in global processes, which was already hinted at in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and was to be the object of much critical commentary upon publication of *The Corrections*. This interest may be best understood in the light of Franzen’s formal evolution: if a fully-fledged realism must aspire to render a (however necessarily partial) view of totality in its Lukácsian sense, a global perspective is a logical objective:

“Because after all,” Bob said, “any wealth gained by a person beyond what he can produce by his own labour *must* have come at the expense of nature or at the expense of another person. Look around. Look at our house, our car, our bank accounts, our clothes, our eating habits, our appliances ... Even if you’re not rich you’re living in the red. Indebted to Malaysian textile workers and Korean circuit assemblers and Haitian sugarcane cutters who live six to a room. Indebted to a bank, indebted to the earth from which you’ve withdrawn oil and coal and natural gas that no one can ever put back ... Indebted to the air and water, indebted by proxy to Japanese and German bond investors. Indebted to the great-grandchildren that will be paying for your conveniences when you’re dead.” (SM 382)

As it may be readily observed, in this chapter the novel’s critical arguments acquire a markedly discursive, “external” character which contrasts with the more

integrated—even if not strictly *verisimilar*—quality of *The Twenty-Seventh City*'s socio-political critique. Probably to make up for this discursiveness, Franzen opens the chapter, in true postmodern pastiche fashion, with a humorous passage in mock seventeenth-century English in which he parodies the classic description of New England offered by the English traveller William Wood in his *New England's Prospect* (1634). In this work, Wood laid the foundations for that enduring vision of New England as a fallen Eden that would haunt later writers such as Thoreau:

The Countrey, according to the first Englishmen to see it, more resembled a boundless green *Parke* than a *Wildernesse*. From the rocky shores inland as farre as a man could journey in a week, there stretched a Forrest suche as teemed with Dere and Elke and Beares and Foxes (SM 375).

It would seem that in *Strong Motion* Franzen's intention is to take full advantage of the standpoint provided by a decidedly historical kind of environmentalism in his indictment of capitalism, which is depicted as a system based on ruthless, unsustainable domination and exploitation of both people and nature. Then, both environmentalism and feminism reveal themselves as usable critical tools to forge a way out of the apparent political deadlock arrived at by contemporary left-wing positions, a dead end which was so visibly invoked in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. In addition, it is interesting to notice how Franzen seems to strive for an *inclusive* depiction of nature, one that seeks to trace and reveal those areas of nature which our culture tends to obscure. Raymond Williams argued that the dominant vision of nature in our age is one of a realm that is separate from the human sphere. A perceived separation which is paradoxically the product of the endless, inextricable interaction with nature which characterizes the industrialized modern world:

The point that has really to be made about the separation between man and nature which is characteristic of so many modern ideas is that—however hard this may be to express—the separation is a function of an increasing real interaction. It is easy to feel a limited unity on the basis of limited relationships whether in animism, in monotheism, or in modern forms of pantheism. It is only when the real relations are extremely active, diverse, self-conscious, and in effect continuous—as our relations with the physical world can be seen to be in

our own day—that the separation of human nature from nature becomes really problematic. (Williams, 2005: 83)

On the other hand, in late capitalist societies, this separation of the human from the natural realm has been followed by what Fredric Jameson has called “the eclipse of nature” (Jameson, 1991: 34-5), the all but complete subsumption of nature under the relentless contemporary expansion of *culture*. Just like the suburban sprawl has incorporated rural and natural areas, turning them into what Debord saw as a pseudo-rural ahistorical environment, the enormous expansion undergone by the sphere of culture—which is to say a realm of production for the market—has reduced nature to a catalogue of commodified images ready to be consumed, a collection of souvenirs.

As if to counter this pattern of estrangement and commodification of nature, Franzen not only draws parallelisms between the earth and the body, but is always ready to remind us of our adscription to the physical world, as we have seen.<sup>95</sup> He also shows that what we usually conceive as “natural” is actually the product of human activity, as his discussion of the transformation of New England’s landscape clearly exemplifies. Besides, Franzen underscores the presence of nature where it is usually no longer noticed:

In Somerville, meanwhile, it was springtime. In one sunny day, when no one was looking, fully grown grass had appeared all over the seven hills, shaggy patches of it suddenly occupying every lawn and traffic island. It was like some garish chlorophyll-colored trash that had been dumped on top of the town’s more indigenous ground cover. (SM 87)

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<sup>95</sup> Franzen’s extensive use of scientific discourse in narratorial discussion of characters seems to corroborate this inclusion of the human in nature. For example, “The time it took him to drive to work ... was the same amount of time his juice and coffee needed to percolate down through kidneys and bladder and send him straight to the men’s room at WSNE” (SM 93-4). Then, love between Louis and Renée is discussed in terms of nuclear interaction: “It was as if, in nuclear terms, the configuration of forces had changed and he was no longer an oppositely charged particle attracted to her from a great distance, but a particle with like charge, a proton repelled by this other proton until they were right next to each other and the strong nuclear force came into its own and bound them together” (SM 181). Scientific discourse used in characterization will achieve even more prominence in *The Corrections*, where neurochemistry is given a central role in the plot and the understanding of characters, as we will see. This kind of discourse is also put to poignant use in his 2001 essay “My Father’s Brain” (included in Franzen 2002), where Franzen discusses a neuropathologist’s report on the brain autopsy of his father, deceased as a consequence of Alzheimer’s disease.

This “more indigenous ground cover” is actually a long, typically postmodernist enumeration of random pieces of rubbish uncovered by the thaw of winter snow (SM 88) which is—like the detailed account of the contents of the Gladneys trash can in DeLillo’s *White Noise* discussed above—ultimately a kind of medical sample, an analysis of social workings. Be it as it may, spring calls forth green sprouts in forgotten urban plots of lawn, to the rather cold reception of a so far unshaken Louis: “Louis didn’t understand these spaces. Why astroturf and plastic trees weren’t used instead” (SM 94-5). Louis does not understand nature, of course, as we have replaced it by an artificial environment which has long become our true nature, to the extent that it lends itself to the use of the pathetic fallacy:

There’s a specific damp and melancholy ancient smell that comes out in Boston after sunset, when the weather is cool and windless. Convection skims it off the ecologically disrupted water of the Mystic and the Charles and the lakes. The shuttered mills and mothballed plants in Waltham leak it. It’s the breath from the mouths of old tunnels, the spirit rising from piles of soot-dulled glass and the ballast of old railbeds, ... In a city where there is no land that has not been changed, this is the smell that has come to be primordial, the smell of the nature that has taken nature’s place. Flowers still bloom, mown grass and falling snow still alter the air periodically. But their smells are superimposed; sentimental; younger than those patiently outlasting emanations from the undersides of bridges and the rubble of a thousand embankments ... the smell of infrastructure. (SM 191)<sup>96</sup>

Money may not smell then, but the accoutrements required for the accumulation of capital certainly do. However, under the filth of the images, it is possible to sense a note of sympathy for the decaying and abandoned pieces of infrastructure. Infrastructure is, after all, an expression of planned, collective vision perdurable in time and, as such, as Robbins (2007) has pointed out, it may stand for values of stability and community-building that are currently being dissolved in advanced modernity, paradoxically under the anomie and the disintegrating forces that are inherent to the same capitalism that

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<sup>96</sup> Perhaps the clearest symbol in the novel of the vanishing of nature before human pressure is the urbanite racoon that takes to visit Renée’s apartment: in chapter eleven, which is both hilarious and moving, perhaps intended as another touch of playfulness to make up for the more discursive passages, Franzen’s renders the precarious life of the animal among the perils and filth of urban life from its own point of view, in a sympathetic yet unsentimental fashion that avoids anthropomorphism.

produced this same infrastructure in the first place. Here we find, again, Franzen's conflicted nostalgia for the industrial age: a tension between the sympathetic evocation of a communitarian dimension which was present in traditional industrial society and is perceived as lost in the world of late capitalism, and on the other hand the uneasy awareness of the environmental, social and ideological contradictions that used to characterize the previous phase of our mode of production.

### **5.5. The quest for truth in *Risikogesellschaft*.**

A frequent trait of Franzen's human habitats is their potential toxicity, which is made all the more disquieting because of the diffuse, uncertain quality of the threat. In his depiction of toxic menace, Franzen follows closely again the example of DeLillo's *White Noise* and its "airborne toxic event". DeLillo's novel contains one of the sharpest novelistic illustrations of Ulrich Beck's notion of contemporary society as *risk society*, as the following excerpt shows. Its influence on Franzen is apparent:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish, the foam insulation, the electrical insulation, the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers, the asbestos fireproofing, the adhesive on shipping containers, the fumes from the chlorinated pool, or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (DeLillo, 1984: 35)

Similarly, in *Strong Motion* we at first find mysterious spills of "greenish effluent" (SM 91) and finally, like in DeLillo's novel, we discover a whole "plume" escaping from the damaged facilities of Sweeting-Aldren, spreading chemical waste all over the surrounding residential areas, where it is also feared that the earthquake has caused a radioactive spill from the nearby nuclear plant (SM 465). All these events are answered by authorities with the deployment of fearful officials dressed in Mylar suits and a lack of information which naturally contributes to public alarm (SM 472). Significant of the prominence acquired in contemporary culture by the ever-present threat of toxic emergencies is the presence at Eileen's fancy-dress party of a guest clad

in a Mylar suit. We can see then that the affinities between Franzen's social portrait and the Beck's analysis are remarkable. For Beck, advanced modernity is defined by the pervading presence of risks which are the result of productive processes. Beck draws a fundamental distinction between contemporary risks and the different types of danger that have threatened human life in previous historical stages. As he argues, contemporary risks are "*hazards and insecurities introduced by modernization itself*." Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt. They are *politically reflexive*." (Beck, 1992: 21, italics in the original) One of the defining characteristics of the risks produced by modernization is that their identification, the assessment of their consequences and ultimately the political decisions concerning their legal definition and limitation are always dependent on scientific knowledge. This fact, far from warranting rationality in the management of risks, opens the door for unsolvable problems which are the product in the first place of the intractable difficulty of scientifically assessing the risks, which involves the impossibility of arriving at an indisputable scientific truth about them; secondly, of the opposite interests of the producers of risks and those affected by them; and finally of the crucial fact that science has ceased to be (if ever was) a universally accepted epistemological foundation for any political decision concerning risks. As Beck has argued, contemporary society is characterized by complete *scientization*, and this unprecedented expansion of science inevitably becomes *reflexive* and brings about its own critique and eventual undermining as a foundational discourse. As a consequence, according to Beck, "a momentous *demonopolization of scientific knowledge claims* comes about: science becomes more and more *necessary*, but at the same time, *less and less sufficient* for the socially binding definition of truth" (Beck, 1992: 156). This is apparent in the novel when the accusative claims put forth against Sweeting-Aldren by Renée, drawn by means of science and presented in scientific discourse, are denied by other scientific quarters using the same type of language: "Almost no one in seismology would absolutely guarantee that Boston had seen the last of strong motion. The sole exception was Mass Geostudy, a private research venture sponsored by the Army Corps of Engineers and the nuclear power industry" (SM 247). As Beck argues, science proves capable of being used to defend opposite views on the same issue, bringing about what the German sociologist calls a *feudalization* of its cognitive practice (Beck, 1992: 168). The ensuing inconclusiveness produces a type of impasse that is all too familiar in advanced modernity and cannot but

be in the benefit of the producers of risks. According to Beck (1992: 45-46), in the conflict between the producers of risks and those affected by them, the logic of wealth production tends to win, supported by an interested use of scientific discourse which denies or downplays the hazards. From another point of view, as it happens in *White Noise*, *Strong Motion* demonstrates another one of Beck's arguments about risk society, namely that the logic of risk distribution differs from that of wealth production in that the risks of modernization often contain a "boomerang effect" that overrides class and national distinctions (1992: 23). This is the case of the damage produced by the last and strongest of the earthquakes induced by Sweeting-Aldren's activities.

Interestingly, in the novel Franzen draws a parallelism between toxic hazard and another great contemporary source of social risk and uncertainty: the job market, characterized by an ongoing decline of the value of labour and increasing insecurity. According to Beck, two fundamental axes of living of the industrial age, standardized wage labour and the nuclear family, are being dissolved in advanced modernity, losing thus their former protective functions. Beck defines this process as the transition from a system of standardized full employment to a system of flexible and pluralized unemployment (Beck, 1992: 140), a new, hazardous environment which Louis is well acquainted with:

To Louis, all the thousands of jobs listed in the paper seemed like noxious effluents that the companies were trying to pay people to get off their hands ... He could feel their anger at the expense of disposing of all this garbage. The top executives dumped the problem on the personnel department, and the people in personnel wore plastic suits easily mistaken for faces and personalities. Their job was to handle the poisonous but inevitable employment by-products without letting them come in contact with their skin. (SM 146)

Significantly, set against these artificial, hazardous and for the most part decaying urban milieus, in Franzen's novels there is a recurrence of images, generally fleeting, of secluded landscapes unspoiled by human presence. This is clearly the case of the birdlife reserve planned by Walter Berglund in *Freedom*. In some cases, nature slowly regains the land that was conquered by humans. It is the case of Buzz Wismer's hunting enclosure in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and it is also an implied potential destiny in that novel for much of what is occupied and built by humans, as we discussed in the

previous chapter. Bob Holland himself, that putative spokesman for Franzen's views in *Strong Motion*, has allowed his front and backyard to revert to original prairie state. Even if it is easy to charge Franzen with a measure of misanthropy here, such as the one displayed by Walter Berglund, it is also possible to identify a Utopian yearning. If, according to Jameson, late capitalism has been defined by an enormous expansion of capital and a colonization of previously un-commodified areas such as nature, the Third World or even the unconscious (Jameson, 1991: 36), if then there is no longer an outside from the being of capital, Franzen's penchant for intact, unpopulated or just plainly deserted spaces is an expression of the wish for such an outside. This comes to remind us once again of the *artificial*—that is, articulated by human beings—character of the concept of nature. As in Franzen's first novel, but now much more explicitly, in *Strong Motion* Native Americans provide a model for a non-capitalist—and by the same token supposedly community-focused—way of relating to nature. These allusions can be inscribed in a central literary myth in American literature, whereby the first inhabitants of the continent have often been depicted as forming pastoral communities. A prominent early version of this view can be found in John Fenimore Cooper's series of novels known as the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841). Raymond Williams has argued that ideas of nature are usually projected ideas of men and society (Williams, 2005: 82). If this is so, it is not difficult to recognize in Franzen's view of nature an implicit, escapist vision of a space where community is made possible by the clearance of a surrounding capitalist system which is seen as all-encompassing and unassailable. In any case, with his approach to nature Franzen joins the literary lineage of Thoreau, whose *Walden* (1854) constituted a rejection of capitalistic exploitation of natural resources that has become central in subsequent critiques of capitalism in the American context. Furthermore, Franzen seems to be positing nature as a symbolic realm of transcendence where to escape from the pervading reification brought about by our mode of production. This, of course, takes us to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his Transcendentalist manifesto *Nature* (1936), where the natural world is sacralised as a manifestation of the divine. It is ultimately a Romantic affinity which is evinced in the following passage by the faint echo of Wordsworth's *A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal*. This is Franzen's account of the consolation that Louis sometimes finds in nature for his persistent grief:

He saw that as a material thing himself he was akin to rocks. The waves in the ocean, the rain that eroded mountains, and the sand that would form the next epoch's rocks would all survive him, and in loving this nature he was doing no more than loving his own fundamental species, expressing a patriotic preference for existence over nonexistence. He felt that, if nothing else, he could always anchor himself on the rocks in the world. (SM 504)<sup>97</sup>

## 5.6. Urban novel and novelistic city.

Like all of Franzen's novels, *Strong Motion* is concerned with the city and its problems. In the previous chapter I argued, following Jameson, that the configuration of contemporary culture is such that severely restricts the possibility of realism as an available form to the writer of fiction. The transformation of closely-knit urban tissue into low-density, formless suburban environments that has characterized the advent of advanced modernity is certainly not unrelated to this difficulty. It is revealing of the intimate connection between the city and the realist novel that, once again, Franzen's dealing with urban issues brings about the crystallization of key aspects of his search for a contemporary realist vision. While the preoccupation with the city is not as centrally thematised as in his first novel, it is significant that the opening of second novel shows the same structure as that of the first one: the presentation of one of the central characters is followed by an account of the main, troubled urban setting: in this case the working-class, drab dormitory town of Somerville, near Boston. In consistence with the themes of barrenness and natural decay—mostly taken from Eliot's *The Waste Land*—that punctuate *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Somerville is referred to as a place which earlier in the century had been “the most densely populated city in the country, a demographic feat achieved by spacing the street narrowly and dispensing with parks and

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<sup>97</sup> Included in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*:

A slumber did my spirit Seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.  
No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears or sees;  
Rolled round on earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

front lawns” (SM 22). Indeed, the city’s physical and spiritual estrangement from nature is underscored from the very outset: “trees tended to be hidden behind houses or confined to square holes in the sidewalks were children tore their limbs off” (SM 22). And as nature disappears from the city, its dehumanizing quality becomes more apparent. Federico García Lorca once described his newcomer’s impression of New York as “geometría y angustia” (Lorca, 2002: 185). Similarly, almost in the way of Lorca’s *Aurora de Nueva York*, Frazen’s image of Boston’s Commercial Street is that of the blind, reifying forces of capitalism:

On Commercial Street there were a thousand windows, bleak and square unornamented windows reaching up as high as the eye cared to wander. Pale green, opaque, unblinking and excluding. There was no trash on the ground for the wind to disturb, nothing for the eye to rest on but new brick walls, new concrete pavement, and new windows. It seemed as if the only glue that kept these walls and streets from collapsing, the only force preserving these clean and impenetrable and uninspired surfaces, was deeds and rents. (SM 19)

And when the only force that binds society together is that of the “cash nexus”, the concept advanced by Carlyle and subsequently appropriated by Marx and Engels for *The Communist Manifesto*, unbearable isolation and loneliness in the city is the logical consequence:

The walking and the cold air had numbed him to the point where the entire darkening city seemed like nothing but a hard projection of an individual’s loneliness, a loneliness so deep it muted sounds—secretarial explanations, truck engines, even the straining woofers outside appliance stores—till he could hardly hear them. (SM 19)

Like Franzen’s first novel, *Strong Motion* is also concerned with suburban life and, once again, his view of the suburbs is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand we find the depressive picture of vapid, eventless tedium that was so present in *The Twenty-Seventh City*:

Dusk was falling on Monday by the time Louis returned to Wesley Avenue from an all-day walk to Lake Forest. He’d located the bland, wide house that Renée had grown up in ... Now the wind and the light had died, and Wesley Avenue

was so deserted—the whole neighborhood so obviously empty of watchful human beings—that it seemed the day might as well had never happened, or at best should have gone in record books with an asterisk. (SM 365)

But there is also the distinct fondness of one for whom the suburb has also been a home and a playground. Again we find in Franzen's topographical renditions of the suburb a quality akin to Bachelard's notion of the bourgeois house as protective and nurturing of childhood and its necessary daydreaming.<sup>98</sup> This certainly transpires in the nostalgic, affectionate depiction of the suburban houses as mothers who must helplessly see their now grown-up children leave. We can also notice, from another point of view, the inconsistency of the attribution to the suburb of a closer, almost Arcadian relation to nature—in marked contrast to the novel's depiction of Somerville—in spite of Franzen's frequently decrying the suburb's environmental unsustainability:

Exiting from Route 128 in Lynnfield, they left the daylight behind and entered a suburban twilight of shadowing trees, of still and bluey glowing lawns and fields and air untorn by any sound more violent than the swish of passing tires. Nature's appearance was inexpressibly benign here in the suburbs. She lay down and whispered like the warm surf between black-bottomed sea and parched land: between the scarred mourning woods, and the city where a new nature had taken nature's place. Lawns freely gave away their smell of grass and earth, lay comfortably naked beneath a sky that could be trusted. Each house was like a mother, silent, set back from the roads with windows lit, as an object always welcoming and sheltering, but as an object always betraying consciousness of the truth that children stop being children, that they'll leave and that an enclosure that welcomes and shelters will ache with their absence, will have ached all along because it's an object. (SM 450)

With this ambivalence in the rendering of the suburban life, which was already present in Franzen's first novel and will reappear in his subsequent fiction, Franzen dodges joining the populous ranks of (mostly male) white American novelists who have depicted the suburban experience in terms of alienation and abasement. In *White*

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<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* the predominant note is certainly dreariness and an oppressive absence of events, but there is also room for the occasional acknowledgement of homeliness (TS 264).

*Diaspora*, Catherine Jurca has described this phenomenon—whose inaugurating landmark she identifies in Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt* (1922)—as dishonestly presenting a “model of middle-classness based counterintuitively, and indeed incredibly on the experience of victimization” (Jurca, 2001: 6). For Jurca, this stance involves a fraudulent attempt to capitalize on the “empowering rhetorics of victimization” (2001: 19), while it “reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee, turns material advantages into artifacts of spiritual and cultural oppression, and sympathetically treats affluent house owners as the emotionally disposed” (2001: 9). According to Jurca’s analysis then, such kind of novel performs a distinctive ideological function in sustaining the position of prominence of the American white middle class over other social groups, a view which is consistent with the socially antagonistic character that Jameson predicates of narrative in *The Political Unconscious*.

From another point of view, Franzen’s ambivalence in his rendition of the suburbs may be understood in the light of Robert Beuka’s study of the portrait of the suburban landscape in American fiction and film. According to Beuka (2004), the depiction of suburban life in American culture has been characterized by a polarization between dystopian and utopian visions. Thus, we can find the familiar view of the suburbs as alienating strongholds of conformity and homogenization, but also visions of social perfectibility and utopian ideas of community and neighbourliness. For Beuka, such disparity of views is a consequence of the suburbs having acquired the status of what Foucault defined as “heterotopias”, that is, conceptual sites which every society produces and that act as mirrors of the culture. In Foucault’s words, quoted by Beuka, heteropia is a “kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Beuka, 2004: 7). For Beuka, in American culture the suburb “emerges as a place that reflects both an idealized image of middle-class life and specific cultural anxieties about the very elements of society that threaten this image” (2004: 7). In this sense, while Franzen’s vision of the suburban experience may not be wholly consistent, on the other hand it illuminates contemporary communitarian longings and concerns about social fragmentation, urban deterioration and environmental sustainability.

In any case, Franzen’s undeniably inclusive approach to the urban is revealing of an analytical, explanatory intention applied to an amorphous contemporary reality of sprawl, decentering and disorientation. As Jameson has observed,

Where the world system today tends toward one enormous urban system ... the very conception of the city itself and the classically urban loses its significance and no longer seems to offer any precisely limited objects of study, any specifically differentiated realities. Rather the urban becomes the social in general, and both constitute and lose themselves in a global that is not really their opposite either (as it was in the older dispensation) but something like their outer reach, their prolongation into a new kind of infinity. (Jameson, 1994: 28-29)

The novel provides us with a wide perspective of the varied urban settings existing in Greater Boston with a look especially alert to social contrast. If in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the novelist's rendering of St. Louis is mostly a picture of disintegration, in *Strong Motion* Boston and its vicinity conform a picture of social inequality and pervading dirt which reflects the human and environmental effects of industrial capitalism. In this sense, in her comings and goings around Boston's area as she tries to uncover Sweeting-Aldren's conspiracy, Renée becomes a Balzacian *flâneuse* of sorts, registering the different urban environments. For example, she walks down decaying areas in Peabody:

She cruised the working people's neighbourhood behind the bank building, past white bungalows nearing condemnation, through varying concentrations of acetone fumes, up and down all the streets that dead-ended against the high corporate fence with its sign saying ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING. (SM 306)

As we have seen, Jameson has argued the contemporary necessity of regaining a sense of orientation in a multidimensional and constantly changing social totality which seems more overwhelming than ever, a procedure that he has termed cognitive mapping. The American theorist built his contention as an extrapolation of Kevin Lynch's study of the psychological effect of urban organization and cityscapes, to which he incorporated Althusser's insight on ideology (Jameson, 1991: 51-54). In this orientational task, the novel has a crucial role. And even if the objectives of the mapping are ultimately global, the endeavour must be locally rooted or even more precisely, urban-focused: totality begins at home, and a global scope is inane without an understanding of local power configurations, as Franzen's first novel shows. Quite

fittingly then, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* Franzen includes a map of St. Louis and its surrounding counties while in *Strong Motion*, Renée provides us with an actual bird's-eye view from a small plane in the course of her investigations of Sweeting-Aldren malfeasance:

Proud mansions spread their green velvet skirts on land wedged between the old brick phalluses of industry and the newer plants ... The most permeable of membranes separated a country club from acres of bone-colored slag piles streaked with sulphuric yellow, like the pissings of a four story dog. Low-rise condos with brand-new parking lots and Baybank branches were perched above algae-filled sinkholes littered with indestructibles. Everywhere wealth and filth were cheek by jowl. (SM 287)

Crucially, Renée's view highlights not only the contiguity but also the interconnectedness of the different spheres of production and consumption, of wealth and impoverishment. This attests to an aspiration to the rendering of social totality which is a distinctive mark of realism. Then, just as in Franzen's first novel the expansion of capital by means of real estate speculation in inner St. Louis required the confinement in the ghetto of the city's poorest population, in *Strong Motion* the accumulation of wealth in some areas is shown to command the accretion of dirt and hardship elsewhere. If the affluence of St. Louis' county was shown to require the ruin of the city, in Franzen's second novel the gloss of the privileged seems to entail the tarnish of the less distinguished areas. Glitter and litter are thus seen as interdependent. From a related point of view, the rhetoric of emptiness which is so central in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, is also present here, accompanied, again by a sympathetic lament for decaying industrial areas:

Renée ... considered how the glassy wealth of downtown Boston required a counterweight in these industrial square miles, where vacant lots collected decaying windblown newsprint, and the side streets were cratered, and the workers had faces the nitrite red of Fenway Franks. (SM 316)

Therefore, what sets Franzen's rendering of the urban milieu apart from other contemporary urban visions which tend to focus on fragmentation and disjunction is his determination to trace connections between what otherwise would seem intractable myriad free-floating social and environmental circumstances. Without denying the

reality of alienation, Franzen's vision is engaged in an attempt at making sense of the (urban) world which is heir to the interpretative efforts that Peter Brooks regards as characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist (urban) novel (Brooks, 2005: 132). Here it becomes apparent that Franzen's engagement with the Systems novel departs substantially from the postmodernist landmarks that defined the subgenre. In the same way as in *The Twenty-Seventh City* the conspiracy serves the purpose of raising the reader's awareness of the workings of the system (since, unlike in the typical conspiracy novel, she is offered the conspirators' insight), in *Strong Motion* the rendering of the different systems informing contemporary society is not an overwhelming vision of *undecidability*, but rather an explanatory attempt with a political intention. In his interview with Burn, Franzen reflects on the particularity of his interpretation of the Systems novel: "I had an idea of the social model that I didn't realize was already outmoded. I rather naively believed that, if I could capture the way large systems work, readers would understand their place in those systems better and make better political decisions" (Burn, 2010: 63). In this statement, Franzen seems to be addressing Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, a notion which as we know involves the ascertaining of our own place in the mode of production and the demystification, to use Althusser's terms, of our imaginary representation of our relation to our real conditions of existence. It is significant that in a 2010 interview, Franzen considers such goal for the novel "outmoded". For Jameson, however, the development of an aesthetic of cognitive mapping is a pressing necessity in the shifting world of late capitalism. We need "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (Jameson, 1991: 54). For the critic, we are in need of new modes of representation which enable us "to begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (1991: 54).

As it was discussed in the previous chapter, in contemporary attempts to interpret social totality, the element of the conspiracy occupies a central place, and this is also the case of Franzen's second novel although, as in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, his use of it differs noticeably from that of the postmodernist writers who had influenced him. In English the word "plot" may refer to a conspiracy, a sequence of events and to a small, delimited piece of ground. It is then consistent that in Franzen's hands, Sweeting-

Aldren's plot becomes an essential framing device which demarcates the novel's materials and concerns, preventing thus the inherent risk of meaningless, amorphous spillage which always afflicts the genre (as well as, significantly, its historical partner: the city). At the same time, Renée's endeavour to unravel Sweeting-Aldren's conspiracy is symbolic of the novelist's—and the reader's, for that matter—undertaking in making sense of a seemingly incomprehensible social reality. In this sense, as if ironically endorsing Jameson's view of conspiracy theories as the poor man's substitute of an adequate cognitive mapping of totality, a jaded, Pynchonesque official at a rather grotesque Environmental Protection Agency's bureau lectures Renée on the exaggerated credibility generally granted to conspiracies, making thus for a metaliterary joke very much in postmodernist fashion: "Malfeasance and conspiracy. I guess I used to think that way myself, a long, long time ago. It's very satisfying, very romantic. But 99.9 percent of the time is not the world really works. You might keep that in mind" (SM 256). The irony is complete when we learn that there *was* a conspiracy after all, but one whose rather mediocre originating motives were the incompetence of Sweeting-Aldren's geologist Anna Krasner and her sexual appeal for one of the company's executives.

In any case, as was argued in the previous chapter, any conspiracy theory is ultimately a theory of fiction, and Renée's quest for truth, her attempt to apply some principle of order to an apparently chaotic reality which is also "not well understood", mirrors what used to be considered the essential task of the writer of fiction. An all but relinquished function which, according to Zygmunt Bauman, the disoriented inhabitants of postmodernity are in desperate need of:

Postmodern discontents are born of freedom rather than of oppression. It is the other qualities of artistic fiction, those spelled out by Umberto Eco—the ability to simplify the baffling complexity, to select a finite set of acts and characters out of the endless multitude, to cut the infinite chaos of reality down to an intellectually manageable, comprehensible and apparently logical size, to present the discordant flow of happenings as a story with a readable plot—that seem cut to the measure of postmodern discontents: of the pains and sufferings of postmodern men and women, bewildered by the paucity of sense, porousness of borders, inconsistency of sequences, capriciousness of logic and frailty of authorities. (Bauman, 1997: 124)

It is easy to see that these remarks on fiction tacitly address a particular type of fiction known for its sense-making and order-imposing capacities which we call realist fiction. However, a close examination of these same arguments also reveals that realism is truly a *fiction* in the etymological sense of the word: an artifice based on ultimately arbitrary procedures of interpretation, selection and montage. There is no escaping the fact that, as Jameson argues, realism is both the most complex epistemological tool for the analysis of society and a very elaborate lie, the literary incarnation of false consciousness and the artistic expression of bourgeois ideology (see Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 179). Be it as it may, it would seem that the kind of broad socio-political critique that Franzen is intent on must necessarily follow this path, as his later stylistic evolution would confirm. As has been discussed in this study, Franzen's novels have been harshly criticized by Annesley (2006) and other critics influenced by the latter on account of his alleged failure at presenting an adequate articulation of agency in contemporary society. Such ineptitude, according to those critics, results in Franzen's novels actually reinforcing the system they try to criticize. There is a point to this criticism, but it is unfortunately overdone and simplistic. Its moralizing approach involves a reductionism that makes a successful representation of effective agency the all-important political touchstone and overlooks any other considerations. It is certainly not the concern of this study to defend Franzen's political stance on any politico-moral grounds, but it is difficult not to observe that approaches such as Annesley's ignore the fact that any expression of disconformity with a state of affairs implies a transformative impulse, aimed either at an anticipated vision of a better state not-yet achieved, or at a more or less imaginary reconstruction of a lost harmony. Nevertheless, no notion of transformative agency seems possible that dispenses with making sense of reality, however necessarily partial, arbitrary and ideologically shaped this sense may be—a task, traditionally that of realist fiction, in which *Strong Motion* is quite obviously engaged in the middle of a rather unpromising cultural environment.

### **5.7. Agency and community: liberals and radicals.**

In their denunciation of the weak vision of agency offered by Franzen, critics have focused on the final failure of the conspiracy's master plan in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and in the apparently hopeless social apathy and resistance to change that the

novel's ending asserts. But, as Jameson has claimed, failed Utopian thought provides valuable information as to the limits of our political imagination. Arguably then, in that novel the most interesting authorial statements on agency lies in the uncanny road set for it: a bizarre conspiracy of infiltrated Indian agents who try to take control of St. Louis. In contrast, in *Strong Motion* the possibility of agency is more clearly affirmed, with a small group of relatively average young people decidedly opposing a powerful chemical corporation, constituting themselves in the process into a small political community whose motives are, unlike those of the Indian conspirators of Franzen's first novel, nothing but commendable.

On the other hand, as critics have not failed to remark, at the end of the novel the status quo remains basically untouched. Hutchinson, for one, has rightly noted: "The status quo once more reasserts itself, not least because of widespread apathy. As in *The Twenty-Seventh city*, there is neither apocalypse nor revolution" (Hutchinson, 2009: 194). Indeed, there is a striking ambivalence as regards Renée's fighting of corporate wrongdoing: her attempt is genuinely brave, and Sweeting-Aldren is finally exposed, but the effort turns out to be all but useless in front of powerful socio-economic and ideological inertias. It has already been argued here that it is Louis and Renée's relatively marginal positions that allow them the possibility of a critical social perspective which was unavailable for the young characters in Franzen's first novel. However, their middle-class activism may hardly be described as really hard-hitting, and it is sometimes reminiscent of the harmless investigations undertaken by the characters of traditional children's fiction. It would seem as if middle-class rebellion against the state of affairs is likened to Peter Stoorhuys's revolt against his father: an always incomplete, impossible event. It is revealing that after denouncing the connivance of Peter's father with Sweeting-Aldren's malfeasance, Louis, Renée and Peter spend the day by the latter's swimming pool (SM 455). It would be short-sighted, however, to limit the cause of the ineffectuality of their activism to a lack of wholehearted commitment or their ineptitude in gathering significant social support to their cause. The problem is to be found in the unavoidable difficulty for the groups affected by risks in contemporary society—what Beck (1992: 48) calls "commonalities of danger"—to articulate themselves into actual political subjects. Beck acknowledges that there is a political potential in socially recognized risks, especially in great disasters (1992: 24). However, these newly formed communities, which face the overwhelming

pluralistic structure of interest groups, are often incomprehensible communities as a result of the incomprehensibility of the problem they arise in response to (1992: 48). According to the sociologist, in lieu of the strong political subjectivities of class society, such as the proletariat, in risk society there is only “the victimization of all by more or less tangible massive dangers ... But can intangible, universal afflictions be organized politically at all?” (1992: 48-49) This entails an obvious impoverishment for emancipatory politics, even in the case that the opposing community achieves successful political articulation, to use Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) terminology. As Beck argues, “in the transition from class to risk society, the *quality* of community begins to change” (1992: 49). While in class society the utopian motive force, the base of its value system, is *equality* in its different formulations (be it equal opportunities, socialism, welfare state, etc.), in risk society the basic aspiration and driving motive is *safety*. In this way, “[w]hereas the utopia of equality contains a wealth of substantial and *positive* goals of social change, the utopia of safety remains peculiarly *negative* and *defensive*. Basically, one is no longer concerned with attaining something ‘good’, but rather with preventing the worst” (1992: 49). This vision of a radical curtailment of emancipatory value in contemporary risk-related activism, which is also perceptible in Walter and Lalitha’s environmental projects in *Freedom*, has a correspondence in the current predominance of what Badiou (2001) sees as a cult of negatively defined human rights. In the same way as in risk society people’s ultimate goal becomes, in Beck’s graphic expression, “being spared from poisoning” (1992: 49), according to Badiou, in the contemporary climate dominated by the ethics of human rights the latter become just “rights to non-evil: rights not to be offended or mistreated with respect to one’s life, body or cultural identity” (Badiou, 2001: 9). In spite of its apparent self-evidence, the problem with this ethical vision of Kantian lineage is that its negative definition and its exclusive concern with victimization (in order to avoid or mitigate it) render it blind to any perspective of positive social transformation.<sup>99</sup> As the French thinker puts it, this kind of ethics

confirms the absence of any project, of any emancipatory politics, or any genuinely collective cause. By blocking, in the name of evil and of human rights, the way towards the positive prescription of possibilities ... it accepts the

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<sup>99</sup> We may observe here that, as Lalitha avows in *Freedom*, the aim of the environmental projects she and Walter lead is ultimately *mitigation* of damage, not social transformation or political reform (F 362).

play of necessity as the objective basis for all judgements of value” (Badiou, 2001: 31-2)

For Badiou, indeed, at the core, this ethics is nihilistic because it assumes that “the only thing that can really happen to someone is death” (Badiou, 2001: 35).

But the group formed by Renée and her friends is not the only example of activism in *Strong Motion*—there is another instance which confirms the suspicion of collective, organized forms of political intervention that can be observed throughout Franzen’s work. In this sense, the anti-abortionist sect led by Reverend Stites, which is clearly a political community, illustrates such distrust. In fact, Franzen’s depiction of the congregation can be regarded as one more act of legitimation of his own politico-literary disavowal: as a disparaging portrait of a radical community it plays a part in the narrative of conversion.

The reverend’s group grants its members the longed-for blessings of community, especially those concerning a sense of purpose and self-esteem. Noticeably, those categories appear in association to, or as a consequence of, wholehearted commitment to a cause. A member of the church tells Renée that “the last five months had been the most meaningful and light-filled time she’d ever known” (SM 317). As Simon Critchley argues, Christian fundamentalism is one of the main ideologies that currently make up for what he sees as “a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life” which afflicts contemporary societies where secular liberal democracy fails to motivate subjects sufficiently (Critchley, 2012: 7). It is significant that the members of the congregation, who live in a sort of commune in an abandoned building damaged by the earthquake, relate to the risks that affect them—mostly that their dwelling should collapse—in a very different way as that of society in general: they sublimate fear into faith. As the reverend tells Renée: “I can live without fear because I can feel how I’m hanging right over death, in the hands of God. If you get your life in balance with your death, you stop panicking. Life stops being just the status quo that you hope won’t end for a long time” (SM 324).

At first sight, the encounter of Renée and the reverend seems a simple staging of the conflict, rather familiar in American contemporary culture, between the discourses of science and religion. But then it is striking to notice that Stites’ critique of consumerist society is remarkably similar to the opinions expressed by the narrator in

the final part of the novel, or to Franzen's own views as expressed in pieces such as the *Harper's* essay. Particularly noticeable is the resemblance with the bitter, misanthropic social view of Walter Berglund in *Freedom*, especially as regards a perceived fetishizing of the notion of happiness and liberty in the United States. For example, Stites argues:

“The human race has never been without suffering in its history, but Mr. Boston Globe and Mr. Massachusetts Senator are suddenly smarter than everybody else in human history. They're certain they've got the answer, and the answer is statutory this and statutory that and university studies of human behavior and the U.S. Constitution. But I tell you Renée, I tell you, the only reason anyone could possibly think the Constitution is the greatest invention in human history is that god gave America so many fantastic riches that even total idiocy could make a showing in the short run, if you don't count thirty million poor people and the systematic waste of all the riches God gave us and the fact that to most of the downtrodden people of the world the word America is synonymous with greed, weapons, and immorality.”

“And Freedom.”

“A code word for wealth and decadence. Believe me. What the majority of Russians think is great about America is McDonalds and VCRs. Only politicians and anchormen are stupid enough to act otherwise.” (SM 328)

The reverend also shows a considerable degree of awareness as to the power of ideology to forestall social change, as is proved by his wry retort to Renée's naïve observation:

“If the majority truly weren't satisfied with their lives, they'd turn to religion. The fact that they don't seems to indicate that they are satisfied.”

“You're not the first person proved revolution logically impossible: the fact that people haven't revolved yet means they're satisfied. That's *real* persuasive.” (SM 327)

We may also notice that the reverend criticizes the American conservatives in very much the same terms as Walter does in *Freedom*. It is interesting to note that so far

Franzen still keeps, by means of the interposed figure of Stites, a critical distance with liberalism—a caution which is all but absent in his fourth novel, much more biased towards that political stance.

Listen, liberalism's so dishonest it won't even admit that everything good about it, the supposed compassion at the center of it—which is irrational, mind you, just like all religion is—comes straight from the two-thousand-year tradition of Christianity. But at least it's got that compassion ... The conservative side is just pure cynical economic self-interest. (SM 329)

The passage is also interesting as it brings to the fore, probably against Franzen's conscious purpose, the complex and usually unacknowledged relation between liberalism and fundamentalism. According to Slavoj Žižek, fundamentalism is a product or, to be more precise, a *supplement* of liberalism. In his words:

[L]iberalism and fundamentalism form a “totality,” for their opposition is structured so that liberalism itself generates its opposite ... Liberalism is, in its very notion, “parasitic,” relying as it does on a presupposed network of communal values that it undermines in the course of its own development. Fundamentalism is a reaction—a false, mystificatory reaction of course—against a real flaw inherent within liberalism, and this is why fundamentalism is, over and over again, generated by liberalism. (Žižek, 2009: 76-77)

But in spite of the obvious points of agreement between Stites and its author, the fact remains that the reverend's group is characterized by oppressive ideological indoctrination, dishonest propaganda, aggressive, intolerant methods and a narcissistic leader. And in the end, of course, the earthquake reveals that the strength of its bonds was illusory and the congregation is disbanded. Again, as in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the possibility of radical political action is evoked to be subsequently discarded as corrupt or otherwise inadequate and ultimately unviable. It is not hard to feel indeed that Stites' religious congregation stands for a radical political community, and that its inevitable rejection in terms of the overall political outlook of the novel prepares the ground for the disavowals to come in Franzen's succeeding work—a perception which is supported by the evident points of coincidence between the reverend's and Franzen's known views. The implication would be that in organized radical politics good motives are inevitably superseded by a series of side effects such as the ones listed above which

eventually end up ruining everything. Political communities are thus to be replaced by the smaller, core communities of family or lovers, where truth, to use Badiou's terminology, can still be generated. Ultimately, individual self-amelioration as that undertaken by Louis at the end of the novel is the only way. Salvation will be individual or not be at all. A related instance of this rejection of radical political action may be found in the somewhat embarrassed distance with which Franzen recounts a day spent with a group of young socialists protesting in Washington, on occasion of George W. Bush's re-election, in his journalistic essay "Inauguration Day" (Franzen 2002).

Undeniably, these rhetorical strategies imply some degree of retreat from the political and the social, as has been pointed out by Green (2005) and subsequently deplored by left-leaning critics. We should consider here the ideological limitations imposed by Franzen's available range of formal choices. On the one hand, there is the inherently static Systems novel which, as we have seen, tends to produce undecidable or inescapable networks of power. On the other hand there is Franzen's evident inclination to realism. But we have seen that the realist novel has ideological bearings of its own. As critics such as Eagleton or Jameson have claimed, realism has a stake in the solidity of what exists which has obvious political implications. In particular, being the social form it is, realism has a vested interest in the stability of the society it seeks to reflect. This is what Jameson has called an "ontological commitment to the status quo as such" (Jameson, 2013: 145), as we discussed in our analysis of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. It turns out then that Franzen is being nothing but *realist* in his pessimistic examination of the possibilities for transformative action in the uneventful times attending the alleged end of history. In any case, what makes Franzen's narrative vision in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* unique in contemporary American fiction is precisely this tension between intention and form. We know, however, that at the end of his second novel the tension will be resolved by means of the salvational perspectives of romance. The ending of *Strong Motion* then stages a renunciation to the insights of radical critical theory and an embracement of the powers of the novel as a symbolic problem-solving device—both in the social and psychological realms—with a favouring of sympathy as the all-important foundation of the novelistic genre.

What is then the actual critical significance of *Strong Motion* and to what extent does it deviate from that of Franzen's first novel? We may notice that the failure of the small group of activists to make any significant impact in the status quo, especially after

bringing to light the outrageous workings of Sweeting-Adren, inevitably arises a feeling of frustration, not unlike the despair of society which is the ending note of *The Twenty-Seventh City*. As the bitter last chapter of the novel seems to ask, what are the real chances of subverting a system that reaches farthest than ever, is characterized by endless powers of co-optation and is constantly fed by ever-bigger ideological machinery? In this sense, it is difficult not to attribute a symbolic compensational character, in Jameson's sense of the term, to the novel's great event, the final earthquake that brings (limited) destruction and considerable distress to Boston's metropolitan area. The final tremor is the obvious symbol of Franzen's intention: shake people out of their ideological torpor and open their eyes to the oppressive reality of corporate capitalism. It is significant that both of Franzen's early novels rely on rather far-fetched events to set their narratives in motion and direct them towards a closing. It tells us in the first place that social novels seem to require substantial events to organize their materials and their perspective while providing a source of narrative interest. It is also revealing of the difficulty of imagining such events in contemporary bourgeois society. Rachel Bowlby reminds us that in the nineteenth-century English industrial novel of writers such as Dickens and Gaskell "the necessary 'event' within an otherwise repetitive routine is typically provided by a strike that has the effect of exacerbating and personalizing the underlying class tensions" (Bowlby, 2010: *xvi-xvii*). Franzen's earthquake is his way of both getting the narrative going and point to the ideological, economic and environmental contradictions of his time—an attempt which is constrained on the one hand by the generalized *post-industrial* worldview (in Daniel Bell's sense of the term) in which Franzen in his own way also partakes, and by the novelist's rather limited social perspective on the other.

The aftermath of the earthquake, in its sheer altering the normal order of things, imbues Louis with an acute sense of unreality: the tremor has performed what in formalist terms we may call a *defamiliarization* of a reality which we usually take for granted uncritically, questioning and challenging common assumptions. For one, it has brought death, which is usually hidden in our society, to the foreground. Now, for Louis, the sight of a dead man by the road makes for

an image as unreal as everything else about this earthquake, as unreal as war reportage or assassination footage on television, except that unreality wasn't quite the word either for what he'd felt there, standing in poison ivy in the last

decade of the twentieth century, surrounded by aftermath and wondering why he lived and what a world that encompassed death was really made of. The world was mystery. (SM 468-9)<sup>100</sup>

However, Franzen seems to acknowledge, such estranging capacity of the earthquake is bound to be short-lived as it is quickly assimilated and neutralized by the ideological output of the omnipresent media: “All Monday, all Tuesday, the earthquake held the country hostage. Giant headlines marching in lockstep like fascist troops booted everything else off the face of the front pages” (SM 470). Instead of questioning of assumptions, the disaster brings about “this endless, endless televised repetition of clichés” (SM 471). Soon enough, the destabilizing effects of the earthquake and the findings as to its cause are subsumed and ideological conformity reigns again. Indeed, as the novel shows, media treatment of images of violence and disaster seems to have an important place in contemporary culture and significant ideological effects. In this regard it is possible to observe, once again, DeLillo’s influence on Franzen. In *White Noise*, the Gladneys are shown spending a Friday evening watching disaster footage on TV with disquieting fascination. As a perplexed Jack Gladney recognizes, “[e]very disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping” (DeLillo, 1985: 64). Elsewhere, DeLillo has analysed the effect of the constant exposition to images of violence and disaster that characterizes our culture and identifies a kind of sickly addiction which nevertheless constitutes a distinctive collective bond:

In my work, film and television are often linked with disaster. Because this is one of the energies that charges the culture. TV has a sort of panting lust for bad news and calamity as long as it is visual. We’ve reached the point where things exists so they can be filmed and played and replayed ... Think about the images most often repeated. The Rodney King videotape or the Challenger disaster or Ruby shooting Oswald. These are the things that connect us the way Betty Grable used to connect us in her white swimsuit, looking back at us over her shoulder in the famous pinup. And they play the tape again and again and again

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<sup>100</sup> The allusion to “mystery” recalls Franzen’s mention in “Why Bother” of Flannery O’Connor’s remarks on the purpose of fiction: “Flannery O’Connor ... insisted that the ‘business of Fiction’ is ‘to embody mystery with manners.’” Franzen then defines this “mystery” as “how human beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence” (Franzen, 2002: 68).

and again: This is the world narrative so they play it until everyone in the world has seen it. (Begley, 1993: n.pag.)

In his essay “The Power of History”, DeLillo argues in a similar way: “These things represent moments of binding power. They draw people together in ways that only the most disastrous contemporary events can match. We depend on disaster to consolidate our vision” (DeLillo, 1997: n.pag.). But the fact that a part of our collective identity is based on the contemplation of violence and disaster has disabling political consequences, not least in the form of a weakening of the possibilities for agency. In this sense, as Green has pointed out:

the channel between isolated private experience and collective being is one laid down in fantasy; to this extent, the imagination of shared experience, collective agency, and desire remain relatively remote and inaccessible, always situated at a remove. Disaster footage presents the image of a passive, victimized (collective) subject. (Green, 2005: 167)

And, indeed, it is difficult not to feel that the ideological effect of disaster images has never been more intense as in the period after the 9/11 attacks, when, as Žižek argues in *Welcome to the Dessert of the Real!*, the endless repetition of the “libidinally invested” (Žižek, 2002: 15) images of the destruction of the World Trade Center was deployed as a fundamental element in a massive act of interpellation at the service of hegemonic American ideology (2002: 46-47). Žižek has also observed the way in which ideology tends to prevent social change by obscuring the historicity of the present: “The predominant notion of ideology is that it fixates on or ‘naturalizes’ what is in fact the contingent result of a historical process; the antidote is thus to see things as dynamic, as part of a historical process” (Žižek, 2009: 404).<sup>101</sup>

At any rate, from Franzen’s point of view the fact seems to be that in our allegedly post-historical times, any potentially difference-making event is bound to become a pseudo-event:

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<sup>101</sup> It should be noticed, nevertheless, that there are thinkers such as Badiou who warn us against overrating the ideological power of media propaganda. Badiou inverts the usual equation by attributing the conforming power of the media system to a previous ideological consensus in the society in which these media operate: “The true nature of the media system seems to me to lie in consensus itself, in the sense that it’s because consensus rules that the media is what they are. I don’t think that the media constructs consensus. Rather, it’s consensus that makes people put up with the media’s repetitive mediocrity and paucity of information” (Badiou and Tarby, 2013: 9).

And now the disaster which had been promising to make you feel that you lived in a special time, a real time, a time of the kind you read about in history books, a time of suffering and death and heroism, a time that you'd remember as easily as you'd forget all those years in which you'd done little but futilely pursue sex and romance through your purchases: now a disaster of these proportions had come, and now you knew it wasn't what you wanted either. (SM 470)

The passage clearly evokes, as transparently as the plot proposal of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, a strong yearning for an Event in the sense developed by Badiou. Particularly, the narrator evinces a longing for the meaning-bestowing epic of revolution, which is consistent with Jameson's view—following Badiou—of revolution as “the one supreme salvational or providential Event” (Jameson, 2013: 201). Of course, nothing of the sort occurs and disappointment is the main aftermath of the earthquake for the narrator. Again, as in Franzen's first novel, we are witnesses of a futile act of what the Marxist tradition has called “voluntarism”, in this case embodied in the activism of Renée and her friends. As in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the failure of voluntarism is a token of social non-ripeness. As Jameson has put it, drawing a parallelism between Marxist and Protestant teleology, “an infantile leftism or anarchist voluntarism now becomes that ‘external sign’ that revolution is not yet in the agenda and that the situation has not yet politically ‘matured’” (Jameson, 2013: 201). The pattern will be confirmed, as we know, in *Freedom* with the failure of Walter and Lalitha's initiative. It is easy to see, however, that one likely consequence of this recognition of society's immaturity for substantial change is a certain kind of ideological conformism. In this sense, we can argue that the disappointing voluntarism observable in *Strong Motion* and later in *Freedom* consolidates the ground for Franzen's overall politico-literary renunciation. This is not the case of Franzen's first novel, where, in truly realist fashion, in the end the reader is not offered anything in compensation for her frustrated expectations. However, in the other two we are granted important symbolical compensations for all that socio-political bitterness—compensations which are marked by a distinctive salvational character: the consolations of ethical commitment in the community of lovers and, in *Freedom*, also a powerful evocation of social reconciliation.

## 5.8. Perspectives of salvation.

In a sense, *Strong Motion* ends with as sour a conclusion as that of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, one that despairs of the possibility of change, as the system is so pervading and well-established, so well founded and fed by its ideological apparatuses that not even an earthquake caused by corporate greed will shake people out of their conformity. The novel's end surely cues the most caustic authorial remarks on society, as Franzen openly addresses the *Unbehagen* of a schizophrenic culture, drawn by commerce into a yearning for (sexual) violence, only to subsequently "feel sick with contrition, because all these sexy images and hints have long since become bridges to span the emptiness of their days" (SM 471). As in Franzen's first novel, in those remarks there is a perceptible resonance with Marcuse's bitter ideological critique of advanced industrial society in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). However, there are important differences in this respect that tell *Strong Motion* apart from Franzen's first novel and which critics have tended to overlook. Certainly a measure of agency has been asserted and, even if modest, results have been achieved. The defining characteristic of this frail prospect of emancipation, however, is that it is strictly individual. In Franzen's world there seems to be no room for collective action, but there does exist the possibility for a relative kind of ideological opting out, once the concealing cloths on reality have been withdrawn. It is certainly not a radical plunge into an outside of the system but a sort of increased awareness of the makings of social totality and of our place in it. In Jameson's terms, we can call it a step into a higher quality cognitive mapping, which is represented by Louis' heightened sympathy at the end of the novel, both towards his community (after the tremor, he offers his gas mask to an unknown man [467] and even becomes a blood donor [483]) and his closest others: Renée, his family. In this sense, Louis becomes a forerunner of later Franzen's characters, namely Walter Berglund or Chip Lambert, that find that the only possible answer to broad social questions is in the first place individual, an answer which furthermore is presented as implying an ethical commitment to the closest other. This commitment is basically what Critchley (2012:11) describes as a yielding to or approval of the ultimately unfulfillable demand placed on the self by the other. In this sense, Franzen's implicit point is that in the subject's perception of the demand placed by the other a fundamental part is played by sympathy, the capacity to feel with the other. In this belief, Franzen is following a philosophical tradition whose most prominent

representative is probably Rousseau, for whom the ethical experience always began with the demand of the suffering human other. Bearing in mind Franzen's conception of the novel as a genre defined by its reliance on sympathy, it is only logical that at the end of *Strong Motion* Louis takes to reading novels (SM 499), thus becoming a member of Franzen's advocated "community of readers".<sup>102</sup> The problem with Franzen's ethical proposal, however, is that it is not wholly consistent with the previous dynamics of the relationship between Louis and Renée in terms of Hegel's Lord and Bondman and its conclusion with the subject's (Louis) desperate need for recognition, which ultimately takes the form of an overwhelming need to be needed.

Not unrelated, in *Strong Motion* we may also observe the coming to the fore of one of the main concerns through Franzen's fiction: the question of happiness (and sadness), a problem that at times seems to become Franzen's fundamental preoccupation, and which is succinctly summarized in *Freedom* as of "how to live". It is significant how in *Strong Motion* sadness and depression are presented as a socially induced ache, the escape from which being, in somewhat Protestant fashion, individual: a personal task. It is known that the Constitution of the United States consecrates the right to pursue happiness, a legacy from the Enlightenment that has undoubtedly contributed to shape a distinctive American ethos. However, as Bauman (2001: 83) has argued, in modern societies the pursuit of happiness has rather become a duty and a supreme ethical principle. This impossible demand, reinforced more recently by consumerist culture, as Franzen has repeatedly denounced, is obviously bound to cause endless suffering and psychological trouble. Then, under certain circumstances, one could even regard one's depression as an oppositional stance, in consistence with the previously stated relatedness of depression and anger. Thus, Louis clings to "the lump of sorrow" inside him, since "[f]or the moment, this sorrow was the only thing he had that indicated there might be more to the world than the piggishness and stupidity and injustice which every day were extending their hegemony" (SM 503). It is difficult not to see Franzen's picture of grief in *Strong Motion* in the light of his biographical account in "Why Bother?"

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<sup>102</sup> Louis' choice of Thomas Hardy and Henry James for his readings seems apt: the former's tragic vision and characteristic sadness suits Louis' condition, while the allusion to the latter—like those to T.S. Eliot in *The Twenty-Seventh City*—is appropriate as the greatest of Boston-native novelists, and as a tribute to that spirit of reform reflected in *The Bostonians*, to which Renée could be considered a heir.

However truly you believe there's a sickness to existence that can never be cured, if you're depressed you will sooner or later surrender and say: I just don't want to feel so bad anymore. The shift from depressive realism to tragic realism—from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it—thus strangely seems to require believing in the possibility of a cure. But this “cure” is anything but straightforward.

I spent the early nineties trapped in a double singularity. Not only did I feel that I was different from everyone around me, but I felt that the age I lived in was utterly different from any age that had come before. For me the work of regaining a tragic perspective has therefore involved a dual kind of reaching out: both the reconnection to a community of readers and writers, and the reclamation of a sense of history. (Franzen, 2002: 92-3)

There is a way, then to deal with disappointment and pain that leads not to crippling anguish but sees them as an illuminating, constitutive part of the world from which to somehow existentially profit, as Franzen has kept telling (others and himself) to this day in his essays.<sup>103</sup> And in this way serious (realist) fiction plays a fundamental explanatory role. There *is* an escape from sorrow then and as the novel shows it seems to lie in love, or, according to Franzen's unsentimental view of it already discussed, in an acknowledged mutual need that transcends mere selfishness. Very much like *Freedom*, the novel ends with an epilogue which clarifies family situations, in this case enumerating three weddings and one divorce in the novel's cast of characters, and a note of tentative hope that is individual rather than social. It has taken pain and convulsions untold but finally a tectonic match has been completed and Louis finally envisages happiness with Renée:

He walked away from her, over the crest of the bridge and down the other side. He was reaching into the familiar place inside him, but what he found there didn't feel like a sorrow anymore. He wondered if it had really been a sorrow to begin with.

“Oh, what's wrong, what's wrong?”

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<sup>103</sup> See for example “Pain Won't Kill You” in the collection *Farther Away* (2012).

“Nothing’s wrong. I swear to you. I just have to walk now. Walk with me, come on. We have to keep walking.” (SM 508)

This is what tells *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* apart, the most important difference between the two novels and a capital landmark in the evolution of Franzen’s fiction: a proairetic schema which certainly alleviates the feeling of frustration caused by the intractability of the system. Here the possibility of radical, progressive social change seems as unlikely as in the first novel, but if the latter ended with the absurd deaths of Barbara Probst and Chief Jammu, and Martin Probst was left overwhelmed and bewildered by his meaningless loss, in *Strong Motion* Louis and Renée are saved by their commitment to each other, by becoming a community of lovers, a world of two where, in spite of all the suffering experienced, truth can always be generated. With this, *Strong Motion* inaugurates a pattern as this will be the type of ending that Franzen will deploy in all his subsequent novels to date. Of course, this circumstance comes to complicate the commonly accepted view of Franzen’s literary evolution, as this kind of narrative closure including a happy end is nothing but a dilution of true realism with a borrowed measure of romance.

Perhaps we may render clearer the spiring, indeed intoxicating effect of a dash of romance if we compare the plotline and closing of *Strong Motion* with those of Steven Soderbergh’s film *Erin Brockovich* (2000). There are striking similarities between the story of Renée Seitchek and that of the American activist who uncovered a case of truly outrageous corporate malfeasance by the Pacific Gas and Electric corporation in Hinckley, California, in 1993. From a point of view like that of Franzen in the novel, the success of Brockovich’s investigation would have been ultimately as disappointing as that of Renée: after all, the blow inflicted to the energy giant by Brockovich had a potentially subversive power which might have transcended the specific case under litigation, but was nevertheless immediately neutralized and absorbed by the legal system. Nevertheless, the film shows the outcome of the affair as an unmitigated happy end because it has presented the situation in terms of personalized stories of suffering individuals who are finally vindicated and (financially) saved. Most importantly, they are saved by a heroine who also saves her own life from the mess she was in. In short, we perceive the film’s ending as unequivocally affirmative because it has wholeheartedly relied throughout in the power of salvation, which is to say the power of romance. This elation is a far cry from Franzen’s bitter awareness of a

capitalist system perceived as unshakeable—an awareness which accounts for the fact that his resort to romance at the end of the novel is characterized by a somewhat tentative quality.

### **5.9. The novel and the problem of alterity.**

One of the concerns of this chapter has been Franzen's treatment of alterity, an examination which raises a question that is central to the novel as an art form, and to Franzen's concept of it, namely the question of the access to otherness. As I have argued, for Franzen our knowledge of the other is bound to be problematic, incomplete. To use J. Hillis Miller's simile, our neighbour is a text that we always misread because that reading is mediated by our own desires and needs (Miller, 2001: 69). However, in this study I have also posited sense-making as the novel's historic main purpose: the comprehension of a world seen as complex, changing and essentially contingent, as well as the ascertaining of our position in it, on the basis of the assumption, with obvious ethical implications, that, even if full knowledge of the social totality will always elude us, the ultimate vocation of the form is to always contribute to the perfection of an intelligible picture of it. The novel was developed to make sense of a new world and in the process has contributed to create it. How can this historic function be reconciled then with the view of the other as never to be completely understood? A view, furthermore, which Miller shows as shared by novelists such as Austen or Eliot, whose novels' plots are often based on the characters' misinterpretation of the other. The answer lies in the novel's capacity for the creation of sympathy. By means of narrative devices such as first person narration, free indirect speech, or an omniscient narrator that can enter the mind of characters, the reader can experience what Miller describes as "a total knowledge of another person, from the inside" (Miller, 2001: 66). Then even if a certain misreading of our neighbour is ultimately inevitable, a fundamental core of sameness may be asserted. In *How Novels Think* (2005), Nancy Armstrong argues that the rise of the novel and the development of the modern subject are indissolubly linked, to the extent that our current conception of the individual is largely a product of the novel. As she explains, in the formation of that notion the human capacity of sympathy played an important part, since it may provide a means for individuals to share their feelings without compromising their individuality, while on the other hand it can act as

a specular reinforcement of that individuality. For Armstrong, “[a]s we witness repeated scenes of the joy and suffering of others, we not only learn to weigh the character and intensity of any spectacle of emotion against its cause; we also gain a progressively clearer sense of how our own emotions should look to other people.” (Armstrong, 2005: 14)

J. Hillis Miller has claimed that one of the main social functions of the novel is “to demonstrate and reinforce, perhaps to generate, the assumption that the other is another person like me” (Miller, 2001: 66). A kind of sameness, Miller points out, that is “the indispensable basis of any viable and just community” (2001: 66). For the American critic, “[r]eading novels breaks down egoism and develops sympathy. It does this because novels present a virtual or imaginary community made of fictive persons with whom the reader is invited to sympathize” (2001: 66). Armstrong has discussed the way in which Darwin’s theory of evolution (especially his proposition regarding the survival of the fittest) was incorporated by the ideology of bourgeois capitalism to *naturalize* its distinctive acquisitive individualism. Significantly, the critic sets the community-solvent effect of a worldview based on competition against the collectivizing drive of sympathy: “In setting man against man in territorial competition, Darwin’s theory set the competitive drive on a collision course with the very notion of sympathy that had performed the cultural work of transforming individuals into a collective body” (Armstrong, 2005: 99). This tension between the competitive impulse and the necessity of sympathy finds an echo in *Strong Motion*, where competition within the family, (especially in his version of sibling rivalry) is one of the main motives for the characters’ acts, a circumstance that is further amplified and extended to love and friendship relationships in *Freedom*.

From the considerations above follows that the novel, or at least a certain kind of it, *creates* community by itself and thus may be deployed against what many people, obviously including Franzen himself, perceive as an ongoing widespread decay of communitarianism. Raymond Williams, as we have seen, has showed that the realist novel requires the existence of communities of truly interlinked individuals on the basis of which to perform its characteristic synthesis. This is a kind of community, Williams argues, whose increasing scarcity apparently signalled the fate of the classic realist novel along the twentieth-century. It would seem however, that the realist novel

incorporates instruments of its own with which to generate (at least part of) its own native soil, the most important of which being sympathy.

Community and its problems have long been a concern of Franzen, who has famously regretted the social fragmentation and individual isolation that for him define a paradoxically massed contemporary culture. In “Why Bother?” he contended that such culture, homogenized and benumbed by consumerism offered little nourishment for an art form that thrives on the analysis of manners and human conflict, and by the same token could derive little of interest from it. In that essay, Franzen also advocated the power of literature to create a community of readers and writers to escape the generalized alienation produced by our cultural climate, a position which was criticized by critics such as Annesley as despairing of social change and promoting withdrawal. There is, in any case, an inevitable feeling of precariousness in Franzen’s proposal of such a community, which is perceptible in the very imagery of exile he uses to describe it in the mentioned essay. Franzen’s literary community certainly recalls a “community of those who do not have a community”, to use the Bataillean phrase quoted by Maurice Blanchot as a frontispiece of *The Unavowable Community* (1988); or the “unworked” community of singularities defined by their common mortality and finitude as was formulated by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1991). As J. Hillis Miller has put it: [t]his would be a community bound together by the singularity and incommunicability of each reading experience, rather than an organic community sharing similar experiences of the words on the page as constitutive of meaning” (Miller, 2005: 99). It is difficult to imagine a potential for political agency for a community of isolated monads such as this.

Franzen’s writing on the novelistic genre has more recently shifted its focus somewhat to openly address the question of sympathy, posing it as a key element for the form. In the *Boundary* interview he refers to the novel as “the venue for sympathy” (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 37), the latter being a “by-product” to good fiction (2009: 46). For Franzen, sympathy involves an open-mindedness that reaches toward the understanding of the other and contemplates people and situations in complex terms, which he summarizes as “seeing both sides” (2009: 49). It might be argued that in *Strong Motion* Franzen’s exploration of the implications of sympathy for fiction is still half-way. However, the novel shows a remarkable skill in offering compelling, sympathetic renderings of otherwise rather unlikable characters such as Reverend Stites

and Melanie Holland's father John Kernaghan. Franzen's awareness of the importance of sympathy in fiction has subsequently heightened, as is shown by "A Rooting History" (2012), an essay on Edith Wharton in which he analyses the different ways a novelist can attract sympathy for her characters—an awareness that may certainly be observed as a central element in his following novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. Sympathy then comes to complement the already obvious interest in character development, and the effort towards the achievement of an orientating, sense-making social synthesis that we have hereby argued of his second novel, placing Franzen in the right position to pursue what Bauman posits as a pressing aspiration for the contemporary novel, so that "artistic fiction, that great school of imagination, empathy and experiment, may now render priceless service to the solitary, often confused and bewildered postmodern interpreters of meaning and sense" (Bauman, 1997: 126). However, the political implications of sympathy, and its effects in the critical depth of Franzen's fiction, are more complex than what might seem at first sight. On the one hand, sympathy constitutes a necessary foundation for community, as well as an imperative requisite for political commitment, and as such seems a much needed capacity in what are widely perceived as times of fragmentation and decline of politics. From another point of view, it would seem that, from *Strong Motion* on, Franzen is positing ever more clearly a dichotomy between ideology (especially *radical* ones) and sympathy in which he favours the latter without acknowledging it as an ideology in itself. After all, sympathy and the capacity to see both sides advocated by Franzen may deactivate our ability to perceive what Moretti (2000: 54) has called "the abstract one-sidedness of the great forces at the heart of every civilization", and the rhetorical strategy of personalization on which the novel usually relies tends to make things such as evil or oppression tolerable as humanized, which may eventually mean acceptable. Exploitation of sympathy thus may lead to a typically novelistic valorisation of compromise solutions that ultimately tends to reinforce existing power structures. Such is the dubious ground traversed by Franzen in *Strong Motion*, but as we will be discussing in the following chapters, his ideological position in this respect becomes clearer in his subsequent novels as he enacts his salvational narratives again.

## 6. *The Corrections*: A family romance for the global age.

*General Motors is bigger than Holland*

—Gary Snyder

### 6.1. Introduction: *The Corrections* as the outcome of a conversion.

Jonathan Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections* (2001), marked a sharp turning point in the novelist's career. Hefty sales figures, general critical assent, honours like the National Book Award and even the media impact derived from the mild scandal of his quarrel with Oprah Winfrey combined to turn Franzen into a prominent figure in contemporary American literary landscape. As a result, the release of *The Corrections* was certainly one of the literary events of the year. Among the critical response generated by the novel, pride of place was assumed by the stylistic departure it showed from Franzen's previous work. The novelist was quickly proclaimed to have abandoned the ranks of the cultivators of the postmodernist novel to embrace traditional realism. Apparently the time was ripe in critical quarters for such a change, as some reviewers such as James Wood or Michiko Kakutani hurried to salute Franzen's move as signalling a general, health-restoring way out of a literary postmodernism which they regarded as artistically exhausted. A crucial part in the critical interpretation of the novel was played by a so far little known essay entitled "Perchance to Dream" that Franzen had published in *Harper's* in 1996 and which now attracted the attention of critics and interviewers. In that piece, to this day known as the *Harper's* essay, Franzen laments the increasing irrelevance of great literature in contemporary American culture and expresses doubts about the future of the novel as an artistic form. He also advocates a fiction addressed to a community of readers for whom literature is a means to resist the alienating forces of contemporary life. Then, after the success of *The Corrections*, the essay was soon examined and taken as a programmatic text, a sort of *correction* of the shortcomings of postmodernist fiction, a kind of promise to be fulfilled in the mentioned novel rather than as the document of a particular state of mind of an author

then full of insecurities that Franzen has acknowledged it to be.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, the tale of the literary reformer obviously stuck. Thus, for example, an American critic argued: “when you correct certain problems in the postmodern novel—its cartoonish characters, its repetitive paranoia and absorption in Big Patterns—you get a better book” (Lacayo, 2001: n.pag.). And in this way was inaugurated a pattern of interpretation of Franzen’s work that has lasted to this day.

Certainly, one of the most striking facts about Franzen’s critical reception is the accumulation of a widespread common perspective on his work. Franzen’s career is therefore often viewed in the light of a well-established narrative mediated by his own account of it in the *Harper’s* essay and other pieces such as “Mr. Difficult” (2002), where Franzen decries what he sees as unnecessary difficulty in certain strand of postmodernist fiction, most notably in that of his erstwhile revered William Gaddis. As we have seen, this account has been subsequently elaborated on by critics such as Jeremy Green (2005) and Robert Rebein (2007). The resulting narrative can be described as the story of a young writer who in his first and second novels emulates his idolized postmodernist references against his true inner (realist) inclinations until a mixture of personal crisis, despair of the role of the novel in contemporary society, and sheer inability to go any further down a literary road seen as self-imposed and alien to his talents bring about a radical change, a true literary conversion announced first in “Perchance to Dream” and finally realized in *The Corrections*. It is, in short, a true salvational story which we have analysed from a structuralist point of view in our introduction to this study. Rebein is probably the critic who has most forcibly reconstructed Franzen’s stylistic evolution, and his revealingly entitled essay “Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said ‘No’ to Po-Mo” (2007) has surely been determinant in the establishment of the shared critical view we have referred to. Rebein, who assumes that a state of exhaustion paralyzes postmodernist fiction and overtly celebrates Franzen’s *defection*, examines Franzen’s arguments as to his stylistic change and likens them to a religious convert’s justification of his embrace of a new faith, a parallelism which Rebein identifies most clearly in Franzen’s criticism of Gaddis in his mentioned essay “Mr. Difficult”.

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<sup>104</sup> Franzen discusses the misinterpretation of the *Harper’s* essay in “A Word About this Book,” the introduction to *How to Be Alone*.

There certainly is a ground for such a narrative and Franzen's own account of the excruciating evolution of *The Corrections* as a work in progress for almost a decade supports it. As he recounts in a 2001 interview, the earliest version of the novel had "an incredibly elaborate plot, involving prisons and insider trading and racial street warfare in Philadelphia and orphans and the Catholic Worker" (Franzen and Smith Rakoff, 2001: 31). The writing of the novel involved radical reworking and the discarding of hundreds of pages. In 1996 Franzen had published "How He Came to Be Nowhere", (Franzen, 1996a: 111-123) which was intended to be the first chapter of his third novel. Significantly, in this text the Lamberts are absent, while the projected main character, the bizarrely named—in obvious Pynchonesque fashion—Andy Aberant, was left out of the final version. Franzen had obviously envisioned his third novel to develop after the model of the Systems novel that had influenced his previous work. Apparently, he was intent on a postmodernist-influenced *tour de force*, a massive "encyclopedia of the information Age", as Burn has put it (Burn, 2008: 96), in the style of contemporary novelists such as Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace. The impact of several personal crises is generally held to be accountable for Franzen's change of literary direction. In the *Harper's* essay he had famously dealt with his depression and his despair at the seemingly unavoidable fate of cultural irrelevance for the novel and the novelist in contemporary society. In his 2001 interview with Donald Antrim, Franzen brings to bear more biographical circumstances:

Well, my father died in 1995. Up until then I'd been trying, sporadically and unsuccessfully, to write a book that was similar to the first two, with an elaborate, externalized, and exceedingly complicated plot. Within a few months of his death, I began writing stuff that came from a very different place. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

The result, as is known, was his abandonment of previous premises usually associated with literary postmodernism in favour of narrative modes and techniques characteristic of realist fiction, leaving behind the Systems novel to explore the personally far closer domain of character and locale. However, while this description seems basically coherent, it undeniably presents important inadequacies as, in a somewhat journalistic fashion, makes too neat a story out of rather more complex and contradictory elements. Part of the oversimplification to be found in the most commonly accepted accounts of Franzen's evolution lies in the rather unquestioning assumption by

critics of Franzen's reflections on his own work. To begin with, most critics have tended to take the *Harper's* essay at face value, using it as an unproblematic key for the understanding of Franzen's fiction. This excess of reliance suggests that both the essay and the novel timely related to a widespread but so far possibly inexplicit set of expectations for a certain kind of fiction among both readers and critics. The exception seems to be Burn who, in his 2008 monograph on Franzen, denounces what he sees as certain critics' all too ready acceptance of Franzen's remarks on his own work. Burn describes the conclusion to "Perchance to Dream" as a "simulated epiphany", as it "charts the resolution of an aesthetic problem that Franzen had not really resolved and did not resolve for several more years" (Burns, 2008: 50). Burn also shows a more nuanced perspective that tells him apart from other critics, as he departs from the most usual critical positions on Franzen's evolution in his highlighting the persistence of postmodernist motifs and references in *The Corrections*: "[T]he apparently conservative retreat in *The Corrections* is balanced by a corresponding move toward more extended language games and toward a more extended intertextual dialogue with Franzen's postmodern predecessors" (Burns, 2008: 92). Indeed, along with certain abstract passages of linguistic experimentation we can notice the presence of a whole catalogue of typically postmodernist themes—or, in Christopher Nash's (1993) terminology, anti-realist *thematic topoi*—to a greater extent than in his two previous novels. In this way, *The Corrections* betrays recognizably postmodernist preoccupations such as the disturbing interconnectedness of things in the inextricably complex system of the contemporary world, where unaccountable, mysterious corporations and institutions are dubiously operated behind an irrelevant public sphere; or the concern with neuroscience and the chemical base of consciousness, a domain where technological development opens the way for potentially dystopian applications involving the use of mind-altering drugs and treatments. Not to mention that *The Corrections* is arguably the novel by Franzen that has been most clearly influenced by Don DeLillo.<sup>105</sup> Today, in sight of Franzen's subsequent stylistic evolution, we may attribute this mixed quality, this hybrid character in *The Corrections* to its being a sort of palimpsest in which the final product still bears the mark of the writer's first intention, but it is certainly a source of interpretative complication which has mostly been overlooked by critics. One of the

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<sup>105</sup> It is pertinent to remember here that, as he recounts in the *Harper's* essay, during the process of writing of *The Corrections*, when he was sunk in personal dejection and despair at the apparent pointlessness of writing novels, Franzen was comforted and reassured in his endeavour by correspondence with DeLillo.

purposes of this chapter is to explore these typically postmodernist elements that linger on Franzen's third novel.

On the other hand, it is striking to notice that most critics have analysed Franzen's work using highly complex and problematic terms such as postmodernism and realism as if they were straightforward and self-explanatory. This is obviously not the case, and a glimpse at the critical production on Franzen's work reveals that most of his critics and reviewers have used these concepts in rather partial and shallow ways. For example, even for Rebein and Wood realism apparently only amounts to an increased focus on character and a more in-depth exploration of family relations. However, while those traits are indeed perceptible in *The Corrections*, they hardly exhaust the implications of realist fiction. In a similar way, when critics examining Franzen's novels have discussed their relation to postmodernism they have mostly meant—possibly following Franzen's own account of it—the work of a small group of American writers such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Robert Coover or Don DeLillo. This critical account has tended to obviate the historical dimension of postmodernism as a cultural dominant derived from our mode of production in the sense advanced by Fredric Jameson (1991: 4). Even the more limited sense of artistic dominant mentioned by Brian McHale (1987) has usually been overlooked as well. This precludes the possibility, for example, of asking oneself about the likelihood of stepping out of postmodernism in a postmodern age, if that be the case. Certainly, stopping to analyse in detail each concept we use in critical discourse in any piece of literary analysis would be unfeasible. There will always remain complex constructions that we receive as given and take for granted. However, a description of Franzen's career using reified, uncritical concepts of postmodernism and realism seems particularly inadequate as it tends to obscure important aspects of his fiction: issues such as the extent of Franzen's realist concerns prior to *The Corrections* as shown in his first two novels, or the actual character of the realism of his work thereafter. Perhaps most importantly, given Franzen's avowed social concerns, the handling of oversimplified concepts of postmodernism and realism prevents asking oneself significant questions as to the social and political implications of each narrative mode; questions about the sheer availability of such a narrative mode as classic realism for a contemporary writer; about the possibilities and limitations of realism as a critical tool in contemporary society, especially in comparison to those of the postmodernist fiction

against which Franzen's work is measured. These are questions which we address in this chapter.

Finally, we will observe in the novel the confirmation of a narrative pattern that, inaugurated in *Strong Motion*, achieves closure in *Freedom*. This rhetorical device, supported by important pieces of non-fiction, involves a symbolical resolution of apparently unsolvable social contradiction by means of the opening of individual salvational perspectives for the novels' protagonists. Thus, Franzen novels offer self-amelioration in lieu of effective socio-political reform, and the intractable antagonisms of the public sphere are replaced by the conflicts of the intimate sphere—a realm where, although not without painful processes of struggle that eventually lead to increased sympathy and ethical commitment to the closest other, reconciliation is shown as possible. This proairetic structure requires for its completion the concurrence of forms of narrative closure inherited not from archetypal realism but from genres which were subverted and appropriated by realism in the course of its historical development, as we discuss in the chapter devoted to that narrative mode—namely, *Bildungsroman*, melodrama and romance.

## **6.2. Topography of the system: global perspectives and (sub)urban ambiguities.**

In this study we have conducted an examination of the narrative mode known as realism from a historical and socio-political point of view, especially as reflected in the realist novel. A short summary of that account, however schematic, is due here in order to clarify our position. The starting point, once again, seems to lie with Auerbach's seminal work. As we have seen, the German critic conceives of realism in political, rather than formal or epistemological terms. For Auerbach, realism is defined by the writer's earnest concern with the fates of ordinary people presented as individuals whose lives are seen as problematic and potentially tragic. These lives are shown in interaction with an intelligible social context and against a background of moving history, that is, they are characters living in an age understood in historical terms, as the product of the past and the seed of the future. This entails that a true realist social vision should include what Auerbach calls "social forces", which amount to the interactive dynamics of social groups, relationships and conditions conducive to socio-political change. In order to accomplish such a wide social portrait out of a necessarily limited

number of characters and situations, the realist novel relies on a distinctive kind of metonymic synthesis whereby its elements of character, plot and social description achieve a representative quality. As Lukács put it, “[i]n realistic literature, each descriptive detail is both *individual* and *typical*” (Lukács, 2006b: 43). This kind of synthesis, however, must perforce stop short of allegory lest it should lose the individuality of character and situation which is a prerequisite of realism. Our assessment of the realist qualities of *The Corrections* and the rest of Franzen’s work will be based on these socio-political considerations.

As we have shown in previous chapters, the presence of concerns usually associated to realism in Franzen’s work precedes the writing of *The Corrections*. A proper understanding of the stylistic evolution that leads to his third novel requires a summarizing of the realist traits apparent in his first two novels. This leads us to one of the premises of this study. For Peter Brooks (2005), one fundamental function performed by the realist novel, as it attained its classical form in the nineteenth century, was that of making sense for its readers of a bewilderingly new environment, that of industrial capitalism, characterized by the secularization of older transcendental narratives, by the contingency introduced by the laws of the market, and, in short, by the all but complete commodification of human activity and relations. In this new world, continuous socio-political and philosophical upheavals showed the contingency of historical states of affairs which so far had been considered natural and hence immutable. Significantly for the purposes of this study, communitarian issues seem central to the realist novel from its very outset. Indeed, community appears as both an essential preoccupation and an indispensable prerequisite of the realist novel. Thus, as the processes of urbanization and industrialization that were taking place in England and other European countries entailed the uprooting of communities at an hitherto unknown scale, writers such as George Eliot set out to reproduce those disappearing communities as if to better understand what was being lost, while in parallel they examined the new forming urban milieus to test their communitarian potential. Indeed, the exploration of the meaning and substance of community was a fundamental part of the analytical endeavour of realist writers. For Williams, as we have seen, community concerns became a focal issue for the generation of English novelists of the 1840s, including Dickens, Charlotte Brönte, Gaskell and Thackeray (Williams, 1970: 11). The thought of Tory politician and novelist Benjamin Disraeli, marked by acute nostalgia for a lost

*organic* society, was a prominent example of the sense of loss of community that had come to be common in contemporary England. In this way, the protagonist of his *Sybil* (1845) claims:

As for community ... with the monasteries expired the only type we ever had in England of such an intercourse. There is no community in England; there is only aggregation, but aggregation under circumstances which make it rather a dissociating than a uniting principle ... It is a community of purpose that constitutes society ... without that men may be joined into contiguity, but they still continue virtually isolated ... It is their condition everywhere; but in cities that condition is aggravated. A density of population implies a severer struggle for existence, and a consequent repulsion of elements brought into too close contact. In great cities men are brought together by the desire of gain. They are not in a state of cooperation but of isolation, as to the making of fortunes; and for all the rest they are careless of neighbours. Christianity teaches us to love our neighbour as ourself; modern society acknowledges no neighbour. (qtd. Jiménez Heffernan, 2013: 9)

As the passage suggests, at the heart of the investigations of the realist novel in the nineteenth century is, to be sure, the city. Certainly, the novels of writers such as Balzac or Dickens seem devised to get to grips with that disconcerting “new total context of modern life” (Brooks, 2005: 131) formed by the city. Then, if the encounter with the city and its perplexing, stimulating mixture of perils and possibilities involved a semiotic crisis for the disoriented newcomer and the baffled reader, the classic realist novel provided both a physical chart and a handy guide to the city’s new sign-systems and social codes. These new codes, as Jameson (2002) has showed, were usually informed by strategies of class antagonism and in most cases, under sundry ideological masking, ultimately boiled down to a manifestation of the “cash nexus” that Marx and Engels saw as the new prevailing foundation of social relations. However, as Jameson (2002: 138, 210) has also argued, the function of the realist novel was twofold, as it played an important role not only in the interpretation of a new reality but also in its creation, by means of the shaping of readers’ consciousness into adjustment to the new milieus. Unsurprisingly then, the potential of the novel for social analysis has always been one the focuses of Marxist criticism, as both its explanatory and *creative* functions naturally fit Marxism’s political agenda. Most notably, Lukács emphasized the novel’s

role in fighting alienation by disclosing the generally hidden workings of capitalist society and by revealing the social forces in action within it.

Ever since the publishing of *Les Illusions Perdues* in 1837, the credibility of the realist novel as an interpretational device of reality has been challenged, not least because the very notion of reality has come to be problematic under the scrutiny of post-structuralist approaches. Indeed, the adequacy of the realist novel for social analysis has been questioned not only on epistemological and linguistic grounds, but also by socioeconomic changes and the overall development of our mode of production. Even realism's inveterate commitment to the description of urban environments seems outdated. "Realism is nothing if not urban", Brooks has asserted (Brooks, 2005: 131). However, a mere glimpse at the configuration of most developed countries reveals that our urban world is remarkably different from that of the writers who gave canonical form to the realist novel. Paradoxically, when the percentage of the world's population living in urban areas is largest than ever before, the traditional, well-delimited city that Debord (2009: 18) defined as "the focal point of history" is becoming increasingly void, blurred and meaningless, lost amid the irresistible spread of an amorphous and featureless suburban environment.

From a different point of view, the suburban expansion has also brought about a further hindrance to the realist novel, whose vocation for representative individualism benefits from local and personal particularities, in the form of cultural homogenization. Franzen is certainly aware of the difficulty for the novel to thrive in such environment, and in the *Harper's* essay he memorably drew a parallelism between the decline of inner cities and that of serious fiction (Franzen, 2002: 62), a situation which he had previously thematised in his first novel. In any case, from the obstacles for the realist novel to perform its inherent interpretational function it should not be inferred that the inhabitants of postmodernity are any less in need of making sense of their world than Balzac's contemporaries. On the contrary, the relentless expansion of capital has been matched by the daunting complexity of what has come to be known, especially since the 1960s, as *the system*, or, according to Wallerstein's (2004) tighter theorization, the *world-system*, whose global functioning has turned increasingly elusive. The disconcerting effects, as far as social awareness is concerned, of such process are evident. As Jameson has argued, there is a parallelism between the alienation we may suffer in a featureless and boundless urban space where orientation is nearly impossible

and our loss of a sense of place and function in the larger global system (Jameson, 1991: 51). This kind of disorientation has obvious practical political consequences and according to the American thinker our acting and struggling capacity are neutralized by our social and spatial confusion. For Jameson, we need to regain the understanding of our position, individual and collective, in the global system—not least by casting light again on the currently obscured prevailing relations of production, in an act of orientation for which he proposes the term of cognitive mapping. Needless to say, in our time this kind of mapping should be global. In this sense, in his 1989 essay “Marxism and Postmodernism” Jameson already introduces a global dimension to his concept of cognitive mapping, characterising it as a new, global kind of class consciousness (Jameson, 1998: 49) Following Lukács, who made a case for the transformative potential of realism based on its capacity to fight the alienation and fragmentation inherent to capitalist societies, and also Bertolt Brecht, who opposing Lukács’ views vindicated the critical power of modernism, Jameson argues for an art that recuperates the connection between culture and pedagogy. In this sense, both *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, novels that cast an analytical eye on local and global workings of the system, stand out as remarkable though imperfect attempts in this direction. In the previous chapters we have referred to the way in which those novels set out to build a small-scale urban model to analyse it in obviously realist, synthetic fashion. This strategy is particularly evident in Franzen’s first novel, where St. Louis may be easily seen as a case study representative not only of other American cities, but also of a certain configuration of socio-economic and political dynamics which is characteristic of many parts of the Western world. In other words, by studying his fictional St. Louis Franzen is trying to get to grips with the system. Interestingly, as it is revealing of the scope of Franzen’s explanatory intentions, in both novels, the focus of the analysis widens to include larger global implications. Such broadened view is still incipient and oblique in the first novel, where it is represented by the Indian conspirators, but it is explicit and obviously theory-driven in the second novel, with its discursive allusions to the converging flows of capital and to American indebtedness to foreign manufacturers and investors. Franzen’s pedagogico-explanatory impulse is also evident in the extensive exploration he provides of the metropolitan areas of St. Louis and Boston. A description which is meant not only as cartographical reconstruction but also as a disclosing of the relationships holding between the different parts of those urban extensions, especially in terms of the obtaining flows of wealth and exploitation. Thus,

in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the affluence of St. Louis County is shown as dependent on the decay of the inner city, while a speculative operation designed to regenerate the downtown entails the enlargement of the ghetto of East St Louis as a sort of side effect. Similarly, in *Strong Motion* the splendour of the wealthy areas of Greater Boston is shown as requiring a flood of rubbish and pollution over less favoured surroundings, while the ruthless pursuit of benefit under capitalism leads to the abandonment of public utilities, whose decay, emotively sung in *Strong Motion* in the memorable “smell of infrastructure” passage (SM 191) is a recurrent theme in Franzen’s fiction to which we shall return later in this chapter. The interpretive, analytical character of the urban portraits of both novels is further underscored by the inclusion of an actual map of St Louis and its surroundings in the first novel, and, less obviously, by showing us a panoramic view of greater Boston from a small plane in the second.

### **6.3. From the city to the suburb and the family house.**

It is significant that while in *The Twenty-Seventh City* Franzen’s urban analysis could metonymically function to an extent as an examination of the system at large, this proves more difficult in *Strong Motion* without resorting to Marxist-influenced external digressions on global economic flows. In *The Corrections* and *Freedom* Franzen no longer uses the city as the central grounding of his systemic analysis. But the city and its suburban extensions are still present in Franzen’s later fiction, mainly as the site of his communitarian concerns.

Franzen’s cityscapes are characterized by their substantiality. Even in the case of the phantasmal, vanishing St. Louis of his first novel, the desolation of the dissolving urban tissue had the concrete-hard materiality of the deserted parking lots that punctuated the city. The Greater Boston where wealth and waste stage their circling flows in his second novel is far from Pynchon’s vision of the city as a cryptogram, a “paranoiac semiotic system” (Hassan, 1981: 103). Certainly, in his first two novels Franzen is not interested in creating that typically postmodernist fictional space which Brian McHale (1987: 44) has defined, after Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as a *Zone*: a heterotopian spatial organization which juxtaposes worlds of incompatible structure. As McHale has put it, in such fiction, space is “less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time” (McHale, 1987: 45). On

the contrary, *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* are meant to recreate with analytic purposes what is perceived as a puzzling but actually existing world. To this end Franzen deploys a time-honoured literary strategy described by McHale as the organization of the spatial construct around a perceiving subject; be it a character, in the way of Balzac's classic *flâneurs* (of which the detective-like Renée Seitchek is a good representative in *Strong Motion*), or "the viewing position adopted by a disembodied narrator" (McHale, 1987: 45). These efforts devoted to the drawing of a symbolic map of socioeconomic relations, apparent in Franzen's early work, are clearly related to the comprehensive quality of high realism, to that aspiration to providing as complete a social portrait as possible which is part of its explanatory vocation. In *The Corrections* the prevailing interest has shifted towards family affairs and the recreation of a specific urban location is not as central as in Franzen's two previous novels. Indeed, there is an evident transfer of interest from the city to the house—which is to some extent made up for by its more extended global preoccupations—but there are nevertheless succinct though pregnant visions of St Jude (standing for St. Louis, and ultimately, in a more general way, for the Midwestern city), New York City and Philadelphia. The latter's decay ("the whole inner city is going back to farmland" [TC 465])<sup>106</sup> is described in terms that are reminiscent of the rhetoric of emptiness and urban *de-textualization* characteristic of the portrait of inner St. Louis in *The Twenty-Seventh City*:

Cinderblock was the material of choice over here for blinding windows. There were fire-gutted LUNC ONETTES and P ZER AS. Friable houses with bedsheet curtains. Expanses of fresh asphalt that seemed to seal the neighborhood's fate more than promise renewal. (TC 461)

Similarly, from his office block, an indifferent Gary Lambert discerns the decadence of older industrial areas: "Gary could see out across the river to the floodplain landscape of Camden, New Jersey, whose deep ruination, from this height and distance, gave the impression of a kitchen floor with the linoleum scraped off." (TC 259)

In contrast with the blight-afflicted inner Philadelphia and decaying industrial New Jersey, we are shown Gary's wealthy suburb, the actually existing Chestnut Hill, whose streets, as ironically Franzen reminds us, are named after "decimated" Native-

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<sup>106</sup> Henceforth we will be using the abbreviation TC when quoting from the novel.

American tribes. Chestnut Hill, an almost exclusively white district in a mostly black city, with its houses protected against intruders with sophisticated and expensive security systems (“floodlight and retinal scanners, emergency batteries, buried hotlines, and remotely securable doors” [TC 259]), is still not one of those *gated communities* which have proliferated in the United States and elsewhere, but it seems in the process of becoming one. Such fortified communities, Zygmunt Bauman has argued, powerfully symbolize what he has called “the secession of the successful” (Bauman, 2001: 51-2), which actually means, first and foremost, “an escape from community” (Bauman, 2001: 57). In *The Corrections* there is a telling incident where Gary’s wife, Caroline, anxiously phones his husband as there is a stranger in a car across the street (TC 256). Significantly, Caroline tells Gary that she has already phoned the police, but has been replied that there is nothing that they can do, since it is “a city street”, that is, not a private one. The incident illustrates the isolating, exacerbating effect of these “voluntary ghettos”, as the Polish thinker has called these areas (2001: 117). The mentioned passage is revealing of the ongoing process described by Bauman whereby public spaces are reshaped as fortresses of the rich (2001: 114). This is accompanied by the institutionalization of urban fear, constantly reinforced by the media, which keeps people out of public spaces. For Bauman, the notion that urban life is fraught with dangers leads to a communitarian dream based on the exclusion of difference, a communal unity based on division and segregation. Unrestrained consumption then appears as the necessarily unsatisfactory compensation for what is essentially an experiential loss. This is apparent, for example, in the piles of technological gadgetry that accumulate, abandoned after merely anecdotic use, in Gary’s house (especially in the children’s rooms), recalling Barbara Probst’s longing for a “life untyrannized by objects” in *The Twenty-Seventh City* (TS 280). Ultimately, according to Bauman, such dynamics leads people to forget the necessary skills to share in public life. Similar concerns are expressed by Franzen also in his essay “First City”, where he adds that, unlike in most suburbs, “there’s something in the very nature of cities which enforces adult responsibility”. According to Franzen, it is not that city dwellers are indifferent to the drives of consumerist culture, but that “it’s far easier on the streets of New York to have experiences that have nothing to do with the spending of money than it is in the typical galleria” (Franzen, 2002: 191).

In any case, one distinctive feature of Franzen's urban vision is its preoccupation with suburban life, a natural consequence of his choice of white middle-class families as the focus of his novels. Perhaps it must be added that in the contemporary American literary scene, characterized by a perceived fragmentation and emphasis on marginal identities, Franzen's claiming of suburban life as a substantial enough subject matter for serious novelistic use is not to be taken for granted.<sup>107</sup> As Green has put it, "Franzen's aim is to present the experience of upper-middle-class Midwesterners—all those middles in an age fascinated by margins—as constituting an identity specific enough for intense fictional exploration" (Green, 2005: 91). After the stylistic turn brought by *The Corrections*, this aim has earned Franzen comparisons with other novelists who have made suburban family life the main subject of their writing, such as John Updike and Sinclair Lewis (see for example Kakutani 2001). It is not difficult, however, to realize that Franzen's social concerns are still evident, and they transcend the placid surface of the suburb to look for the economic and ideological processes that sustain its existence, as well as the social and environmental consequences that an essentially unfair distribution of wealth entails. This is an endeavour that was central in Franzen's two first novels and which is all but absent from the work of the mentioned novelists. A similar comparison may be drawn between Franzen and other contemporary novelists that share his suburban concerns. In this sense, for example, Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994) shows a similar, penetrating involvement with the dysfunctions of wealthy suburbanite families, and he also shares Franzen's attentive eye to the painful circumstances of misfit adolescence. As in *The Corrections* in its own way, in Moody's novel the characters are, quite naturally, completely immersed in the dynamics of consumerism of early 1970s American society, but there is little in the way of testing the workings—economic, political, ideological—of such system. The scope of the novel never leaves, either physically or imaginatively, the affluent surroundings of New Canaan. Similarly, the recreation of historical details remains within the superficially satisfying realm of what Jameson has described as nostalgic pop images. A different case is that of Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), also concerned with suburban life in the early 1970s. Although the action is entirely set in the flat,

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<sup>107</sup> We should also add that suburban families are not a particularly prestigious choice of subject matter for practitioners of the Systems novel either. Thus, for example, in a 1982 interview DeLillo uses the hardly laudatory term "around-the-house-and-in-the-yard-fiction" (Harris, 1982: 26) to refer to the work of writers, ranging from Updike to Carver, who tend to favour that kind of settings.

featureless Midwestern suburb of Grosse Pointe, Michigan, a larger social picture is suggested. The novel shows how an orientational shift of perspective may be attained simply by climbing a rooftop, revealing what lies beyond the boundaries of the peaceful suburb forming both its reverse and existential prerequisite—the labour of factories, the squalor of slums, the din and chaos of city life:

From the roof of Chase Buell's house where we congregated after getting out of our dress-up clothes to watch what would happen next, we could see, over the heaps of trees throwing themselves into the air, the abrupt demarcation where the trees ended and the city began. The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset. Sounds we usually couldn't hear reached us now that we were up high, and crouching on the tarred shingles, resting chins in hands, we made out faintly, an undecipherable backward-playing tape of city life, cries and shouts, the barking of a chained dog, car horns, the voices of girls calling out numbers in an obscure tenacious game—sounds of the impoverished city we never visited. (Eugenides, 1994: 34)

Similarly, the troubled relations of production which underlie suburban affluence are recurrently suggested in Eugenides' novel by means of a protracted, symbolic strike of cemetery workers, a protest which complicates the funerals of the deceased in the suburb and brings to light the normally hidden labour implications of even such an intimate, apparently private event as dying.

In previous chapters of this study we have observed that Franzen's portrait of the suburbs is characterized by profound ambiguity and the complex symbolic import that is characteristic of heterotopias. We have seen, especially in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, that in Franzen's narrative the suburban spread is sometimes seen as the first cause of the decline of the city, mainly through the process of tax base drainage and subsequent deterioration of services entailed by white flight. The result, according to Franzen, is not only to be deplored in terms of social justice, but also because the city constitutes the quintessential site of public space, the symbol of that open realm of political and intellectual intervention that Habermas (1991) defined as the public sphere, whose eclipse Franzen has repeatedly lamented in essays such as "First City" and "Imperial Bedroom" (Franzen 2002). At another, less explicit level, the relentless suburban sprawl

and the destructive environmental effects it entails also stand in Franzen's fiction for the process whereby capitalism has apparently come to occupy every aspect of life in the entire planet, to the extent that it has virtually left no outside from which to build an alternative, more community-oriented perspective. The end of Nature means, as Jameson has argued, the end of any (non-capitalist) Other to our culture. Besides, as has been discussed elsewhere in this study, in their perceived uneventful, a-historical existence, the suburbs represent in Franzen's novels the most perfected incarnation of that crippling contemporary view, so inimical to literary realism, which presumes that the course of history has come to its end. Characteristically, nevertheless, each of Franzen's novels includes some passage in which the drabness of suburban life may be read in the less symbolic, more personal terms of the Midwest-bred youth who has fled his hometown for a more stimulant coastal life:

The midmorning light of a late-winter thaw, the stillness of a weekly nonhour in St. Jude, Gary wondered how his parents stood it. The oak trees were the same oily black as the crows perching in them ... a mailman whistling something Celtic and slamming mailboxes harder than he had to, because the deadness of these streets, at such a nonhour, in such a nonseason, could honestly kill you. (TC 201)

And a similar kind of ennui characterizes Gary Lambert's Chestnut Hill:

For miles in every direction, despite high population densities and large household incomes there were no fast roads and few useful stores. The Land that Time Forgot, Gary called it. Most of the houses here, including his own, were made of a schist that resembled raw tin and was exactly the color of his hair. (TC 164)

Indeed, an urge to flee the drabness of suburban life may be perceived in all of Franzen's novels, as if he had interiorized Edith Wharton's injunction against suburban fiction in her 1925 review essay "The Great American Novel", discussed by Jurca (2001). In that piece Wharton deplored what she perceived as the reductionist materialism that had taken over American culture and accused novelists who focused on the reality of dull bourgeois life of reproducing the very spiritual barrenness they aimed to criticize. Wharton was thus contributing to lay the foundations of one of the most powerful and enduring American literary myths, that of the large, inclusive novel which

provides a wide, historical portrait of the culture. Franzen is surely among the believers in the power of such narrative concept, yet he is also a suburb-bred novelist, which creates noticeable tensions and ambiguities in his suburban pictures. Certainly, there is more than mere dullness to Franzen's suburbs. Fondness for the remembered scenery of childhood is often present too, and we have seen how in Franzen's previous novels the suburb is also affectionately portrayed as a cosy haven of neighbourliness and family bonds. This view is consistent with the experiences of childish pranks and adolescent bonding which Franzen recounts in autobiographical essays such as "Then Joy Breaks Through" and "Centrally Located", included in his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* (2006). After all, in his monograph on the cultural representation of American suburbs, Robert Beuka (2004) shows that most surveys reveal a considerable degree of satisfaction among their inhabitants as concerns community values. Thus, generalized Philistinism and prying neighbours may be felt as suffocating by a young aspiring lover of literature, but Franzen is keen to characterize the Lamberts' suburban St. Jude—a fictional version of the Webster Groves he grew up in—with a certain egalitarianism that seems to be rooted in the pioneering origins of Midwestern culture. This contrasts not only with the snobbish Eastern world of the Lambert's offspring, but also with the unabashed classism of Klaus Müller-Karltrou, a wealthy Austrian doctor with St. Judean connections:

"Do you know what I rilly [sic] *hate* of St. Jude?"

"No," Denise said. "What do you really hate about St. Jude?"

"I rilly [sic] hate the phony democracy. The people in St. Jude pretend they're all alike. It's all very nice. Nice, nice, nice. But the people are not all alike. Not at all. There are class differences, there are race differences, there are enormous and decisive economic differences, and yet nobody's honest in this case. Everybody pretends! Have you noticed this?" (TC 454)

Later, Franzen makes Denise Lambert, probably in an unnecessarily explicit way, elaborate on Müller-Karltrou's remarks apropos of her soon-to-be new lover, Robin Passafaro:

maybe because some sentimental part of her was taken in by the egalitarian ideal that Klaus Müller-Karltrou found so phony in St. Jude, but the word she wanted

to apply to Robin Passafaro, who had lived in urban Philly all her life, was “Midwestern.” By which she meant *hopeful* or *enthusiastic* or *community-spirited*. (TC 465)

Nevertheless, Franzen makes sure that this rather unlikable doctor has a point in what he says: after all, St. Judean equality extends to a rather closed circle, as its communitarian membership seems reserved to affluent white families. This character reminds us of the antiabortionist Reverend Stites, who in *Strong Motion* makes a critique of consumerist society which at times sounds remarkably close to Franzen’s own views, albeit from very distant ideological positions.

A similar cultural contrast may be noticed when Gary, imbued in Eastern elitism and irony, visits his former hometown. Accustomed to Eastern fierce individualism, he resents Midwestern old-fashioned rituals of civility as invasions of privacy and lavishes sarcasm over a shop assistant at a medical supply store in St. Jude, whom he sees as overly friendly (TC 558-559). What the incident suggests, of course, is that such ardent defence of privacy is ultimately an extension—or a justification—of that disengagement from community on the part of the wealthy we have discussed above. Previously, Gary had been repelled by the sight of working-class customers at the store:

Gary’s problem with illness, in aggregate, aside from the fact that it involved large quantities of human bodies and that he didn’t like human bodies in large quantities, was that it seemed to him low class. Poor people smoked, poor people ate Krispy Kreme doughnuts by the dozen ... A diseased underclass that he really, really wanted to keep away from. (TC 557)

Here Franzen seems again to share a point with Beck in showing that although the logics of wealth distribution and risks distribution are different, to the extent that risk awareness is partly a factor of adequate knowledge, the better educated social groups—which tends to amount to the wealthier—are in a better position to protect themselves from those risks which one may actually diminish (Beck, 1992: 53).

The difference in outlook between the East and the Midwest, nevertheless, does not prevent Gary from noticing the increasing tendency towards cultural homogeneity worked by consumerist society, which he presents as the Midwest being intent on adopting Eastern ways and, more specifically, Eastern *distinction*, to use Bourdieu’s

term (or *cool*, in Gary's parlance). This category, as the French sociologist demonstrates, is essentially realized by consumption habits that act as markers of social status. By this token, the generalization of those habits corrupts their meaning as social signifiers, in the same way as the proliferation of stolen alarm signs in Gary's suburbs undermines their deterrent function. This explains Gary's displeased look on the new St. Judean cool:

At the same time, all the restaurants in St. Jude were suddenly coming up to European speed ... and shoppers at the mall near his parents' house had an air of entitlement offputtingly similar to his own, and the electronic goods for sale in St. Jude were every bit as powerful and cool as those in Chestnut Hill. (TC 226)

Actually, it is the eagerness and haste with which *uncool* sections of the country adopt features of distinction from the cool ones, and thus devalue them, which keeps the (mostly Eastern-based) sociocultural system for the production of distinction-bestowing tokens in continuous functioning. In this sense, significant purchasing power is of course a prerequisite of distinction but, in being too transversal, does not constitute a valid criteria on its own (in fact, true distinction tends to conceal its own dependence on wealth and considers vulgar any ostentation of means). True distinction, as the novel shows, is a matter of educated taste. In this sense, Franzen is particularly adroit at characterizing his creatures by means of more or less *distinguished* consumption choices. Especially significant is the division between the sophisticated taste of the younger Lamberts as regards food, decoration or entertainment choice, and (what they perceive as) the old-fashioned, suburban tackiness of their parents.

In the previous chapter we have already discussed how Franzen's ambiguous portrait of suburban life evinces a kind of honesty which according to Catherine Jurca is lacking in the fiction of authors such as Sinclair Lewis. For the critic, this and related novelists fraudulently present the experience of affluent white house-owners in terms of cultural oppression with the objective of capitalizing on "the empowering rhetoric of victimization" (Jurca 2004: 19) in what is essentially a justification of class privilege. In *The Corrections*, rather, what is more evidently evoked is the embarrassment which for certain people of progressive professions accompanies the realization of the unfairness at the root of their own privilege, an uneasiness which has come to be known as liberal guilt. Be it as it may, Franzen's affectionate view of the suburb seems to condense in

the family house. In fact, in a clear reflection of Franzen's new emphasis on the private sphere of family matters, the Lamberts' family house is granted a prominent position, both real and symbolic, in *The Corrections*.

There is an obvious identification in the novel between the family and the Lamberts' house in *The Corrections*. This house matches Gaston Bachelard's critical version of the classic bourgeois three-story house whose walls, corners and nooks have nurtured and protected childhood but now is only inhabited by the ailing elder Lamberts. In a way, the container stands for the contained: at the beginning of *The Corrections* we learn that the Lamberts' residence, like that of the Lisbons in *The Suicide Virgins*, has fallen into disrepair, suggesting in this way the fragmentation of the family—the falling apart that had set for the Lamberts a vague but distressing “alarm bell of anxiety” (TC 2), or perhaps, in Bachelard's words, “the cosmic anguish [that] precedes the storm” (Bachelard, 1994: 44). Indeed, at the very opening of the novel we see the Lamberts' house threatened by “[t]he madness of an autumn prairie cold front coming through” (TC 3), in obvious anticipation—wind being traditionally associated to madness—of Alfred's mental illness. It is also significant, in this sense, that Alfred spends most of his time in the chaotic cellar, a part which Bachelard identifies, following Jung, as the *irrational* part of the building: “the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces” (Bachelard, 1994: 18). Subterranean forces, by the way, which can also be related to the metallurgic experiments he conducts there. In any case, in Bachelard's words, Alfred's cellar becomes “buried madness, walled-in tragedy” (1994: 20). More than in any other of Franzen's novels, the house is given centrality at key moments of *The Corrections*. In the superb scene of *the dinner of revenge*, where infant Chip is punished for refusing to eat his unsavoury meal of liver, there is a moment when we can visualize the house as a whole, with Alfred working in his laboratory in the cellar, Chip still sitting at the kitchen table on the ground floor, and Enid and Gary at the latter's bedroom upstairs. As the night falls and the scene advances, the story is permeated by a certain air of un-reality and Franzen's symbolic intentions become evident:

Whether anybody was home meant everything to a house. It was more than a major fact. It was the only fact.

The family was the house's soul.

The waking mind was like the light in a house.

The soul was like the gopher in his hole.

Consciousness was to the brain as family was to house. (TC 309-310)

We can relate this un-real quality of the scene to *daydreaming*, the activity which for Bachelard is most emblematic of the childhood sheltered by the house, and which will inevitably tinge later recollections of it:

[T]he house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace ... Therefore, the places in which we have *experienced daydreaming* reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places of the past remain with us for all time. (Bachelard, 1994: 6)

Another key moment in which the Lamberts' house gains prominence in the novel is during the incomplete family meeting that Enid has been desperately trying to organize for Christmas. The novel emphasizes that the house protects the family from the biting cold outside: "Cold drafts were finding ways through the windows, faintly stirring the open curtains. The furnace was running almost constantly" (TC 631) Indeed, as Bachelard puts it, "[t]he house derives reserves and refinements of intimacy from winter" (1994: 40). And the colder it gets outside, the warmer it feels inside, which is to say the clearer it becomes the mutual need of the members of the small community formed by the Lambert family. As we shall see, in the climactic reconciliation scene in *Freedom* a freezing-cold outside is also used to symbolically emphasize the need for communion, in this case within the small community of lovers formed by Walter and Patty.

Besides, as the French philosopher explains, the house's "virtues of protection and resistance can be transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body" (1994: 46). In this way, as in *Strong Motion*, in *The Corrections* we can find the occasional identification of the house and the anxious, neglected mother which, in its emphasis on her protective role, seems to pose the latter as the real heart of the family:

To Enid at this moment came a vision of rain. She saw himself in a house with no walls; to keep the weather out, all she had was tissue. And here came the rain from the east, and she tacked up a tissue version of Chip and his exciting new

job as a reporter. Here it came from the west, and the tissue was how handsome and intelligent Gary's boys were and how much she loved them ... and it rained harder and harder and she was so tired and all she had was tissue. (TC 357)

As J. Hillis Miller observes, “[w]e charge houses with our feelings for the personalities of those who live there or divide our lives, as Proust’s Marcel did, between a Germantes’ Way and a Swann’s Way” (Miller, 1995: 20). This is indeed a common literary procedure. What is most relevant for us here is the way Franzen uses it to support his commitment to the small community of the family. The novelist will draw on the identification between house and family again in “A House for Sale”, the opening essay in *The Discomfort Zone*, in which Franzen recounts the proceedings of the sale of his parents’ house in Webster Groves, St. Louis, after the death of his mother, making for a moving sort of epilogue to *The Corrections*.

We have seen how at the heart of classic realism—as in the mind of its theorists—lies a profound preoccupation with the possibilities and pitfalls of community. Franzen’s emphasis on the house is symptomatic of a shift of focus towards the family as the most significant source of community that both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* illustrate, and which is arguably revealing of a deeper intuition about the impossibility of attaining true community at a larger social level which unformulated underlies Franzen’s fiction. For Franzen, the room for collective social amelioration is small. Community bonds may bring relief for the various forms of personal pain and depression that his characters have to endure, but salvation, as we observed while discussing *Strong Motion*, is necessarily individual. As Jiménez Heffernan argues apropos of Jean-Luc Nancy’s view of community, “la comunidad habrá de residir en la casa aislada, tomada y encantada: mansión originariamente aristocrática en la que la pequeño-burguesía exhibe, en éxtasis minuciosamente bataillano, su perverso y discreto encanto.” (Jiménez Heffernan 2007: 26)

#### **6.4. Charting totality: conspiracy vs. synthesis.**

The characteristic analytic impulse of realism we have been discussing is incorporated by Lukács to that ambition to portray a social whole that the critic finds in the great classic realists such as Balzac, and which he describes as the aspiration to

totality. Such aim is exemplified by Jameson with the quintessentially synthetic *Middlemarch* and its “web of interrelationships,” which is to be understood as

an immense and mobile concatenation of events ... rather than a static table of equivalences; and at this point its synchronic nature also necessarily becomes visible, in the form of interconnections that fan out well beyond the reader’s field of vision and are yet modified by the most minute adjustments in the “lives” thereby brushing against each other. (Moretti, 2006: 123)

Although a complete account of totality is by definition out of our reach, as Lukács recognizes, he defends the ideal of totality as the “guiding principle” for the truly realist artist. As Laclau has put it, “totality is a horizon, not a ground” (Laclau, 2005: 71) For the Hungarian theorist, the realist novelist should traverse that path for as long as possible, so as to achieve an “intensive” vision of totality that invests her work with depth, providing then a partial vision that is as consistent as possible with other partial accounts.<sup>108</sup> Such task, however, has proven increasingly difficult in the evanescent times of liquid modernity, characterized by a profound aversion to totalizing thought (when not sheer repression of it). We have seen following Jameson that the emergence of conceptions such as totality or mode of production was historically determined. According to the American critic, in order to be thought at all, these notions presuppose a strategic critical distance that is mainly given by the awareness (or memories) of the coexistence of different modes of production, a set of circumstances that has all but vanished in the late form of capitalism we are immersed in (Jameson, 1998: 41-43).<sup>109</sup> There can be little doubt that the current, also historically determined abandonment of totalizing thought that is broadly coincident with the consolidation of a truly global world system of ever increasing complexity has had decisive effect on the novel of our time. Already in 1984, Jameson noticed a pressing “spatial dilemma confronted by contemporary fiction in the ‘world system’”, which he saw as

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<sup>108</sup> In “Critical Realism and Socialist Realism” Lukács argues: “The ideal of totality in art can never, of course, be more than a guiding principle, applied to a particular segment of life; it can never be more than an approximation to totality. Lenin demanded a similar conception of totality in regard to science: ‘A problem can only be fully understood when all its aspects, all its implications, all its determinants have been established and examined.’ This demand applies even more to literature, where the achievement of depth, of intensive totality, always has priority over extensive totality” (Lukács, 2006: 100).

<sup>109</sup> One of the consequences of this kind of ideological repression is the obscurity cast upon actual relations of production. This is shown by currently prevailing theoretical constructions that portray a present state free of class struggle, such as the *post-industrial society* described most notably by theorist Daniel Bell (1973).

the increasing incompatibility—or incommensurability—between individual experience, existential experience, as we go on looking for it in our individual bodies, and structural meaning, which can now ultimately derive only from the world system of multinational capitalism. (Jameson, 1984: 116)

This surely accounts for the contemporary success of conspiracy theory, a distinctive and recurring resource for postmodernist fiction which in Jameson's words represents "a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson 1991: 38). Conspiracy has thus become a substitute for adequate cognitive mapping and has replaced totalization as an explanatory device in much postmodernist fiction. Particularly, conspiracy theory is used to provide an explanation, perforce inconclusive, to what is perceived as a mysterious, disturbing network of connections underlying all sorts of states of affairs at national or even worldwide level. The multinational corporation and the obscure government agency (famously conflated in what Eisenhower termed in his 1961 farewell speech "the military-industrial complex", which has since assumed the role of the villain in so many fictional products), with their secretive, relentless pursuit of money and power in the underside of the public sphere are of course the most obvious conspiratorial agents, not only in postmodernist fiction but in contemporary popular culture. Probably to a hitherto unparalleled extent, many citizens in America and the rest of Western countries have come to feel that their conditions of living are at the mercy of powers above the governments they nominally elect—powers not only beyond accountability but also past common cognoscibility. This is widely perceived, even if often not fully understood, as a loss of community, as is apparent in novels such as Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Coover's *The Public Burning* (1976), Gaddis' *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) or DeLillo's *The Names* (1982), *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997). The list of works could certainly be much longer which, together with the sheer length of the time span involved, shows the depth and persistence of that concern. As Jerry Varsava has put it:

American life today is controlled by governmental and corporate organizations to a degree unprecedented in peacetime, and this circumstance does indeed militate against the formation of those communities that might be inclined to oppose given governmental and corporate agendas ... The complexity and operational secrecy of these systems, not to mention their sheer number, have

made it very difficult for citizens of the late-twentieth-century liberal state to establish links between events and phenomena, to conceptualize any sort of integrated notion of their own historicity. (Varsava, 2003: n.pag.)

It is possible that conspiratorial approaches to totality would have earned similar reproaches from Lukács as he bestowed upon modernism, which for the Hungarian critic rendered reality unintelligible and hence inalterable, disabling any notion of human agency and paving the way to generalized angst, a “mood of total impotence, of paralysis in the face of the unintelligible power of circumstances” (Lukács 2006c: 36). However, these “distorted” social visions, as Lukács might have called them, are not to be lightly dismissed. Firstly because, as Jameson has argued, in the same way as failed Utopian thinking in fiction, they may productively reveal the limits of and constraints acting upon our political imagination; and ultimately because, as Hardt and Negri have pointed out, in the Debordean spectacular society we inhabit, conspiracy theories are “both true and false”, since

[t]he spectacle of politics functions as if the media, the military, the government, the transnational corporations, the global financial institutions, and so forth were all consciously and explicitly directed by a single power even though in reality they are not. (Hardt and Negri 2001: 323)

From another point of view, as Peter Knight has pointed out, the recurrence of conspiracy in contemporary culture theory is also symptomatic of a deep dread at the heart of our societies, signalling to “a far more general anxiety about the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of the increasingly vast and anonymous bureaucratic forces that seem to control our lives, and even our most intimate thoughts and body processes” (Knight, 2002: 10).

The theme of conspiracy has also an important presence in Franzen’s novels. It is certainly a structural element in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* although, as we have seen, in both novels conspiracy takes on a distinctive character that sets it away from other more perfunctory conspiratorial displays in contemporary fiction. Indeed, in the first novel, the Indian conspiracy performs a twofold function as the ultimately collapsing vehicle for a Utopian impulse and also—given that the reader often shares the conspirators’ infiltrated point of view—as the platform from where to cast an inquisitive look at St. Louis’ varied power spheres. In *Strong Motion*, where the

use of the conspiratorial fictional device is ironically acknowledged (SM 256), Sweeting-Aldren's conspiracy is of course the motor that drives the plot, but also the reason for another explanatory effort, embodied by Renée's detective-like quest. Although there are no conspiracies in *The Corrections*, its typically postmodern preoccupation with connectedness has obvious conspiratorial overtones, which have moved critics to relate it to DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a novel intent, according to James Wood, on showing "the interconnectedness of American society by picturing it as a web threaded on strings of paranoia and power" (Wood, 2001b: n.pag.). Thus, in his novel DeLillo manages to draw uncanny connections between the Agent Orange used in the Vietnam War, Minute Maid orange juice and Prokofiev's opera *Love for Three Oranges*. In *The Corrections*, similar paranoia-tinged suggestions of interconnectedness abound, as the one which relates C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* with the design drug that a bogus doctor provides Enid with during her sea cruise (previously we have seen Chip Lambert taking a caplet of "Mexican A" with the logo of Midland Pacific railroads in it). Certainly, the most obvious vehicle for such disturbing images of connection in the novel is provided by tentacular multinational corporations like Orfic Midland, Alfred Lambert's last employer and responsible for the dismantling of Midland Pacific, as well as the liquidation of public assets in Lithuania. Similarly, a company called Axon Corporation, has developed a revolutionary brain therapy which is at the same time promising and potentially dystopian, using, in another eerie coincidence, some of Alfred's metallurgical findings. In this way, the so-called Corecktall process purports both to provide a cure for Parkinson's disease and to solve the problem of crime by reprogramming the brain of criminals. Franzen, finally, even makes a point of showing one of his detested SUVs, the imaginary Ford Stomper, as the automobile of choice of both American wealthy suburbanites and Lithuanian criminal warlords (TC 452).

There is a parallelism between the representation of power in *The Twenty-Seventh City* as hierarchically stratified in increasingly evanescent and incomprehensible spheres (TS 328), and the depiction of multinational corporations as vastly powerful though slippery, semi-secretly operated organizations which are apparently unaccountable for their deeds. In both cases power is presented as in the hands of a restricted circle of *illuminati*. Interestingly, just as in the case of Franzen's first novel power was shown as affected by a sort of uncertainty principle, or, according

to another analogy, disseminated in the way meaning is conceived to be in post-structuralist linguistics, so is—perhaps too explicitly—corporate responsibility in *The Corrections*:

Orfic Midland had joined the ranks of the indistinguishable bland megafirms whose headquarters dotted the American exurbs; its executives had been replaced like the cells of a living organism or like letters in a game of substitution in which SHIT turned to SHOT and SOOT and FOOT and FOOD, so that, by the time Gary had okayed the latest bulk purchase of **OrficM** for CenTrust's portfolio, no blamable human trace remained of the company that had shut down St. Jude's third largest employer and eliminated train service to much of rural Kansas. (TC 177)

Actually, in the novel we can also find the familiar concern with the problematic processes of representation and meaning—a distinctive outcome of post-structuralist thought—which has become a fixation in postmodernist fiction. Indeed, a defining characteristic of such genre is a high degree of theoretical awareness, to the extent that a postmodernist work of art that does not bring to the fore its consciousness of the conventional character of its own process of representation seems scarcely possible. Consequently, in *The Corrections* we attend Alfred Lambert reflecting on the impasse between reality and our mental representations of it:

The floor's nature was to some extent unarguable, of course; the wood definitely existed and had measurable properties. But there was a *second* floor, the floor as mirrored in his head, and he worried that the beleaguered "reality" that he championed was not the reality of an actual floor in an actual bedroom but the reality of a floor in his head which was idealized and no more worthy, therefore, than one of Enid's silly fantasies. (TC 315)

Indeed, the exploration of Alfred's consciousness becomes at times an overt formulation of typical postmodernist concerns with the constructed character of reality: "The suspicion that everything was relative: That the 'real' and 'authentic' might not be simply doomed but fictive to begin with. That his feeling of righteousness, of uniquely championing the real was just a feeling" (TC 315). From this point of view, the enigmatic narratorial sentence "[t]he betrayal had begun in Signals" (TC 78) takes on a

distinctive poststructuralist flavour.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, Sylvia Roth also ponders on the quandary of the mind's access to reality and realizes the irresistible power of spectacular image, not only as mediation between the world and consciousness but as a shaper of consciousness itself:

She wondered: How could people respond to these images if images didn't secretly enjoy the same status as real things? Not that images were so powerful, but that the world was so weak ... the world was *fungible* only as images. Nothing got inside the head without becoming pictures. (TC 352)

To complete the picture, the novel is also deeply concerned with neurochemistry and mind-altering drugs—a preoccupation which, in its insistence on the material base of mental processes, chimes in with post-structuralist denunciations of traditional humanist conceptions of identity and consciousness as transcendent, self-centred entities. This interest also reminds us that scientific discourse has become an apparently indispensable attribute of postmodernist fiction. From a different point of view, it can also be read as an expression of widespread fear in the face of the ever growing possibilities of manipulation of the individual that technological development brings about, and which corporations and governments may secretly use in their own interest against those of the citizens. Ultimately, this preoccupation is another expression of the contemporary anxiety described by Knight about a perceived loss of individuality and autonomy of the individual, since such technological advances are seen not only as facilitating mental manipulation but also as paving the way for a the total reification of the self, and the ensuing commodification of a realm which is generally seen as that of the innermost sources of identity. This preoccupation, also noticeable in the work of Franzen's fellow novelists such as in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), has been explored perhaps most notably by DeLillo in novels such as *Great Jones Street* or *White Noise*. For example, in the latter Jack Gladney and his wife surreptitiously rely on a new pharmaceutical called Dylar to get rid of their fear of death. Franzen's interest in highlighting the organic, biochemical basis of thought and consciousness and their new susceptibility to commodification produced by technological development is evident in

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<sup>110</sup> It is easy to take the sentence as pointing to the disintegrating, disseminating effect produced by the ascendancy of liquid modernity in both the ill-fated railway which employs Alfred Lambert and in the latter's mind, quite symbolically affected by Parkinson's disease. However, testifying to the hybrid nature of the novel, later on we learn that the remark was more referential than we might have thought. There was an actual betrayal in Alfred's life: that of the subordinate employee of the Signals department who seduced his teenage daughter Denise.

*The Corrections*. We are acquainted with Gary's envisioning of his own state of mind as a sort of stock exchange market where key neurochemicals in his brain rise and fall like the value of shares, which is certainly consistent with his materialistic worldview (TC 169-160). We are also shown how Enid Lambert's sense of shame and failure is held at bay by Aslan, the illegal drug she is provided with during her cruise holidays (and which is named, in another knot in the novel's network of interconnections, after one of the characters in *The Narnia Chronicles* saga read by Gary Lambert's children). By means of that prescription Enid is able to buy out of that tragic sense of life that Franzen in the *Harper's* essay calls "the Ache" and which, it should be remembered, the novelist sees as a prerequisite for the appreciation of serious fiction: "Death, Enid thought. He was talking about death. And all the people clapping were so *old* ... But were was the sting of this realization? Aslan had taken it away" (TC 388).<sup>111</sup> Finally, of course, there is Alfred Lambert, whose mental disintegration is told in rather modernist fashion with profusion of abstract detail, but whose illness might be cured, we are told, by changing the chemical composition of his brain. It is interesting to notice how for Franzen this particular scientific advance seems to entail spiritual impoverishment and ultimately a detriment to the novel, continuing thus the fundamentally humanist point he had made in the *Harper's* essay. As he puts it in his interview with Donald Antrim:

[t]here's a vulgar intellectual materialism that is encapsulated, for instance, in the currency of the term "clinical depression". If I say, "At that time in my life I was clinically depressed", in a way this ends the conversation. It replaces a potentially interesting story with a very simple, material story. "I was clinically depressed. The chemicals in my brain were bad. And I took this material thing into my body, and then the chemicals in my brain were better, and I was better". Obviously I'm not trying to minimize the seriousness of actual profound depression. But what we gain as science learns how to correlate the organic with the psychological, we lose in terms of the larger conversation. The poetic, the subjective, and particularly the *narrative* account of what a person is and what a life means—I feel like the novelist's vision is engaged in a turf war with the scientific, biological, medical account. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

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<sup>111</sup> In the narratorial comments of *The Corrections* we can find an account of such affliction which complements that of the *Harper's* essay. According to Franzen, this is the price the human species pays for consciousness: "that the finite and specific animal body of this species contained a brain capable of conceiving the infinite and wishing to be infinite itself" (TC 537).

In a way, in the above-mentioned choice of themes and motifs, Franzen is being the proverbial postmodernist. However, the contrast with the deeper realist elements that sustain the novel renders them in a way secondary and suggests that such profusion of postmodernist *topoi* would be part of an attempt to meet the requirements of postmodernist credibility or to sheer imitativeness—Franzen’s indebtedness to DeLillo is evident—in accordance with the narrative of conversion discussed in this book.

As we have seen, the realist novel developed as an explanatory device which enabled changing societies to explain themselves to themselves (Denith 2010: 41), and it is necessarily based on the assumption that reality (especially *social* reality) is there to be understood. Thus, while in *Underworld* the world system is awe-inspiring and well-nigh preternatural in its being beyond any possible conscious knowledge, in Franzen’s world conspiracies may be unravelled, knowledge can be gained, and truth may be attained, even if for no great practical effects from a political point of view, as is shown in *Strong Motion*, where Renée Seitchek, its determined *Seeker-Hero* finally attains the truth of the conspiracy she investigates. The kind of narrative and *epistemological closure* achieved by Renée contrasts sharply, for example, with the *undecidability* Oedipa Maas finds herself in at the end of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). As Ihab Hassan has put it:

The mystery that Oedipa Maas pursues through the labyrinths of signs remains a mystery; for self and society in America have dissolved into these same esoteric signs—hieroglyphs of concealed meaning or meaningless (we never know which). (Hassan 1981: 101)

Not to mention that in *The Twenty-Seventh City* we are allowed to observe chief Jammu’s conspiracy *from within*, which in the corresponding chapter of this study led us to observe, paraphrasing Raymond Williams, that Franzen’s are *knowable conspiracies*. Indeed, a noticeable characteristic of Franzen’s use of conspiratorial elements in his first two novels, as we have discussed in previous chapters drawing on the polysemy of the term, is the extent to which conspiracy turns into *plot*. In other words, how conspiracy is used, in a fairly classic, detective story-like way, as a selective principle for the materials of fiction out of a potentially unmanageable repertoire, as a framing device for the otherwise magmatic and incontrollable components of a novel.

We should not forget, finally, that for a novelist a conspiracy makes for a convenient generator of events in times perceived as eventless.

Franzen also keeps away from typically postmodernist views of the system as inscrutable in *The Corrections*. As befits a novel published in 2001, *The Corrections* is concerned with the process of globalization. Anthony Giddens defined that phenomenon as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1991: 64). Franzen, however, tightens this neutral definition to emphasize the way in which actions taken by unaccountable, a-national corporations in search of short-term benefit influence the innermost daily life of people living in some cases across the world from where the decision was taken. The instability and insecurity that this situation brings upon the lives of millions of people is a defining feature of what Bauman has termed liquid modernity and Ulrich Beck (1992) has defined as *Risikogesellschaft*, two related conceptions that inform our analysis of Franzen’s social views throughout this study. Of course, Franzen’s visions of structural social and economic mutability inscribe themselves in a long-standing tradition. In this way, in our discussion of *The Twenty-Seventh City* we argued that cultural and artistic representations of life under capitalism had often fallen into two different types: the vision of capitalism as tedium and stagnation typical of a certain bourgeois art; and the view of capitalism as continuous, turbulent change which found one of its most perdurable expressions in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels, 2010: 25)

Franzen’s view of the social effects of late, globalized capitalism in *The Corrections* implicitly shares this approach, which contrasts with the general immobility portrayed in its previous novels. It can be argued then that with globalization a certain

sense of moving history enters Franzen's worldview as reflected in his fiction. This fact may be understood in terms of Jameson's account of the conditions of possibility for totalizing thought as dependent on the awareness of the coexistence of different modes of production, which I have discussed above. In this sense, it is safe to affirm that the phenomenon of globalization has been widely perceived as involving a degree of transformation of the system of late capitalism. The factuality of such transformation is of course the subject of a debate which is out of our scope here, but the fact is that such sense of change—which has allowed a measure of critical distance to think the global system again in the kind of abstract, totalizing terms that Jameson had found missing in much postmodern thought—seems to be making new room for the perception of world-historical events. And this is reflected in Franzen's fiction too. Indeed, the socio-political transformation of the Eastern bloc is the background of a substantial part of *The Corrections*. It must be added that for Franzen this historical motion takes mostly the form of an unstoppable increase of the power of finance capital, now free to devour formerly public assets around the world or bankroll the transmutation of former soviet republics into veritable mafia states. Thus, as Annesley (2006), Hutchinson (2009) and Hawkins (2010) have rightly pointed out, in the novel there is not much for the individual to do about this overpowering hegemony of capital, except to be carried away by it or retreat to the (relatively) safer sphere of family—a stance on Franzen's part to which we shall come back below.

It is true that in his novel Franzen does not articulate any effective forms of resistance against a state of affairs that he evidently laments. However, these critics overlook the way in which Franzen casts a demystifying look on a system which contemporary American fiction has so often portrayed as an essentially unknowable entity—a sort of impenetrable, all-encompassing conspiracy. There is nothing actually unfathomable in the way an American-based corporation may buy previously privatized public assets in post-soviet Lithuania to subsequently liquidate them for a marginal profit. Similarly, the apparent omnipresence of Orfic Midland corporation in the novel may be disquieting, but behind it there is actually nothing more than the relentless, speculative pursuit of benefit of two Southern investors, the Wroth brothers, whose actions, in synthetic fashion, are representative of the usual ways of *hedge funds*.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> It is significant that instead of the more probable board of anonymous executives, Orfic Midland is presented as directly run by two specific individuals, the Wroth brothers, for whom Franzen even

What these cases reveal is not a paranoid vision of undecidable interconnections within a spectral world system, but rather the utter lack of regulation of an economic activity which governments around the world have renounced to control for the common benefit of their citizens:

Chip was struck by the broad similarities between black-market Lithuania and free-market America. In both countries wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few; any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors have disappeared; captains of commerce lived in a ceaseless anxiety that drove them to expand their empires ruthlessly; ordinary citizens lived in ceaseless fear of being fired and ceaseless confusion about which powerful private interest owned which formerly public institution on any given day. (TC 511)

As in his previous novel, Franzen is keen on revealing the ways in which ideology works to uphold the socio-economic state of affairs. If in *Strong Motion* the incessant ideological production of the media manages to quickly neutralize the consciousness-shaking effect that an earthquake caused by corporate greed ought to have, here Franzen specifically mentions the same ideological vectors he deals with in the *Harper's* essay, namely techno-consumerism and benumbing forms of entertainment. The true nature of this ideological pressure is highlighted by means of a memorable comparison with its starkly undisguised Lithuanian equivalent:

The main difference between America and Lithuania, as far as Chip could see, was that in America the wealthy few subdued the unwealthy many by means of mind-numbing and soul-killing entertainments and gadgetry and pharmaceuticals, whereas in Lithuania the powerful few subdued the unpowerful many by threatening violence. (TC 511)

In any case, it is conceivable that typically postmodernist social visions based on conspiracy and paranoia have been made obsolete by the enormous amount of research and discussion generated by globalization over the last decades, together with the new, sharpened awareness of socioeconomic processes that the ongoing global financial crisis has inevitably brought about. Indeed, it may be argued that both the transformation of

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provides some personal background. This kind of personalization, of obvious pedagogical qualities, is of course a quintessentially novelistic device which may be regarded as more *realist* than *realistic*

late capitalism produced by globalization (be it qualitative or merely quantitative), as well as the magnitude of the financial crisis that became suddenly visible in 2008 have led to the generalization of a new focus on the capitalist system as a whole and by this token to a revival of totalizing thought which naturally avoids substitutive worldviews based on conspiracy. As Lukács reminds us, for the Marxist tradition the relations of production form a whole. However, during the periods of smoother functioning of the capitalist system, and as a result of its structural logic, “the surface of capitalism appears to ‘disintegrate’ into a series of elements all driven towards independence” (Lukács, 1977: 32). To be sure, as can be noticed in postmodern conspiracy fiction, this perception is reflected in the artistic production of the age in question. However, as Lukács observes, following Marx’s *Capital*, “[t]he underlying unity, the totality, all of whose parts are objectively interrelated, manifests itself most strikingly in the fact of crisis” (1977: 32).

#### **6.5. Family elegies, social pictures (and vice versa).**

If typically postmodernist conspiracy is not Franzen’s favoured vehicle for the rendering of social totality, then to what extent does he explore the other way, that of Lukácsian synthesis? And, not least of all, what are the possibilities for such procedure to be used in contemporary fiction or, in other words, is contemporary society susceptible of being synthesized? In our discussion of realism we have seen that at the end of *Mimesis* Auerbach expresses his sympathy for Virginia Woolf and other Modernists who relinquish the aspiration to rationally analyse a society which is seen as essentially irrational (Auerbach, 2003: 548). The German critic thus accepts the particular synthesis of Modernism which aims to imply a whole life out of an apparently random or banal sample, just as a modern scientist is able to extract an individual’s key genetic information out of any cell of her body, since the totality of her fate is potentially contained in any random fragment of her life and consciousness (Auerbach, 2003: 547). It is revealing, however, that well after the alleged demise of modernism and deep into postmodernism, for some thinkers such as Bauman and Jameson, the need to explain our society to ourselves is arguably more acute than ever.

The central figure among those who defend a novel of social analysis is of course Lukács, for whom the value of a novel ultimately lies in its capacity for resisting

the alienating forces of capitalist society by creating an explanatory microcosmic model of social totality, revealing its inner dynamics and contradictions. For this, the novelist must be able to reconcile individuality and typicality. The “type” is then the central concept in realist literature according to the critic, a particular synthetic construction (be it a character or a situation) which binds together the general and the particular (see Lukács 2006b: 383-4). This requires that the novelist portrays individuals as essentially social beings, showing, in Lukács words, the “inner dialectic of their social and individual existence” (2006b: 387). It is evident that Franzen’s third novel relies on that dialectic between the individual and social dimension of its characters to a greater extent than his previous work. Franzen manages to provide us with a substantial social vision by means of the interaction of a group of characters that in synthetic way are both individual and representative. It is interesting to notice that critics have tended to ignore or even deplore the social content of the novel, and found the claim to realism in *The Corrections* instead in its in-depth exploration of highly individualized characters, to the detriment of the aspirations to social criticism that prevailed in his previous novels. One of these critics was Wood, who dismissed Franzen’s attempt at social analysis: “[t]he novel of intimacy, of motive, of relation, creates a heat that burns away feebler energies such as the social novel” (Wood, 2001a: n.pag.). We can notice that Wood’s opinion is representative of a widespread current conception of realism which dispenses with its social dimension, as if realism could be other than social, and it surely points to a common ideological prejudice, namely that, history having come to an end, all appropriate novelistic materials in works of contemporary setting are inevitably of private nature: personal relationships and moral insight. This prejudice, it must be added, is by no means a prerogative of our time. We have seen that in *History and class consciousness* Lukács saw it as a defining characteristic of bourgeois thought, a circumstance that could be in fact extended to all hegemonic ideologies. Raymond Williams, for example, locates it in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot’s only novel set in her own time, and one which certainly evinces an attitude marked by resignation before the course of events. In this way, for Williams in that novel Eliot

is able, conscientiously, to narrow her range because the wide-ranging community, *the daily emphasis of want*, is supposed past and gone with old England. All that is left is a set of personal relationships and of intellectual and

moral insights, in a history that for all valuing purposes has, disastrously, ended.  
(Williams, 1973: 180; my italics)

It is likely, nevertheless, that Franzen's critics have been misled in this respect by his apparent renunciation to the social novel in the *Harper's* essay. Indeed, it seems that Franzen cannot but be a social novelist, as befits a writer of realist inclinations. Therefore, rather than a let go of the social, what is apparent in *The Corrections* is that Franzen has found a different form, if by no means new, of including society in the texture of the novel, one in which the intended social vision is implied in the characters' interaction rather than directly conveyed in expository manner by authorial comments or digressions, as it is mostly the case in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and, especially, *Strong Motion*. In this way, already in the same *Harper's* essay in which some critics read Franzen's disavowal of social criticism we can notice the following acknowledgement of its inevitability:

I'm amazed, now, that I trusted myself so little for so long, that I'd felt such a crushing imperative to engage explicitly with all the forces impinging on the pleasure of reading and writing: as if, in peopling and arranging my own little alternate world, I could ignore the bigger social picture even if I wanted to.  
(Franzen, 2002: 95)

Paula Fox's short novel *Desperate Characters* (1970), a piece of fiction which Franzen has passionately praised, most famously in the *Harper's* essay, has surely been influential in persuading Franzen that the conflicts of an affluent white middle-class family were worthy of intense novelistic exploration. It seems likely in any case that Fox's work played an important part in the modification of his approach to social description. If in Franzen's previous work individual (especially family-related) and social concerns are two clear axes of interest which at times appear to point in different directions, *Desperate Characters* seems to provide him with a model of a tighter integration of both spheres of interest, a more balanced account of that dialectic duality of human beings which Lukács himself advocated. Even the structure of *The Corrections* seems inspired by *Desperate Character's*: Franzen's novel is divided into the five interrelated stories of its main characters, each one of them to some extent an independent novella which follows the model of Fox's novel. The influence of *Desperate Characters* on Franzen has been analysed by Green, who notices how in the

*Harper's* essay the novelist praises "a delicate balance between the domestic and the social novel" in Fox's book. (Green, 2005: 97) For Green,

[i]n sustaining the balance between internal, domestic malaise and external, social pathology, Fox combines the virtues of the traditional domestic novel with the insinuation of social significance. This balancing act provides Franzen with an aesthetic ideal. (Green, 2005:98)

Certainly, in her novel *Paula* Fox strikes a fine balance in the way of conveying a social vision with a minimum of narratorial comment, by way of relating the individual and social dimensions of its main characters, the Bentwoods, a Brooklyn upper-middle class intellectual couple. In his 1999 introduction to the paperback edition of *Desperate Characters*, Franzen highlights the novelist's ability to equate "a crisis in marital partnership with a crisis in business partnership and a crisis in American urban life" (Franzen, 1999: *xiii*). Such synthetic capacity often relies on symbolism or metonymy: the dread of impending social and personal disintegration that runs through the novel is represented by Sophie Bentwood being bitten by a stray cat, an apparently minor event which becomes ominously symbolic. Urban decay and class hatred are represented obliquely by means of the apparently banal intrusion of rubbish, irate drunkards and sneering rural people upon the formerly unconcerned world of the Bentwoods (Actually, Chip Lambert's vision of New York City also seems to have been influenced by Fox: "in New York City you never had to go far to find filth and rage. A nearby street sign seemed to read Filth Avenue" [TC 117]). Former Otto Bentwood's friend Charlie Russell very precisely describes the condition of the couple as "drearly enslaved by introspection while the foundation of their privilege is being blasted out from under them" (Fox, 2003: 39), which summarizes the mood of liberal guilt that permeates the novel and can be easily related to political attitudes that can be found in *The Corrections*, discussed below.

It is obvious that Franzen has tried to attain a synthetic, representative quality in *The Corrections* that goes beyond what can be found in his previous work. It is the five members of the Lambert family, of course, who become the means for this comprehensiveness. From a social point of view, the older Lamberts and their offspring stage the divide between two different American worldviews: the Midwestern and the Eastern, respectively, which would be safe to characterize in turn as modern and

postmodern, as the differences between them seem historical rather than merely cultural. In the passages of *The Corrections* devoted to Alfred and Enid Lambert's youth in the early 1960s we can observe the heyday of American industrial society, which is to say of the American middle class. Alfred, the head of the family, is employed as an engineer by Midland Pacific, a Midwestern railway, for all of his working life. This pays for a comfortable life in a suburb characterized by an atmosphere of good neighbourliness. The autobiographical elements used by Franzen in his construction of this opposition are well-known, and are interesting as they are clearly reflected in the novel. As he affirms in his interview with Antrim:

To say that the book is thematically self-conscious is to put it mildly. I come from a kind of old-fashioned Midwest, and I live in a technocorporate, postironic, cool, late-late Eastern world. The two worlds hardly ever talk to each other but they're completely, constantly talking to one another inside me. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

In this way, Alfred and Enid stand for a distinctively Midwestern ethos characterized by tradition, by the austerity of those who have been through hard times, by the value bestowed on hard work, thrift and communitarian bonds of neighbourliness. In the course of his inspection of the infrastructure of Erie Belt, an Ohio-based railway, young Alfred observes that such disposition is being replaced by what he sees as Eastern frivolity:

Everywhere Alfred went in the Erie Belt's hinterland he heard young Erie Belt employees telling one another "Take it easy!" ... The phrase seemed to Alfred an Eastern blight, a fitting epitaph for a once-great state, Ohio, that parasitic Teamsters had sucked nearly dry. On the high prairie where he'd grown up, a person who took it easy wasn't much of a man. Now came a new effeminate generation for whom "easygoing" was a compliment. (TC 281)

But Alfred's Midwestern code is also, as Franzen is keen on showing, a mind-set marked by stiff social conservatism and patriarchal attitudes, made evident in the way he tends to tyrannize his wife. In a way, Alfred, like Martin Probst in Franzen's first novel, stands for a now disappearing type of social organization which Bauman (2000) has called solid or heavy modernity—*the era of hardware*—and Beck (1992) on his part has analysed as industrial society. In this sense, we may remember that, as we discussed

in our study of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, for Beck (1992: 106), industrial society has a certain feudal quality in that it is based on a fundamental distinction of roles, male and female, which are ascribed to the individual by birth. The sphere of production and wage labour is assigned to men, and the realm of family and housework to women, always in a relation of dependence and male supervision. This brings about a certain antagonism between the sexes which to an extent parallels that between classes, as the quarrels between Alfred and Enid Lambert superbly exemplify. From a different point of view, Alfred's distinctive austerity and integrity—the very qualities behind his productiveness—are shown to have their correlate in sexual repression, which is perceptible in his guilty masturbation at a hotel when away from home (TC 284) or in his refusal to Enid's advances concerning oral sex (TC 322). In this sense, it is significant to see how Alfred seems only able to repress the libidinal impulses that bedevil him when he is away from home by working even harder, in explicit illustration of Freud's famous view of sublimated sexual drives as the basis of culture: "civilization depends upon restraint", says Alfred to the sentient turd that torments him in his dementia (TC 328).

To be sure, Alfred's job stands for a kind of hard, manly, rewarding productive labour that has traditionally occupied a central place in American ideology, although this construction is clearly undermined by Franzen's examination of its underside. This has been noticed by Ty Hawkins (2007) in his essay on the ideological constitution of the American Dream, which we have discussed in the chapter dedicated to Franzen's reception. As Hawkins recounts, at the end of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Biff Loman (the son of the play's protagonist Willy Loman) aspires to avoid the alienation inherent to his father's kind of labour by seeking a more fulfilling and meaningful work which in his view should be related to the worker's own environment, such as farming work. Though in theory Alfred's work as a railroad engineer should meet Biff's requirements for non-alienated labour, as Hawkins remarks, it actually represents the failure of the myth of meaningful, hands-on work as an escape from alienation. Not only does the railroad finally succumb to unproductive speculation but Alfred, who "had boundless energy for work but as soon as he quit he could barely stand up", (TC 314) falls to Parkinson's disease. Alfred's abnegation, an archetypal example of what after Weber is usually understood as Protestant work ethic (especially as regards its business-like emphasis on delayed gratification), thus comes to seem a

kind of false consciousness, an ideologically induced containment device meant to postpone, by means of sheer exhaustion, an inevitable realization of vital emptiness: “Months were rushing him forward on their rigid track, carrying him closer to the day he’d be the father of three, the year he’d paid off his mortgage, the season of his death” (TC 285). As Colin Hutchinson has observed, “Franzen suggests that the values of the Wroths and those of Alfred are not so very far apart and that Alfred (and therefore ‘old’ capitalism) held within himself the seeds of his own destruction” (Hutchinson 2008: 151), something which seems to be corroborated by the degenerative character of his illness. After all, as Miller’s play accurately shows, the generations of Willy Loman and Alfred Lambert preceded that of the younger Lamberts in the generalized access to gratification through technological consumerism. Although this is sometimes obscured by Franzen’s nostalgias, late capitalism is only the consequence of development of the immanent, reifying logic of capitalism. The advent of postmodernity was then implicit in modernity, just as Alfred’s dementia was inscribed in his own genes.

In the previous chapter we discussed that Franzen’s work also reflects one of the processes inherent to what Beck describes as advanced modernity qua risk society, namely the *de-standardization* of work. The parts of *The Corrections* dedicated to Alfred and Enid Lambert’s youth show that labour, clearly structured in solid and understandable ways, was a cornerstone of American industrial society together with its complementary institution, the nuclear family. As Beck argues, following Helmut Schelsky, at that time family and occupation still are “the two great forms of security that had remained for people in modernity”, providing people’s lives with “inner stability”, as well as affording access to fundamental social experiences (Beck, 1992: 140).<sup>113</sup> The ascendancy of this socio-economic configuration was visible in the external prominence and inner organization of work centres. This is reflected in the novel in the description of the Midland Pacific headquarters building:

The brain of the Midland Pacific, the temple of his soul, was a Depression-era limestone office building with rounded rooftop crenellations like the edges of a skimpy waffle. Higher-order consciousness had its cortical seat in the board-

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<sup>113</sup> In his interview with Antrim relates this circumstance to his father’s working experience: “I look at my father, who was in many ways an unhappy person, but who, not long before he got sick, said that the greatest source of satisfaction in his life had been going to work in the company of other workers. He got up every weekday morning for 40-plus years, put on a nice suit and a hat, went to this wonderfully structured environment, and did work that he perceived to be important and constructive.” (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

room and executive dining room on the sixteenth floor and in the offices of the more abstract departments (Operations, Legal, Public Relations) whose vice presidents were on fifteen. Down at the reptile-brain bottom of the building were billing, payroll, personnel and data storage. In between were mid-level skill functions such as Engineering, which encompassed bridges, track buildings, and signals. (TC 407)

The organic quality of the building's rendition evokes a reassuring sense of meaningfulness and functional stability. In its reflecting a *natural* order, the anthropomorphic analogy of the description reminds mediaeval conceptions of the body politic as analogically reflecting the hierarchically structured order of the universe. It evinces, in any case, that industrial society is characterized by what Bauman calls "the solidity of mutual engagement" (Bauman 2001: 42), which involves a certain feudal quality in that both employer and employee (or ruler and ruled) are bonded to a place. Of course, there is also an implication of rigid hierarchy and a disciplinary regime based on constant, direct supervision. The centralized production centres of the industrial age have traits of both fortress and prison, in contrast with the dissemination of production in advanced modernity. As Bauman has argued of society in general (2001: 41-2), in our time the enforcement of discipline does not rest in a cumbersome panopticon-style apparatus but in the uncertainty of the ruled as to what move their rulers, now exterritorial and diffuse, may make next. Therefore, as the novel shows, Midland Pacific's impressive infrastructure and its meaningful organization of material and human resources are doomed with the advent of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), a passage marked in the history of the company by its takeover by the Wroth brothers. As Beck explains, "[t]he observable symptom of such a transition from the old to the new employment system would be the gradual *abandonment* of large-scale work buildings, which, like the dinosaurs of the industrial age, would more and more serve only to remind us of a dying epoch" (1992: 142-3). The abandonment of structured labour runs parallel then to the desertion of infrastructure. This relinquishment is thus symbolic but has very real consequences, especially concerning the status of community in the affected sites. There is more to infrastructure than just the usual phallogocentric pride, as the novel shows. In this sense, Franzen's choice of Alfred's occupation is highly significant: he works for a railway which plays an important role in the maintenance of Midwestern communities ("he knew firsthand what scheduled service meant to a town's

civic pride, how the whistle of a train could raise the spirits on a February morning at 41°N 101°W” [TC 79]), but which is to be dismantled by the speculative investors. The fact that Alfred’s specific job at the railway is the maintenance of infrastructure recalls the way in which the latter is invested with communitarian symbolism in *Strong Motion*. Infrastructure is seen as part of that threatened pool of traditionally shared resources which Hardt and Negri (2005) refer to as *the common*,<sup>114</sup> and which Žižek describes as “the shared substance of our social being” (Žižek, 2009: 428). In *The Corrections*, Franzen continues this symbolic strategy and we can find a matching passage to that of his previous novel, containing another elegy for infrastructure:

The Erie Belt was a regional system whose freight business trucks had damaged and whose passengers business private automobiles had driven into the red. Although its trunk lines were generally hale, its branches and spurs were rotting like you couldn’t believe. Trains poked along at 10 mph on rails no straighter than a limp string. Mile upon mile of hopelessly buckled Belt. Alfred saw crossties better suited to mulching than to gripping spikes. Rail anchors that had lost their heads to rust, bodies wasting inside a crust of corrosion like shrimps in a shell of deep-fry. Ballast so badly washed out that ties were hanging from the rail rather than supporting it. Girders peeling and corrupted like German chocolate cake, the dark shavings, the miscellaneous crumble. (TC 281)

Thus, in *The Corrections*, again, the planned, collective vision embodied by infrastructure, even when privately-owned, appears as bound to dissolution: the era of hardware is coming to an end. If in Franzen’s previous novel the smell of abandoned, rotting infrastructure impregnates the city, now it is expeditiously dismantled and scraped by the Wroths for meagre though immediate profit: “He went over to the siding and saw three fellows ripping down the wire, smashing signal boxes, coiling up anything copper ... Hired for copper salvage at fifty cents a pound” (TC 80). Similarly, Chip Lambert notices the pitiful state of Manhattan’s public phones, ravished by disrepair and vandalism, and laments that “[t]hings cellular are killing public phones” (TC 117). According to this symbolism in the novel, undeveloped infrastructure in emerging countries implies a model of economic growth, now triumphant, which entails

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<sup>114</sup> In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri explain their preference for the singular form of the noun—as opposed to the more frequent plural *commons*, used among others by Žižek—as a way of highlighting its philosophical content and differentiating the concept from its older sense referring to the pre-capitalist shared productive spaces destroyed by privatization (Hardt and Negri, 2005: xv).

rather weakened community bonds, as is suggested by Ted Roth's description of upper-class houses in Uzbekistan with a Ford Stomper in the driveway but lacking indoor plumbing (TC 377).

In contrast, the Lamberts' offspring live in a late, shifting sand-like postmodern world of cool sophistication, instant gratification mostly by means of consumption, financial speculation and relentless individualism—a world which besides seems destined to overcome any other cultural forms in the apparently irresistible momentum towards homogenization of contemporary commercial culture. The three Lambert siblings also play different representative roles. Chip, a disgraced former professor of cultural studies, occupies a central place and represents the ineffectuality of a contemporary Left which, engrossed in theoretical disquisitions, has been reduced to political irrelevance, neutralized by the system it purports to oppose after having embraced materialist culture and, last but not least important, because in the course of its antiauthoritarian struggle it has lost sight of fundamental communitarian referents. Chip is additionally deployed by Franzen in a stint in Lithuania to show first hand some of the noxious effects of globalization. Gary, a Philadelphia bank executive, illustrates the bland materialism of the wealthy (Eastern) suburban class. Finally, Denise, a celebrity chef with a messy private life, attests to the spiritual impoverishment and inner fragmentation entailed by the frantic lifestyle of the successful, but also embodies those problems of social skills and adaptation which characterize other Franzen's characters such as Louis Holland and Renée Seitchek. We may notice how against the solid tangibility of Alfred's work, the occupations of his offspring are characterized by a marked speculative nature. Like Martin Probst in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Alfred Lambert hates speculation and he even refuses to take advantage of inside knowledge concerning the merger of Midland Pacific and Erie Belt, to his wife's dismay. In contrast, plain financial speculation is of course Gary's main activity; then (mostly ineffective) theoretical speculation is also a component of Chip's academic job; and Denise's success, for all her talent, is presented as ultimately dependent on hype (the fact that her trendy Philadelphia restaurant is set in an abandoned, hollowed-out electric power plant is certainly significant, adding to that Midwest-East symbolism). In the postmodern culture of the younger Lamberts, a neurotic form of consumerism based on the cultivation of instant gratification has substituted Protestant work ethic as a fundamental compelling force, as is exemplified by Chip's comic shoplifting scene at a

gourmet groceries store. Then, even if they are actually founded upon social exclusion, as the novel suggests, the communitarian aspects of the Lamberts' Midwestern suburban world, illustrated by relations of good neighbourliness and mutual trust, are in sharp contrast with the rampant individualism that characterizes their offspring's Eastern lives. The younger Lamberts also illustrate the ongoing decay of industrial society's conception of the nuclear family, subject to the erosion of the forces of modernization. Indeed, in the process of individualization that is characteristic of modernity and the result of the extension of the reifying logic of capitalism to all areas of life, "the relationship between family and individual biography loosens," to use Beck's phrase (Beck, 1992: 114). In this way, it is only Gary of all three siblings who has carried through the formation of the classic family unit. Significantly, however, his attempts to implement an improved, more up-to-date and *democratic* version of the model inherited from his parents fails pitifully. Gary tries to rescue the reassuring qualities of his parents' model of family—its "solidity of mutual engagement", in Bauman's expression—but devoid of its older feudal and patriarchal characteristics. Nevertheless, Gary's family is afflicted by the individuation forces of advanced modernity, attesting to the fact that, as Beck argues, the family is the ground where the contradictions of modernization are staged. As the novel shows, the relations between the members of Gary's family are mediated by commodity fetishism and competition and, as a result, the comforts and confidence which used to be provided by true mutual commitment must be sought in the "self-help" and pop-psychology books consumed by Gary's wife. The nuclear family seems then the object of Franzen's conflicted nostalgia regarding the industrial age as its erosion is obviously perceived as a loss. Then, if the older Lambert's house stands for the family it used to shelter, its current cracks are analogous to the crumbling items of infrastructure sung by Franzen in *Strong Motion* and *The Corrections*: both symbolize a communitarian impoverishment.

In the representation of this dichotomy between modern and postmodern culture, as well as in the lamentation for the perceived loss involved in this cultural turn, to use Jameson's term, Franzen's view seems informed by Daniel Bell's representation of what he called the cultural contradictions of capitalism. Bell observes, and obviously regrets:

the development of new buying habits in a high consumption economy and the resultant erosion of the Protestant Ethic and the Puritan Temper, the two codes

which once sustained the traditional value system of our society. It is the breakup of this ethic and temper, owing as much to changes in the social structure as in the culture, that has undercut the beliefs and legitimations that sanctioned work and reward in American society. It is this transformation and the lack of any rooted new ethic, that is responsible, in good part, for the sense of disorientation and dismay that marks the public mood today. (Bell, 1972: 31)

The decay of the Protestant ethic is of course a central issue in *The Corrections*, which starts by declaring that Alfred Lambert's code, "the whole Northern religion of things [is] coming to an end" (TC 3). Franzen seems to share with Bell the sense that the causes of this "disorientation and dismay" lay in changes in the economic structure, as we can notice in his emphasis on the transition from a productive to a speculative economy. In spite of his hostility against 1960s counterculture, for Bell the roots of the cultural change are economic. As he quite precisely states:

The protestant Ethic and the Puritan Temper, as social facts, were eroded long ago, and they linger on as pale ideologies, used more by moralists to admonish and by sociologists to mythologize than as behavioral realities. The breakup of the traditional bourgeois value system, in fact, was brought about by the bourgeois economic system—by the free market, to be precise. (Bell, 1972: 32)

The view of culture as emanating from the economic base of the mode of production is of course a tenet of classic Marxist thought. The problem in Bell's argument, a problem conspicuously shared by Franzen's political outlook, is that he does not pursue the full implications of this conception, or, to put it simply, that he does not really believe in it. Indeed, Bell begins his essay with an assertion of the independence of the realms of economics, politics and culture, as well a claim about the supremacy of the latter over the other two in terms of initiative for change (1972: 11-2). In his basically humanist view, for Bell, as for Franzen, the vision of the human being as *homo pictor* (capable of producing symbols) takes precedence over that of the human being as *homo faber* (capable of making tools) (1972: 11).<sup>115</sup> On his part, in the *Boundary 2* interview Franzen argues: "I can hear myself proving that I'm not a Marxist in my bones, because I'm proposing that politics is not the last instance. It is itself a

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<sup>115</sup> Bruce Robbins has pointed to the contradictions of Bell's statement "within Bell's own argument" (Robbins, 1999: 30).

phenomenon; it's not the driving force" (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 45). This is a significant statement on its own but is even more meaningful if we substitute "the economic base" for "politics". We will be discussing the political implications of this ideological conception for Franzen's work in the following chapter. For now we may advance that one outcome of a social perspective which tends to conceive of the spheres of the economy and culture as independent, obscuring then the ways in which the former conditions the latter, is arguably a propensity towards inoperative lamentation of cultural loss. A second consequence, as *Freedom* illustrates, is a clear vulnerability before the ideological campaign staged by the American Right in the so-called culture wars.

### **6.6. Sympathetic types.**

An important part of the synthetic power of a novel depends on the representative qualities of its cast of characters, or, to use Lukács terminology, of its typology. We have seen how the Lamberts stand for certain sociocultural patterns that Franzen is interested in examining. From another point of view, in their private dimension, which in good Lukácsian logic is ultimately inseparable of their social side, all these characters are also mainly representative of certain, universally recognisable, patterns of (conflicted) familial relationships. In *The Corrections*, Franzen seems to find the way to enact those individual and social issues, rather than have them explained by a narrator. In Rebein's words, these questions "are actively in play on almost any page. They are not forced on us or lowered from above on a rope of dazzling rhetoric. Rather they are evoked, brought to life first within the characters and within us readers" (Rebein, 2007: 219).

The representative qualities of the Lamberts did not go unnoticed with some critics, perhaps as unaccustomed in contemporary fiction. For example, in hindsight Kakutani criticized what she considered excessive symbolism in the characterization of the Lamberts, in comparison with the more individualized characters of *Freedom*:

While *The Corrections* attested to Mr. Franzen's discovery of his own limber voice and tamed his penchant for sociological pontification, the novel was something of a hybrid in which the author's satiric instincts and misanthropic

view of the world sometimes seemed at odds with his new drive to create fully three-dimensional people. It felt, at times, as if he were self-importantly inflating the symbolic meaning of his characters' experiences, even as he condescendingly attributed to them every venal quality from hypocrisy and vanity to paranoia and Machiavellian conniving. (Kakutani 2010)

However, most critics agreed on the breakthrough development in characterization involved in *The Corrections*. Perhaps most conspicuously, as we have seen, Wood set Franzen's novel as an example against what he considered DeLillo's "total lack of characterological depth" (Wood 2001a). In his praise of Franzen Wood is surely overdoing his criticism of DeLillo, but there is certainly a striking, fundamental difference in the way characterization works in *The Corrections* as opposed to Franzen's first two novels. In order to assess that difference it is worth quoting at length the way Martin Probst is characterized in *The Twenty-Seventh City*:

Born in the very pit of the Depression, he had groped and bullied his way into some kind of light, demolishing and steam-rolling and building higher, building the Arch, building developments of the most youthful and prosperous nature, the golden years of Martin Probst. Inside, though, he was sick, and the city was sick in the inside too, chocking on undigested motives, racked by lies. The conspiracy invaded the city's bloodstream while leaving the surfaces unchanged, raged around him and in him while he sat apparently unseen, uncounted, uninvolved, and it was right here, in this identity of his life with the city's life, that he could see himself disappearing. The more he was a figure, the less he was a person ... There were two Probsts, it seemed ... but the personal Probst was disappearing. (TS 216-217)

This characterization is based, in rather modernist fashion, on an authorial act of will, on a determined exertion of authority on both the character and the reader: the identification of Probst with the city is given from the outside, and assent is compelled from the reader. In contrast, the characterization of Parkinson's disease-affected Alfred Lambert seems to come much more naturally *from within*:

"I'll leave you alone for a minute," Denise said, "while I get the lunch going."

He closed his eyes and thanked her. As if waiting for a break in a downpour so that he could run from his car to the grocery store, he waited for a lull in his tremor so that he could reach out and safely eat what she'd brought him.

His affection offended his sense of ownership. These shaking hands belonged to no one but him, and yet they refused to obey him. They were like bad children. Unreasoning two-year olds in a tantrum of selfish misery. The more sternly he gave orders, the less they listened and the more miserable and out of control they got. He'd always been vulnerable to a child's recalcitrance and refusal to behave like an adult. Irresponsibility and indiscipline were the bane of his existence, and it was another instance of that Devil's logic that his own untimely affliction should consist in his body refusal to obey him. (TC 77)

Here, as we observe Alfred's efforts to control his handshaking we are also offered an insight into his personality, into his private suffering as his old authoritarianism and self-reliance—which, it is implied, most likely were a disguise for sheer self-consciousness—are pathetically mocked by his current physical disability. Alfred's bewilderment is undoubtedly more moving than Probst's, as it is felt as more naturally arising from his circumstances—his painful attempt to steady his hands—than Probst's identification with the city.

Similarly, although the character of Chip is invested with an obvious representative quality, Franzen takes care of providing that generalizing impulse with a unique individualizing background. As Lukács argues:

The typical is not to be confused with the *average* (though there are cases where this holds true), nor with the *eccentric* (though the typical does as a rule go beyond the normal). A character is typical in this technical sense, when his innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society ... the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found in them in a concentrated form. Yet, though typical, they are never crudely "illustrative". (Lukács, 2006a: 122)

Thus, we understand the inner fragmentation and alienation of Chip and Gary Lambert, for example, as an effect of the alienation brought about by consumer society, but we also see the possible origin of Chip's disordered hedonism in his reaction as a

child to his father's repressive puritanism. Chip's backlash is compellingly illustrated in the also individual-yet-typical scene of *the dinner of revenge*. In this way is achieved what Lukács calls the "organic unity of profound individuality and profound typicality" (2006a: 123), which is a requirement for the characters of a realist novel. Admittedly, typicality has been one of the concepts inherent to the realist novel which have been challenged by postmodernism's anti-realist drive. As Franzen himself observes in "Mr Difficult", postmodernist novelists seem to have collectively assumed John Hawkes' famous dictum: "I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained" (Enck 1965: 149). This has important implications concerning the communitarian import of the novel. In fact, typicality seems both a requirement of the realist novel and one of the main components of its capacity for the creation of community, which we have discussed in previous chapters following the work of J. Hillis Miller. According to Miller, recognizable characters make community. As the American critic argues,

the novelist makes his particular configurations of character out of personality 'traits' that are already known to his readers. They are known not as the property of this or that real person, but as general components of character that may be possessed by many persons. (Miller, 1992: 69)

Miller draws on the etymology of the word *character* (among other meanings, a character is a recognizable sign which is in turn made up of conventional traits or graphs that may appear in other signs) to underline its obvious social quality, akin to that of a linguistic sign or a piece of currency. For the critic, "the characters in a novel spring to life when each has been imprinted with an assemblage chosen from common traits of character that make up the common genetic code in the community of readers for which the novel is written" (Miller, 1992: 70). Elaborating on the parallelism between linguistic signs, monetary units and fiction characters, the critic predicates a socially integrating function for the latter:

The common possession of these little coins [recognizable characters], their free circulation within society, from readers to novelist to novel and back again to the readers, is the fund or reserve out of which the novel is conceived. This common

pool guarantees the novel's function in the psychic economy of the society to which it belongs, just as all speech and all writing are made of a finite lexicon of words, out of which all sentences have to be made. (Miller, 1992: 70)

According to Miller then, the novel performs an important part in the creation and maintenance of communities. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the American critic argues that the novel contributes to promote sympathy and break down egoism by underscoring the fundamental sameness that lays in the other, notwithstanding any irreducible core of otherness (Miller, 2001: 66). In Miller's opinion, "novels present a virtual or imaginary community made of fictive persons with whom the reader is invited to sympathize" (Miller, 2001: 66). It follows, besides, from Miller's argument, and from his choice of examples which illustrate it, that it is the *realist* novel that can fulfil this function. It is hard indeed, to predicate a true community-building effect of fictions which, Lukács reminds us, by overlooking the social dimension inherent to human beings project a picture of complete, essential isolation of the individual, and present an image of society as hopelessly unintelligible. This is not to imply, of course, any superiority of quality in literary terms, but to acknowledge an obvious set of social implications of the realist novel. It seems clear that Franzen, who has often expressed his concern with what he perceives as a loss of community in contemporary society recognizes this sympathetic effect of the novel. In fact, he proceeds to relentlessly explore it by means of the continuous intimation of his characters' consciousness he provides throughout the novel, be it through the use of free indirect speech or by the interventions of a narratorial voice which is sometimes hard to tell apart from that of his characters. We have already discussed that Franzen has recently recognized the development of the reader's sympathy for his characters as one of his main concerns.<sup>116</sup> As *The Corrections* shows, one of the most powerful ways of prompting such identification is by conveying the characters' most acute desires. In the novel, there is always something that all the main characters badly want, be it money, food, sex, recognition or one last family Christmas. In Franzen's words:

my breakthrough, the thing I learned in writing this book if I learned nothing else, was that a good way to write a scene, a good way to write a book, is to

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<sup>116</sup> See "A Rooting Interest: Edith Wharton and the Problem of Sympathy." *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2012.

define a character by what he or she *wants*. Sex is useful to the storyteller because the wanting can be so extreme. The wanting is so blunt and ferocious. It's a great plot device; once you take away conspiring Indians, or serendipitous earthquakes, you need something else to drive the plot ... I was also looking for a counterpoint to the relative abstraction of the cultural or political or linguistic preoccupations that drove the previous generation of big novels. Saying "I'm hungry and I want something" is a form of correction, a correction towards more traditional and humane motives for a novel. (Antrim, 2001: n.pag.)

We have also seen that Franzen is fond of using his characters' readings to further develop them. It is significant then that at the bottom of his path of self-deterioration and irresponsibility Chip confesses to himself to not having read a novel in at least a year (TC 527). This fact, according to Franzen's logic, which is also Miller's, underscores—and in some way explains—the extent of the egoism and lack of sympathy achieved by Chip.

### **6.7. Problems of perspective in postmodern politics.**

The characters and incidents in *The Corrections* show a clearly synthetic quality, as we have seen. However, to assess the scope of Franzen's realism there are other elements that should be considered. One of them is what Lukács analysed as perspective. This complex concept refers to the principle of selection and organization of the necessarily limited materials (characters, situations, etc.) which will then metonymically inform a fictional construction of larger individual, social and historical implications. According to Lukács' theory, the validity of a writer's perspective depends on the lucidity of her social insight, so that she is able to detect and examine the most significant circumstances where social contradiction, development and change are enacted. Of course such insight is for Lukács related to the writer's social conditions and ideology. Thus, although the theorist praises a number of bourgeois critical realist writers—most notably Balzac and Mann (Lukács 2006a) on account of their penetrating social vision, he also argues the limitations of perspective caused by their class adscription. For Lukács, then, even in the case of the most socially insightful bourgeois novelists, their account of what he saw as the most dynamic and significant social force, that of socialism within the working class, was bound to be a description from the

outside (Lukács, 2006a: 93). For the critic, “writers will tend to present an inside picture of the class on which their own experience of society is based. All other social classes will tend to be seen from the outside” (Lukács, 2006a: 94). In *The Country and the City*, Williams argues similarly with respect to George Eliot’s social portrait: although her social vision is much wider and far more penetrating than most previous English novelists, there are times when her perspective is inevitably external. In Williams’ words:

[T]hough George Eliot restores the real inhabitants of rural England to their places in what had been a socially selective landscape, she does not get much further than restoring them *as a landscape* ... But as themselves they are still only socially present, and can emerge into personal consciousness only through externally formulated attitudes and ideas. (Williams, 1973: 168)

These questions are brought to the fore when we set Franzen’s aspiration to broad social and cultural description against his actual perspective. It is easy to realize that the cast of characters whose point of view he explores belong almost invariably to white upper-middle class families throughout his work. As Williams might put it, Franzen’s position as an observer is “a position which is part of the community being known” (Williams, 1973: 164). It is precisely in *The Corrections*, the novel where his characters seem most representative, that their social circle is the most restricted. For a socially concerned novelist, this entails important constraints. It is certainly not the same, for example, to obliquely *imply* social oppression, which is Fox and Franzen’s technique, than to actually *show* it from the point of view of the oppressed. This restriction, which contrasts with the larger scope of classic realists such as Balzac or Eliot, inevitably causes a limitation of perspective which Franzen tries to compensate for by means of narratorial comments and digressions. As we have already discussed, this is surely one drive behind the contemporary cohort of white straight, middle-class cultivators of the Systems novel. It seems clear that most contemporary white straight American writers, even those of radical persuasions, lack the knowledge and / or confidence to even attempt description of social groups other than their own. This is so for a number of complex reasons which include not only the inherent limitations of class perspective on the part of the writers, but also an increased social awareness and heightened sense of belonging on the part of minority social groups. Such awareness even suggests that any attempts at social description from an outsider writer are likely to

be met with hostility. This deprives these writers of access to a wealth of materials, that is, specific characters and situations of significant novelistic value concerning fundamental issues such as identity development, inter-personal bonding, social group dynamics and community. As a result, white straight middle-class writers with social concerns and oppositional political stands tend to resort to the—inevitably more abstract—analysis of the overwhelming workings of the system.

Be it as it may, there are interesting features to be examined in Franzen's deployment of social points of view in his first three novels. It is of course in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, with its imported Indian conspirators, where we notice the greatest variety. Most importantly for our concerns, it is in that novel that we find the only American non-white, lower-class character of any consequence—black police officer R.C. White, whose function in the story, however, goes little beyond illustrating the advance of gentrification in inner St. Louis. Perhaps aware of the tepidness of the characterization, Franzen has subsequently retreated to more knowable communities and that was the last time Franzen made such an attempt.<sup>117</sup> This withdrawal clearly involves a loss as far as the Lukácsian ideal of totality is concerned, but it also entails a substantial decrease in the kind of discursive variety defined by Bakhtin as *heteroglossia*. This certainly makes things easier for the novelist, who may thus avoid acute problems of discourse management. As Williams explains,

A knowable community can be, as in Jane Austen, socially selected; what it then lacks in full social reference it gains in an available unity of language in all its main uses. But we have only to read a George Eliot novel to see the difficulty of the coexistence, within one form, of an analytically conscious observer of conduct with a developed analytic vocabulary, and of people represented as living and speaking in mainly customary ways; for it is not the precision of detailed observation but the inclusive, socially appealing, loose and repetitive manner that predominates. There is a new kind of break in the texture of the novel, an evident failure of continuity between the necessary language of the novelist and the recorded language of many of the characters. (Williams, 1973: 169)

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<sup>117</sup> As we will be discussing in the corresponding chapter, in *Freedom* we can find several working or lower-class characters, but in all cases they are deployed as mere antagonists of the well-off Berglunds, whose perspective completely prevails in the novel.

There can be little doubt that Franzen's answer to the problems described above by Williams includes a restriction in both social point of view and discourse. This brings about a certain discursive uniformity that has been noticed by critics who point out at the similarity—perhaps we should say conflation of—between Franzen's narratorial speech and that of his characters.<sup>118</sup> Thus, in *The Corrections* we can distinguish two main idioms, those of the two fundamental groups of characters: the old-fashioned accents of rigid perplexity, of stubborn Midwestern traditions exerting resistance to new cultural ways; and on the other hand the ironic, flexible voices of postmodern Eastern *cool*. The narratorial voice, on its part, tends to reproduce each character's individual discourse around his or her interventions. In this sense, for example, Enid's personality, shaped by her humble Midwestern background, is correspondingly reflexed by the narrator's language in one of the scenes that take place at a cruise:

There was no porthole. A room with a view would have cost hundreds of dollars more, and Enid had reasoned that, since a stateroom was mainly used for sleeping who needed a porthole, at that price? She might have looked through it six times on the voyage. That was fifty dollars a look. (TC 278)

In contrast, the narrator recounts Gary's expectations concerning his father's patent in a state-of-the-art Eastern ironic speech that is in accordance with his greedy nature:

Gary's hopes of extracting quick megabucks from Axon were withering in the absence of online hype. Feeling a bit e-weary, fighting an e-headache, he ran a word search for earl eberle ... *Forty million dollars annually* was more like it. *Forty million dollars annually* restored Gary's hopes and pissed him off all over again. (TC 195)

All in all, however, it is the younger Lamberts' up-to-date irony that the narrator's persistent own irony feels closer through the novel. In fact, as it is also the case in the rest of Franzen's novels, the identification of the narrator with the characters' idiom and the constant use of free indirect speech often produces ambiguity

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<sup>118</sup> The most conspicuous example of conflation of narratorial and characters' voice in Franzen's work is surely the chapter in *Freedom* that pretends to be a memoir written by Patty Berglund, for whose writing Franzen does not create a distinctive voice of her own.

as to the authorship of reflections, making them difficult to ascribe to either narrator or characters. It should be remembered, by the way, that according to Nash, free indirect discourse “is not merely an idiosyncrasy of Realism; it’s the seal of its whole narrative procedure and outlook.” As for the ambiguities that this narrative mode tends to produce, Nash observes: “An irony of this melding of disparate ‘knowings’ in one apparent intelligence is that the narrator’s sense of gravity of the character’s insentience is often thus the basis of *our* first mistaken sense of the character’s perspicuity” (Nash, 1993: 316).

It is striking to see, however, how this homogeneity in speech and social point of view can be broken by an outburst of radical social alterity, of the repressed but necessary underside of the characters’ world. As we have seen, in *The Twenty-Seventh City* Barbara Probst is killed by a random effusion of violence from the ghetto, a space of dehumanization which is seen as the repressed but ultimately intractable excrescence of St. Louis’ system, the inevitable by-product of its socio-economic processes. In *The Corrections*, we find a similar incident in the meaningless murder of a social worker named Jordan Roth, the young daughter of a wealthy white liberal Eastern couple, at the hands of Kellye Withers, a black inhabitant of the ghetto. Let us define first, however, as an undeniable sign of limitation in perspective on Franzen’s part that the only view of lower-class and marginalized groups in his novels should be thus associated to violence and crime. In any case, the extreme brutality of the murder tears up the tissue of the novel’s familiar world like a sudden irruption of the Real on the symbolic order. The story of the murder is complexly retold by the narrator from Sylvia Roth’s account to Enid Lambert with a deadpan and a gradual disclosing of the horrifying details that make for a certain gruesome irony. Roth’s narration is interspersed with remarks quoted from the murderer’s declaration at the trial which reveal him through his speech as a black youth. His blunt interventions evince a bloodcurdling utter lack of empathy which seems the product of life in the ghetto: as we have observed following Bauman in our study of Franzen’s first novel, the ghetto constitutes a laboratory of dehumanization (Bauman, 2001: 212). In any case, the trauma virtually undoes Sylvia Roth, torn between her lust for revenge by means of Withers’ scheduled execution and her liberal persuasions and understanding of underlying social problems:

She wanted him dead despite imagining a society that provided jobs at a decent wage for young men like him (so that he would not have had to bind the wrists

and ankles of his former art therapist and bully out of her the passwords of her bank and credit cards), a society that stanching the flow of illegal drugs into urban neighborhoods (so that Withers could not have spent the stolen money on crack, and would have had more mental clarity when he returned to the apartment of his former art therapist (TC 352-3).

Here we may notice the tormenting suspicion on the part of Silvia Roth that on a very deep level her social class bears some kind of guilt of the tragedy that befell her daughter, which is an obvious example of that crippling sentiment known as liberal guilt which Franzen and a good deal of his readership are certainly familiar with. Actually, the naturally devastating effect of such a trauma seems to be compounded by its impact on her previous ideological positions: “She wanted him dead despite knowing her desire would please conservatives for whom the phrase ‘personal responsibility’ constituted permission to ignore social injustice” (TC 354). Conflicting impulses then have left Sylvia trapped in a circular dynamics of anger and shame that impedes the necessary course of grief: “She was a Sisypha who every night destroyed her own creations” (TC 348). The passage is notable as an example of Franzen’s new, more complex and subtle way of conveying social views, in this case concerning the (mainly sexual) violence that consumerist society inherently generates: whereas in *Strong Motion* these reflections took the form of narratorial comments or just plain digression, here the message is transmitted through free indirect discourse interspersed with third-party quotations (those of Withers). In any case, the tragedy of Sylvia Roth’s daughter harks back to a previous and seemingly minor event in the narrative whose significance is now highlighted, namely the small electric chair that an infant Gary Lambert includes—mainly to earn his father’s approval—in the jail he has built with Popsicle sticks (TC 315). Now we understand that at the foundations of St. Judean communitarianism Franzen finds something more than pioneering spirit. Actually, we know that Franzen was interested in the role of prisons and the penal system as elements of class repression which support an unjust socio-economic regime during the process of writing of *The Corrections*, as is shown in his 1995 essay “Control Units”, where he conducts a reportage study of maximum security prisons in Colorado evidently influenced by the Foucault of *Surveiller et Punir*. Be it as it may, Sylvia’s predicament connects with the mood of liberal guilt and themes of political paralysis and impotence which are so

prominent in the novel. These problems, which to some extent are Franzen's own, as we will be discussing, are clearly embodied by the character of Chip Lambert.

The cultural and political climate of postmodernism poses further problems of perspective for the bourgeois male novelist than those described by Lukács. John Kucich (1988) is one of the critics who have been more influential in examining the difficulties for white male American writers to articulate a critical position of their own, a quandary he has memorably defined as “the plight of the white male writer”. In an essay on DeLillo's fiction Kucich argues that postmodernism, in its rejection of any unifying political narrative, and in its acknowledgement that all political struggle is ultimately constituted by nothing but language, and language being grounded on nothing but language itself, has left the social position of the speaker as the only source of legitimation for oppositional political discourse. Many a critic, indeed, shares the opinion that along the end of the twentieth century, the left has been disabled to some extent by the work of theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard with their contention that, as Colin Hutchinson has put it, “there is effectively nothing beyond ideology at all: no ‘deeper’ Marxist-friendly reality or teleology, and no stable codes of meaning or agreed set of values that are revealed once the dark curtain of ideology has been drawn back” (Hutchinson, 2008: 5). For Kucich, the typical “postmodern paranoia about the ability of mainstream culture to appropriate all gestures of resistance to it” (Kucich, 1988: 333) has exacerbated distrust to the extent that “the discourse of postmodern politics has usually demanded—much more so than in any prior form of political art—that the marginal or aggrieved social position of the speaker (and in some cases the audience) guarantee its political legitimacy” (1988: 333). This situation, which looks indeed like an extreme version of Lukács' defence of socialist realism and denies the possibility for an *outside* writer to create a text containing the same ideological import, in Kucich's words “spells political death for the white male American postmodernist” (1988: 333). The critic himself illustrates the case in his essay with a scathing criticism of DeLillo's political stance, which he regards as reinforcing the state of affairs he means to oppose. This same argumentation is at the basis of much political criticism addressed to Franzen. We have already discussed, for example, how Catherine Toal (2003) denies Franzen—together with Rick Moody and David Foster Wallace—the legitimacy of his critical position on the subject of contemporary

preoccupation with mental health, on the grounds of his participation in a mainstream masculine culture which is in crisis. Similarly, Kucich argues:

The real problem for DeLillo's male characters is that their attempts to oppose the power of mainstream American culture always involves the appropriation of gestures or poses that they cannot legitimately claim as their own—patterns of behaviour, rather than principles or doctrines, that are conventionally rooted in someone's else's social identity. And in this agony of social distance lies their impotence. (Kucich, 1988: 337)

In *The Corrections*, the character who embodies the predicament described by Kucich is obviously Chip Lambert, whose job as a professor of cultural theory is no less symbolic than his father's. As a representative of certain theory-informed contemporary left, the picture he presents is certainly disheartening. The professedly Foucauldian scholar criticizes corporate advertising practice without acknowledging that his own teaching is funded by those same corporations, and combines a radical political discourse with mindless absorption in consumerist culture. Chip, whose office is located in D—college's *Wroth* Hall, accurately represents a sense of impotence felt in contemporary left-wing quarters which is derived from what is widely perceived as loss of direction and complicity with the system. The difficulties posed, as far as Chip's critical position is concerned, by the current prevalence of political discourses based on social position and identity described by Kucich are made apparent by his perplexity before a reproof from his disdainful student Melissa Paquette, concerning the gains achieved by minority groups:

“This whole class”, she said. “It's just bullshit every week. It's one critic after another wringing their hands about the state of criticism. Nobody can ever say what's wrong exactly. But they all know it's evil. They all know ‘corporate’ is a dirty word. And if somebody's having fun or getting rich—disgusting! Evil! And it's always the death of this and the death of that ... Here things are getting better and better for women and people of colour and gay men and lesbians, more and more integrated and open, and all you can think about is some stupid, lame problem with signifiers and signifieds”. (TC 50-51)

Significantly, Chip cannot answer Paquette's tirade. It is not just that the lecture comes at an end but that he feels unable to articulate any theoretical discourse against

the force of the argument of empowerment of minority groups. Any objection concerning, for example, the essentialism of minority discourse, the way it tends to obscure class differences or leave untouched the economic origin of those differences. The seemingly unending capacity of the establishment for the co-optation and assimilation of critical discourse is shown in Melissa's approval of the women-targeted campaign of W—corporation that Chip presents for analysis: "It's celebrating women in the workplace ... It's raising money for cancer research. It's encouraging us to do our self-examinations and get the help we need. It's helping women feel like we own this technology, like it's just not a guy thing" (TC 50). The problem for Chip is that there is little that he can argue against assimilation, as he is fully assimilated himself.

Interestingly, in his previous novel Franzen had adopted different types of recognizable feminist discourse and made somewhat of a martyr of its female protagonist. This could be seen as a strategic move to secure the otherwise precarious critical capacity of his authorial position. In Hutchinson's opinion, "the use of a female protagonist is one means by which the white male left-liberal novelist is able in some measure to deflect the accusation that his proposal of a communitarian solution to his own crisis carries with it implications of patriarchal reassertion" (Hutchinson 2008: 134), which the critic exemplifies with the character of Martha Cochrane in Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1998). However, in *The Corrections* it is easy to sense some authorial antagonism in Franzen's portrait of Chip's professional rival, the feminist Vendla O'Fallon, apparently more attuned than Chip to contemporary academic trends. Kucich predicates of DeLillo's novels that they "often strike back by trying to demonstrate that social identity is the wrong bulwark against the rational poverty of contemporary avenues of opposition" (Kucich, 1988: 339) Similarly, Toal accuses Franzen of too sympathetic a treatment of Chip, as in her opinion the novelist presents the young professor "as a victim of the social power of women and minorities" (Toal, 2003: 315). Indeed, Chip is genuinely a mess and is rightfully expelled from his job, but O'Fallon on her part is presented as a near academic fraud, a representative of the blandest therapeutic views of culture ("Vendla's idea is that we should sit around and talk about our feelings" [TC 56]) whose popularity with students mainly stems from her not being intellectually demanding. It is significant as revealing of a widespread perception on the part of contemporary (white male) writers that Chip's fall has similar counterparts in present-day fiction. Thus, for example, Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000)

and Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) are often seen as novels in which patriarchal authority in an academic context is challenged. At this point, it is difficult not to consider that, in his recognizable nostalgia for what we have called, following Beck, the American industrial age, Franzen might also be influenced by motives outside the aforementioned communitarian longings. After all, the industrial age was a period in which Franzen's cultural authority would have been secure. As Green observes:

Franzen is caught between nostalgia for a system that would value his work without reference to its social context, and his anxious recognition of a new, emergent cultural field that leaves him in a position of marginality—insignificant and anachronistic beside the unresting machinery of mass culture, and marginal too in relation to the rise of multiculturalism. (Green, 2005: 103)

In any case, Chip clearly embodies those “[t]hemes of entrapment within circularities, and of resistance being undermined by ambivalent impulses”, that Hutchinson discerns at the heart of *The Corrections* in his essay on Franzen. (Hutchinson, 2009: 199) This entrapment is symbolized by Sylvia Roth's obsessive habit of drawing guns and especially by Chip's endless, inconclusive reworking of his film script *The Academy Purple*. Interestingly, such indecisive aimlessness may be found in numerous other left-liberal intellectual or academic characters in contemporary fiction. Jack Gladney, the consumption-prone professor founder of the research field of Hitler studies in *White Noise* is a clear forebear of Chip in DeLillo's fiction, while the ineffectual *old drone* Bob Holland of *Strong Motion* is Chip's antecedent in Franzen's own work. Probably the closest forerunner of Chip, however, is Grady Tripp, novelist and teacher of creative writing in Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys* (1995). Very much like Chip's, Tripp's private life is a mess of uncontrolled hedonistic drives and mild irresponsibility; and if Chip is struggling with his script, Tripp is unable to finish his long-awaited novel, a work forever in progress whose manuscript is over 2000-pages long. It could be said that in their ineffectual left-liberalism, guilty hedonism and frequent familial embarrassment both characters are ultimately distant descendants of Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy. And of course both characters inevitably point as well to DeLillo's Bill Gray, the reclusive writer in DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991), who after twenty-two years is unable to finish his book due to circumstances that go well beyond the merely aesthetic and are related to his own cultural marginalization. As Green has observed apropos of DeLillo's character, “something in the culture at large, from which

he has done everything possible to insulate himself, undermines his faith in the novel—the particular novel he is trying to complete, and the novel in general” (Green, 2005: 163).

These fictional novelists’ inconclusive struggling with their stalled works represents the difficulty for contemporary liberal writers to arrive at a satisfactory synthetic view of social totality, mostly because of apparently insurmountable limitations in perspective. Without appropriate synthesis, a writer intent on providing a wide social view may end up stuck in a novel which, as the famous Borgesean map, is just as soul-destroying and hypertrophied as the system it purports to portray—which is, not incidentally, one the accusations Franzen aims at Gaddis in “Mr Difficult”. Significantly, and with a heavy dose of irony, reflecting on his unfinished screenplay Chip acknowledges that “he’d imagined that he could remove certain hackneyed plot elements—the conspiracy, the car crash, the evil lesbians—and still tell a good story. Without these hackneyed plot elements, however, he seemed to have no story at all” (TC 104).

#### **6.8. The search for community in post-historical times.**

Also in evident synthetic fashion, Chip’s hedonism and anti-authoritarianism are charged with ideological implications. Hutchinson (2008), probably the critic who has examined the ideological import of Franzen’s novels in a more thorough and balanced way, detects in them an indictment of the outcome of the libertarianism and individualism of the counterculture of the 1960s. For Hutchinson, who in this argument follows Patricia Waugh, such libertarianism proved to be more inclined to the satisfaction of individual appetites than to the building of true alternative communitarian bonds, and thus revealed itself amenable to dissolve into the selfish, unrestrained individualism of social Darwinism that was celebrated by the prevailing political stances during the 1980s and which seems very much to enjoy ascendancy today. For Hutchinson, the libertarian vocabulary of the rebellious movements of the 1960s was safely integrated in the language of dominant neoliberalism and now only serves to reinforce consumerism and social stasis, as in one of those Pynchonesque historical forks in which America took the wrong turn. From a different point of view, the success of the political Right’s strategy in the ideological struggle known in the

United States as culture war (which we discuss at length in the following chapter) may also account for that rejection by a certain contemporary Left of radical libertarian views inherited from the 1960s. According to Bruce Robbins, a testimony to the success of the Right's ideological offensive in the *culture war* is the development of "the real, if badly named, phenomenon of 'left conservatism'" (Robbins, 1999: 33). For the critic,

Provoked by the success of the Right's cultural campaign, many progressives have been tempted to reply in kind; they have sought to win back cultural territory occupied by the family-values platform by appropriating carefully selected planks. Some were already "embarrassed by or actively hostile to the cultural radical legacy of the sixties," (1999: 33)

And it is easy to perceive Franzen's aversion towards that legacy in the derisive portrait of Chip Lambert's radical, postmodern political views (what the narrator calls his "Foucaultian heart" [TC 511]).

Certainly, a concern with what is widely felt as a decline of community in the United States is evident in the works such as Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1999) or Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). Amitai Etzioni has even taken the step of starting a communitarian movement, with *The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society* (1998) as its manifesto. It is conspicuous, nevertheless, that these authors, especially Putnam and Etzioni, do not attribute any of the social wrongs that are afflicting American communities to the inherent contradictions of capitalism. Such lack of analytical depth weakens their critical stand which at times seems limited to a set of recommendations to social agents based on mere good will. However, their identification of the period starting with the New Deal and going through the post-war decades as the high point of American communitarianism implies that it was the processes of political de-regulation and unchecked capitalism that have been implemented since the 1970s which have brought American *Gemeinschaft* to what they see as its current critical condition.

Hutchinson also discerns a recent "communitarian turn" among left-liberal writers which in his opinion Franzen exemplifies, together with British novelists such as Jonathan Coe, Ian McEwan or Martin Amis. Such inflection is apparent in the recuperation of certain ideological tropes which have hitherto been associated with

social and political conservatism but which now may be seen as sites of resistance against the overpowering forces of reification and fragmentation of late capitalism:

In the context of the New Right ascendancy, communities could be seen as sources of identity and support rather than as repositories of exclusion and restriction; public life and its associated institutions no longer seemed so discredited by corruption, waste and incompetence when they could offer some degree of protection against the market ... tradition and history could provide the means by which to view contemporary market-driven values of consumerism from alternate perspectives; while the family needed not be seen as a source of enslavement from banal domesticity, but instead as a potential source of resistance to the increasing demands of a working life dominated by the need to generate profit. (Hutchinson, 2008: 93)

If discourse about community, public institutions, history and family may be used against the hegemony of contemporary neo-liberalism, it would be easy to infer that so can be realism. However, as Hutchinson hastens to add, using discourse and values related to conservatism—still somewhat of an embarrassment in certain left-wing quarters—requires a great deal of precaution, as “the danger of adopting tropes that assert the importance of unity and tradition is that one also risks their less palatable associations: inflexible social hierarchies, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, racism and xenophobia” (2008: 93). Such precautions are apparent, for example in Stephen Daldry’s film *Billy Elliot* (2000), which takes care of separating commendable communitarian values of class solidarity in the miners’ ideology from the more restrictive and intolerant aspects of their tradition. Similarly, we have already analysed how Franzen’s account of the Midwestern ethos of the older Lamberts acknowledges its communitarian attributes but also dwells on its authoritarian and repressive aspects. In a related way, finally, it seems clear that a recuperated realism should be wary not to be deserving of Brecht’s familiar accusation as to the fetishizing of reality, as to its presentation invested with such unassailable solidity that precludes any change. Perhaps we should add too that a contemporary realist should never forget that reality is always constructed by discourse, a discourse which is always ideologically informed.

Of a similar opinion to Hutchinson is Bruce Robbins, who in a 2007 essay, precisely entitled, after Franzen’s suggestive phrase in *Strong Motion*, “The Smell of

Infrastructure” sees the novelist’s dirge for abandoned or dismantled utilities in that novel as a communitarian plea. The critic identifies a strain of anti-utilitarianism of Romantic origin in left-wing intellectuality that has led it to abstract Foucauldian critique rather than to the actual defence of points crucial to the survival of community. In his words:

To speak telegraphically, my point is that water is being privatized. The privatizing of water has at least as good a claim as the Panopticon to stand for what is most wrong with the world at the present time. Yet thanks to our anti-utilitarian, antigovernmental bias, we of the “cultural left” have little if anything to say about it (Robbins, 2007: 28).

For Robbins then, like for Hardt and Negri, the commons are being enclosed without the left having been able to articulate a valid response. Indeed, the intense anomie of late capitalism has increased under the ongoing crisis to a pitch which seems to have bewildered many quarters of that “cultural left”, usually populated by hitherto unconcerned scholars of difference or by intellectuals grown in the safer environment of social consensus that followed World War II. There are, however, critics who in consistence with the communitarian turn described by Hutchinson have sought to explore ways of opposition which deconstructionist and related approaches seemed to proscribe. For example, Terry Eagleton has described postmodernity as “a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of general progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation” (Eagleton 1996: vii), but himself and theorists such as Hardt and Negri have contextualized and relativized the import of these theoretical tenets:

The postmodernist epistemological challenge to “the Enlightenment”—its attack on master narratives and its critique of truth—also loses its liberatory aura when transposed outside the elite intellectual strata of Europe and North America ... In the context of state terror and mystification, clinging to the primacy of the concept of truth can be a powerful and necessary form of resistance ... The master narratives of the Enlightenment do not seem particularly repressive here, and the concept of truth is not fluid or unstable—on the contrary! The truth is

that this general ordered the torture and assassination of that union leader, and this colonel led the massacre of that village. (Hardt and Negri 2001: 155-6)

And if there is a use for such a dubious concept as “truth”, so there must for the realist novel, that old instrument for social analysis of bourgeois origin that Jameson has described, as we have already discussed, as simultaneously a valuable epistemological instrument and an “elaborate lie” (Hardt and Weeks, 2000: 179).

To continue with Robbins’ point, we need to make infrastructure visible “as a guide to the struggles of the present” (Robbins, 2007: 32. For certain critics, however, it is precisely the struggles of the present which is most painfully absent in Franzen’s novels. We have already discussed how for critics such as Annesley and even Hawkins Franzen fails in his critical attempt not least because he does not articulate any possibility of agency and resistance. An examination of the portrait of actual left-wing or progressive movements (that is, discounting Chip’s barren theoretical disquisitions) in *The Corrections* certainly renders a most unpromising picture. In this sense, we are introduced to the corrupted, Mafia-connected unionism of the Teamsters and to a radical left scene in Philadelphia characterized by short-sightedness, dogmatism, marginality and ultimately ineffectuality. There are two significant initiatives in the novel: one is the brutal aggression that a W—Corporation executive suffers at the hands of Robin Passafaro’s troubled stepbrother (a darker, senseless version of the individual’s struggle against the corporation that Renée embodies in *Strong Motion*). The other is the occupational farm started by Robin Passafaro in a Philadelphia slum, an isolated project which arises more from Passafaro’s personal need for atonement than from any explicit, collective political vision. Tellingly, Passafaro’s initiative, which is funded by the fortune his husband has obtained by selling software to W—Corporation, seems to Denise “utopian and crackpot” (TC 461). Then, while in Franzen’s previous novels we observe the exploration of the viability of political communities, that is, communities intent on some kind of social transformation (chiefly represented by the group of Indian conspirators in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and by the small group of young questers led by Renée in *Strong Motion*), in *The Corrections* on the other hand this possibility seems to be explicitly dismissed from the outset.

Especially critical of Franzen’s political stand is Annesley in his dismissal of Franzen’s view of globalization as deterministic and “un-dialectical” (Annesley, 2006:

125). As we have seen, for this critic Franzen represents globalization as “an irreducible reality that the novel is powerless to either interrogate or resist” (Annesley, 2006: 124).<sup>119</sup> In his essay, Annesley proceeds with an argumentation which has become remarkably influential in Franzen’s critical assessment: with his characters deprived of agency, and his “hegemonic and incontestable” (2006: 125) depiction of globalization, Franzen is actually reinforcing the process he is trying to criticize. As we have stated elsewhere in this study, although Annesley’s critique contains valuable insight into Franzen’s work, it is unfortunately overdone and sports an evident moralistic and condescending tone that works against its intended effect. Earlier in this chapter we observed the transitional, hybrid character of *The Corrections*. In a way, then, we could describe the novel as a take on globalization from a formal point of view which is still close to the inherently static Systems novel. We have argued above that globalization has produced a renewed interest in totalizing thought and in the workings of the global capitalist system. It should be taken into account, in this sense, that between the writing of *The Corrections* and Annesley’s essay important works have appeared that collectively have undeniably shaped general opinions about that process. Perhaps most notably, Hardt and Negri’s fundamental *Empire* (2000) has contributed to spread dialectic views of globalization which both acknowledge its oppressive aspects and discern the new possibilities for emancipation it offers, much in the way Marx and Engels saw capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* as presenting more opportunities for liberation than previous modes of production.

Admittedly, Annesley and other critics of Franzen have a point in signalling to his refrain from the representation of viable agency and progressive social change, but they do not really account for the formal and ideological reasons behind this withdrawal or the symbolic compensations that his novels offer to make up for that renunciation. As we have seen, *The Twenty-Seventh City* ended in a note of despair of an intractable system and a hopelessly apathetic society (which highlighted on the other hand the novel’s huge Utopian investment represented by the paradoxically corrupted, failed Indian plot). More openly auspicious was *Strong Motion* in that we accompany a small

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<sup>119</sup> In his *Fictions of Globalization* (2006b), Annesley criticizes DeLillo’s portrait of globalization in virtually the same terms: “The problem with DeLillo’s position is that it represents globalization as an *irreducible reality*. There is no room for interrogation of this vision, nor any sense than the novel can do more than offer homological reflection of these material conditions. Globalization is, it seems, a reality that the novel is *powerless either to interrogate or to resist*” (Annesley, 2006b: 68, my italics). Similar remarks are directed by Annesley toward Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (1999).

group of individuals who bravely challenge a powerful corporation. However, in the end as we know the status quo remains very much the same even after the outrageous malfeasance of Sweeting-Aldren has been uncovered. It is precisely in *Strong Motion* where we may already observe what is to become Franzen's main strategy of compensation, that of individual salvation from unhappiness, whose importance will only grow in his subsequent fiction. In any case, the end of *The Corrections*, despite its allusion to the cyclic crises of capitalism, is actually characterized by the same suggestions of end of history as his previous novels:

*The correction*, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor. (TC 647, Franzen's italics)

Certainly, after the tremendous burst of the financial bubble we have recently attended to and the new awareness brought about by it, this passage seems curiously dated and a manifestation of what Lukács would surely perceive as defective historical perspective. Although it is all too easy to be overly critic with the benefit of hindsight, we may observe that in this respect Franzen's fiction deviates significantly from Auerbach's concept of realism. We know that the German critic considered a historical view of the present and an adequate representation of the social forces conducive to historical change as necessary components of the realist vision; and though Franzen usually traces the origins of social situations and families back to their historical roots (be it the decay of St. Louis, the environmental transformation of New England by capitalism or the Depression background of the Lambert family), there is no sight in his fiction so far of any serious factors of social change. Of course, a blocked historical vision is a sign of our time, as Jameson has famously argued, an incapability to imagine future social developments that are not strictly eventless repetitions of an eternal present. As Hardt and Negri put it, "Empire presents itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing states of affair for eternity (2001: xiv). The force of such perception of immutability—which would by the way have seemed most strange to the founding fathers (and mothers) of the realist novel—is certainly one reason behind the decline of the social novel along the last decades of the twentieth century and since, in

spite, for example, of Tom Wolfe's successful attempts. But this vision of triumphant, unrestrained and limitless capitalism has also brought about what Annesley (1998) has defined as a whole new subgenre, that of 'blank fiction', represented by the production, among others, of Bret Easton Ellis, Susanna Moore or Chuck Palahniuk. According to Annesley, such fiction, characterized by its complete immersion in consumerist society and utter lack of any ethical grounding, has come to take over the Systems novel as a reference in contemporary narrative. What is Franzen's way then in the middle of such harsh landscape? How does he cope with the perceived socio-political dead end he finds himself at by the end of *The Twenty-Seventh City*?

As we have already advanced, from his second novel on Franzen resorts to narratives of personal salvation which involve a strategy of displacement of conflicts from the social to the personal domain. The first and last sentences of the novel's epilogue constitute an unequivocal index of this symbolic substitution of the private for the social. In the last quotation we have seen that the last section of the novel begins with yet another confirmation of the persistence of the status quo, a jaded acknowledgement of the hopeless repetitiveness of pseudo-events in the public sphere. However, the last line is on a contrasting note: "She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life" (TC 653). The shift of attention from an irredeemable realm to another where the future can still be envisaged with hope is obvious. If we believe, with Fredric Jameson, that all narratives enact symbolical resolutions of unsolvable social contradictions, we may observe that, faced with the perceived impossibility of social transformation, Franzen and his characters take the road of self-amelioration. To this end, the novelist directs his characters on a path of self-abasement and deterioration which leads to dejection or, more specifically, depression, until a cathartic personal event awakens their sense of sympathy and orients them toward community understood as a commitment to the closest other. The obvious implication here is that before you may think of helping others you must be able to help yourself. This is certainly the trajectory of Chip Lambert in *The Corrections* and Louis Holland in *Strong Motion*. We have seen how the latter is degraded by his unfair, dominance-seeking treatment of Renée Seitchek until the latter is grievously shot. From that point on, he lovingly dedicates himself to her care. In a similar way, Chip goes through a descendent curve of self-degradation and inner fragmentation tainted by self-deception, irresponsibility and selfishness (it is surely not incidental that during this time his

occupation evolves from the teaching of cultural studies to wire fraud, which obviously suggests a common ground to both activities). As Franzen declares in his interview with Burn, self-deception was a significant concern for him during the writing of *The Corrections*. The novelist refers to its use as a driving force for the narrative and a source of comedy:

I am indeed interested in self-deception. Realist fiction presupposes that the author has access to the truth. It implies a superiority of the author to his or her comically blundering characters. *The Corrections* was written as a comedy, a somewhat angry comedy, and so the self-deception model worked perfectly. Self-deception is funny, and the writer gets to aggressively inflict painful knowledge on one character after another. (Burn, 2010: 66).

In fact, it could be said that all the members of the Lambert family are afflicted by self-deception. Chip thinks himself a subversive intellectual and a prospective filmmaker who is simply undergoing a spell of bad luck; and her mother Enid insists on denying the reality of the fragmentation of her family and her husband's mind. At any rate, Chip presented as lost to himself: "He'd lost track of what he wanted, and since who a person was was what a person wanted, you could say he'd lost track of himself" (TC 620). Chip finally hits the bottom during his pitiful escape from Lithuania. Parallel to what happens to Louis in *Strong Motion* when Renée is shot, this is an epiphany-like moment of self-recognition for Chip, coincident with his vital lowest point, in which he is taught humility and thus abandons his previous pretension and self-deceiving. The final recognition of the reality of his situation is linked to the recognition of his true self and opens the way for his salvation and attainment of peace and happiness. Salvation is completed by the afore-mentioned necessary ethical commitment: what Simon Critchley (2012) describes as the acceptance of the ultimately unfulfillable ethical demand placed by the other. Thus, Chip devotes himself to taking care of his sick father and having lost enough of his egoism he is able to find a stable, satisfactory love relationship.<sup>120</sup> On a slightly more abstract level, there are also significant affinities with this pattern in Walter Berglund's story in *Freedom*, where Franzen's narrative of conversion attains its

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<sup>120</sup> The possibility of self-recognition and then salvation is however denied to Denise and Gary, who at the end of the novel are still in the grip of erroneous notions of themselves

own closure, brought about by acts of reconciliation which are individual but socially symbolic as well, as we will be discussing in the next chapter.

These narratives resemble Franzen's own account of his vital and literary evolution, which he has presented in his non-fiction—most notably in the *Harper's* essay—in terms of a misguided, downwards path, namely that of the practice of literary postmodernism and radical socio-political critique, which led him to a dead end and depression, followed by epiphany and re-discovery of his own literary self. Insofar as these stories culminate in personal salvation, they perform an obvious legitimating function of Franzen's *conversion*. The ethical commitment they stage has led critics to discern a communitarian turn at the end of *The Corrections*, and thus to qualify their otherwise rather harsh criticism of Franzen's socio-political stance.<sup>121</sup> We should bear in mind, however that the community toward which these characters head for is ultimately the *Ur*-community of family and / or the community of lovers, for which the community of readers proposed by Franzen in the *Harper's* essay can be seen as a substitute. Indeed, it is not hard to interpret Franzen's vision of family as that of the last line of defence against the fragmenting forces of individuation which characterize advanced modernity.

And it may well be that the very genre chosen by Franzen in the last resort helps lead the characters to the family realm, since in its apparently inherent need for narrative closure the realist novel seems to naturally gravitate toward the family, which is to say toward family romance. Indeed, except in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the main element of closure in Franzen's novels is what for narratologists constitutes a time-honoured family-related structural function: reconciliation, the choice of which has ideological implications that we will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. With this move, in any case, Franzen avails himself of the novel's inveterate capacity for the assuagement of conflicts and protection of the Ego which Franco Moretti has identified as a key property of the genre. As the Italian theorist has put it, as a general rule, "literature is not produced to multiply symbolic tensions out of control, but rather to reduce and contain them" (Moretti, 2000: 242). To be sure, this is one of the circumstances that have led more than one critic—most notably LeClair (2002) and

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<sup>121</sup> See, for example, Hawkins (2010: 82): "If this is a long journey for Chip, it is likewise a long journey for Franzen, one that carries him through the end of the twentieth century and deposits him squarely on the brink of a metavisioin of community that could anchor the twenty-first-century social novel which effectively challenges the hegemony of self-interest."

Marcus (2005), two defendants of the Systems and experimental novel—to level harsh, and not completely undeserved, accusations of commercialism on the novelist.

In any case, although in this and previous chapters we have drawn attention to what we have deemed inadequate critical accounts of realism, in general and as far as Franzen's work is concerned, this study is not committed to asserting any essential superiority of narrative realism over other fictional modes. On the contrary, we believe Lukács' famous quandary between Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann to be a false dilemma, as we appreciate the critical power of irrational, symbolist or experimental narratives and throughout this study we have amply discussed the limitations of scope inherent to realism as regards social critique. We do believe, anyway, that there is a place for a fiction of excellence that makes the functioning of the social and economic spheres more intelligible, a fiction that can take advantage of recent developments in globalizing socio-economic theory and the relative unblocking of totalizing thought and historical awareness that has taken place in the last decade. As Jameson has observed, realism as a mode has historically been associated to the function of demystification.<sup>122</sup> In this sense, what *The Corrections* suggests is that for all its maddening complexity the world system need not be unfathomable or hopelessly undecidable as a Pynchonesque conspiracy. We just need better—much better—cognitive mapping. This assertion does not necessary imply a return to old foundationalist discourse: as was advanced in the introduction to this study, following Jameson (1998: 37), there is a misconception in the common rejection of systematic approaches to totality on account of the latter's being constituted by differences. The obvious evidence of this, in good post-structuralist logic, is to be found in language itself—very precisely a system made of differences.

Annesley and Hawkins decry Franzen's failure to write a fiction that could be put to a Lukácsian kind of leading, illuminating ideological use. This was an unfounded expectation from the outset: not only is Franzen's social perspective too narrow for that but, as we show in this study, since an early moment in his career, Franzen's response to social and ideological contradictions takes the form of narratives of individual salvation. It would seem, however, that at an age when whole countries are being sacrificed to those little known but all too real conspiracies known as "the markets", and the conditions of life of their citizens are being severely harmed because, we are told, there

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<sup>122</sup> "Realism as a form (or mode) is historically associated, particularly if you position the *Quijote* as the first (modern, or realist) novel, with the function of demystification" (Jameson, 2013: 4).

is no alternative, there is a use for a fiction that helps eliminate mystifications and illuminates the system's zones of shadow. At a time when extant communities are widely sensed to be disintegrated by the anomie of rampant capitalism, there is a use for a novel that is aware of the social nature of human beings. At an era when we are constantly told that we live in the best of possible worlds, we need novelists with the necessary theoretical equipment so as to penetrate ideological masking and show it in their fiction. If it is true that in *The Corrections* Franzen's advances in that direction are incomplete and at times unsatisfactory, it is also true that his contribution, *pace* Annesley, is a valuable one, and by virtue of his many gifts as a humourist and a sympathetic drawer of characters also an aesthetically satisfying one.

## 7. How to close a (meta)narrative: *Freedom*.

*The final believe is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.*

—Wallace Stevens

Common critical opinion of *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen's best-selling fourth novel, has regarded it as the culmination of its author's stylistic evolution from an obviously postmodernist-influenced fiction to a fully-fledged realism in the fashion of classic nineteenth-century novelists. The landmark hinge of that transition would be found in *The Corrections*. In this way, Franzen's third novel is usually seen as the realization of the points made by the author in the *Harper's* essay, a piece widely regarded as a sort of literary manifesto. For example, in his review of *Freedom* for the *New York Times*, Tanenhaus stated that in *The Corrections* "Franzen cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism" (Tanenhaus 2010). Subsequently, Franzen further elaborated on his literary stand in his polemic 2002 essay "Mr Difficult", a disavowal of former postmodernist leanings and an indictment of what he perceived as unmotivated difficulty in fiction. *Freedom* then would constitute the arriving point for this progression, the last act of this narrative. Accordingly, as Kakutani expressed it in her review for the same periodical, in his fourth novel Franzen showed that "he's also completed his own transformation from a sharp-elbowed, apocalyptic satirist focused on sending up the socio-economic-political plight of this country into a kind of nineteenth-century realist concerned with the public and private lives of his characters" (Kakutani 2010).

While it is easy to generally agree with this view of Franzen's stylistic development, once his work is examined in any depth we are confronted with a more problematic picture. As has been shown in previous chapters, the most common critical account of Franzen's career is characterized by important inconsistencies and

oversimplifications that prevent a fuller understanding of his fiction, all the while evincing a widespread, rather reductionistic critical use of complex theoretical notions, especially those of realism and postmodernism. We have also observed that a great deal of critical opinion of Franzen's work has been substantially shaped by Franzen's own account of it, all of which has led to the consolidation of what in preceding chapters we have called the narrative of conversion—the commonly accepted and conveniently *narrativized* account of Franzen's abandonment of postmodernism and embrace of realism. One of the tenets of this study is that all artistic forms have an inherent ideological message, and, accordingly, the key question about Franzen's transition is that it is not only stylistic but political. In this sense, as is known, Franzen's evolution has involved the disavowal of previous and more radical stylistic and political approaches. For a novelist to turn his fiction over time to more conservative grounds is certainly not uncommon, but Franzen's case seems unique in the way he has been able to integrate a complex case into a meaningful narrative, vigorously arguing through outspoken pieces of non-fiction. But perhaps what is most striking is the manner in which he has inscribed a justification for his evolution in his works of fiction. Thus, from *Strong Motion* on, Franzen has articulated his novels around plots of personal salvation that in one way or other resemble Franzen's own narrative of conversion, acting thus as disguised apologies of Franzen's own stylistic and ideological evolution. In this chapter I will analyse the ways in which *Freedom* constitutes the final buttress to support that construction. These rhetorical strategies involve a displacement of social issues by personal concerns, and a social vision where only the prospect of self-amelioration remains, since progressive social change brought by public political action has been ruled out as impossible.

In the present chapter I will also be discussing the ways in which Franzen's way of providing a social vision varies with respect from his previous novels. The point of departure certainly is that, in spite of his professed renunciation of social criticism (notably in the *Harper's* essay), the whole of Franzen's work is characterized by its social concerns and its aspiration to provide a substantial account of society. This is of course consistent with his realist leanings, since, as I have argued in this study, true realism cannot be but social. Actually, it is precisely in his early novels—the ones most clearly influenced by major American postmodernist novelists—where Franzen is most keen on the creation of those synthetic, explanatory social small-scale models which are

a central feature of high realism, while in *Freedom* we may observe significant structural elements derived from not properly realistic genres such as melodrama and the classical *Bildungsroman*. That these complexities have largely remained unnoticed by critics testifies both to the regrettable scarcity of serious academic criticism that has concerned itself with Franzen's work, and to the recurrent mystifications that beset many a journalistic critic's handling of key theoretical concepts.

Be it as it may, Franzen's way of drawing a social picture has certainly undergone a visible transformation, mostly involving the transition from what we might call an explicitly systemic approach with a considerable reliance on authorial digression, as is the case in his first two novels, to a more limited focus based on implication—following the model provided by Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters*—combined with specific cultural commentary of a more reduced scope. In this way, while *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* obviously convey a Marxist-influenced, grand-scale economic and political analysis, in *The Corrections* the attention tends to concentrate on the smaller community of the family. The urban concerns that are central in Franzen's early work—the correlate of his preoccupation for what he sees as a decay of the public sphere, and ultimately a communitarian loss—are superseded by an unremitting concentration on the troubled economy of family relationships, probably because the public sphere, that typically liberal-bourgeois conception always besieged by fragmentation and ideological torpor, is seen by Franzen as hopelessly intractable. Cityscapes are then replaced in Franzen's third novel by the representation of what goes on inside the house, which is done with such intensity that the latter seems to acquire animated qualities in quasi-Gothic fashion. It is surely to Franzen's credit, nevertheless, that in *The Corrections* he is able to trace the influence of global forces down to the interstices of family life and indeed down to the individual's innermost recesses, and, crucially, he does so transcending the more facile conspiratorial uncertainties and paranoia characteristic of the Systems novel, pointing thus the way towards the critical possibilities of a contemporary realism. He does so, however, without articulating any viable form of agency or resistance against the current state of affairs—which he obviously bemoans in many respects—that is not a retreat from the political to try and set the mess of one's life right. This stance, clearly exemplified by the character of Chip Lambert, has been harshly deplored by certain critics, as we have seen.

After this seeming abdication, it is remarkable to notice how the possibility of activism is raised so vividly in *Freedom*, embodied by the characters of Walter Berglund and Lalitha. The present chapter aims to probe the actual substance of this engagement: its ideological assumptions and its socially antagonistic dimension; the significance of the fact that it is ecology what is offered, exclusively, as the absolutely central object of reformist concern. Of course, I examine the fact that their initiative fails spectacularly, faced with the public's incomprehension and mired by inevitable compromise with the system. At the same time, I also observe and interrogate the implications of Franzen's ideological shift from the more radical positions of his early work to the critical liberalism that prevails in his fourth novel, a political stance that he has elsewhere presented as inherent to the novelistic form and which he evidently uses to support the afore mentioned narrative of conversion.<sup>123</sup> In the study of Franzen's rhetorical and ideological strategies of self-justification, as well as in the assessment of the actual depth and significance of his critical insight in *Freedom*, especially as regards the potentialities and limitations of his chosen form, the classic realist novel, I rely on the theoretical constructions of Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti, whose shared conception of the novel as a symbolic artefact and as such a problem-solving device, both from a social and psychological point of view, seem especially relevant to Franzen's narrative endeavour. Particularly, I will be concerned with the ways in which *Freedom* re-enacts literary procedures dating back to the classical *Bildungsroman* to suit its ideological import. Which is not surprising when we bear in mind that Franzen's career makes for a *Künstlerroman* in its own way.

### 7.1. Guilty (liberal) pleasures.

As in his previous novels, with the exception of *The Corrections*, Franzen places an urban account at a prominent place at the beginning of *Freedom*. Perhaps surprisingly, given the grim pictures of apparently unstoppable urban degradation and the ensuing loss of community that abound in Franzen's previous fiction, *Freedom* starts on a contrasting note: in the first pages of the novel we witness the regeneration of

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<sup>123</sup> In the 2009 interview for *Boundary 2*, Franzen overtly vindicates a liberal conception of the novel: "The form is well suited to expanding sympathy, to seeing both sides. Good novels have a lot of the same attributes of good liberal politics. But I'm not sure it goes much further than liberalism. Once you go over to the radical, a line has been crossed, and the writer begins to serve a different master" (Connery and Franzen 2009: 46-7).

Ramsey Hill, an inner-city slum in St. Paul, Minnesota,<sup>124</sup> by young, left-leaning couples like the Berglunds, “the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St. Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier” (F 3).<sup>125</sup> As in *The Corrections*, we find again that the novel will be articulated around a Midwestern family invested with representative qualities. This synthetic character of the novel’s protagonists—one of the marks of classic realism—is not as pronounced as in the case of the Lamberts, whose two generations seemed to embody two American worldviews, but nevertheless did not go unnoticed among critics. For example, Sacks observed that “The Berglunds’ personal crises are thus framed as a microcosm of a national obsession with freedom and global pre-eminence” (Sacks, 2010: n.pag.).

As the narrator informs us, the neighbourhood’s new settlers, those latter-day Midwestern pioneers, strive to “relearn certain life-skills that your own parents had fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn” (F 3), a phrase loaded with suggestions of filial rebellion and community building that inevitably recall the alternative cultural movements of the 1960s. At any rate, the lines recall Franzen’s praise of city life (as opposed to life in the suburbs) in his 1995 essay “First City”. In that piece, Franzen commends the way the urban experience endows citizens with a set of skills regarding how to share the public space while retaining a reasonable amount of privacy. In his opinion, true privacy “depends not on the pseudoparental expedients of isolated houses and controlled shopping environments but on modes of adult behaviour best learned in public spaces like the sidewalk.” (Franzen 2002, 193-194) The initiative of Ramsey Hill’s young settlers then appears at first sight as an attempt at reversing the phenomenon of white flight that has ravaged so many inner-city districts in the United States and which was a central theme in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Thus, instead of the recurrent images of emptiness and urban de-textualization into meaninglessness that we find in Franzen’s previous novels, *Freedom* starts by staging the opposite movement: the re-knitting of social fabric by the new dwellers of the district. In contrast with the allusions to T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* of Franzen’s first novel, young Patty Berglund’s everyday interaction is aptly depicted with an environmental image of fertility: “For all

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<sup>124</sup> As undoubtedly Franzen knows, nearby Summit Avenue is the site of the house where Francis Scott Fitzgerald grew up, a connection that is reminiscent of the allusions to St. Louis’ native T.S. Eliot in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Another example, like Franzen himself, of a novelist who fled the Midwest to find recognition in the East.

<sup>125</sup> Henceforth we will be using the abbreviation F when quoting from the novel.

queries, Patty Berglund was a resource, a sunny carrier of sociocultural pollen, an affable bee” (F 5). However, as the reader soon realizes, the utopian edge of Ramsey Hill’s regeneration is inevitably impaired: the community formed by the regenerators of Ramsey Hill proves to be built upon the same opposition between included and excluded as society at large.

It is obvious that every process of settlement tends to produce antagonism between original inhabitants and newcomers, and this is certainly the case with gentrification, as Franzen’s first novel sharply illustrates. One then might have expected Franzen to exploit the inevitable tensions between widely different social groups in the benefit of the novel’s social insight, very much in the way Paula Fox uses the awkward coexistence of the protagonist couple, the well-off Bentwoods and their poorer neighbours in her novel. Strikingly, however, in *Freedom* the perspective of the impoverished original citizens of Ramsey Hill is reduced to a few conspicuously passing, ironic references. This anticipates the fact that the novel’s perspective is, once again, unequivocally white liberal, upper-middle class. In this way, in the middle of a page-long comic enumeration of life skills required by the district, which includes, for instance, the proper maintenance of Volvo cars, we can find “[how] to respond when a poor person of color accused you of destroying her neighborhood” (F 4). It could be argued that this reference to the loser side of gentrification, together with other related brief allusions mentioning panhandlers and public schools abandoned by the middle class, being all of them embedded in a long list of petty-bourgeois banal concerns, would serve a corrosive intention as to exposing the selfish insularity of the new inhabitants of Ramsey Hill, and by extension of their bland liberalism, were it not for the fact that, as it turns out, this is the last time that these disagreeable issues are discussed in the novel. It would seem that with these allusions Franzen is just acknowledging the existence—and the unfairness—of such situations in as quick as possible a way before he can turn to something else. That being, of course, the story of the Berglunds, which is told accompanied by a cultural and political portrait of the troubled years of the George W. Bush administration and a somewhat cumbersome environmentalist plea. Furthermore, any expectations as to the possibility that the novel is presenting a communitarian or progressive initiative of any consequence in its rendering of Ramsey Hill’s refurbishing, or alternatively providing a serious exercise in social critique are rapidly dismissed by the general tone of mild, even affectionate irony

and blatant middle-class perspective of its introductory chapter “Good Neighbors”. Indeed, here the reminiscence of John Updike’s *Couples* (1968) is obvious from the very outset. The Hanemas’ first liner and their subsequent chatter in Updike’s novel (“What did you make of the new couple?”) resound heavily through *Freedom*’s introduction, especially when the narration conveys the discussion of the Berglunds by the Paulsens, a gossipy neighbour couple. Perhaps less becoming, though clearly perceptible as well, is the reminiscence of contemporary mass culture products such as the TV series *Desperate Housewives* or *Sex and the City* and their voiceover introductions to each show. After all, the first chapter performs very much the same function of a film trailer: a narrator of limited knowledge teases the audience with the intriguing skeleton of the tale of the Berglunds as seen from the point of view of their neighbours—a story whose antecedents and details will be provided later by Patty Berglund’s autobiographical text and which will be continued and completed by a second piece by Patty and eventually again by the narrator.

## **7.2. Beaten up by rednecks: class discourse and ideology**

As will have become already apparent, the concept of social class is a fundamental one in this chapter. This notion, of course, is not self-explanatory but rather a permanent source of a heavily ideologized sociological debate in which not only the character of society’s stratification into classes, but the very existence of classes as well is questioned. Although Marx discusses the concept of class only briefly in *Capital* the idea is central in Marxist theory. Within that tradition, the division of society into classes is determined by position within the process of production. A succinct definition of class was proposed in 1919 by Lenin, for whom

[c]lasses are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated by law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy. (Lenin, 1965: 421)

Also relevant for the purpose of this book is Max Weber's influential notion of status group, which both contrasts and partially overlaps with the traditional Marxist concept of class. In contrast with the Marxist tradition, for Weber social stratification is not ultimately economically determined—which under capitalism means market-organized. In his view, a political community is not only constituted by an “economic group” but must perforce also entail the construction of “value systems”, in accordance to which the community constituents have more or less legitimacy or prestige (Weber, 1978: 902). This accounts for a variety of relations between economic position and actual status since classes and status groups may and frequently do coexist, and in theory classes may develop into status groups and vice versa:

In contrast to classes, *Stände* (status groups) are normally groups. They are however of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined “class situation,” we wish to designate as *status situation* every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*. This honor may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality, and, of course, can be knit to a class situation: class distinctions are linked in the most varied ways with status distinctions. (Weber, 1978: 932)

The crucial introduction of the ambiguous element of honour as a non-economically determined factor to account for social stratification opens the way for moral considerations that can be used to legitimize social inequality or advocate any kind of social leadership. As this chapter will argue, Franzen shows a position implicitly informed by Weber's thought in *Freedom* as part of the legitimation strategy for his own social outlook—a view which becomes clearer when we replace the archaic concept of honour used by the Weber by the more modern notions of *dignity* and *distinction*, characteristics which for Franzen differentiate certain characters belonging to a class, according to mere economic criteria, from the rest of the members of that class. This is apparent in his treatment of the Berglunds, who, like the Probsts or the Lamberts are presented in a much more favourable way than other characters theoretically belonging to the same class but lacking their legitimizing dignity—a moral stance which is shown as the result of having achieved their current social position through adherence to traditional Protestant work ethics. In consistence with this approach, Franzen downplays the shaping role of the mode of production but

emphasizes cultural differences when he confronts characters belonging to different social classes. In this study, my own position on the subject of class is closer to the Marxist tradition than to Weber's elaboration. We are most indebted, nevertheless, to the anti-essentialism of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), whose acknowledgement of the ineradicable fragmentation of positions within social agents and their ultimate lack of rational identity seems especially adequate for the analysis of Franzen's social picture. As Laclau and Mouffe put it,

[I]n order to advance in the determination of social antagonisms, it is necessary to analyse the plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions, and to discard the idea of a perfectly unified and homogeneous agent, such as the 'working class' of classical discourse. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 84)

As I have implied, *Freedom* is characterized by quite apparent displays of social antagonism which will eventually try to subsume. From the novel's perspective, one of the main objects of confrontation does already appear in the first chapter, namely working-class, right-wing populism as embodied in the character of Blake, the new boyfriend of Carol Monaghan, one of Ramsey Hill's older neighbours. Blake disturbs the neighbourhood's apparently Arcadian left-liberalism with his glaring Republicanism (which includes an "I'M WHITE AND I VOTE" bumper sticker in his truck) and, perhaps even worse, with his alien cultural coordinates and coarse taste. It should be noted that while Franzen's perspective has certainly been middle-class throughout his work, he seems to have driven that stance one step beyond in *Freedom*, the novel where we find his middle-class vision most unremittingly deployed and his social perspective most constricted. The ideological implications of a writer's class affiliation as regards perspective are referred to by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. For Marx, petty-bourgeois intellectuals represent the petty bourgeoisie because "in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life ... they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter politically" (Marx, 2001: 50).

In this respect, we may remember how in *The Twenty-Seventh City* Martin Probst's outlook is unequivocally middle-class too, despite his wealth and status as a successful contractor, and how his worldview and values are vindicated against those of the corrupt and selfish ruling class of St. Louis. Nevertheless, in Franzen's first novel

there were the Indian conspirators brought in from the outskirts of capitalism, the satiric insight into the city's power machinery, and the scandal of the derelict human refuse of East St. Louis, a symptomatic reminder of the social consequences of capitalism; all of which elements overruled the Probsts' narrower field of vision. In *Strong Motion* there was a resort to the critical power of Marxism and feminism. In *The Corrections* the perspective is certainly getting narrower, but this is to some extent made up for by its global concerns and its contrasting of two different world views: the Midwestern modern of the Lamberts and the Eastern postmodern of their offspring. In *Freedom*, in contrast, every social perspective that is brought to bear only seems to be proving its fundamental wrongness as compared to Franzen's middle-class ideal. From a Marxist point of view, this kind of oppositional stand is inherent to any class discourse. As Jameson has put it:

[T]he very content of a class ideology is relational, in the sense that its "values" are always actively in situation with respect to the opposing class, and defined against the latter: normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the legitimation of its own power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will often, in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and undermine the dominant "value system."

This is the sense in which we say, following Mikhail Bakhtin, that within this horizon class discourse ... is essentially *dialogical* in its structure. (Jameson, 2002: 69)

Then upper-middle-class, enlightened left-liberalism as represented by the Berglunds (more specifically by Walter) confronts basically two antagonist social perspectives in *Freedom*. In the first place we find working-class right-wing populism. This is clearly a notion that requires some clarification. In the first place, in order to briefly elucidate our concept of the working and lower classes we may use Harold Kerbo's definition:

The working class will be used to signify people with little or no property, middle to low positions in occupation (manual labor), and little or no authority. A further distinction will be made with respect to skilled and unskilled manual workers. At times the term lower class will be used to signify those individuals

with no property, who are often unemployed and have no authority (that is, the poor). (Kerbo, 1996: 13).

The concept of populism, which shall reappear in this chapter, is probably more controversial. It is certainly polemical in two ways: in the disagreement among theorists as to its characterization and in its being frequently utilized in political struggle as a derogatory adjective against adversaries who threaten a specific hegemonic consensus. This is certainly not the place to conduct an exploration of a complex idea which would inevitably take us far from our way. In order to arrive at a working concept let us state that our notion of populism follows Laclau's description of it as a political logic inherent to processes of social change. This logic governs the articulation into equivalence of a variety of social differences involving different demands. For Laclau, "the equivalential moment presupposes the constitution of a global political subject bringing together a plurality of social demands. This in turn involves ... the construction of internal frontiers and the identification of an institutionalized 'other'" (Laclau, 2005: 117). The fact that populism operates over what Laclau has termed "empty signifiers" entails that its referents are indeterminate until they are *filled in* by the hegemonic process. As a result, populism is multivalent and lends itself to very different political causes. According to the novel, the political stance of large segments of the working class is characterized by a particular form of right-wing populism which is apparent in a reductionist political outlook obviously hegemonized by the ruling classes and intensely confrontational. This ideological stance is represented by Blake, by the stubborn West Virginian Coyle Mathis and their associates and, last but not least, by Walter Berglund's own father and siblings. It should be noted that in the novel their confrontation is not abstract but very real—they are actually and explicitly the Berglunds' antagonists, what prevents them from attaining their perceived life goals. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, antagonism is that relation in which "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 125). In this way we realize that Blake stands in the way of Patty's relationship with her own son and Mathis and his group of rednecks are an obstacle to Walter's environmental scheme. Not to mention the way young Walter is tormented by his father and siblings. Indeed, the portrait of Walter's father, the truly obnoxious Gene Berglund, deserves special attention: "He was belligerently populist, defiantly proud of his *unspecialness*, and attracted therefore, to the dark side of right-wing politics" (F 446). Through an

interminable series of consistently poor business decisions, Gene drives his family into a precarious financial situation (the fact that he alone is responsible for his economic misfortunes is not, of course, without ideological implications: Franzen's antagonistic strategy of self-legitimation is evidently at work here) and then cultivates a bitter anti-bourgeois, and most importantly for Franzen, anti-intellectual resentment: "To Gene, this was just more evidence that his siblings looked down on him, considered themselves too fancy for his motel, and generally belonged to that privileged class of Americans which it was becoming his great pleasure to revile and reject" (F 447).

As if this were not enough, as an interracial couple Walter and Lalitha are the object of the aggressive racism of a rural West Virginian at a restaurant. Working-class characters in *Freedom*, especially when rural, are invariably depicted as anti-intellectual, anti-liberal, disdainful of environmental issues, and even prone to racism and physical violence, as is proved by the beating Walter receives at the hands of Mathis and his followers. Soon it becomes obvious that in his construction of working-class characters Franzen is drawing from, as well as contributing to, a well-known repertoire of disparaging fictional types—the narrow-minded, the coarse, the redneck: "He felt conspicuous enough already, felt glaringly urban, sitting with a girl of a different race amid the two varieties of rural West Virginians, the overweight kind and the really skinny kind" (F 307).

In spite of the obvious differences between the American and British scenes, it is revealing to see Franzen's disparaging portraits of working-class types in the light of Owen Jones' compelling study of class hatred in contemporary Britain. In his aptly titled *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (2011),<sup>126</sup> Jones shows how the destruction of working-class communities since the late 1970s, caused by the dismantling of British manufacturing tissue and anti-labour legislation, has been accompanied by an ideological operation whereby the once-proud British working class has been reduced, according to hegemonic media representations, to a marginal, antisocial underclass devoid of moral values which lives exclusively on social benefits. Needless to say, demonizing people at the bottom is a way of justifying social inequality. According to Jones, at the heart of this caricature of the working class is the

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<sup>126</sup> "Chav" is a stereotype and a pejorative adjective that has gained cultural currency in Britain during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is used to refer to young lower-class people of loutish, antisocial behaviour. Its approximate (age-neutral) American equivalent would be "white trash".

interested belief (refuted by income statistics) that now “we are all middle class, apart from the chav remnants of a decaying working class” (Jones, 2011: 23). It is also interesting to consider the place left for the (white) working class in multicultural societies like the British and American. Jones documents how in British media working-class people are regularly depicted as “backward-looking, bigoted and obsessed with race” and he relates it with the repression that the concept of class underwent in the aftermath of Thatcherism:

Because “class” had for so long been a forbidden word within the political establishment, the only inequalities discussed by politicians and the media were racial ones. The white working class had become another marginalized ethnic minority, and this meant that all their concerns were understood solely through the prism of race. They were presented as a lost tribe in the lost side of history, disorientated by multiculturalism and obsessed with defending their identity from the cultural ravages of mass immigration. The rise of the idea of a “white working class” fuelled a new liberal bigotry. It was OK to hate the white working class, because they were themselves a bunch of racist bigots.” (Owen, 2011: 8-9)

As a result, for Owen, generalizing attacks that would justly cause uproar were they directed towards ethnic or racial minorities are constantly levelled with impunity to the working class in the United Kingdom. There is a certain parallelism here with the representation of the working class among American liberals, as our novel shows. The determinant aggravating circumstance is, of course, that, according to stereotype, the American working class supports the political Right.

It is also noticeable that, in his representation of lower-class hostility towards the liberal gentry embodied by the novel’s main characters, Franzen is following again the model provided by *Desperate Chapters*. In this sense in Fox’s novella, for example, the liberal Bentwoods make a trip to the countryside holiday farmhouse they own to find that it has been broken in and viciously wrecked in the inside. When they question the rural working-class locals that are supposed to look after the house about the incident, they are met with barely concealed derision. The evident antagonism exasperates Otto Bentwood: “I wonder if those Haynes cretins had something to do with it. How they

hate us! Did you see how gratified they were by this trouble of ours? Everything in that kitchen ... it all said one thing to me. It said, *die*” (Fox, 2003: 140).<sup>127</sup>

However, while Fox is cold and ambiguously detached in her presentation of the Bentwoods, and usually deploys a narratorial deadpan that compels the reader to assess the Bentwoods’ moral and psychological positions in her own terms, Franzen’s approach is rather, as it was in *The Corrections*, the opposite: warm, affectionate empathy, frequently realized in exhaustive—and sometimes even redundant—renderings of the characters’ thoughts in which the narrator’s speech is often hard to tell from that of the characters. Franzen’s sympathy then, which he has claimed as a key attribute of a novelist,<sup>128</sup> is evidently selective and founded on a kind of partial identification with his characters.

The way in which Franzen characterizes working-class people is also revealing as it involves not only political or moral discredit but cultural embarrassment as well. Thus, in the presentation of those characters Franzen deftly strings together apparently casual details of what contemporary educated upper-middle class people would consider unforgivable bad taste: Blake’s “great room” with its beer keg and foosball, Carol Monaghan’s “tarty” clothes and excessive make up, Walter’s brother’s favouring of “anthem rock”, all of which are in sharp contrast with the Berglunds’ “excellent urban-gentry taste” (F 350). These references are clearly aimed at an audience that will recognize them as a vindication of their own taste, which enhances the impression that *Freedom* is fundamentally intended for a specific demographic group, that of its main characters. If in *The Corrections* Franzen showed his adeptness at highlighting the status-marker function of *refined* consumption patterns, in *Freedom* he seems to be proving Pierre Bourdieu’s remarks as to the fact that “art and cultural consumption are

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<sup>127</sup> The passage from *Desperate Characters* has a quite literal echo in *Freedom*, in what seems a tribute to Jane Smiley. In Franzen’s novel Richard Katz experiences the hostility of Washington D.C. in the same terms: “The whole city was a monosyllabic imperative directed at Katz in his beat-up biker jacket. Saying: die” (F 350). The formula reappears some pages later, this time reflecting with considerable bitterness the intergenerational divide between Katz and the younger attendants to Conor Oberst’s concert: “They gathered not in anger but in celebration of their having found, as a generation, a gentler and more respectful way of being. A way, not incidentally, more in harmony with consuming. And so said to him: die” (F 369).

<sup>128</sup> See “A Rooting Interest. Edith Wharton and the Problem of Sympathy.” *The New Yorker*, February 13 and 20 2012.

predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu, 1984: 7).

Franzen’s harsh portrait of working class characters and his rather unconcealed display of antagonism might at first sight appear as curiously un-liberal, as it apparently contradicts what Hutchinson has described as “the tendency for contemporary left-liberals to attempt to reconcile, synthesize or transcend opposing views rather than to assert one view over another in the manner most frequently associated with political radicalism” (Hutchinson, 2008: 5). As Laclau and Mouffe argue, “the notion of antagonism has been erased from the political discourse of the Left” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: *xiv*), which has brought a “sacralisation of consensus” (2001: *xv*). Why then this antagonism towards working-class characters, which seems ill at ease with traditional progressive visions of social harmony?<sup>129</sup> Part of this animosity may probably constitute a symptomatic manifestation—in the way of self-justification—of what is usually known as liberal guilt: the shameful realization of the basic unfairness at the root of one’s privilege. In this sense, the novel’s early, seemingly pre-emptive denial of such guilt in the Berglunds reads as a kind of *excusatio non petita*:

To Seth Paulsen ... the Berglunds were the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege. One problem with Seth’s theory was that the Berglunds weren’t all that privileged; their only known asset was their house, which they’d rebuilt with their own hands. (F 7)

But the ultimate cause of Franzen’s hostility is surely to be found in an ongoing socio-cultural phenomenon taking place in the United States, namely the widespread ideological polarization of American society over a number of perceived key issues

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<sup>129</sup> In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx explains social-democracy’s proverbial pursuit of social harmony in terms of limitation of perspective, or, more exactly, of the (mis)application of one limited class perspective to society as a whole: “The peculiar character of social-democracy is epitomised in the fact that democratic-republican institutions are demanded as a means, not of doing away with two extremes, capital and wage labour, but of weakening their antagonism and transforming it into harmony. However different the means proposed for the attainment of this end may be, however much it may be trimmed with more or less revolutionary notions, the content remains the same. This content is the transformation of society in a democratic way, but a transformation within the bounds of the petty bourgeoisie. Only one must not form the narrow-minded notion that the petty bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the special conditions of its emancipation are the general conditions within which alone modern society can be saved and the class struggle avoided”. (Marx, 2001: 50)

such as reproductive rights, conceptions of family, sexual morals, education, the relationship with the sacred, the morals of art, certain civil rights and freedoms, the attributes and functions of the government, or the size and competences of the welfare state. This ideological battle, popularly known as culture war(s) has been famously analysed by James Davison Hunter (1991), who accurately discerns a struggle for power in the current fight for “the definition of America”. The perception as to which side is leading in this fight may vary in accordance to the ideological perspective, but it is clear that liberals tend to think that they have been losing the ground before the conservatives for a long time. Walter does not mince words voicing that opinion:

“Listen Richard,” Walter said. “The conservatives won. They turn the Democrats into a center-right party. They got the entire country singing ‘God Bless America,’ stress on *God*, at every single major-league baseball game. They won on every fucking front, but they especially won culturally, and *especially* regarding babies.” (F 221)

For many observers indeed, the antagonism provoked by that ideological cleavage, which has been widening since at least the 1960s, has probably reached a peak during the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>130</sup> From a left-liberal point of view, it is probably political analyst Thomas Frank (2004) who has made the most influential contribution to this debate. In his partisan volume he caustically decries the ideological dominance of what he calls “the great backlash”, a conservative reaction whose origin he explains as a response to the moral and political upheaving of the 1960s. Frank elaborates on Hunter’s notion of culture wars:

While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues—summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art—which it then marries to pro-business economic policies. Cultural anger is marshalled to achieve economic ends. And it is these economic achievements—not the forgettable skirmishes of the never-ending culture wars—that are the movement’s greatest monuments. (Frank, 2004: 5)

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<sup>130</sup> The publishing in 1993 of “Beyond the Culture Wars”, in which Gerald Graff studies the bearings of this ideological conflict in American higher education confirmed it as a pressing, wide-reaching issue at the time.

Frank's thesis is that conservative leaders have been able to ideologically trick the American working classes through a form of "tragically inverted class consciousness" (2004: 259) into supporting political stances that are against their own interest. According to Frank, the contemporary American political scenario is one of "sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances" (2004: 10). For the political analyst, the Democratic Party is itself to blame for having squandered its traditional allegiance with the working class by focusing on technocracy, dropping class language and ceasing to address people on the losing end of the free-market system (2004: 245). While certainly less publicized, Bruce Robbins' view of the issue seems the most perceptive. For Robbins (1999), the ongoing controversy over culture rests upon the ideological perception of an illusory separation of the economic and cultural realms, which he already discerns, as we saw in the previous chapter, in the thought of theorists such as Daniel Bell. Robbins follows Habermas in stating that this disjunction—which is in contradiction of Marxist views of culture as emanating from the mode of production—turns culture into a sort of scapegoat as it allows the less desirable consequences of capitalist modernization to be burdened on it. According to Robbins, this disjunction of realms, which protects capitalism from radical critique, has been successfully exploited by the Right to achieve an apparently contradictory political hegemony:

From the perspective of economics, it means that the victims of capitalism are enlisted in support of capitalism. From the perspective of culture, it means that the Republicans can support family values while encouraging social conditions under which family values will be unlivable—conditions under which, as Marx put it, everything solid melts into air. This self-contradiction is veiled from sight by the disjunction of culture and economics, which thus serves as the glue fastening together the victim / victimizer coalition. (Robbins, 1999: 32-3)

It should be noticed that, to one extent or other, this perception of economics and culture as separate realms is also common among the Left. We have discussed in the previous chapter that Franzen is aware of what Bell called the cultural contradictions of capitalism, but like Bell himself his awareness of those contradictions is impaired by the implicit acceptance of the separation of economics and culture, as is suggested by his classist view of the cultural controversy in *Freedom*.

It is in the context of this embittered political atmosphere, one in which left-liberal influence is widely perceived to be steadily declining, that Franzen's disparaging show of working-class types is best understood, as it is evident that, for the novelist, the popular classes have been hopelessly colonized by the political right and therefore stand as one of the greatest obstacles for the realization of any progressive reformist agenda. Franzen's response to this state of affairs seems to be the same perplexed frustration that currently afflicts many left-liberals in the United States. In this sense, Simon Critchley sees a disabling weakness in the political vision of much of today's American Left: they do not understand the essentially adversarial character of politics. For Critchley, the Republican leaders show a clear, Carl Schmitt-influenced understanding of the adversarial nature of the political, which they conceal under a moralizing and apparently depoliticized discourse—a hypocritical but effective stance.<sup>131</sup> In contrast, for Critchley, the Democrats

want to bring healing and reconciliation to the divided body politic ... They need to study their Carl Schmitt and more importantly, Gramsci on common sense, hegemony, religion, ideology and collective will formation ...the sine qua non of oppositional politics lies in an understanding of populism, what Gramsci used to call the 'national-popular'. What needs to be politically articulated at this historical conjuncture is, in my view, a leftist populism. (Critchley, 2012: 143-144)

As I will be discussing below, Franzen's final political vision is aimed towards reconciliation, rather than determined oppositional politics, and certainly there is not much in the novel that is attuned to the articulation of the leftist populism proposed by Critchley. On the contrary, apparently for Franzen the impulse for social amelioration can only come from a scientifically enlightened elite (which is not to be confused with the basically self-serving Republican ruling class). This implies a rejection of populism which from Laclau's point of view amounts to a dismissal of the political as such: "the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an administrative power

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<sup>131</sup> In *The Concept of the Political*, first published in 1932 (the year before he joined the Nazi party), Schmitt conducts a sharp critique of liberalism on the grounds that its inherent tendency towards compromise and procedure instead of struggle when conflict is envisaged, as well as its propensity to diverge the latter into the abstract realms of ethics and economy inevitably entail an impoverishment of the political. For Schmitt, the departing point of politics lies in the friend-enemy distinction. In his words: "political thought and political insight prove themselves theoretically and practically in the ability to distinguish friend and enemy. The high points of politics are simultaneously are the moments in which the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy" (Schmitt, 1996: 67).

whose source of legitimacy is the proper knowledge of what a ‘good’ community is” (Laclau, 2005: x). In this sense, we may notice that Walter does believe in progressive change but in the way of reform led by influent progressive circles. As he exemplifies it: “Positive social change works top-down ... The surgeon general issues his report, educated people read it, bright kids start to realize that smoking is stupid, not cool, and national smoking rates go down” (F 362). In the same way, the declared aim of Walter and Lalitha’s projected summer activities is to gain “rich college kids” for the cause of population control, in an implicit acknowledgement, but also an endorsement, of the classist character of (what is left of) the public sphere. In any case, at this point we may notice that the credit given to experimental science in Franzen’s novels is remarkable. We may remember here that Renée Seitchek, the heroine who uncovers Sweeting-Aldren’s corporate malfeasance in *Strong Motion*, is a scientist using scientific methods of enquiry. Significantly as well, what makes Walter’s collaboration with the coal industry in his environmental project acceptable, even though it entails the practice of mountain top removing (a procedure usually considered ecologically harmful), is the fact that the latter is to be followed by “science-based reclamation” of the mined areas. Franzen’s apparent trust of experimental science acquires interesting connotations in *The Corrections*, where the productiveness and communitarian benefits of Alfred Lambert’s work, as a railroad engineer who in his free time conducts metallurgic research in a home laboratory, is contrasted with the sterility and phoniness of his son Chip’s labour as a professor of cultural theory. This faith in experimental science seems one more of Franzen’s characteristic nostalgias (i.e. those evoked by the city, the public sphere, industrial society, the social novel), as it is to be sure more characteristic of traditional industrial society than of the ongoing advanced phase of late capitalism that Beck (1992) has described as reflexive modernity or risk society. Indeed, the current validity of science as socially acknowledged epistemological foundation could be not much higher than that of Chip’s critical theory. In our discussion of *Strong Motion* we argue, following Beck, that in advanced modernity, the relentless process of *scientization* of society has also brought a critique of science, which has become reflexive, taking itself as its own main subject. As a result, scientific discourse has been rendered ambiguous, suspect indeed of being subservient to spurious interests, disabled thus as a basis for a universally acknowledged truth.

In any case, Walter's favouring of reform advanced by enlightened elite brings to the fore the issue of philanthropy, which has a prominent place in the novel. Indeed, Walter's environmental schemes are in all respects philanthropic except paradoxically in their not having *people* as their primary beneficiaries. Significantly, Jameson has included the philanthropic project, understood as an individual—that is, crucially, *not collective*—attempt to solve the dilemmas of totality, among the strategies of containment used by realist writers to hold in check everything that may threaten the ontological status of the world created by their work. As the American theorist puts it, “everything which is not-being, desire, hope, and transformational praxis” must be fold back into the status of nature. According to Jameson, “these impulses toward the future and toward radical change must systematically be reified, transformed into ‘feelings’ and psychological attributes, the properties and accidents of ‘characters’ now grasped as organisms and forms of being” (Jameson, 2002: 181). The philanthropic project then “stands at the very fault line of such narrative strategies, and is best renaturalized as quixotic altruism, eccentricity, or harmless mania” (2002: 181). As Jameson has noticed, following Lukács, the deployment of the philanthropic endeavour as a novelistic theme involves positing ethical abstraction as a central motivation for a character. This circumstance, given that the proper raw material for narrative is the empirical rather than abstraction, inevitably leads to what Lukács calls “a demonic narrowing of the soul”, which manifests itself only negatively, by the hero having to abandon everything he achieves because “[reality] is never what he wants, because it is broader, more empirical, more life-like than what his soul set out to seek” (Lukács, 2006c: 110). This is, quite precisely, the case of Walter, whose demonic disposition, together with the divergence between his “abstract idealism,” to use Lukács expression, and the non-compliant empirical reality, are made dramatically manifest in his inflamed “cancer on the planet” speech at the inauguration act for the environmental reserve he has promoted. The novel even contains an explicit piece of praise of philanthropy: although he makes fun of rock celebrity Bono's commercialized persona, Richard Katz—somewhat improbably—acknowledges his integrity in “trying to do some actual hands-on good in Africa. Like: be a man, suck it up, admit that you like being part of the ruling class, and that you believe in the ruling class, and that you'll do whatever it takes to consolidate your position in it” (F 204).

Franzen's endorsement of "top-down" social change has its correlate in the perception, widespread in liberal quarters, of the lower and working classes as an intractable hindrance for reform. The picture, however, is not exactly the same as regards the middle class: the novel shows how middle-class families, if appropriately approached, are capable of surmount their initial reluctance and realize the environmental damage their cats can do. In contrast, to put it briefly, the novel argues that the American lower and working classes are the ideological hostages of a fetishized vision of the American way of life which consecrates useless or downright harmful modes of freedom, such as the right to carry fire arms, the right not to have medical insurance or, especially important for Franzen, to be as wasteful as one wishes or can afford. The working class then, serves the benefit of the ruling elite, a conglomerate of corporate and political interest who is able to arrange lucrative military interventions abroad with the aim of securing the proper oil supply to meet the nation's unquenchable thirst for the fuel they market. A kind of vicious circle is completed, as the novel shows, when the impoverished, mostly unemployed West Virginians displaced by Walter's environmental project (belonging to families, by the way, which are statistically likely to have one of their younger members sent to the war in Iraq) are employed by LBI, a fictional corporation modelled on Dick Cheney's Halliburton, in a brand-new plant where body armours are manufactured for the military. This way, the agents that create the necessity for the armed intervention abroad end up profiting from it. What is more, all the while they elicit support among the lower class by means of granting poor people a patriotism-coated pittance of their gains. In contrast, Coyle Mathis' open despise of Walter summarizes in the novel the working-class perspective of the liberal bourgeoisie, a commonplace view of liberals as decadent, arrogantly intellectual snobs who drive foreign cars, advocate abortion and homosexuality and for the most part make fun of honest, hard-working American Christians (we should bear in mind, nevertheless, that such vision is more exactly the liberals' perception as to how they are perceived by working-class, right-wing populists). In Franzen's view then it becomes apparent that large sections of the American working and lower classes support political alliances that are basically external to their class interest. In understanding this kind of seemingly contradictory political investment, the theory of political hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) under Gramsci's influence is certainly relevant. From their point of view we could argue that American neo-conservatives have succeeded in constructing a hegemonic articulation through a system

of equivalences, unifying multiple subject positions (or social groups) around certain individualistic definitions of individual rights and negative conceptions of liberty which act as nodal points or master-signifiers, and whose definition is in the benefit of the ruling elite.

The contradictory political landscape depicted in *Freedom* may also be interpreted, in terms which are not incompatible with those of Laclau and Mouffe, in the light of Althusser's theory of ideology. It seems clear that Franzen regards the American lower and working classes as more vulnerable to ideological alienation than others. One of the manifestations of ideology is the gap between one's actual best interest and the real effect of the political stand one defends. Such gap has become very wide indeed in the case of the conservative populism that has taken root among the American lower and working classes. One of the mainstays of the conservative agenda in the United States and elsewhere is the attack on governmental capacities for regulation and taxation which are denounced as excessive and counter to American traditions of freedom and self-reliance. Žižek concurs with Frank:

the inconsistency of this ideological stance is obvious: the populist conservatives are literally *voting themselves into economic ruin*. Less taxation and regulation means more freedom for the big companies that are driving the impoverished farmers out of business; less state intervention means less federal help to small farmers; and so on. (Žižek, 2006: 359)

The social fragmentation and communitarian loss entailed by such deregulating policies, which I have also discussed in the analysis of *The Corrections*, need not be emphasized. An explanation for this kind of ideological blindness can be found in a generalized and powerful libidinal investment in what could be described as a series of ideological fetishes, which is particularly entrenched in American society due to its specific historical configuration. For Žižek, the function of ideology in modern societies has come to rely mainly on fetishism. As he has put it,

[I]n our allegedly “post-ideological” era, ideology functions more and more in a *fetishistic* mode as opposed to its traditional *symptomal* mode. In the latter mode, the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms *qua* “returns of the repressed”—cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie—while the fetish is effectively a kind of *envers* of the symptom. That is to

say, the symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other scene erupts, while the fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth ... fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughgoing "realists," able to accept the way things are because by clinging to their fetish they are able to mitigate the full impact of reality. (Žižek, 2009: 65)

It is clear that Franzen is aware of the working of this kind of ideological fetishism and he sets about exposing it in the novel. Thus, in his *Time* magazine interview following the release of the novel he argues in this direction: "It seemed to me that if we were going to be elevating freedom to the defining principle of what we're about as a culture and a nation, we ought to take a careful look at what freedom in practice brings" (Franzen and Grossman, 2010: n.pag.). In particular, he is keen on laying bare the fetishized concept of freedom that pervades American political discourse, which in his view poses a fatal hindrance to the public discussion of key issues in rational, scientifically enlightened terms of common good:

"It's all circling around the same problem of personal liberties," Walter said. "People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have the money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you cannot afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to." (F 361)

Significantly we may notice that here the lower and working classes are specifically singled out as the prototypical prey to the ideological power of fetishized freedom. It is difficult, however, not to feel that there is something too simplistic, too flattering for the middle classes in this picture of lower and working classes in the grip of ideology and manipulated by a ruthless ruling class, while the urban gentry of *New York Times* readers remains relatively non-alienated. It would seem that in Franzen's vision a certain extent of ideological awareness is accompanied by a corresponding measure of blindness. Žižek has been concerned with the ideological struggle outlined by Walter, taking it beyond the usual liberal self-centred expression of victimhood or despair at the dreadful backwardness of the lower classes. He acknowledges that the

ruling class hypocritically mobilizes a populist moral agenda with which it ultimately is not concerned, tolerating, in his words, this “moral war as a means of keeping the lower classes in check, that is, enabling them to articulate their fury without disturbing their economic interests” (Žižek, 2009: 360).<sup>132</sup> For Žižek then the culture war spells more than liberals would acknowledge: “*culture war is class war* in a displaced mode” (2009: 360). A class war which, needless to say, would pose a threat to the liberal gentry’s privilege too, were it to take full form. Besides, as the Slovenian thinker argues, “it takes two to fight a culture war” (2009: 360). For him, liberals’ consecration of certain issues (the fight against sexism, racism and fundamentalism, the defence of multicultural tolerance) as central in the political debate covertly serves a hegemonic purpose in subduing the lower class: “while professing solidarity with the poor, liberals encode culture war with an opposed class message: more often than not, their fight for multicultural tolerance and women’s rights marks the counterposition to the alleged intolerance, fundamentalism and patriarchal sexism of the ‘lower classes’” (2009: 361). It is obvious that environmentalism, the central political issue offered by the novel, belongs in the list of liberal concerns mentioned above and is then also susceptible of being strategically used as an instrument of opposition to a rival class. In this sense, it is telling that two working-class characters in the novel, namely Blake, the Berglunds’ Republican neighbour in Ramsey Hill, and Walter’s elder brother are depicted as notorious, prompt fellers of trees.

At the other end of the scale of social antagonists, according to Franzen’s upper-middle-class perspective, is what we have called the ruling class, formed by members of the corporate and political elite (which in this perspective is usually associated to the Republican Party). In *Freedom*, this class is mainly represented by two characters: Vin Haven, the energy tycoon who finances Walter’s environmental plan for his own profit-making ends and who finally betrays the spirit of the project; and Howard (whose family name Franzen conspicuously never provides), the founder of a conservative think tank dedicated to produce arguments to support American military intervention in Iraq

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<sup>132</sup> Although he may overlook its ultimate ideological implications in the benefit of his own political stand, Franzen is of course aware of the fundamental phoniness of the culture war scenario, of its function as ideological distraction for the naïve across the mainstream ideological spectrum. Thus, apropos of the Republican leaders’ hypocritical endorsement of the conservative moral agenda, Richard Katz points out to Zachary, a liberal teenager: “Do you think George Bush actually hates gay people? Do you think he personally gives a shit about abortion? Do you think Dick Cheney really believes Saddam Hussein engineered 9/11?” (F 202)

and elsewhere. Both characters bolster the upward trajectories of Walter and his undergraduate son Joey, respectively; and as if in a classical *Bildungsroman*, both characters act as the devious mentors of the upstart hero. Significantly, however, for both Berglunds such association eventually only leads to their entanglement in different webs of corruption from which they have to extricate themselves after sobering disappointment. For Franzen then the games played by the ruling class are essentially debased and there is no way of playing them without getting sullied. In this respect, the coherence in Franzen's outlook throughout his work is remarkable: again, obscure and far-reaching corporations or lobbies, powerful enough to turn the political power into an instrument of their interest, reveal themselves as the true villains of the story. This was the case, we may remember, with the lobbies of corporate interest that indirectly ruled St. Louis for their own benefit in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. The pattern is confirmed with Sweeting-Aldren, the rogue corporation that causes earthquakes in *Strong Motion*, and with the Wroth brothers, the speculative investors who buy and subsequently dismantle the Midland-Pacific railroad—as well as public assets around the world—in *The Corrections*. We may observe as well that, as befits a realist writer, Franzen eschews again the paranoia-inducing, undecidable conspiracies of a certain kind of postmodernist fiction. In *Freedom* the real conspiracy is the collusion of corporate and political interest that leads to that gigantic scam which is the American intervention in Iraq. The actual evil-doers are also visible and unambiguous: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Richard Perle and the rest of conservative leaders who control the government. A special mention is deserved in this respect by Howard, the neocon thinker who, with rhetoric borrowed from Leo Strauss, defends the legitimacy of the lies told by the government to justify the war, embodying thus the blunt ideological cynicism that sustains the privilege of the ruling elite.<sup>133</sup> Howard exemplifies the kind of hypocritical but clear-sighted political vision attributed by Critchley to Republican leadership. The depiction of his Jewishness is also interesting. As Franzen makes clear, Howard is too much of a pragmatic cynic to be a real believer. Nevertheless he is able to turn Jewish cultural heritage into a convenient, consumer-friendly tool for self-help:

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<sup>133</sup> In his aptly titled essay “War as Supreme Form of Plutocratic Consensus,” (included in Rancière 2010), Jacques Rancière explores the undeniable success of the propagandist strategies of justification of the war in the United States and their overall ideological effect. The French thinker sees ideological conformity or “consensus” as a defining characteristic of Western societies. In this sense, for him the most efficient type of consensus is “one cemented through the fear of a society grouped around the warrior state” (Rancière, 2010: 106).

“We have the most marvelous and durable tradition in the world”, he said. “I think for a young person today it ought to have a particular appeal, because it’s all about personal choice. Nobody tells a Jew what he has to believe. You get to decide all that by yourself. You can choose your very own apps and friends, so to speak.” (F 269)

To this bland depiction of Judaism we can apply Žižek’s remarks on so-called Western Buddhism, which he describes as an ideological fetish that helps the *user* through any unsavoury act of cynicism or compromise she may be obliged to perform:

It enables you to fully participate in the frantic capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware how worthless the whole spectacle is, since what really matters is the peace of the inner Self to which you know you can always withdraw. (Žižek, 2009: 66)

One consequence of this individualistic approach to religion is of course that it can hardly lead to true forms of community since there is obviously little coincidence of interest between a member of the ruling elite associated to the Republican Party such as Howard and, say, a Queens middle-class Jew. But there is an additional and important political implication to the forms of Jewishness presented in *Freedom*, one that reflects Franzen’s own antagonism towards the ongoing identity-based political dynamics which undermines his critical authority as a white straight male intellectual. As Franzen presents it, Judaism becomes a form of empowerment since by invoking it one instantly becomes a member of a (vertical) minority community and thus acquires a better position in the politico-economic competition in American society. This is highlighted by an incident in the last part of the novel. We learn that Edgar, Patty’s younger brother and a ruined former stock-market broker, has joined an ultra-orthodox Jewish congregation whose support he relies on to feed his family, and is considering moving with his family to a settlement in Palestine funded by an American Zionist group (which of course involves dispossession of Palestinian citizens). He has thus become, out of mere material convenience, a *professional* member of a minority. It would seem, then, that Franzen is decrying what he sees as a process of social and cultural fragmentation into minority communities that threatens to end with the concept of a mainstream American culture—a process which by the same token undercuts his recognized cultural authority, being a non-minority writer—by exemplifying it with a community, that of

ultra-orthodox Jews, which he obviously dislikes. This criticism of identity politics—which might well be regarded as a counter-attack on Franzen’s part, as is suggested by the study of his reception included in this book—seems to be confirmed by Patty, who, although theoretically a Jew by birth according to Jewish tradition, dismisses any religious or cultural affiliation:

“You see,” she said, “I think, when it comes to religion, you’re only what you say you are. Nobody else can say it for you.”

“But you don’t have *any* religion.”

“Exactly my point. That was one of the few things that my parents and I agreed on, bless their hearts. That religion is stoopid.” (F 265)

Patty’s parents, the snobbish Emersons, of course belong to the upper class as well, although on a lower tier than Howard, and therefore bear their own share of guilt in Franzen’s social picture. However, their culpability is of a different type and occurs in a different realm: the private sphere of the family. To be sure, Joyce Emerson is a prominent Democrat politician in New York State, and the venality of political activity is more than once alluded to in the novel, but in that public domain the Emersons are redeemed to an extent by Joyce’s successful husband Ray and his pro-bono work as a lawyer in favour of the socially disadvantaged. What Patty, through whose vision we approach the Emersons, cannot forgive is their parenting. In this, *Freedom* repeats the model of family relationship that appears in *Strong Motion*: children neglected by withdrawn, ineffectual fathers and self-absorbed, un-motherly mothers. As a result, the Emersons are disabled as providers of what for Franzen is the fundamental communitarian sphere: the family.

### **7.3. *Aurea mediocritas*: Franzen’s middle-class ideal.**

Against this arch of reactionary and antagonistic social positions Franzen posits his own particular ideal of middle class, which is ultimately an ideal of class reconciliation, as we will see. Franzen’s proposed middle-class model is embodied, of course, by Walter and Patty Berglund, with whom the reader is invited to sympathize throughout the novel by means of traditional narrative devices such as free-indirect-

discourse explorations of consciousness by a sympathetic narrator, and, needless to say, by the emotional response elicited by their painful melodramatic vicissitudes. Like the Probsts in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and the Lamberts in *The Corrections*, the Berglunds are characterized by one circumstance that sets them apart from *regular* middle-class families like, for instance, the Paulsens in *Freedom*, namely the *legitimacy of original hardship* or, to put it another way, the exemption from the original sin of privilege. In this sense, Franzen is again noticeably consistent throughout his work: we may remember how the wealthy Martin Probst<sup>134</sup> is a self-made man who grew up in the Depression era, just like Enid and Alfred Lambert (who, as we know from interviews and Franzen's memoir *The Discomfort Zone*, are modelled to a certain extent on his own parents). All three are examples of social and economic success through reliance on traditional Protestant work ethic. In this sense, it seems clear that for Franzen the class affiliation of these characters is not the mechanic result of the deterministic workings of the economy but a circumstance loaded with legitimating moral and symbolic values that grant them a distinctive kind of dignity. These characters are then presented not as mere constituents of a class but rather as *honoured* members of a status group. This receives further confirmation by the way Walter manages to escape the poverty and oppression of his unsupportive and reactionary working-class family by means of sheer abnegation. Particularly, the fact that Walter is able to acquire a notable amount of *cultural capital*, to use Bourdieu's term, getting himself a good education and a remarkably wide range of cultural interest amidst the intellectual squalor of his family is part of the general strategy of legitimation of his political and moral stand in the novel. In fact, it may be argued that what legitimizes Walter's gentry membership is precisely this early acquired cultural capital and the distinction it entails. Interestingly, here we can also find another act of justification of Franzen's own career inscribed in the novel: Walter's commendable cultural achievement makes for a refutation of

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<sup>134</sup> It is clear that for Franzen's Weberian ideal of middle class, membership is a matter of origin, mind-set and values, rather than actual income. A certain measure of austerity and thrift seems necessary anyway to qualify. Thus, Enid Lambert's stinginess is noticeable and, more significantly, we are informed that Martin Probst's self-assigned salary amounts to \$190,000 a year, yet he keeps quirky habits such as using his finger to make sure no content of an egg is left within the shell before cooking it and is, like Alfred Lambert, a hopeless accumulator of useless junk which he cannot bring himself to discard. Walter on his part receives a similar salary from his employer Vin Haven without any visible change in his outlook. This suggests that Franzen makes a point of his own middle-class affiliation, regardless of his actual status as a highly successful novelist. It is easy, however, to relate this attitude towards social position to what Robbins calls "the paradox or utopia of rising *without* rising, of success that would somehow evade the ethical self-betrayal of assimilation into the ruling order" (Moretti, 2006: 416).

accusations of elitism sometimes addressed to intellectual circles (criticism of the kind sometimes received by Franzen himself, for example, on account of certain stylistic features in *The Corrections*, as he acknowledges in “Mr Difficult”, or probably more decisively, in the wake of his dispute with Oprah Winfrey).<sup>135</sup> The ground for such rejection of charges would be, of course, that even if the community of readers often advocated by Franzen in his essays is effectively an elite, membership is self-appointed, as Walter case shows.

A sceptic observer of Walter’s upward social mobility might argue that the novel takes it too much for granted, as his trajectory from college to lawyer for 3M and subsequent senior work for Natural Conservancy is presented as nothing but straightforward. Be it as it may, the difficult circumstances of Walter’s formation obviously make a difference for Franzen, who is, for example, keen on making clear that the wealthy neocon consultant Howard *inherited* most of his riches. Interestingly, while in classical novels of formation with a working-class hero, once the protagonist attains his new position among the bourgeois he realizes his irremediable isolation, cut-off from his fellow workers but not accepted in his new social milieu, in contrast, Franzen’s characters interiorize in unproblematic ways what Moretti has called “the comfort of civilization” (Moretti, 2000: 15), embodied, for example, in the good neighbourliness of a cosy suburb, as the Lamberts’ case show. The more culturally and politically aware first-generation middle-class members such as Walter may find, however, that there is a price to pay for such comfort, as we have seen, namely to become the object of the disturbing hostility of the lower class, and the need to flee the spiritually impoverishing, intolerable boredom of the suburb.

#### **7.4. Untying the knot of ideology: salvation and reconciliation.**

Status-group legitimacy in terms of *honourable* origin of wealth (according to Franzen’s own standard), however, is only one part of the ideal of middle class proposed by the novel. Equally important is a certain measure of ideological

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<sup>135</sup> As Franzen recounts in “Mr Difficult”, on account of using certain “fancy words and phrases” like “electro-pointillist Santa Claus faces” in his third novel, a reader accused him in a letter of writing for “the elite of New York, the elite who are beautiful, thin, anorexic, neurotic, sophisticated, don’t smoke, have abortions tri-yearly, are antiseptic, live in lofts or penthouses, this superior species of humanity who read *Harper’s or New Yorker*”. The coincidences with the accusations often directed at the liberal gentry from working-class quarters mentioned above are evident.

enlightenment, which includes, of course, environmental awareness. It would seem, in fact, that Franzen is implying that ideological awareness is part of the scientific approach to reform he defends. This is something, in any case, that disqualifies the rural, uneducated families led by Coyle Mathis, whose new income, now that they are employed by LBI in its body-armour plant, enables them to instantly and effortlessly join the middle class. In the drunken-like, unmistakably Franzenesque rant—discussed above—which Walter addresses to them the novelist seems to vent his exasperation with a middle class that he sees as completely abducted by consumerism—an ideology which consecrates an environmentally unsustainable way of life that is ravaging the planet. Here, the Franzen of *Strong Motion*, the slightly misanthropist practitioner of systemic, global critique reappears:

Welcome to the middle class! That's what I want to say ... because it's a wonderful thing, our American middle class. It's the mainstay of economies all around the globe! ... And now that you've got these jobs at this body-armor plant", he continued, "you're going to be able to participate in those economies. You, too, can help denude every last scrap of native habitat in Asia, Africa, and South America! You, too, can buy six-foot-wide plasma TV screens that consume unbelievable amounts of energy, even when they are not turned on! ... It's a perfect system, because as long as you've got your six-foot-wide plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don't have to think about any of the consequences. You can watch *Survivor: Indonesia* till there's no more Indonesia! (F 483)

The allusion to television in Walter's irate speech reminds us that in previous novels Franzen has shown a remarkable awareness of the conforming effect of the ideological output produced by the media. Most notably, in *Strong Motion* the unremitting use of clichés by the media manages to deactivate the politically destabilizing potential of the earthquake. In the last chapter of *Freedom* there's an overview image of the newly built Canterbridge Estates by what used to be the relatively unspoiled Nameless Lake, representative of the unstoppable exurban expansion that is part of Jameson's "eclipse of nature", which Franzen has recurrently deplored.<sup>136</sup> Significantly, Franzen shows us through the windows of each house the

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<sup>136</sup> Walter's retirement in search of solitude to his modest dwelling by a small lake; his living, quite literally, in contemplation of nature; his conflicts with neighbours he sees as alienated by the uses of

flickering of large TV screens telling their viewers “whatever the world believed was happening to it tonight” (F 557). It is in contact with this un-enlightened middle class, environmentally unfriendly, ideologically alienated by consumerist culture—a middle class, last but not least, whose free-ranging cats are murdering American songbirds, that Walter’s innate misanthropy reaches a peak. At this point, the novel’s net of antagonisms gets to a deadlock. The system, symbolized by American suburban expansion, reveals itself as intractable again, immune to enlightenment and change. This is the kind of social impasse that we may observe in Franzen’s early novels, especially in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and would have surely meant the collapse of the novel’s plot, at the hands of the impossibly non-compliant determinism inherent to realism, were it not for the essentially novelistic message of reconciliation brought by rescuing Patty, which is a key element in the ideological message of the novel. A message, we shall see, that is all but inherent to the romance-like form chosen by Franzen. In any case, in sight of the romantic excess of the memorable *mise-en-scène* of Patty and Walter’s reconciliation, with the former determined to let herself die in the cold unless she is rescued by the very person she is actually rescuing from dejection, we may remember with Jameson the liberating effects of romance on the stifling confinement to the existent which is characteristic of realism. There is in romance a principle of transformation of reality that transcends realism’s commitment to what is (Jameson, 2002: 90-91). From the point of view of Laclau and Mouffe we could argue that, if antagonism represents the experience of the limits of the social, of its ultimate impossibility (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 84), that is one impossibility which may be overrun by the magic of melodrama.

For a contrast, if we look back at Franzen’s first novel we may notice that in true realistic logic, that is to say, in absence of the salvational perspectives brought by romance or melodrama, a conspiracy intending to radically subvert the status quo of an American city cannot but fail leaving behind a suffocating sense of despair at an oppressive system. This is obviously not the feeling evoked by *Freedom*, whose ending carefully works to leave each character—and reader—therapeutically satisfied. Indeed,

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society; all this cannot but recall Thoreau’s account of his life by Walden’s pond (1854), a classic reminder of the individual’s urge, so often told by American literature, to leave behind a society which is seen as irremediably corrupt—an impulse that is inevitably associated to misanthropy. Walter’s solitude, however, besides being made impossible by exurban expansion has a contemporary quality to it, as his cottage is equipped with a connection to the internet.

a simple look at the plot of the novel reveals the important presence of melodramatic elements. This is acknowledged by Patty in her autobiographic text, where she refers to the vital trajectory of *Freedom*'s main characters as "some bizarre pathological sequence of events." As she rightly wonders, "What were the chances of all that happening?" (F 139) Chances are certainly few, but as in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, or the humblest of soap operas, the constantly high emotional temperature enhances suspension of disbelief and we are carried away by the sheer momentum of events in what we might describe in Barthes' terms as a heavily *kernel-driven* narrative. It has already been discussed in this study how, according to Brooks, melodrama infused the realist novel with "a sense of memorability and significance" (Brooks, 1976: 13) of which the novel was in need. After all, as Brooks persuasively puts it, melodrama belongs to those narrative "modes which insist that reality can be exciting, can be equal to the demands of the imagination" (Brooks, 1976: 6). The excitement of theatricality notwithstanding, perhaps the greatest service paid to *Freedom* by its melodramatic component is related to its structural configuration. In absence of conspiracies to set a plot in motion and bring it to its ultimate consequences, melodrama can be a convenient generator of narrative. Of particular importance, to this effect, is its capacity to provide meaningful, satisfying—even if often catastrophic—closure. In Jameson's words: "emptied of its content and traditional meaning, melodrama ... is also an empty form, which survives to supply the structure of narrative and in particular that by which it can be set in motion and that with which it can find closure" (Jameson, 2013: 160). We should note, nevertheless, that while melodrama—which in any case is, as we have seen, a recognizable component of the nineteenth-century novel as well—may in a way compensate for the ontological limitations of realism, it also involves its own rigidities, as most generic discourse does. In fact, for Moretti melodrama is the necessary, stabilizing counterbalance to the characteristic irony which he sees as consubstantial to the novel and which always threatens to corrode and undermine its own discourse (Moretti: 2000: 99).

### **7.5. Keeping it in the family.**

To complete Franzen's implicit proposal for social reconciliation we should also notice that if Walter leaves behind the reactionary, alienated working class, in a

corresponding move Patty cuts off her ties with the condescending and morally compromised upper-class Emersons, renouncing material benefits to carve the decencies of middle-class life from scratch with Walter. In this way, by means of *déclassement* the Berglunds become a kind of new social synthesis that carries within itself the potentiality for social reconciliation, a view consistent with Moretti's claim that "the novel is founded on the assumption that social relationships are representable through the filter of *personalization*" (Moretti, 2000: 54). One of the tenets of this study is Jameson's claim that all narrative is the manifestation of a political unconscious in the sense that it tries to present a symbolic resolution of an unsolvable social problem (Jameson 2002). A similar case is made by Moretti regarding the social function of the novel. In his words,

Symbolic forms are fundamentally problem-solving devices: ... they are the means through which the cultural tensions and paradoxes produced by social conflict and historical change are disentangled (or at least reduced). Here lies the so-called social function of literature, with its so-called aesthetic pleasure: solving problems is useful and sweet. (Moretti, 2000: 243-244)

We have already stated that Franzen's wager, from *Strong Motion* on, is a displacement of political reformist concerns by individual stories of self-amelioration, a retreat from a hopeless public sphere into the private world of the family, where salvation—albeit certainly not without suffering and due expiatory penance—is still possible. This may seem a grim prospect for a reformist at first sight but it shows an evident Utopian drive in the sense Jameson uses the term. If, after all the misery and pain inflicted, Walter and Patty, Chip Lambert and his parents, Louis Holland and Renée Seitchek may all reconcile, surely there might still be some hope for us all at the end of the day. It should be noted that the model of reconciliation proposed by the novel is not one that solves the causes of the conflict, in the familial as in the social realm, but rather one that teaches us to live with them. The conflict between Patty and Walter is the inevitable consequence of her contradictory love for both him and Richard Katz. Patty's infidelity cannot be made not to have happened and innocence cannot be restored, but, as the novel shows, one should be able to move on and leave some of the experienced suffering behind. In the same way, the causes for the social and ideological antagonisms described in the novel are not really going away, as they are inherent to the capitalist system, but there is always the possibility of mitigation, gradual improvement

or damage control, those archetypal liberal goals.<sup>137</sup> In displacing conflicts from the social sphere to the familial then Franzen is opening up a space in which (deplored) socio-historical facts are “no longer quite so irreparable, no longer quite so definitive”, to quote Jameson in his discussion of Balzac’s *La Vielle Fille* (Jameson, 2002: 151). Needless to say, this is not to imply that Franzen envisages family as some Arcadian realm in any way. On the contrary, for the novelist the communities of family and lovers are veritable battlefields fraught with horrors whose exploration Franzen presents as his fiction’s overt objective. However, they seem to be the only realms where actual truth can be generated and, thanks to the power of romance, they form the sphere where redemption is always possible.

It is obvious that this kind of arrangement does not constitute a synthesis in any way, but rather a *compromise*, which is, according to Moretti, “the novel’s most celebrated theme” (Moretti, 2000: 10). It is this which the *Bildungsroman*-like form employed by Franzen encourages us to pursue. As Moretti puts it, in this favouring of compromise the classic novel of formation shows its adaptation, as a kind of narrative embodiment of the reality principle, to a modern bourgeois culture that is characterized by ideological pliancy and contradiction:

When we remember that the *Bildungsroman*—the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization—is also the most *contradictory* of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the interiorization of a contradiction. The next step being not to ‘solve’ the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival. (Moretti, 2000: 10)

Franzen is then, to use Žižek’s expression, translating “a historical Real in terms of a family narrative”, an ideological operation whereby “the conflict of larger social forces (classes and so forth) is framed into the coordinates of a family drama” (Žižek, 2008: 52). This undertaking ultimately implies proposing the family as a social model. Such ideological strategy, of course, is hardly new in the history of the novel. As Moretti shows, in the classical *Bildungsroman* the family is often the metaphor for a

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<sup>137</sup> As Lalitha remarks to the more radical Richard, “we’re a pragmatic organization. We’re not trying to overthrow the whole system, we’re just trying to mitigate. We’re trying to help the cultural conversation catch up with the crisis before it’s too late” (F 362).

possible social pact. In his words, “it is not a question of retreating within the family to pursue there those ends which the public sphere tends to frustrate, but of irradiating outside the family that notion of inner harmony and trustful acceptance of bonds that are its most salient features” (2000: 24). The articulation of an adequate mechanism of social advancement, together with the restoration of social harmony, were, as Moretti has argued, recurrent objectives of the classic nineteenth-century novel, since both novelists and their audience were eager to see the healing of the breaches brought about by the French Revolution and its aftermath. As the Italian critic puts it, “the classical *Bildungsroman* narrates ‘how the French Revolution could have been avoided’” (2000: 64). In a similar way, once its ideal of enlightened, progressive middle class has been asserted, at the end of *Freedom* movements of conciliation abound. Walter reconciles with his son, with his working-class brothers, and even, thanks to Patty’s help, with his *regular* middle-class neighbours in the Canterbridge Estates (the ones previously presented as alienated cat-owners and TV-viewers), in whom he has instilled the seed of environmental consciousness granting them access to the bird sanctuary into which he turns his property by the lake. Even reconciliation with his former best friend Richard Katz is suggested. On her part, Patty makes peace with her son Joey, with her parents and even sets about assuaging the financial disputes within the Emerson family. Needless to say, the reconciliation of Walter and Patty after their estrangement is the true event of the novel, the cathartic culmination towards which it is structurally directed. This rhetorical strategy corresponds to the type of narrative textual configuration which Moretti, following Yuri Lotman, describes as “classification principle”. As the Italian theorist argues, although in varying proportions, both the classification principle and a transformation principle are present in all narratives, and the pre-eminence of one over the other has important ideological implications. In his words:

Where classification is strongest—as in the English ‘family romance’ and in the classical *Bildungsroman*—narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable ... This teleological rhetoric—the meaning of events lies in their finality—is the narrative equivalent of Hegelian thought, with which it shares a strong

*normative* vocation: events acquire meaning when they led to *one* ending and one only. (Moretti, 2000: 7)

All these acts of reconciliation in *Freedom*, among others, are actantial or proairetic schemata—to use Greimas' and Barthes' terms respectively—inherited from the classic nineteenth-century novel and as such, as Jameson has shown, constitute narrative *ideologemes* that continue to emit their ideological message “like a shell or exoskeleton ... long after the extinction of his host”, to use the American critic's memorable phrase (Jameson, 2002: 137).<sup>138</sup> In a way then, if for Moretti much of the nineteenth-century novel tries to convey the notion that the revolution never took place, it may be argued that *Freedom* evinces a longing for a return to the height of the liberal consensus some forty years ago, that is, as if the culture wars had never taken place. This is, of course, a wish for reconciliation in one's own terms.

There can be little doubt that an aspiration as the one described above has little use for the classic Marxist vision of society divided into antagonistic classes created by the blind forces of the economic base and vying for hegemony. In contrast, Weber's vision of society structured by different status groups whose respective ideological stance may be assessed on intellectual, moral and even *aesthetic* grounds becomes a valuable support for Franzen's implicit Utopian vision: a harmonic, unequal but organic society where an enlightened elite, self-appointed and meritocratic, rationally and benevolently leads the way towards the common good. This is a kind of communitarian potential that Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein seem to discern in Weber's theory:

A status group-structuring of the distribution of power, because the constituent groups are arrayed honorifically by rank, confers on each other more or less prestige and pride, and through that, the solidarity and capacity to act collectively in relation with one another. A class structuring of this distribution of power, in contrast, because of the market principle—which in its operations for Weber, either eliminates all consideration of honor from its relations or is constrained in its working by them—provides its constituent classes with no necessary solidarity in their relations with one another, and hence no necessary capacity for collective action in or on this relations, In short ... status groups are

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<sup>138</sup> As we discussed in our introduction, Jameson's insight was prefigured by Macherey (1989, 41-42) who in turn seems to follow Bakhtin's view of the linguistic sign as ideologically charged.

constituents of and therefore carriers of a moral order, in Durkheim's sense. Classes are not. (Arrighi et al, 1989: 17)

## 7.6. The politics of environmentalism.

After examining the novel's general ideological stance, it is time to analyse in depth its professed political commitment, namely ecology. Environmental concerns are a constant in Franzen's novels and non-fiction. They are especially prominent in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* and, as we have seen, in both novels environmental damage is very precisely shown to be the consequence of socio-economic processes characteristic of late capitalism. In this way, in Franzen's first novel, the unstoppable exurban expansion of concrete—illustrated with images of barrenness and allusions to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*—stands for the irresistible broadening of a mode of production that has come to colonize virtually the whole world. As I have argued in previous chapters following Jameson, the extension of the capitalist system—its *naturalization*—has been accompanied by a corresponding abolition of Nature, which can no longer stand for that reservoir of difference, that wholly Other to capitalism it has traditionally constituted. In this novel we can already observe Franzen's obvious penchant for natural spaces from which human presence has been banned, which evinces both a longing for an Outside to capitalism where forms of true community may be viable, and an undeniable measure of misanthropy (as Walter acknowledges, “My problem is I don't like people enough ... I don't really believe they can change” [F 495]). Migratory songbirds, the central concern of Walter's environmental project and a well-nigh obsessive interest for Franzen himself, make appearance in Franzen's first novel. It is hard not to attribute a symbolic quality in Franzen's fiction to these creatures that traverse the planet according to natural rhythms of their own, but whose proper natural space is being obliterated by human expansion.<sup>139</sup>

*Strong Motion* is, as we have seen, a novel that already contains most of the issues that will become central in Franzen's succeeding work. One of these concerns is

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<sup>139</sup> Franzen indefatigable dedication to bird watching is documented in “My Bird Problem”, included in his memoir *The Discomfort Zone* (2006). In “The Ugly Mediterranean”, included in *Farther Away* (2012), the novelist recounts his activism in favour of migratory songbirds in Cyprus.

ecology. Environmentalist discourse, which was mostly implied in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, becomes explicit in Franzen's second novel and, significantly, appears in discursive digressions including Marxist-influenced considerations about the concentration of wealth and its global circulation. That is, ecology and economy appear as indissolubly linked. In addition, *Strong Motion* is conspicuously constructed around a central environmental symbol: the injection well through which the chemical giant Sweeting-Aldren secretly pumps toxic waste into the earth. Subsequently, whereas in *The Corrections* environmental preoccupations recede to the background, in *Freedom* they become, at least on a conscious level, the overriding political issue.

This environmental consciousness in *Freedom* is represented by Walter (who is introduced in the novel's first page as "greener than Greenpeace") and his young assistant—and eventually also lover—from Bengali origin, Lalitha. Their conservationist project, developed in quite a Faustian way thanks to the copious funding of a questionable sponsor, the aforementioned energy magnate Vin Haven, is twofold. In the first place it involves the creation of a stronghold for a relatively endangered migratory songbird, the cerulean warbler. Here the motif of the creation of a pure, secluded natural space devoid of any human presence reappears. The misanthropic hints of such aspiration are highlighted by the fact that the scheme requires the displacement of dozens of poor rural families—the ones led by Coyle Mathis—from their ancestral homes in a backward West Virginian county. The classist implications of the move are so obvious that we are tempted to interpret it as ironic, that is, as an acerbic criticism of the kind of liberal-progressive approach to social problems which is disabled by its coldly intellectual character and its seemingly unbridgeable psychological distance from the actual people on which it is to act—a political stance which ultimately only leads to lower and working-class people embracing all the more readily the ideological decoys offered by the ruling class (just as Mathis' people are bound to become supporters of the Republican-biased politico-corporate complex that will employ them). Walter's project cannot but raise the question as to why the possibility of promoting sustainable, *songbird-friendly* development for that community is never even considered. Again, as in the initial passing allusion to poor black people intruding into the banalities of Ramsey Hill's gentrifiers, it is evoked the possibility of a social and political criticism which would attain real depth insofar as it would be first and foremost a piece of *self-criticism*. However, the novel is clear in its sympathies and these are granted to Walter

and Lalitha not only with the traditional resources of the classic realist novel, such as point of view or exploration of consciousness, but also with the full power of melodrama's capacity for eliciting the emotional identification of the reader.

The second part of Walter and Lalitha's environmental scheme is a campaign to raise awareness of the need for global population control, on account of overpopulation being the most acute environmental threat to the planet. According to the two campaigners, since the 1970s, the time when that issue was allegedly an assumed part of the political debate, support for the cause of population control has all but disappeared, in what Walter regards as another manifestation of the culture war through which the political Right has eroded liberal influence:

"In my own way," Walter said, "I guess it was part of a larger popular shift that was happening in the eighties and nineties. Overpopulation was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies, with Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome, and ZPG. And then suddenly it was gone. It became just unmentionable." (F 220)<sup>140</sup>

A glimpse at the intellectual references from the late 1960s and 1970s evoked by Walter reveals that they are characterized again by unpleasant detachment and all but entomologist-like indifference to the actual people concerned.<sup>141</sup> Evidently aware of this, Franzen provides a *humane* root to Lalitha's unmovable commitment to the cause: her belief developed as a result of the shock of the vision of overpopulated Calcutta's squalor as a teenager (F 315). The justification mimics Paul Ehrlich's at the beginning of his discredited catastrophist classic *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968: 1) and

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<sup>140</sup> Paul Ehrlich, co-founder of the Zero Population Growth organization, is an entomologist and professor of population studies. He is the author of the best-selling—and much criticized—*The Population Bomb* (1968), in which he strongly advocates governmental intervention into population control. In that volume, Ehrlich makes a series of catastrophist predictions regarding overpopulation which have proved to be wrong. Like Walter in the novel, in his analysis Ehrlich completely disregards questions of social inequality or the relations of production.

<sup>141</sup> When the question of population control takes a general dimension and is grasped from an inter-class perspective in abstraction of the actual, singular social circumstances of the people concerned, it seems to be inevitably associated to misanthropy and classism: it is always the mob that persists in its insensible proliferation. This was certainly the case with Malthus, Walter's somewhat embarrassing forbear in his preoccupation: "A mob, which is generally the growth of a redundant population goaded by resentment for real sufferings, but totally ignorant of the quarter from which they originate, is of all monsters the most fatal to freedom. It fosters a prevailing tyranny, and engenders one where it was not; and though, in its dreadful fits of resentment, it appears occasionally to devour its unsightly offspring; yet no sooner is the horrid deed committed, than, however unwilling it may be to propagate such a breed, it immediately groans with a new birth" (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, IV, VI, 3).

inevitably reads as *ad hoc*. However, in spite of Walter and Lalitha's passionate commitment, Franzen's endorsement of Ehrlich's views seems unlikely. Given that in *Strong Motion* Franzen draws heavily upon the respectable work of the environmental historian William Cronon, it is difficult indeed to explain the poor quality of Walter's theoretical equipment in this particular issue, unless it is because Franzen does intend to portray Walter and Lalitha as "crackpots", to use his frequent expression. Thus, their exalted, narrow-minded approach contrasts with the author's more comprehensive and tolerant vision. This certainly would justify the novel's subsequent sobering course of events understood as a manifestation of Franzen's currently more moderate stand. By the end of the novel, Walter's vision is both wider and more temperate. To be sure he is—thanks to Patty's quintessentially novelistic intervention, which is to say, thanks to the sympathy-enhancing properties of the novelistic form—more sympathetic and less prone to be judgemental. The implication here is that, until the end of the novel, the author is wiser and less radical than his characters because he has already been through what his characters have to endure. Any reader acquainted to the *Harper's* essay will recognize the striking similarity of concerns and pathos between Walter and the Franzen of the early nineties as described by the novelist himself—social disintegration and entropy, erosion of the public sphere, irrelevance of art, commercialization of culture, loss of community:

"This was what was keeping me awake at night," Walter said. "This fragmentation. Because it's the same problem everywhere. It's like the internet, or cable TV—There's never any center, no communal agreement, there's just a trillion bits of distracting noise. We can't never sit down and have any kind of sustained conversation. All the real things, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce about like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest random stimuli. (F 218)

This is probably the novel's fundamental contribution to Franzen's own narrative of conversion. The parallelism of Walter's turmoil with Franzen's avowed state of dejection and despair during the early 1990s is evident:

He was aware, of course, that it was wrong to feel this way ... He was aware of the intimate connection between anger and depression, aware that it was mentally unhealthy to be so exclusively obsessed with apocalyptic scenarios,

aware of how, in his case, the obsession was feeding on frustration with his wife and disappointment with his son. (F 315)

The words used by Franzen to describe himself during the early nineties as “a very angry and theory-minded person” (Franzen, 2002: 4) can easily apply to Walter. As Richard Katz puts it, Walter is “an *angry crank*” (F 218). This (which, incidentally, is a variation on the well-known novelistic theme of the revolutionary whose ideological ardour derives from frustration and resentment, one of realism’s naturalization strategies of Utopian impulses analysed by Jameson) relates the novel to *Strong Motion* as well, where anger and its concomitant depression are key concerns, as illustrated by the character of Louis Holland. In any case, as Franzen confesses in the *Harper’s* essay, “If you are depressed you will sooner or later surrender and say: I just don’t want to feel so bad anymore” (2002: 93). Then, if we are to believe Franzen’s metanarrative, the novelist, for the sake of the continuity of his work, which seemed in great peril, and ultimately for the sake of his own sanity, abandoned postmodernism’s more radical approaches to the novelistic form, together with his previous, also radical pretensions of large scale, systemic social critique. In a way, with this act a Freudian reality principle asserted itself. What Franzen’s metanarrative and Walter’s story share is that confronted with the impossibility of social amelioration, the only viable alternative they envisage is self-betterment to thus achieve some kind of emotional redemption. In other words, salvation can only be individual. Correspondingly, Walter abandons his grand environmentalist (that is, *political*) schemes to settle for a small scale, local actuation (the modest bird shelter into which he turns his house by the lake), which furthermore at the end of the novel he leaves behind to try and regain domestic, everyday happiness in the domain of the family. The move, like Franzen’s, is presented as legitimized by the intensity of the pain he has hitherto endured. Suffering (and the basic human necessity, embodied by the Ego, to stop suffering) is indeed a fundamental source of legitimacy in Franzen’s work. It justifies Walter’s abandonment of his grand-scale environmentalist approach in *Freedom* as well as Franzen’s notorious stylistic and political disavowal within the frame of the narrative the novelist has devised for himself. The suffering of a character is, after all, a basic resource to elicit sympathy and emotional identification in the audience of any narrative. And pain, meticulously described by the omniscient narrator is, of course what ultimately ennobles the Berglunds’ tale of social and emotional dysfunction. In the study of Franzen’s reception

included in this book it is shown how in her 2003 essay Toal already identifies Franzen's use of depression as a source of legitimation for his abandonment of the perspective of progressive social reform (Toal, 2003: 314). Indeed, it is safe to argue that Franzen has sought legitimation in unhappiness and pain, both for his characters as for himself, all the way from *Strong Motion* and the *Harper's* essay through his recent commencement address at Kenyon College entitled "Pain Won't Kill You" (Franzen 2012).<sup>142</sup>

But Franzen's self-justification strategy in *Freedom* is not only deployed through Walter's experience: an important part is played by Joey's own narrative. In this sense, it may be argued that if Walter and Patty's story shows important elements derived from the *Bildungsroman's* tradition, Joey's subplot constitutes a novella of formation in its own right. Joey's narrative has a clear antecedent in Franzen's previous novel, as there is an evident parallelism between Joey's story and that of Chip Lambert, whose life trajectory already constitutes the main expression of Franzen's metanarrative in *The Corrections*. Both characters are defined by their initial anti-parental revolt; both achieve an economic position above their respective merit through the intervention of unsavoury mentors who back their participation in a dishonest enterprise. The correlate is also noticeable in the salvational character of the account of their moral evolution: both characters undergo a process of self-degradation which is the result of their selfish disposition until they hit the bottom in catastrophic failure. They are subsequently redeemed by self-discovery and assumption of their actual selves, which involves letting go of externally-imposed, alien narratives and a commitment to the other within the realms of family and the "two-person world" (F 476) of a community of lovers. In

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<sup>142</sup> In fact, Franzen has used unhappiness as a legitimation strategy so often that we may well consider him an apologist of pain. We shall briefly mention that in the *Harper's* essay, Franzen advocates a "tragic realism," characterized by its concern with a primordial, inescapable existential pain that he refers to as "the Ache." As we have discussed in the corresponding chapter, in *Strong Motion* depression and anger are central concerns and are even granted an oppositional import when a depressed Louis Holland clings to his inner "lump of sorrow", since "[f]or the moment, this sorrow was the only thing he had that indicated there might be more to the world than the piggishness and stupidity and injustice which every day were extending their hegemony" (SM 503). In the aforementioned commencement address, Franzen argues that "[w]hen you consider the alternative—an anesthetized dream of self-sufficiency, abetted by technology—pain emerges as the natural product and natural indicator of being alive in a resistant world" (Franzen, 2012: 11). One of the arguments whereby unhappiness affords Franzen legitimation is that for him it leads to the creation of better art. For example, we may compare the dark, tormented artist Richard Katz, who turns "his ungratified desire into art" (F 349), with the tepidness of the younger and better-adjusted Conor Oberst. There is also a measure of intergenerational grudge: As the novel informs us, "his [Richard's] perception of the world as a hostile adversary, worthy of his anger—had made him more interesting than these young paragons of self-esteem" (F 348).

the case of Joey, the quasi-allegorical move includes renouncing the flashy but insubstantial Jenna, assuming his commitment to his unsophisticated girlfriend Connie, and returning to his so-far disdained family. Last but not least, he exchanges his lucrative but immoral work as a contractor in Iraq by a community-favourable and environmentally friendly work as a broker of shade-grown coffee, as a final token of the way in which, as in a classical *Bildungsroman*, his coming of age is associated to his true and honourable social integration. The comic context of the scene notwithstanding, Joey's self-discovery is also presented as a kind of epiphany:

He could see this person so clearly, it was like standing outside himself. He was the person who'd handled his own shit to get his wedding ring back. This wasn't the person he'd thought he was, or would have chosen to be if he'd been free to choose, but there was something comforting and liberating about being an actual definite someone, rather than a collection of contradictory potential someones. (F 432)

Here we remember that Franzen's metanarrative is also markedly salvational: after a long period of disorientation and ever deeper dejection that results from following self-imposed corrupt and alien literary ways, there is an epiphany-like moment in which the novelist rethinks the nature of his literary calling and decides to listen to his own true self as a writer. Common to Franzen's salvational narratives (those of his characters and his own) is the crucial end of self-deception. Joey stops pretending he can be a "bad news" character, that is, ruthless in business and in his dealing with women, like some of his successful young Republican acquaintances, and must settle for his actually being an ordinary decent person. Chip, whose most evident show of self-deception is his endless retouching of his unviable film script, stops postponing the dreaded coming to terms with the moral contradictions that beset him. Walter is forced to realize the unbearable (though sensed) truth about his marriage, and he must confront the real outcome of his collaboration with Vince Haven. In the same way, according to Franzen's metanarrative, after writing his second novel there is a time when he is unable to continue pretending he is a middle-aged postmodernist writer, the mask that he has donned to avoid confronting the deep personal conflicts that afflict him. A realm of painful personal experience from which, however, its truest writing will flow once the mask has been shed.

The parallelism between the characters of Chip and Joey is also noticeable at another structural level: both are used in order to illustrate an important critical point that Franzen wishes to make. Chip is sent to Lithuania so that *The Corrections* may show from the field the deleterious effects of unchecked capitalism and economic globalization. Joey becomes a Young Republican so that we may observe from within the stark hypocrisy of the neocon ideologists and the ruthless pursuit of self-benefit of the Republican elite. Subsequently, he becomes a contractor for the U.S. military so that we can observe from the inside the true character of American intervention in Iraq: a colossal scramble for spoils and profit, such as described by Naomi Klein (2004).<sup>143</sup> Joey's story thus is one of the novel's entry points for world history in its proper domain of everyday life—a universal history which, according to Moretti is “funneled” and reshaped through the viewpoint of everyday life to amplify and enrich the life of the individual, or what Agnes Heller calls “particularity” (Moretti, 2000: 35).

### **7.7. The elephant in the room.**

There is another important aspect of Walter's environmentalist commitment that requires discussion here, namely the degree to which it displaces other social concerns. This is especially conspicuous regarding his concern with overpopulation, which Walter heatedly presents as a kind of source of all evils, while on the other hand population control is proposed as a universal instrument of damage mitigation:

Think about how crowded the exurbs are already, think about the traffic and the sprawl and the environmental degradation and the dependence on foreign oil ... And then think about global carbon emissions, and genocide and famine in Africa, and the radicalized dead-end underclass in the Arab world, and overfishing the oceans, illegal Israeli settlements, the Han Chinese overrunning

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<sup>143</sup> Some critics, such as Shivani (2011) have criticized the lack of verisimilitude involved in the nineteen-year-old Joey managing a \$900,000 subcontract with the military. However, as Naomi Klein shows in a 2004 field report for *Harper's* which Franzen is likely to have had knowledge of, similar situations were frequent in occupied Baghdad: “The Green Zone ... was filled with Young Republicans straight from the Heritage Foundation, all of them given responsibility they could never have dreamed of receiving at home. Jay Hallen, a twenty-four-year-old who had applied for a job at the White House was put in charge of launching Baghdad's new stock exchange. Scott Erwin, a twenty-one-year-old former intern to Dick Cheney, reported in an e-mail home that ‘I'm assisting the Iraqis in the management of finances and budgeting for the domestic security forces’. The college senior's favorite job before this one? ‘My time as an ice-scream truck driver’” (Klein, 2004: 46).

Tibet, a hundred million poor people in nuclear Pakistan: there's hardly a problem in the world that wouldn't be solved or at least tremendously alleviated by fewer people ... Any little things we might do now to try to save some nature and preserve some kind of quality of life are going to get overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, because people can change their consumption habits—it takes time and effort, but it can be done—but if the population keeps increasing, nothing else we do is going to matter. And yet *nobody* is talking about the matter publicly. It's the elephant in the room, and it's killing us. (F 220)

Overpopulation may well be the elephant in the room of the public debate nowadays, but, as this excerpt shows, there is a voluminous bulk negatively defined at the heart of Walter's discourse too, namely the absence of any reference whatsoever to social emancipation, neither regarding its necessity nor its conditions of possibility or potentiality. In the novel, the politically-enlightened, ideologically-aware Walter takes existing social and political structures for granted and never gives a thought to issues of social inequality, never considers crucial questions such as the current relations of production, nor even to weigh their environmental consequences. Certainly, we should be wary when assessing Franzen's actual endorsement of Walter's views. We know that for the most part of the novel Franzen emphasizes the exalted elements in Walter's discourse only to demand assent from the audience when this discourse loses its radical edge. Franzen is interested in making his characters appear narrow-minded so as to highlight his own enlarged, sympathetic vision and in doing so he is inscribing an inescapable element of ideological ambiguity in the novel. However, it is Franzen who is using Walter as a mirror and an instrument of self-justification and therefore it seems reasonable to infer a substantial degree of sanction to Walter's stand. In any case, we already know that Franzen's novels tend to deny the possibility of collective emancipatory action (although in some cases, like in the first two novels, the possibility is first suggestively evoked and then cancelled), but in *Freedom* its absence is made more patent by the sheer elaborateness of Walter's scheme, and the cumbersome arguments he has to bring to bear to support it. Indeed, what Franzen's procedure recalls more than anything here is the well-known psycholinguistic strategies of avoidance and substitution. As he recounts in the *Harper's* essay, his head "had been turned by Marxism" in college (Franzen, 2002: 61-62), but now he seems at pains to conceal it. In this sense, it is not difficult to see Walter's environmentalist passion as part of a

fetishistic disavowal, a kind of *Verleugnung* involving, to use Žižek's words, "the elevation into the principal Cause of some fetishistic ersatz of the class struggle as 'the last thing which we see' prior to confronting the class antagonism" (Žižek, 2008: 339).<sup>144</sup> Relatedly, this treatment of a fetishized environmentalism is consistent with Jameson's unmasking of the philanthropic drive as a deactivation of Utopian impulses, discussed above. Here we are once again reminded of Macherey's injunction to the critic to explore not what is in the object of study but rather that which is not: "the silences, the denials and the resistance in the object—not that compliant implied discourse which offers itself to discovery, but that condition which makes the work possible, which precedes the work so absolutely that it cannot be found in the work" (Macherey, 1989: 150). From this point of view we can consider class struggle and emancipatory fight in the novel as the "*absence* without which it would not exist" (Macherey, 1989: 85).

At times, the conversion of social issues into environmental problems is so obvious that it would look ironic—and as such ambiguous—if, once again, the ironic interpretation were not against the overall rhetorical structure of the novel. Thus, strikingly enough, in the *Harper's* essay Franzen complains about social and cultural fragmentation in the United States, and roughly fifteen years later Walter bemoans the fragmentation of the habitat of songbirds in *Freedom*:

I wasn't accomplishing anything systemic in Minnesota. We were just gathering little bits of disconnected prettiness. There are approximately six hundred breeding bird species in North America, and maybe a third of them are getting clobbered by fragmentation. Vin's idea was that if two hundred really rich people would each pick up one species, and try to stop the fragmentation of their strongholds, we might be able to save them all. (F 218)

Note, incidentally, once again the eulogy of philanthropy, the idea of progressive change as necessarily promoted by a social or cultural elite. In contrast, the events organized by Free Space, the activist movement for population control created by

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<sup>144</sup> We find a measure of the coldly intellectual way in which Franzen handles classic concepts derived from the Marxist tradition in the passage where Walter and his helpers try to develop a strategy for their activist organization (F 361). There, Richard Katz—always the most radical—openly discusses capitalism itself as the ultimate obstacle for population control without any mention whatsoever to any social issues produced by the relations of production.

Walter and Lalitha, soon develop into anarchic, menacing concentrations of radicals, “the sort of discontents who hit the streets in ski masks to riot against the WTO” (F 494). In good liberal fashion, Walter laments the current national mood of political anger that shows up in meetings sponsored by Free Space: “His father had been enraged like that, of course, but in a much more liberal era. And the conservative rage had engendered a left-wing counter-rage that practically scorched off his eyebrows at the Free-Space events in Los Angeles and San Francisco” (F 493). The main Free Space gathering in West Virginia turns into an uncontrollable, muddy mixture of Woodstock festival and anti-globalization riot, the crowd certainly closer to an angry mob than to a Negrian *multitude*. As a horrified Lalitha tells Walter, “everybody’s stoned and spread out over ten acres, and there’s no leadership, it’s totally amorphous” (F 500). For Hardt and Negri the multitude is the emerging new model of de-centred, non-hierarchical and pluralistic configuration of singularities acting in common. Although they never provide a tight definition of it, in the trilogy beginning with *Empire* (2000) Hardt and Negri rely heavily on this concept derived from Spinoza’s philosophy. For these theorists, the multitude has replaced older socio-political groups such as the working class or the proletariat as the main element of democratic resistance in a contemporary global system which they call Empire. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri refer to the incomprehension or even downright rejection that contemporary spontaneous, horizontal movements of protest tend to elicit in the mainstream Left, usually more interested in a nostalgic revival of older communitarian institutions—a response that is evidently shared by Lalitha and Walter:

Even when something that resembles the people does emerge in the social scene in the United states, Europe and elsewhere, it appears to the leaders of the institutional Left as something deformed and threatening. The new movements that have arisen in the last decades—from the queer politics of ACT-UP and Queer Nation to the globalization demonstrations at Seattle and Genoa—are incomprehensible and threatening to them, and thus monstrous. (Hardt and Negri, 2005: 191-192)

In any case, the picture of deranged progressive action presented by *Freedom* brings to mind the fact that previous depictions of activism in Franzen’s work are rather dismal. Most conspicuously, in *The Corrections* we may find the isolated and ineffectual, “crackpot” individual initiative of Robin Passafaro and her occupational

urban garden for slum teenagers in Philadelphia; the mindless and counterproductive brutality of her brother's attack on a W—Corporation executive; and the corruption of the Teamsters' unionism.

Against this sombre scene regarding progressive action, *Freedom* seems to offer environmentalism as the most important reformist field, which brings us to the crucial question of the real critical import of environmentalism in Franzen's proposal. From the point of view of Laclau and Mouffe, environmentalism is just one of the multiple contemporary subject positions which can be included in a hegemonic articulation. However, its meaning cannot be defined *a priori*. As they claim: "The political meaning of a local community movement, of an ecological struggle, of a sexual minority movement, is not given from the beginning: it crucially depends upon its hegemonic articulation with other struggles and demands" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 87). In this sense, Badiou has observed that, in our time, any perspectives of radical political change are bound to develop as different forms of local collective experimentation (Badiou, 2013: 37). But for the French thinker,

This experimentation must be guided by ideological norms ... It's a question of whether what one does in a particular situation goes in the direction of equality, elaborating a vision that is opposed to the absolute domination of private property and of the political and social organization that depends on this. (2013: 37)

We may argue on our part, following Žižek, that from a progressive point of view—which is how Franzen presents his proposition—the key question about environmentalism, in the same way as about multiculturalism, feminism, or any other specific or minority concern movement, is whether it can be integrated in a broader chain of progressive struggle for emancipation. The likelihood of this circumstance should be tested against the basic social antagonism underwriting the existing variety of social difference: that between the Included and the Excluded. For the Slovenian thinker, this antagonism is the fundamental one, the point of reference for all others and the source of their subversive edge (Žižek, 2008: 430). For Žižek, only a certain type of environmental activism would qualify as part of the aforementioned emancipatory alliance: "only those ecologists are included who do not use ecology to legitimize the oppression of the 'polluting' poor, trying to discipline the Third World countries"

(2008: 428). This is so because, according to Žižek, “[o]ne can sincerely fight for ecology ... while not questioning the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded—what is more, one can even formulate some of these struggles in terms of the Included threatened by the polluting Excluded” (2008: 430). Furthermore, as the theorist argues, the overlooking of the mentioned social opposition may lead to an exaltation of philanthropy such as which afflicts Walter. As he puts it:

In short, without the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, we may find ourselves in a world in which Bill Gates is the greatest humanitarian fighting against poverty and diseases, and Rupert Murdoch is the greatest environmentalist mobilizing hundreds of millions through his media empire. (2008: 430)

From these considerations, it should be clear that Walter’s political stance, characterized by a peculiar mixture of cold abstractness and rage, intellectual elitism, fetishizing of ecology, and a focus that virtually turns away from the actual sources of social inequality and social antagonism, is no example of “subversive edge”. Actually, it could be argued that it is only Walter’s anger and misanthropy that tells his ecologist devotion apart from environmentalism understood as “the safest of liberal concerns”, as Shivani calls it in his censorious review of the novel (Shivani 2011). This, of course, is hardly surprising and consistent with the psychological function that the novel performs for its author—a function which is easy to see, following Moretti, as that of protection of the Ego which he predicates of the classic *Bildungsroman*. According to the critic, the genre is characterized by “[a]n elusion ... of whatever may endanger the Ego’s equilibrium, making its compromises impossible” (Moretti, 2000: 12). In the case of *Freedom*, that protection of the Ego would be given by the extent to which it contributes to Franzen’s own metanarrative (a protection also extensible to readers sharing a similar perspective). In this sense, we know, from essays such as “My Bird Problem” (Franzen 2006) and “The Ugly Mediterranean” (Franzen 2012) that Franzen largely shares Walter’s environmental concerns, except for the overpopulation issue, which is absent from his non-fiction work.<sup>145</sup> It is, however, Walter’s ardent concern for population control which stands for the radicalism that Franzen has abandoned in his stylistic and

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<sup>145</sup> The population control policies enforced by Chinese governments are briefly and uncritically mentioned by Franzen in “The Chinese Puffin”, a 2008 reportage article on the environmental effects of industrial development in China included in the compilation *Farther Away* (see Franzen, 2012: 206).

political approach to the novel—the radicalism which, because of the self-justifying function of his narrative of conversion, is open to censure and rejection in *Freedom*. Therefore, in strictly structural terms as regards that symbolic function in Franzen’s metanarrative, Walter’s zeal for population control would be interchangeable for any other political passion that could be presented as hopelessly utopian. Certainly, consciously formulated utopias have been traditionally ill-treated by the novelistic genre. To use Moretti’s words once more, conscious utopias, like revolutionary rupture, make visible “all too clearly the abstract one-sidedness of the great forces at the heart of every civilization, forces which any novel tries to exorcise through mediation and compromise” (Moretti, 2000: 54). Now it is pertinent to recall that Franzen has praised the novel’s capacity to promote sympathy, a quality which for him seems associated with liberalism and compromise:

When Jane Smiley uses the phrase “the liberal novel”, she basically means “the novel, period”. The form is well suited to expanding sympathy, to seeing both sides. Good novels have a lot of the same attributes of good liberal politics. But I’m not sure it goes much further than liberalism. Once you go over to the radical, a line has been crossed, and the writer begins to serve a different master. (Connery and Franzen, 2009: 46-7).

Even the character of Richard Katz seems to support Franzen’s apology of compromise by way of negative example: his relentlessly uncompromising attitude has earned him admiration and a credibility which is his main asset. However, Katz, who is significantly shown in the novel reading Pynchon’s *V* and expressing his desire to see the system overthrown, tends to see the world as meaningless and is thus prone to bouts of self-destructive nihilism. Katz then stands as a symbol of the dead end and destructive potential involved by radicalness. It is in the light of this embracement of sympathy and compromise that one of Franzen’s great disavowals that have marked his career, the rejection of critical theory is best understood, as nothing represents abstract radicalism—and thus threatens compromise—like critical theory. In point of fact, critical theory stands as a symbolic token of Franzen’s *conversion*: from initial (false) faith to abjuration.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> As we discuss in the introduction to this study, in his 2011 public address “Pain Won’t Kill You”, included in *Farther Away* (2012), Franzen acknowledges his early interest in theory, a concern shared by his then soon-to-be wife, and locates his discarding of it at some time during his twenties. However, as

Of course, the emphasis put by this book on the *Bildungsroman*'s tendency towards compromise, and on Franzen's readiness to profit from it, cannot but raise the question of the motives behind the environmental (which, we insist, means *political*) commitment offered by the novel or, in other words, the question as to why show commitment at all. Discussing in biographical terms the reasons and drives behind Franzen's felt need to write socially engaged fiction would be probably futile, but there are nevertheless certain circumstances particular to contemporary American society that are worth bearing in mind as they are relevant to the ways in which Franzen's social engagement is shaped and expressed. In this study I have already discussed how the rise of identity politics in the United States and elsewhere has badly undermined the cultural authority of white straight male writers. Given the fact that the authority of an intellectual's stand is, due to reasons out of our scope here, greatly increased by its having an oppositional character, there are compelling incentives for a writer to articulate such a position. In this sense, Joan Didion's memorable words, written in 1965, on intellectuals' need for social engagement are entirely relevant to the understanding of Walter, Franzen's partial alter ego:

There's something facile going on, some self-indulgence at work. Of course we would all like to "believe" in something, like to assuage our private guilt in public causes, like to lose our tiresome selves; like, perhaps, to transform the white flag of defeat at home into the brave white banner of battle away from home. (Didion, 2008: 162)

In any case, the question for a writer such as Franzen is how to substantiate a critical position from the mainstream, with no minority or underprivileged group to rely on, even more when potentially critical subgenres such as the Systems novel have been discarded and political utopias are out of the question. In this sense, environmentalism may afford a much needed critical position for the novelist. However, we should bear in mind that the same non-specific character which makes environmentalism available for any novelist as an instrument of critical leverage, in practice undermines its actual power as such, unless it is deployed in the way proposed by Žižek, mentioned above. Which is, as we have seen, not Franzen's case.

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this study shows, the influence of various undercurrents of postmodern and Marxist theory is quite obvious his first two novels.

## 7.8. The Ring of Life: *How to Live. What to Do.*

There is another important way in which the novelistic form chosen by Franzen performs that Ego-protective function analysed by Moretti. This strategy is once again related to Franzen's metanarrative and relies on the almost uncanny capacity for narrative to provide meaning and purpose, to impose order and connection on essentially meaningless circumstances and events by providing an inner thread, or plot, that connects them, as if sequence somehow engendered causality and purpose. This meaning-conferring capacity is conveyed by Toolan's succinct but compelling definition of narrative: "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (Toolan, 1988: 7). As Toolan argues, a mere juxtaposition of events does not constitute a narrative. The fact that events are perceived as "non-random" implies "a connectedness that is taken to be *motivated* and *significant*" (Toolan, 1988: 7, my emphasis). In Frank Kermode's expression, narrative allows us to "experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions" (Kermode, 2000: 35-36). A concordance which, according to the critic, we need all the more acutely in our sceptic times to make sense of the world. This capacity, although inherent to all narrative, seems to reach a formal peak in the classical *Bildungsroman*, in all likelihood as a result of its vocation for harmonizing individual development and social integration. As Terry Eagleton puts it, "[n]arrative orders the world into a shape which seems to emerge spontaneously from it" (Eagleton, 2005: 16). Moretti (2000: 18) illustrates this ordering capacity of the novel with two excerpts from *Wilhelm Meister*:

I lost myself in deep meditation and after this discovery I was more restful and more restless than before. After I had learnt something it seemed to me as though I knew nothing, and I was right: for I did not see the connection of things [*Zusammenhang*], and yet everything is a question of that. (*Wilhelm Meister*, I, 4)

The presence of the ancient well-known works of art attracted and repelled him. He could grasp nothing of what surrounded him, nor leave it alone; everything reminded him of everything. He overlooked the whole ring of his life; only, alas,

it lay broken in pieces in front of him, and seemed never to want to unite again.  
(*Wilhelm Meister*, VIII, 7)

These passages find a clear echo in Franzen's presentation of Walter's existential disorientation and sense of meaninglessness:

He let the phone slip from his hand and lay crying for a while, silently, shaking the cheap bed. He didn't know what to do, he didn't know how to live. Each new thing he encountered in life impelled him in a direction that fully convinced him of its rightness, but then the next new thing loomed up and impelled him in the opposite direction, which also felt right. *There was no controlling narrative*: he seemed to himself a purely reactive pinball in a game whose only object was to stay alive for staying alive's sake. (F 318, my emphasis)<sup>147</sup>

There is an evident parallelism between Wilhelm's lack of *Zusammenhang* and Walter's longing for a "master narrative". As Moretti argues, the German term used by Goethe is revealing, in its double meaning, of the narrative logic of the classical *Bildungsroman*. As the Italian theorist puts it, it tells us that "a life is meaningful if the *internal* interconnections of individual temporality ('the plot of all life') imply at the same time an opening up to the *outside*, an ever wider and thicker network of external relationships with 'human things'" (2000: 18). In this way, plot as a chronological sequence "is transfigured into a system of relationships" (2000: 19). In the classical *Bildungsroman* then, the processes of the hero's socialization and the achievement of maturity go hand in hand, and completeness of the individual is achieved in community. As Moretti puts it, "[o]ne must learn first and foremost, like Wilhelm, to direct 'the plot of [his own] life' so that each moment strengthens one's sense of belonging to a wider community" (2000: 19). Then, once the process is completed, the narration can conclude.

In turn, in invoking *narrative* as an ordering principle, Walter is making basically the same plea as Wilhelm, as narrative is a privately-originated activity which also opens up to the social outside. Narrative works indeed simultaneously as an inner sense-making procedure that strings events in a thread of causality and as a social, performative speech act intended to cause an effect in an audience. As Macherey put it,

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<sup>147</sup> In the passage Franzen seems to be alluding to an early poem by Wallace Stevens precisely entitled *How to live. What to Do*.

the logic of narrative “compels” both its producer and its receiver (Macherey, 1989: 43). For Walter, narrative is in the last resort the instrument required to reconnect with society and escape the prison-house of misanthropy. The difference between the heroes of classical *Bildungsroman* and Walter—and the rest of Franzen’s perplexed creatures—is the sense of what lies in that outside. For Franzen, the target community for the maturing hero can only be that of family, or even only its core, the community of lovers, “a couple united as a front against the world” (F 476)—that “two-person world” to which he frequently alludes in his work, since larger communities have been discarded as impossible in a world marked by fragmentation. Actually, as Franzen famously bemoaned in the *Harper’s* essay, in the contemporary cultural climate even the performative character of narrative would seem dubious, as its audience inexorably dwindles and blurs, were it not for the community of readers, the constellation of “matching diasporas” (Franzen, 2002: 89), whose existence the novelist has recurrently argued through several essays.<sup>148</sup> In any case, it is only when eventually Walter and Patty arrive at a true, secure version of this “two-person world”, authenticated by all their previous suffering, that they achieve true maturity and stability—the final stage towards which the plot of the novel has been directed. Reconciliation is thus accomplished and the narration, as salvational as the narrative of Franzen’s conversion, can finally close. This is, by all standards, a far cry from realism. Realism, as we have seen, is calculated contingency, the “meaningful meaninglessness”—to use Moretti’s phrase—of Barbara Probst’s absurd death and Martin’s perplexity at the end of *The Twenty-Seventh City*—curiously the novel which is usually considered the least realist among Franzen’s. A rapid comparison with Lalitha’s death in *Freedom* is revealing: Lalitha’s untimely death is tragic, but *meaningful*, or, to put it another way, her death is given meaning by the narrative insofar as it brings about a great deal of things that *need* to happen so that the novel achieves its meaningful closure: Walter’s abandonment of his over-ambitious activism, his hermit-like retirement to his house by the pond, sympathetic identification with his grief on the part of readers and other characters alike, and, ultimately, his rescue by Patty and subsequent reconciliation which constitute the climax of the novel. What we find then with increasing clarity through

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<sup>148</sup> In his 2012 essay “On Autobiographical Fiction,” compiled in *Farther Away*, while recalling the compositional process of the *Harper’s* essay the novelist restates his belief in a community of readers and writers: “I became aware of belonging not just to the two-person team of me and my wife but to a much larger and still vital community of readers and writers. To whom, as I discovered, crucially, I also had responsibilities and owed loyalty” (Franzen, 2012: 133).

Franzen's novels from *Strong Motion* on until its culmination in *Freedom* is a kind of happy ending which, although common in classic realist novels, actually inheres in romance. This makes for the curious paradox that Franzen's first novel, usually considered the most clearly postmodernist one, actually contains a realistic hard core which is diluted in Franzen's subsequent more "realist" fiction. There is, at any rate, little room for salvation in true realism. In fact, the truth is quite the opposite, since for a truly realist narrative an unhappy ending is all but compulsory. In contrast, it is easy to see how the narrative strategy of the happy ending contributes to Franzen's metanarrative: the recurrent happy endings we can find in Franzen's novels from *Strong Motion* on represent quite literally its sanction. Happy endings, as the teleological culmination of the narrative, reinforce the sense of meaningfulness provided by the narrative form by elevating it to the category of immanent. As Moretti describes it, "[t]ime is transfigured by the meaning it has helped to establish, and the latter is in turn immanent to the world we find at the work's end" (2000: 118). And the happiness that reigns at the end of *Freedom* certifies that yielding to the reality principle which brought about Franzen's and Walter's respective disavowals was the right thing to do. Here we can conclude, with Moretti, that the reality principle, rather than the antagonist of the pleasure principle as is usually assumed, is actually an extension of the latter, which, by modifying and extending it, makes its fulfilment possible. After all, if the basic aim of the Ego is to avoid unhappiness, it is by being led by the reality principle that it manages to be at ease in the world. Stopping suffering, avoiding unhappiness, being at ease in the world. "If you are depressed you will sooner or later surrender and say: I just don't want to feel so bad anymore". This is certainly a life goal one can relate to, and one which for the novelist is worth a whole narrative of salvation.

## 8. Conclusion / Coda.

### 8.1. Conclusion

It is difficult to write a conclusion to this study when Franzen's conclusion to his metanarrative by means of the ending of *Freedom* has been so resonant and *conclusive*, so obviously keen on providing a *closure*. It is not, of course, that it is the first time he resorts to the salvational teleology of romance to provide a closure to his novels. As we have seen, he has been doing it since *Strong Motion*. But there is a qualitative difference between *Freedom* and the previous novels, which arises from the respective different degrees of formal and emotional emphasis with which salvational closure is asserted. An examination of the novels' endings is revealing of Franzen's evolution. To be sure, *Strong Motion's* *happy end* was in sharp contrast with the bleakness of *The Twenty-Seventh City*, but it looks certainly cautious and restrained with hindsight after the impact of *Freedom's* ending. It almost looks as a last-minute change of mind on Franzen's part. Even though the airiness of *Strong Motion's* ending is reinforced by the enumeration of three weddings of secondary characters, in an obvious celebration of family bonds, there is a tentative quality to the way Franzen presents the prospective life in common of Louis and Renée. The narrative ends soon after their reconciliation with an ambiguous note: the last thing we see from them is a minor argument. The possibility of childbearing has been hinted at, but for all we know their relationship might as well be finished the next day. What we have is Louis' invitation for Renée to walk with him:

“Oh, what's wrong, what's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong. I swear to you. I just have to walk now. Walk with me, come on. We have to keep walking.” (SM 508)

Four years later, the *Harper's* essay clearly shows Franzen using a salvational narrative pattern to reconcile personal contradictions: through recognition of his true writing self and dedication to his proposed community of readers he is able to escape depression and is reborn as a novelist. The pathos of the closing lines of the essay is actually not unlike that of *Strong Motion's* ending: hopeful but not quite wholeheartedly affirmative: “A generation ago, by paying close attention, Paula Fox could discern in a

broken ink bottle both perdition and salvation. The world was ending then, it's ending still, and I'm happy to belong to it again" (Franzen, 2002: 97).

With *The Corrections*, Franzen certainly goes one step beyond in the spirited assertiveness of its ending: the epilogue informs us that Chip finds love and stability with his father's neurologist and becomes the father of twins. It is also suggested that Chip is well-received by the family of his new Jewish wife. And, of course, there is the novel's last line conveying Enid's sense of liberation after Alfred's death: "She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life". Still, this information is provided in summarized way in a semi-comic, anti-climactic epilogue completely devoid of the emotional intensity of the previous scene led by Chip and his sick father at the hospital. The power of *Freedom's* ending is definitely on a higher level and is the product of the melodramatic intensity of Walter and Patty's reconciliation: its carefully staged theatricality realized in Patty's apparent decision to let herself die of cold, without uttering a word, rather than going away from Walter again; her seeming last-resort rescue by the latter; the immense relief—for characters and readers—at the realization, pointed out by the narrator, that the unbearable heaviness of all their previous suffering, of all their mutually inflicted wounds, has come to equal the weight of a feather. Furthermore, Patty and Walter's encounter is actually invested with the mysticism of *communion*:

And so he stopped looking at her eyes and started looking into them, returning their look before it was too late, before this connection between life and what came after life was lost, and let her see all the vileness inside him, all the hatreds of two thousand solitary nights, while the two of them were still in touch with the void in which the sum of everything they'd said or done, every pain they'd inflicted, every joy they'd shared, would weigh less than the smallest feather on the wind.

"It's me," she said. "Just me."

"I know," he said, and kissed her. (F 559)

This climax is also followed by an epilogue where the loose ends of narrative and characters are tied up and reconciliation triumphs, but this time we are left in no doubt as to the actuality of Walter and Patty's ensuing happiness together. Likewise, as

in a classic *Bildungsroman*, Franzen is clearer about the balance achieved by Walter between his always unsatisfied individuality and the necessity of social integration. All things considered, the power of this closing is such that it makes difficult to imagine how Franzen could write another novel along the same structural patterns without becoming hopelessly redundant.

We find an eloquent defence for his unabashed deployment of narrative closure in Franzen's interview with Burn. When the interviewer observes the contrast between the open character of the endings in Franzen's first two novels and the more tightly resolved endings of *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, the novelist uses a rhetoric which is reminiscent of his polemic essay "Mr Difficult". It is significant that Franzen also relates happy endings to *meaning*—a match which of course ultimately lacks a rational justification but which is revealing once again of the protective psychological function performed by the kind of fiction practiced by Franzen:

I can see that lack of resolution as a young writer's move. You find that you have talent as a novelist, you understand a lot more about the world than many other people your age do, and yet you haven't lived enough—certainly I hadn't—to really have something to say. Everything is still guessed at, every conclusion is provisional. And this came to be my gripe at postmodern aversion to closure. It's like, Grow up already! Take some responsibility for your narrative! I'm not looking for *the* meaning, but I'm looking for *a* meaning, and you're denying me a vital element of making sense of any story, which is its ending! Aversion to closure can be refreshing at certain historical moments, when ossified cultural narratives need to be challenged. But it loses its subversive bite in a culture that celebrates eternal adolescence. It becomes part of the problem. (Burn: 2010: 70)

One of the effects of *Freedom*'s climax and ensuing closure is that the previous events of the narrative, even the most painful ones, instantly become teleological, that is, conducive to this very result. They become, so to speak, justified. Therefore can see that Walter's attempts to act upon the public sphere on a grand-scale, that is, his schemes to create a vast, untouched natural reserve for the cerulean warbler first and, then—even more ambitious—to organize a large, influential NGO in favour of population control, are destined to fail with a backlash of pain and tragedy for Walter.

Quite simply put, Walter's experience shows that trying to change the world leads to failure and depression. It should be noted that Walter's plans are presented as radical measures fuelled by radical theories and ultimately by deep personal frustration of familial origin. In contrast, the humble recognition of one's limitations, which includes the abandonment of illusions of grandeur and the rejection of over-ambitious abstract theory, allows Walter to open up his shut-off self to the demands placed upon him by his closest others—his family. In this way, the Berglund family, a small community which was in a shambles, is regenerated, and in turn will act as a mediator to favour Walter's integration into larger social communities, as is proved by Patty's deft mediation between the misanthropic Walter and his neighbours at Canterbridge Estates. Large-scale reforms have been discarded then, but substantial benefits, even if more limited in scale have been achieved. "You must be the change you wish to see in the world", says a famous aphorism attributed to Gandhi, and the modest bird sanctuary by the lake left by Walter to that community becomes a symbolic reminder of what the world could become if everyone lived by that principle. The similarities between this biographical trajectory—or that of Chip Lambert, for that matter—and Franzen's personal *Künstlerroman*, started in the *Harper's* essay and subsequently echoed by critics have already been shown in this book. I have already presented my interpretation of the story of a young writer who tried to change the world by bringing "news to the mainstream" about society's multifarious ills by means of postmodernist-inspired novels which were alien to his true literary self—novels which tried to engage with the system at large. Notorious disavowals of previous professions such as Walter's, and drastic, publicized shifts in literary and ideological stances such as Franzen's usually require from some kind of justification or legitimation on the part of the subject, especially if they imply the retreat to a zone of ideological comfort. No doubt an effective one is to present them as a way out of intolerable suffering or, even better, to cast them as the traditional structural element of *recognition* (including both self-recognition and recognition of the closest other) in a romance-like narrative culminated by ethical or amorous commitment. Thus, in the *Harper's* essay and "Mr Difficult" we are made to know that Franzen's self-imposed burden led him to sheer depression and how he could only escape from it *in extremis* by letting go of that weary and misguided load, coming to terms with his true literary self, and embracing a narrative mode that would allow him to concentrate in small (familial) communities that were emotionally and experientially close to him, and, in this way, serve that family-like community of

readers he had just come to recognize and to which he is now committed. It is only a small conceptual leap that allows us to grasp how, drawing on the teleology of narrative and the sentimental power of romance and melodrama, Franzen's stance is legitimized by Walter's, as it had previously been by Chip's and, still in a tentative way, by Louis's.

It is not hard to see that all these formal decisions on Franzen's part are ideological, that is, that they imply, to quote Jameson's words again, "a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community" (2002: 56), an assessment of social situations and an implicit evaluation of different possible courses of political action. There is certainly a difference between showing examples of resistance and displaying social assimilation. Pursuing social conflicts to their roots through an open-ended, contingent world, as Franzen tries to do in his first novel, is one thing, while protecting the Ego by means of ideological compromise is an altogether different one. Showing individual amelioration as the only way to improve society is a decision which has a political significance. Symbolically deactivating persistent social and political contradictions by transporting them to the more amenable sphere of the family, a domain where they can be solved by the wish-fulfilment power of romance and melodrama, involves an ideological move. And it is one, I should say, that seems scarcely possible outside one particular world-view, namely that of liberalism. The only one in which, as Jameson has put it, "the political and the ideological are mere secondary or 'public' adjuncts to the content of a real 'private' life, which alone is authentic and genuine" (Jameson, 2002: 279). Franzen's position then implies (and thus supports) a typically liberal separation between the realms of private life and politics which, according to Jameson, would not be possible "for any world-view—whether conservative or radical and revolutionary—that takes politics seriously" (2002: 279).

It should be clear that Franzen's formal and thematic choices are ideological not only in the more obvious, common-sense meaning of the term, that is, in the sense that they support the liberal ideology. They are profoundly ideological in that—like most cultural products at any historical moment for that matter—they work to, in Jameson's terms, "manage" and "defuse" potentially dangerous political impulses conducive to change which are instead rechanneled and offered different "non-political" objectives of a "private" nature. But we should not forget either that, as Jameson has argued following Bloch, there is a dialectical relation between ideology and the Utopian impulse. In the course of the very process whereby cultural products deactivate

potentially destabilizing political or proto-political impulses, these same drives must perforce be evoked, which in a way keeps them alive. As has been shown, this circumstance is particularly visible in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, where the final assertion of the immutability of the status quo, which I have interpreted as a product of a specific ideological climate, cannot conceal the intense underlying Utopian yearnings. In these two novels then hopes of change are frustrated, but the wishes for a true Event and for the sense of fulfilment afforded by commitment to a community of activists have been inscribed. But there is yet another aspect of the relation between the ideological and the Utopian to be considered in relation to Franzen's work. We have seen that Franzen's novels incorporate rhetorical artefacts of ideological legitimation which support not only his particular political and literary evolution, but much larger perspectives of social antagonism in ongoing disputes for cultural and political hegemony in the United States and elsewhere. As Jameson shows (2002: 277-278), this kind of devices, like all genuine hegemonic attempts, cannot perform their function by sheer force. Rather, they must compel assent through persuasion, that is, by offering their receivers different types of incentives and gratification. Again, this can be perceived in Franzen's work. The abandonment of perspectives of change in the public sphere, the relinquishment of public intervention, the desertion of the idea of collective emancipatory action that are symbolically staged in *The Corrections* and *Freedom* require powerful ways of compensation for both writer and readers. These can be found—by means of the elation produced by the reader's sympathetic identification with characters, which as we know has become a central preoccupation for Franzen—in the absorbing quality of melodramatic vicissitudes within families, in the compelling force of personal narratives of salvation. As Bloch realized, the gratification of Utopian impulses is a fundamental incentive in the process of ideological persuasion and legitimation. In this sense, it is not difficult to notice that Franzen's later fiction still addresses Utopian longings only now at a deeper level, confined within a more manageable domain. After all, the fact that the novelist is proposing family as a sort of last refuge from the ruthless anomie of late capitalism constitutes of itself a Utopian statement. Like Franzen's characters, surrounded by a bitingly cold environment, we are still in sore need for the warmth of communion and community, and in his novels Franzen provides us with them within the small world of the family or the "world of two" of the community of lovers.

## 8.2. Coda.

The attention devoted to Franzen's use of the teleological quality of narrative for self-legitimizing purposes brings to mind the fact that this study has also told its own story: that of the linear development of Franzen's formal and ideological strategies of self-legitimation. Inevitably then this book has made use of some of the very same meaning-conferring properties of narrative exploited by the novelist: the capacity to originate connectedness, to turn sequence into causality. In fact, it is not difficult to realize that this book contains a metanarrative on a metanarrative. This circumstance does not invalidate its claims: it might well be that all criticism with a diachronic perspective actually resorts to the properties of story-telling. Not to mention that there is a distinctive teleological thread joining textual elements such as introduction and conclusion. Anyway, having acknowledged a certain narrative quality to this study, it seems appropriate to move on from the conclusion towards an element identified by narratologists as a frequent structural component of personal narratives, and the one that occurs last: the coda.<sup>149</sup> In narratology, a coda is a rhetorical device that seals off a narrative by explicitly declaring it over. It usually implies a deictic shift whereby both the focus of attention and the verbal tense are changed to the present. In George Labov's words, codas bridge "the gap between the moment of time at the end of the narrative proper and the present. Codas bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative" (Labov, 1972: 365). In this way, now I may leave the exegesis of Franzen's salvational narratives to address in more general terms the intended contribution of this study to the precedent critical discussion of Franzen's work.

An extensive survey of Franzen's critical reception has revealed a highly polarized panorama divided into overwhelming media attention and limited academic regard, exaggerated praise and remarkable animosity. I have tried to escape these extremes and show the limitations and shortcomings that characterize the most common critical views of Franzen's work. As we have seen, the question of realism occupies a central position in the discussion. Critics have tended to assume a straightforward

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<sup>149</sup> Labov discerns a sequence of up to six structural elements in personal narratives: Abstract, Orientation, Complicating action, Evaluation, Result or resolution, and Coda (Labov, 1972: 363).

transition from the literary postmodernism of his first two novels to the realism of the third and fourth. However, I consider that this picture is a simplification which is partly due to a reified, uncritical use of the category of literary realism. Indeed, many reviewers have identified realism with plain emphasis on character. To overcome this conceptual impoverishment I have sought a richer, historicized notion of narrative realism as embodied by the realist novel before applying it to the analysis of Franzen's fiction. To this end I have conducted a diachronic study of that form which has provided this project with a substantial part of its theoretical coordinates. This study of narrative realism has included an interrogation as to the possibilities of that mode in the times of late capitalism, in the course of which I have argued for the current viability of updated, theoretically enlightened forms of the realist novel. Regarding Franzen's work, the most obvious result of this study of realism has been to complicate the usually all-too-neat picture of Franzen's evolution. The features whereby *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* show a postmodernist lineage have been analysed, but I have also identified and explored those other which evince a distinctive calling for realism and that had been generally neglected by critics. In this process, I have relied on theoretical constructions by Auerbach, Lukács, Jameson, Brooks and Moretti, among other critics. In this regard, it cannot but look anomalous that the foremost theorists of the realist novel have been all but ignored by critics in the examination of—precisely—the realist quality of Franzen's fiction. This attests both to an unfortunate current lack of critical interest in realism and non-compartmentalized views of literature as a social act, as well as to an also regrettable generalized handling of reified critical categories. It could be said then that this study in a way agrees with Rebein's loose claim as to the realist writer *hidden* under Franzen's "Po-Mo machinery", but that it has arrived at it in a more systematic way through explicit and specific theoretical pathways. Likewise, I have deviated from common critical views in the assessment of realist traits in Franzen's two subsequent novels. I have not studied *The Corrections* as a plain realist novel, but as a work obviously influenced by postmodernist tenets and displaying typically postmodernist motifs and concerns which has opened itself to the influx of textual strategies and cognitive procedures that come as much from realism proper as from romance. And when I have approached the realist component of that novel, I have brought to bear again inescapable dimensions that are nevertheless absent from the critical literature on Franzen: the notions of totality, synthesis, perspective.

I have found in the global concerns of *The Corrections*—already traceable in the previous novels—that calling for the synthetic rendering of social totality which is a distinctive mark of realism and which is hard to find in contemporary American fiction. In the same way, we can detect in that novel a certain sense of moving history, no doubt as a result of the winds of globalization, that could be related to what is, as Auerbach and Lukács knew, a prerequisite of realism: the perception of the present as historical. The problems with Franzen's stance in this respect are on the one hand that his social perspective is too narrow and self-centred; and on the other that in *The Corrections* history seems to be accelerating only to achieve stasis sooner—a final state marked by the triumph of financial capital. What is lacking here then, due to a confinement of the political imagination which is by no means exclusive to Franzen, is a dynamic concept of society as formed by different forces conducive to social and political change. At this point, again, I have avoided chastising Franzen on account of his inability to articulate a valid vision of social agency, and have analysed instead the ways in which the novelist tries to escape that ideological and literary dead end by means of the symbolic power of narrative as studied by Jameson, Moretti or Frye. I have been concerned then with the legitimizing properties of narrative, with the capacity of the novelistic genre for deactivating or mitigating social and psychological conflicts, with melodrama's compelling power to carry our attention from the social to the personal and, last but not least, with romance's ability to generate perspectives of salvation. It is when all these considerations are drawn together that the narrative of salvation emerges from Franzen's work.

We have seen that an important part of the critical discussion of Franzen has revolved around political questions. Again, here I have tried to go beyond existing critical positions. In this sense, rather than charging Franzen, as Annesley and others have done, with being a *faux* radical leftist, I have chosen the less moralizing procedure of studying his declared liberalism as such, which has given rise to the chance of analysing the place of the liberal stance in the ideological struggles taking place in the United States, as well as its literary implications as regards the novelistic form. Similarly, instead of condemning Franzen's putative ideological short-sightedness, I have assumed Jameson's view of the constraints exerted upon our political imagination by our mode of production and have opted for, taking into account the larger ideological and cultural context, analysing the effects of these restrictions on Franzen's

work, which has included uncovering the ensuing Utopian manifestations within a conceptual framework that posits a dialectical relationship between the ideological and the Utopian. This deliberate avoidance of moral judgement, of course, has not prevented the examination of the obvious component of class antagonism that can be found in Franzen's work, including his vindication of enlightened elites and their legitimation to promote top-down social reform.

Now it is time to put an end to what has intended to be both a study of Franzen's fiction and an exercise in cognitive mapping by allowing the coda to fulfil its one structural function left: the one of giving back the floor to other possible participants in a conversation.

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