

**Joseph Carroll**  
*University of Missouri, St. Louis*

## Correcting for *The Corrections*: A Darwinian Critique of a Foucauldian Novel

Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) is a major novel—a family drama that broadens into an ideological critique of late capitalism in the twentieth century. The critical response to his novel suggests the magnitude of his achievement: a flood of enthusiastic reviews in high-profile venues, a National Book Award, and a substantial handful of scholarly commentaries by academic literary critics. *The Corrections* is Franzen's third novel. His first two established him as one of the better minor postmodern novelists, someone to watch, but not someone in the same league as Pynchon or DeLillo. The critical and commercial success of *The Corrections* transformed Franzen into one of the two or three most prominent contemporary American novelists. The review in the *Christian Science Monitor* offers a representative assessment. "*The Corrections* represents a giant leap for Jonathan Franzen—not only beyond his two previous novels, but beyond just about anybody else's" (Charles).<sup>1</sup>

My critical response to *The Corrections* diverges from that of most reviewers and academic critics. I think Franzen lacks generosity and conforms timidly to current ideological conventions. He minimizes or suppresses positive family emotions and ironizes common moral norms. A smug and facile postmodern skepticism hovers over all aspects of the domestic and social life depicted in the novel. Because he envisions his characters from within the limitations of his own persona, he often gives an implausible, distorted, and impoverished depiction of their inner lives. From my evaluative perspective, imaginative sympathy and truth of representation are inherently valuable attributes in literary depiction. They imply seriousness and honesty in an author's conception of his subject.

Apart from judgments of literary value, failures of verisimilitude naturally prompt readers to probe the nature of a distorting bias, asking what specific impulses might have deflected the author from giving a true account of his subject. I shall argue that in Franzen's case the distorting bias results from interactions between his ideological stance and more intimate, personal aspects of his identity. Those more personal aspects are rooted in the family dynamics depicted in the novel.

*The Corrections* is not precisely and literally autobiographical, but three of its main characters—the mother, the father, and the oldest son—are clearly based on members of Franzen’s family.<sup>2</sup> The childhood experiences of another character, the second son, seem intimately autobiographical. Whether literally true or not, the depicted experiences give symbolic form to central features in Franzen’s attitude toward his parents. As an adult, the second son adopts a Foucauldian ideological stance indistinguishable from Franzen’s own.

Though not an academic, Franzen is an intellectual. He is well-read in affective neuroscience and in “popular sociobiology” (Franzen, *Freedom* 192). His outlook is not, however, essentially biocultural. In an essay about his father’s Alzheimer’s, he reflects on his “conviction that we are larger than our biology” (*How To Be Alone* 33). He acknowledges that he recoils from the idea of “the organic basis of everything we are” and explains that he prefers to “emphasize the more soul-like aspects of the self” (19). For Franzen, as for many contemporary intellectuals, resistance to the idea of an organic basis does not translate into religion; it translates into ideology. The intuitive belief in the autonomy of the human soul manifests itself as a belief in the autonomy of culture.

Franzen was an English major at Swarthmore in the late seventies and there became enamored of “Theory” (Franzen, *Farther Away* 9–11, *How To Be Alone* 59–60). Describing his sense of vocation at the time he began writing his first novel, Franzen says, “In college I’d admired Derrida and the Marxist and feminist critics, people whose job was to find fault with modern world. I thought that maybe now I, too, could become socially useful by writing fault-finding fiction” (*How To Be Alone* 246). That early sense of vocation, though described in a typically sarcastic and self-deprecating way, has remained active in Franzen’s later work. *The Corrections* is deeply imbued with the Foucauldian ethos, and the ideology of his most recent novel, *Freedom* (2010), is continuous with that of *The Corrections*.

Intellectual life in the Anglophone world is now increasingly divided between the mindset embodied in Franzen and the biocultural perspective exemplified in works by evolutionary biologists, social scientists, and literary scholars. Most educated common readers do not read academic literary theory, but the commercial and critical success of Franzen’s work gives evidence that Foucauldian ideology has affinities with beliefs and attitudes widespread in American culture. Many educated common readers do read works in evolutionary biology and social science—works by authors such as E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Nicholas Wade, and Jonathan Haidt. Few such readers, though, have yet fully bridged the gap between “the two cultures”: the sciences and the humanities. The contemporary American mind is suspended,

at the moment, in the midst of a paradigm shift. In this essay, I aim to encompass Franzen's Foucauldian perspective within the perspective of biocultural critique. In the degree to which that effort succeeds, it should help advance the movement toward a more complete and integrated world view.

This essay is designed also to advance the cause of evolutionary literary criticism. As it seems to me, the most important weakness in much evolutionary criticism is a single-minded focus on represented behavior. Evolutionary literary critics use concepts from evolutionary social science to describe the motives of characters. That kind of criticism has a certain utility. It underlines the way in which evolved human motives and passions provide the central subject matter of literature. Nonetheless, in my view, that kind of character analysis stops well short of what interpretive criticism can and should accomplish.

In a series of essays, I have argued that "point of view" is the locus of "meaning," and that meaning is the necessary subject of literary criticism ("Human Nature," "Literature," "Evolutionary Paradigm," "Truth about Fiction," "Meaning and Effect"). By point of view, I do not mean mainly the technical question of narrative mode—omniscient third-person, participant first-person, and so on. I mean interactions among the minds of authors, readers, and characters ("Truth about Fiction" 138–40). The most important factor in this interplay is the mind of the author—the mind that creates a depiction and takes a tonal stance toward it (Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger, 52–56, 60–69). I agree with Henry James that "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer" (64). The quality of the author's mind can be reconstructed from the whole array of materials that go into any fictional story: subject matter, attitudes, the emotional trajectory of plot, thematic structures, symbolic images, perceptions, observations, narrative techniques, stylistic nuances, tonal inflections, allusions, cultural references, and all the rest.

In addition to these common resources for critical analysis, a fictionalized autobiographical psychodrama offers special advantages for analyzing the identity of the implied author. Parental imagoes—internalized images of parents as adult role models—are central in the formation of personal identity. When an author creates fictional images of his own parents, he necessarily gives fictive form to symbolic components of his own psyche. He acts out the unresolved tensions between his own parents and the person he has become. If the author is an intellectual, that psychodrama almost inevitably expands into philosophical and ideological dimensions. I shall argue that for Franzen the psychodrama comes first, causally. His Foucauldian ideological critique rationalizes and partially disguises the failures of resolution within the psychodrama.<sup>3</sup>

After comparing biocultural and Foucauldian perspectives, I summarize the story line of the novel, give an overview of its thematic and tonal structure, and offer textual evidence supporting my chief interpretive contention—that the central organizing principle of the novel consists in Franzen’s effort to invalidate a patriarchal conception of authority by depicting a patriarch, Alfred, from a Foucauldian perspective. In the concluding sections, I reflect on Franzen’s conception of the author’s role in society.

### **Biocultural Criticism and Foucauldian Cultural Critique: A Comparison**

Biocultural critics affirm that the elements of human nature—motives, emotions, and cognitive mechanisms—have been shaped by an adaptive evolutionary process. They argue that human nature informs and constrains cultural systems. Humans have evolved dispositions for survival, mating, parenting, forming social groups, negotiating dominance hierarchies, engaging in collective action, and participating in shared forms of imagination through stories, songs, dance, and visual images. Those shared imaginative forms embody beliefs and values. Different cultures organize the elements of human nature in somewhat different ways, but all cultures share species-typical forms of behavior that anthropologists designate “human universals” (Brown). Forms of cultural imagination derive their deepest emotional force from the evolved and adapted dispositions of human nature.

Foucauldian cultural critique is the most general form of poststructuralist literary theory. It has three chief constituents: deconstructive epistemology; Freudian psychology in a textualized Lacanian form; and Marxist social theory in a textualized Althusserian or Jamesonian form. Deconstructive epistemology tells us that “reality” has negligible constraining force on human mental experience. Things are what they are because we name them or describe them in one way rather than another. Freudian psychology tells us that the deepest forces in human character are repressed because they are taboo—dangerous and frightening. Marxist social theory tells us that all forms of social polity, short of a communitarian utopia, are exploitative and oppressive. The victims of oppression, in contemporary cultural critique, are not only proletarians; more often, they are women, homosexuals, and racial and ethnic minorities. Deconstruction, Freudianism, and Marxism, when combined in their Foucauldian form, suggest that exploitative social power, omnipresent and diffuse, fabricates illusory public norms rationalizing injustice. The function of Foucauldian cultural critique, and of fictions like Franzen’s, is to expose the true character of the socioeconomic and cultural order.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault deprecates the idea that reality exercises a constraining force on thought and perception. “There is,” he tells us, “nothing absolutely primary to interpret” (“Nietzsche, Freud, Marx” 64). He argues that “power produces knowledge,” that “power and knowledge directly imply one another,” and that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (*Discipline and Punish* 27). Knowledge is merely the manifestation of power, power merely the effective content, source, and consequence of knowledge. Since “power is always exercised at the expense of the people” (*Language* 211), there are only two possible stances toward power: collaboration or resistance. Despite the seeming omnipotence of “power-knowledge” (*Discipline and Punish* 28), the Foucauldian cultural critic can somehow step outside of power, probing beneath conventional beliefs and values so as to reveal the malevolent machinations of ruling elites. “The intellectual’s role” is to engage in “a struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious” (*Language* 207, 208).

Foucault extends his critique of power-knowledge into every region of inquiry, even seemingly benign disciplines such as “clinical medicine” and “psychiatry.” The more benign any such discipline might appear, the more insidious its ultimate application as “an instrument of subjection” (*Discipline and Punish* 224). Following that line of thought, one of the main characters in *The Corrections*, a Foucauldian English professor, exclaims against “a commercialized, medicalized, totalitarian modernity” (31). The term “medicalized” refers to anti-depressant medications, a theme that runs throughout the novel. From the Foucauldian perspective, psychoactive medicine is just another form of mind control, part of the system of manipulation by sinister elites. After spending a few months in Lithuania while it is undergoing anarchic political upheaval, the English professor formulates a Foucauldian comparison between Lithuania and America:

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.

It warmed his Foucaultian heart, in a way, to live in a land where property ownership and the control of public discourse were so obviously a matter of who had the guns.

(441)

In this vision, threatening to shoot people is exactly parallel to treating them for mental illness, providing them with computers, and offering them cable TV. Control, domination—those are the crucial constants. The sheer absurdity of the parallelism

can be overlooked only by readers willing to accept a theoretical framework that rigidly segregates all members of a population into rich and poor, dominant and subordinate, masters and slaves. Foucauldian cultural critics necessarily reject the idea that a social system can reflect the will of the populace at large. Government is never of the people, by the people, and for the people. It can only always be a system of domination by elites. Participatory democracy is just another kind of psychoactive drug, an illusion fostered by the ruling few on the gullible many.

Since Foucault believes that all actual social relations are necessarily forms of dominance and subjugation, treating those relations as violations of justice requires measuring them against a utopian norm: a world of perfect equality. “If one wants to look for a non-disciplinary form of power, or rather, to struggle against disciplines and disciplinary power,” one should turn “towards the possibility of a new form of right, one which must indeed be anti-disciplinarian, but at the same time liberated from the principle of sovereignty” (*Power/Knowledge* 108). In Foucault’s terminology, “sovereignty” is any form of “domination” that disguises its “brutality” in terms of “right” (*Power/Knowledge* 95). A world without sovereignty would be a world without hierarchical difference.

Biocultural critics readily acknowledge that social power is unequally distributed and that public norms are sometimes delusory. Unlike Foucauldian cultural critics, though, most bioculturalists do not tacitly measure all past and present power relations against a utopian norm—a world that is free of competing interests and thus also free of conflict. From the biocultural perspective, conflicts are an ineradicable part of life. Individual organisms compete for scarce resources against other organisms. In sexually reproducing species, organisms compete for mates. Social groups compete against other social groups. Within social groups, individuals negotiate between reciprocal benefits and competing interests. Even in the most intimate relationships among kin, partially shared and partially conflicting fitness interests guarantee perpetual tension.

Biocultural critics do not typically envision a world in which “power”—the differential exercise of force in social relations—no longer exists. But then, neither do they typically believe that all cultural norms result from the sinister machinations of social elites. As researchers closely affiliated with evolutionary social science, they aim to delineate the precise configuration of conflict and cooperation in any given cultural ecology. As practical literary critics, they seek to illuminate the ways in which individual writers position themselves in relation to their environments, physical and cultural. Like the Foucauldians, they have an encompassing explanatory framework. They evaluate individual works of imagination by situating those

works within an evolutionary conception of human nature and culture. In place of Freudian notions of family dynamics, they invoke empirically grounded forms of family psychology. In place of Marxist notions of social conflict, they ground social conflicts in evolved human social dispositions. In place of Derridean notions that words construct the world, they invoke the idea that the mind has evolved in an adaptive relationship with an environment that radically constrains the forms of mental experience.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Story Line**

The main characters in the story are the five members of the Lambert family: Alfred, a retired railroad engineer, his wife Enid, and their three adult children, Gary, Chip, and Denise. Alfred is in his mid-seventies and Enid a little younger. Alfred has Parkinson's and is becoming increasingly debilitated, mentally and physically. Alfred and Enid still live in the house in suburban St. Jude (St. Louis) in which they raised their children. At the time of the core story—the sequence around which flashbacks are constructed—Gary is about forty-three, a successful banker, married, with three children, living in Philadelphia. Chip is thirty-nine and unmarried. After having been fired from his job as an English professor for having had an affair with a student, he has moved to New York and is making ends meet with part-time jobs while working on a screen play. Denise, thirty-two, had dropped out of college to begin a successful career as a chef at high-end restaurants. Like Gary, she is living in Philadelphia.

The core story takes place between autumn and Christmas in a single year. Alfred and Enid meet with Chip and Denise in New York before setting out on a luxury cruise. On the cruise, Alfred falls overboard. The fall causes him little serious injury but perhaps accelerates his decline from Parkinson's. Chip meanwhile has taken a job with a Lithuanian ex-diplomat running a fraudulent investment scheme. Working from Lithuania, Chip and the Lithuanian successfully bilk American investors until the government of Lithuania collapses. At the climax of the story, Chip, Gary, and Denise arrive in St. Jude to satisfy their mother's desire that the family have one last Christmas together in their old home.

Much of the narrative consists of flashbacks: Chip's illicit liaison with the student at his college; Gary's relationship with his wife; and three of Denise's sexual relationships—an affair with one of her father's subordinates when she was in her late teens, a marriage with a much older man from whom she learned to cook, and an affair with the wife of the owner of her current restaurant.

There is a central flashback story for the whole family, about midway through the book. Gary is in the fifth grade and Chip in the first; Enid is pregnant with Denise.

After Enid nags Alfred to buy stock using insider trader information derived from his work with the railroad, he storms out of the house without kissing her goodbye and is gone for ten days, inspecting a railroad. When he returns, they argue, and she cooks “The Dinner of Revenge” (249)—liver, rutabagas, and boiled beet greens, all foods he hates. Chip refuses to eat and is compelled to stay at the table for five hours. We are given to understand that he is permanently traumatized by this experience. Enid and Alfred have sex that night, but Denise, in the womb, is also permanently traumatized by the emotional discord of the parents.

During the climactic Christmas visit, it becomes apparent to everyone that Alfred has descended into dementia and that Enid can no longer take care of him at home. Chip helps Enid place Alfred in a nursing home. Gary and Denise resume the ordinary course of their lives. Eventually, Chip marries one of Alfred’s doctors and moves to Chicago, teaching part time in high school while still working on his screen play.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Thematic and Tonal Structure of the Novel**

The three children are given more or less equal narrative time, but they do not have equal weight in the thematic and tonal structure of the novel. Chip, the second son, serves as an internal representative for Franzen’s persona. Franzen would have us believe that Chip advances toward a long delayed coming of age. The story is his *Bildungsroman*. At the beginning of the main time sequence, already thirty-nine, he “had almost nothing to persuade himself he was a functioning male adult” (19). He had told a girlfriend that rebellion against one’s parents is how one defines oneself as a person (59). By the end of the novel, he is reconciled with his parents, has married, and has fathered two children. His is the most complete story line, the line that involves the most serious transformation and the most complete resolution.

Denise, also, undergoes a transformation or “correction” during the autumn and early winter of the main time sequence. She has already been awakening to her sexual identity as a lesbian. While visiting her parents, she has an epiphany in which she radically shifts psychological allegiance, moving away from her father and toward her mother. This putative psychological shift does not alter her life trajectory, though. It manifests itself in no significant alteration of her behavior. The transformation is psychologically thin and serves chiefly to shore up the Foucauldian thematic structure of the climax and denouement.

Gary undergoes no significant change in relation to his parents. His main story consists in a prolonged effort to deny that he is slipping into depression. That story climaxes when he concedes to his wife that he is, as she has been claiming, depressed.



She soothes him. He immediately feels better. They have voluptuous sex, and he continues his long-term trend of acquiescing to her psychological domination.

At the end of the story, Chip, Denise, and Enid form the inner protagonistic group: they embody the positive thematic values invested in the emotional resolutions and the moral affirmations toward which the story moves. Gary remains outside that group. He is conventional in outlook and “materialistic”—delighting in acquiring expensive consumer goods. He blusters and bullies but gets no respect. He is comically ineffectual. Of the three children, he is by far the least capable of understanding the family drama from a perspective approximating the level of intelligence and insight in the implied author.

Gary is a foil, but only a minor character, a buffoon. In the main thematic and tonal movement of the story, the chief antagonist is Alfred, the father. He has dominated the family psychologically and physically. He is cold, remote, private, but when younger also “a shouter and a punisher” (22). An autocratic ruler, he embodies the patriarchal bourgeois ethos of mid-century America. Enid, Gary, and Chip all resent him but are also intimidated by him. Denise shares his “intimidating air of moral authority” (30) but, until her ostensible transformation at the end, she accepts his dominance within the family. The comedic resolution depends on getting Alfred out of the house, marginalizing and humiliating him through his dementia, while also containing him thematically within a Foucauldian perspective that quarantines him as a personification of “power”—that is, abusive and illegitimate authority.

The comedic resolutions of the story seem incomplete and artificial. They do not adequately contain the forces at work in the family dynamics. Franzen filters the qualities of the characters through a Foucauldian thematic grid, subordinating psychological truth to thematic structure. Alfred as antagonist becomes merely a personification of emotional negativity. Enid, though silly and self-deluding, is promoted to protagonistic status and becomes a personification of positive emotional force. Epiphanies and transformations in Denise and Chip are fabricated, implausibly, to support the decisive shift toward comedic resolution.

Franzen’s Foucauldian framework is in place from the beginning of the novel, but in the main body of the novel, ironic mockery sometimes seems to cut in all directions at once. In the shift toward resolution at the end, Franzen completes a process of emptying out the inner lives of his characters, then forces a turn to hedonism as a way to proclaim comedic closure.

The central thematic and tonal challenge for Franzen is to achieve interpretive dominance over Alfred’s perspective. The comedic resolution excludes Alfred and stigmatizes the terms he personifies: discipline, responsibility, self-control,

restraint, and constructive effort. Within Franzen's Foucauldian thematic framework, those terms are inescapably bound up with the negative and punitive aspects of "discipline": punishment and imprisonment. By the end of the novel, self-restraint has been reduced to repression, a denial of life, the power of "refusal," saying no. Alfred's constructive effort—his absorption in work as an engineer and amateur metallurgist—is represented only as an escape from intimate social relations.

Like "discipline," the term "corrections" has dual and conflicting connotations. In one sense, it means correcting course, correcting for some faulty emphasis, correcting mistakes. In the other sense, it means punishment, spanking, imprisonment. Early in the story, evidently for no reason other than to signal the "corrections" theme, Franzen tell us that Chip used to live across from an automotive graveyard owned by the Connecticut State Department of Corrections. Gary, in the fifth grade, makes a jail out of popsicle sticks and places within it a malformed little electric chair. Alfred, we are told, is a devotee of capital punishment. During his luxury cruise, he hallucinates a conversation with "a sociopathic turd" (282), a voluble hunk of his own fecal matter, who taunts him with his putative wish to imprison all the members of every possible demographic group except the one to which he himself belongs: "upper-middle class northern European men" (285).

This elaborately contrived network of thematic motifs points unmistakably to one key theoretical source: Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Hence the frequent references to Chip's affiliations with Foucault (92, 115, 440, 441). In a moment of anguish, Chip burns himself with a cigarette. His Lithuanian business partner has burn scars inflicted during torture by Soviet police. Responding to the Lithuanian's derision at Chip's small, self-inflicted wound, Chip remarks, "Different kind of prison" (134). Chip is often an object of satire, but it is Franzen, not Chip, who self-consciously constructs an elaborate network of references to "disciplinary" behavior and to "penal" regimes. Franzen and Chip ultimately converge in their Foucauldian perspective.

The story line "corrects" the course of the family by eliminating Alfred, physically, from the house, and by rejecting the authority he embodies. Alfred comes to represent the spirit of "correction" as punishment, and the novel achieves resolution by excluding that spirit altogether. In the process, Franzen creates a sharp moral and emotional dichotomy. The positive emotions and moral values of the protagonistic group tacitly exclude discipline, self-restraint, and responsibility, thus reducing the happy comedy mood of the end to a two-dimensional affirmation of pleasure. Constructive effort remains active in the person of Denise, as a chef, and in the person of Chip, writing his screenplay. In Denise, the devotion to work can

be associated with an alternative to the nuclear heterosexual family. Moreover, her work is dedicated to creating pleasure in the form of food. As the sociopathic turd tells Alfred, “‘Food and pussy, fella . . . is what it all comes down to. Everything else, and I say this in all modesty, is pure shit’” (285). Chip’s constructive effort is to write his own story from a Foucauldian perspective.<sup>7</sup>

Franzen’s memoir *The Discomfort Zone* contains an extended eulogy to the cartoonist Charles Schultz, creator of *Peanuts*. After sketching a farcical scene of his parents squabbling over the setting of the thermostat, Franzen remarks, “I wonder why ‘cartoonish’ remains such a pejorative. It took me half my life to achieve seeing my parents as cartoons. And to become more perfectly a cartoon myself: what a victory that would be” (51). Chip has a similar revelation. His screenplay depicts his own story about being fired for sexual impropriety. In the main time sequence of the novel, his culminating moment consists in an epiphany about literary genre. Recalling his Lithuanian business partner’s characterization of a political upheaval as “‘a tragedy rewritten as a farce’” (530), Chip has a breakthrough. “All of a sudden he understood why nobody, including himself, had ever liked his screenplay: he’d written a thriller where he should have written farce. . . . He spoke out loud: ‘Make it *ridiculous*. Make it *ridiculous*’” (534). This generic revisioning aligns Chip with the tonal stance adopted by Franzen in *The Corrections*. As in many an author’s *Bildungsroman*, the story leads to the moment at which the author finds himself able to tell his own story. For Franzen, that story is above all about his relationship with his parents. It is thus also their story.

Becoming a cartoon and treating one’s parents as cartoons makes it possible to dodge the moral and emotional challenge presented by the parents. By becoming cartoonists, Chip and Franzen need never become emotionally mature. They can stand off to the side, mocking and sneering, as adolescents are wont to do, but also adopt an ideological posture in which reflexively disparaging authority serves as a substitute for wisdom and maturity.

### **Life History, Maturity, and Foucauldian Substitutes for Adult Identity**

Human life history theory gives us a standard against which to measure the maturity of Franzen’s perspective. All species have a life history—a species-typical organization of birth, growth, reproduction, and death. Species vary in number and pacing of offspring, pace of development to maturity, forms of reproductive relationships, and longevity. Humans share with all mammals adaptations for live birth, the suckling of young, and mother-infant bonding. Through most of human evolutionary history, raising children to maturity has required dual parenting. Because human children

have required dual parenting, humans have evolved dispositions for pair-bonding between male and female adults—adaptations they share with few mammals but with many species of birds and a few other species (Flinn, Geary, and Ward; and Muehlenbein and Flinn).

The life history of every species constitutes a reproductive cycle. Any species that failed to reproduce would go extinct within a single generation. The reproductive cycle is thus the most deeply conserved behavioral structure for every form of life. It is the one structure that has remained in place, through every conceivable kind of evolutionary change, since the first single-celled organisms, ancestors of us all, developed the knack of replicating themselves. On the scale of evolutionary time, the adaptive functions regulating reproduction necessarily precede all specifically human motives and passions, including every specifically human adaptation for sociality, cognition, and cumulative culture. Any ideology that locates its own causal terms higher on the scale of explanation than the reproductive cycle has made a logical error. Hence the force of E. O. Wilson's observation that "Marxism is sociobiology without biology" (*On Human Nature* 191).

From a life history perspective, individual development progresses toward two chief features of adulthood: the capacity to acquire resources through the organism's own efforts, and reproductive maturity. Predators must learn to hunt; herbivores must learn where to acquire food and how to avoid predators. Social animals must also develop the capacity to function effectively with other members of their social groups. As adults, human beings typically take on functional duties within their social group, assume responsibility for their own behavior, and also assume responsibility for the care of their children (McCormick, Kuo, and Masten). In assuming responsible adult positions, people necessarily also assume power and at least tacitly affirm their authority as responsible agents.

From a human life history perspective, a child progresses toward an adult condition in which he or she can take the place of his or her parents, assuming power and affirming his or her own authority. As Foucauldians, Chip and Franzen short-circuit that phase of the life cycle. They reflexively denigrate power and authority in family life and in the larger culture. Psychodrama and ideology interact causally in *The Corrections*, but ideology does not come first in the causal sequence. For Chip and Franzen, Foucauldian ideology is a reflex of a failed development toward psychosexual maturity. Their Foucauldian thematics articulate an arrested state of emotional development.

In typical Foucauldian fashion, Chip and Franzen repudiate adult authority while nonetheless remaining in thrall to it. Alfred is the central figure of authority in the

world of this novel. Chip and Franzen can glimpse Alfred's inner nature but cannot sustain a sympathetic understanding of it. A perspective adequate to the challenge posed by Alfred's personality would acknowledge his faults without condoning them but would also appreciate his strength, integrity, and generosity. Realizing that the sociopathic turd is not quite adequate as a voice of wisdom and maturity, Chip and Franzen hover obsessively about Alfred's personality, belittling it, disparaging it, but never ceasing to be overawed by it. The best that can be said for Chip's supposed development into an adult male is that Franzen tacitly acknowledges the spurious character of Chip's maturity. Franzen is self-consciously equivocal, simultaneously affirming Chip's transformation into an adult and wistfully acknowledging Chip's inability to achieve that transformation.

### **Cutting a Giant Down to Size**

Before losing his academic job, Chip sometimes entertains his academic colleagues by telling "embarrassing stories about his mid-western childhood" (34). Alfred is the central figure in these anecdotes, and Chip, "despite his many grievances with Alfred" is "careful to impress on his dinner guests what a giant, in his own way, the old man was" (35). Franzen's central motive in the novel is to cut this giant down to size. The central drama is thus a thematic struggle between Alfred's world view, as Franzen depicts it, and Franzen's own. The struggle is uneven, of course, because Franzen is telling the story. He is free to distort and to diminish Alfred's world view. But then, readers are also free to evaluate the verisimilitude of Franzen's depictions and to make inferences about their functions.

Franzen points toward the psychodramatic core of the book in a carefully calculated use of a single word: "refusal." The word is a keynote for both Alfred and Chip. In Alfred's case, it signifies a purely negative stance toward existence. As Franzen depicts him, Alfred is existentially empty, sustained only by the force of his will. For Chip, the word signifies a refusal of Alfred's domination, hence also a rejection of the values and beliefs that constitute Alfred's world view.

Alfred's refusal makes its first major appearance on his business trip before the Dinner of Revenge, while spending a night in a cheap motel. He is under tremendous strain from repressed sexual desire and lack of sleep and has an access of neurotic self-pity. "He refused to weep. He believed that if he heard himself weeping, at two in the morning in a smoke-smelling motel room, the world might end. If nothing else, he had discipline. The power to refuse: he had this" (244). In the nursing home in which Alfred dies, paralyzed and helpless with Parkinson's, Enid visits him every day in order to tell him how wrong his whole stance toward life has been, "how wrong to have been so negative, how wrong to have been so gloomy, how wrong

to have run away from life, how wrong to have said no, again and again, instead of yes” (566). Alfred escapes finally by committing suicide in the only way open to him. He refuses to eat. “The one thing he never forgot was how to refuse” (566). In that statement, Franzen tacitly aligns himself with Enid, suggesting, in company with her, that Alfred has always only “said no, again and again.”

Chip’s refusal appears most dramatically at a definitive moment in the formation of his identity—the five hours he spends sitting at the dinner table, at the age of seven, refusing to eat liver, rutabagas, and boiled greens.

If you sat at the dinner table long enough, whether in punishment or in refusal or simply in boredom, you never stopped sitting there. Some part of you sat there all your life.

As if sustained and too-direct contact with time’s raw passage could scar the nerves permanently, like staring at the sun. (268)

Franzen makes sure readers do not overlook the way “refusal” links Alfred and Chip. He tells us that Chip could have emulated Gary by surreptitiously throwing his food away after everyone had left the room. Chip chooses not to end his own suffering in this sneaky manner because his father would think he had eaten the detested foods, “and eating them was exactly what he was refusing now to do. Food on the plate was necessary to prove refusal” (263). The whole incident is clearly meant to have symbolic value. Stay at the table long enough, Franzen says, and “only you and your refusal remained. And like self-pity, or like the blood that filled your mouth when a tooth was pulled—the salty ferric juices that you swallowed and allowed yourself to savor—refusal had a flavor for which a taste could be acquired” (263). Franzen has himself unmistakably acquired that taste.

In order to make refusal effective from the perspective of an adult, one must undermine the core features of identity in the authority being rejected. From a human life history perspective, work and family, being able to take care of oneself and one’s children (if one has children), constitute adulthood. When Chip entertains his colleagues by telling embarrassing stories of his Midwestern upbringing, he draws a portrait of Alfred in which commitment to work and family are the most prominent features:

His father not only had worked long hours at the Midland Pacific Railroad and read aloud to his children and done the yard work and home maintenance and processed a nightly briefcaseful of executive paper but had also found time to operate a serious metallurgical laboratory in the family basement. (34)

The embarrassing part of this anecdote is not Alfred’s profile but rather Chip’s response to that profile. He explains to his dinner guests that to impress his father, as a boy, he had faked two science projects, both of which had won prizes at the local

science fair. The profile of Alfred looks very impressive, but the impressiveness, Franzen would have us believe, is all on the surface. It is a persona. Beneath that surface, the real man is empty, frightened, lonely, and weak.

### **The World of Work: Daytime Pretenses and Night Terrors**

Franzen satirizes Alfred's commitment to work by depicting it as masculine preening and by attributing it to an obsessive and ultimately futile desire to dominate nature. Franzen draws a paradigmatic portrait of Alfred on the job, in his prime, inspecting a railway network. Alfred is standing on the catwalk of a railway bridge, inspecting it for rust:

Maybe some of the women drivers . . . saw him perched there, flat of belly and broad of shoulder, the wind winding his cuffs around his ankles, and maybe they felt, as Enid had felt the first time she'd laid eyes on him, that here was a *man*. Although he was oblivious to their glances, Alfred experienced from within what they saw from without. By day he felt like a man, and he showed this, you might even say flaunted it, by standing no-handedly on high narrow ledges, and working ten and twelve hours without a break, and cataloguing an eastern railroad's effeminacies. (243–44)

The qualification “by day” precludes the depiction of Alfred's nervous collapse at night, in the smoke-smelling motel room. The juxtaposition of night and day is meant to suggest that the daylight preening is surface; the truth opens up at night, with its miseries and terrors and emptiness.

By imputing the term “effeminacies” to Alfred's observations of the railroad's defects, Franzen means to suggest that Alfred has a male bias. Good things—sound, strong, well-engineered, orderly, functional—are male. Bad things—weak, slack, disorganized, dysfunctional—are female. That masculinist slant applies to everything, not just railroads. It takes in all of nature. As Franzen depicts it, Alfred's metallurgical research is driven by a compulsive need to dominate nature, to force it to behave.

Unfortunately, metal in its free state—a nice steel stake or a solid brass candlestick—represented a high level of order, and Nature was slatternly and preferred disorder. The crumble of rust. The promiscuity of molecules in solution. The chaos of warm things. States of disorder were vastly more likely to arise spontaneously than were cubes of perfect iron. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, much *work* was required to resist this tyranny of the probable—to force the atoms of a metal to behave themselves. (269)

Disorganized, warm—Franzen might be describing Enid. In any case, Franzen makes it clear that Alfred's desire to dominate nature runs parallel with his desire to dominate women. Both desires, in Franzen's depiction, spring from an essentially male need to control the environment, including the human environment.

Gender runs deep in Franzen's portrayal of Alfred, but it is not the deepest thing. The deepest thing is epistemology. Alfred is an engineer and a metallurgist. He believes in reality as a hard physical fact. His son, in contrast, is an English professor, an aficionado of Poststructuralist Theory. In that theory, facts are always relative to discursive systems. To affirm the dominance of discourse over fact, Franzen has Alfred himself give testimony supporting Theory:

Maybe a floor became truly a floor only in his mental reconstruction of it. . . . 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. . . .

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. These were the suspicions that had lain in ambush in all those motel rooms. These were the deep terrors beneath the flimsy beds.

And if the world refused to square with his version of reality then it was necessarily an uncaring world, a sour and sickening world, a penal colony, and he was doomed to be violently lonely in it.

He bowed his head at the thought of how much strength a man would need to survive an entire life so lonely. (272)

Alfred is empty and alone, with nothing to sustain him but his own strength of will, the strength of metal resisting with gloomy futility its own inevitable entropic dissolution. That might seem bad enough, but molecules, even in promiscuous solution, are at least real. The deepest terrors of Alfred's nights turn out to be fears that Derrida's epistemological vision is true and authentic—the vision in which nothing is true and authentic.<sup>8</sup>

These passages on work accomplish much *work*. They evacuate the true inner life of their subject and absorb that subject within a poststructuralist vision of reality, gender, and mind. In that vision, work has no intrinsic psychological value. It is not a source of fulfillment that contributes to legitimate self-confidence. It is all pretense and vanity, a show put on to impress the world and to delude oneself. If it has any private inner significance, emerging spontaneously as a motive, it is a kind of futile defensive action designed to compel some fragile temporary order that runs counter to what Nature actually likes. Nature likes disorder, Franzen tells us. In attempting to force order on Nature, Alfred is thus completing his total existential isolation. He is isolated, we are to believe, not only from other people but even from the physical world. He exists only as a despairing and futile assertion of will, disconnected from everything.

What is wrong with this picture? One can grant Franzen the rights of caricature, satiric exaggeration, the tonal slant deriving from his own stance toward his subject. At some point, though, caricature becomes untruth, and Franzen, as I perceive it,



goes well past that point. The truth about Alfred, all the Alfreds in the world, is that they do in reality love their work. They take pleasure from creating functional design. Their success in making things work does not separate them from nature. Quite the contrary. Mechanical contrivances work only if the forces of nature are put into play. Creating functionally successful designs gives assurance that one is in reality in tune with nature.

Contrary to the false dichotomy at work in Franzen's caricature of Alfred, nature does not like disorder only. Order is apparent everywhere in nature, from subatomic structure to molecules, from molecules to solar systems, from organic chemicals to organ systems. Denying order, insisting on the primacy of chaos, gives a false picture of what each of us experiences at all times: we live in a world that is, prior to any human involvement, complexly structured. Tweaking that complex structure to satisfy human needs has been a driving force in human evolution. "Gene-culture co-evolution"—the causal interaction of cultural contrivances and the adaptive structure of the human genome—begins with simple chipped stones. It takes a huge leap forward with the control of fire, which makes it possible to produce cooked foods. Because cooking reduces the effort of digestion, it has, over hundreds of thousands and possibly millions of years, radically altered the anatomy and physiology of humans, decreasing the size of the gut and freeing up metabolic resources for the brain (Wrangham). Work, technique, skill, the thoughtful application of labor, artfully manipulating sticks and stones so as to produce some desired result—over millions of years, dispositions for that kind of behavior have been built into the human genome, altering both body and brain, and with them, emotion. Fulfilling adaptive dispositions for work produces pleasure, gives satisfaction, increases confidence, and makes people feel more at home in the world.

That is what is wrong with the picture Franzen draws. Alfred is depressive, has bad moments, to be sure, but he also has creative energy, takes pleasure from that creation, and in that way earns the authority Franzen is so fiercely determined to deny him.

### **The Disciplinarian at Home: Alfred and Enid**

As a young man, Alfred had rented a room in a boarding house run by Enid and her mother. In his room, Enid had found "a much-handled volume of Schopenhauer with certain passages underlined" (266). These passages, sprinkled throughout the Dinner of Revenge sequence, consist in observations on the general misery of life, the dominance of Will, and the natural subordination of women to men. One passage contains the admonition "*you cannot do better than accustom yourself to regard this world as a penitentiary; a sort of penal colony*" (254). Alfred's penal vision

of the world has a precedent in Schopenhauer, but when that vision is associated with Derridean epistemology, it has a still closer affiliation with *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trapped for life within an inescapable prison, tormented by fears that nothing is real, Alfred's only consolation is to become a trustee enforcing a disciplinary regime on the other prisoners—especially the members of his own family.

Alfred's disciplinary regime moves seamlessly from railroad inspection to metallurgical lab to domestic life. While discrediting Alfred's impressiveness as a worker, Franzen is simultaneously undermining Alfred's claims as a husband and father. And since the family functions as a metaphoric nucleus for any disciplinary regime, discrediting the patriarchal bourgeois family also serves to discredit the larger political culture in which the patriarch lives.

Alfred's metallurgical research is mirrored in his marriage. Alfred himself is strong, hard, and cold, like metal (264). The "chaos of warm things," in this gendered vision, is female. Franzen tells us that Enid "had few interests and no expertise. A capacity for love was the only true thing she'd ever had" (312). She is warm and loving, but she is also chaotic. In the opening sequence of the novel, Franzen describes the piles Enid leaves everywhere—in bags, in closets, and on stairs—piles containing bills, recipes, magazines, business letters, photographs, investment statements, birth certificates, catalogues, and other such detritus of domestic life. Alfred is "the governing force" in the house; Enid is "a guerilla" dodging the watchful eye of the government. "By day she ferried material from depot to depot, often just a step ahead of the governing force" (5). As he deteriorates neurologically, Alfred becomes less and less able to control the mess Enid perpetually creates. "Alfred's cries of rage on discovering evidence of guerilla actions—a Nordstrom bag surprised in broad daylight on the basement stairs, nearly precipitating a tumble—were the cries of a government that could no longer govern" (6–7).<sup>9</sup>

Alfred's cries of rage seem, at first, legitimate. Few people enjoy living in squalid disorder. In the comedic resolutions valorizing all the terms antithetical to Alfred's cold male dominance, the guerilla movement reveals itself as a heroic affirmation of life and hope. In the gendered binaries of this novel, life and hope are female qualities set off against the negations personified in Alfred. "Any soil that might have nurtured hope in Alfred had blown away in one or another west Kansan drought" (246). Enid has the final word, and that word is hope, an expression of positive emotionality. After kissing Alfred's dead forehead in the mortuary, she walks out "into the warm spring night," and she feels that "nothing could kill her hope now, nothing" (566).

Through most of the novel, Franzen depicts Enid as an annoying ninny. She is a plausible caricature of bad taste, conventional values, sentimentality, and pecuniary greed. She has a chronic, irrepressible need to make everyone in her family conform to her own narrow conceptions of success and respectability. “Nobody but Enid . . . had ever mistaken Denise for a failure” (79). When nagging fails to produce results, she creates fantasy images of her children’s lives and foists these delusory narratives off on her neighbors and herself (308). When nagging fails to coerce Alfred into making an investment he thinks dishonest, she tries sexual bribery (277). When he refuses to gouge a company that wishes to purchase one of his metallurgical patents, she hides the document he had signed for the deal, and then loses the document.

In the aftermath of the Dinner of Revenge, Enid asks, “‘What is the reason you’re so cold to me?’” (276). Franzen has made those reasons abundantly clear. She is warm and loving, but for any person of intelligence and integrity, her company, over the long haul, would be almost intolerable. In speaking with her, Denise habitually exercises a grimly determined patience that is “more hurtful to Enid than a violent explosion” (98). Alfred has violent explosions, and he has no respect for Enid’s “silly fantasies” (272), but he does respect her desire for family unity. He encourages all the children to acquiesce in her desire for one last Christmas at home.

Franzen finds Enid an irresistible subject for satire, but he also needs her to function as a thematic antithesis to Alfred, so he is compelled to try to rehabilitate her at the end of the story. Denise is enlisted in that effort of rehabilitation. Arriving home on a visit while undergoing a “correction” in her sexual identity—becoming fully lesbian—Denise “nearly put her tongue in the pretty old woman’s mouth, nearly ran her hands down Enid’s hips and thighs” (422–23). The erotic response is prelude to a radical reevaluation. Putatively paraphrasing Denise’s thoughts, Franzen says it was “possible that Enid wasn’t entirely the embarrassing nag and pestilence that Denise for twenty years had made her out to be, possible that Alfred’s problems went deeper than having the wrong wife, possible that Enid’s problems did not go much deeper than having the wrong husband, possible that Denise was more like Enid than she had ever dreamed” (423).

Possible, but not very plausible. Denise is open-minded, tough, realistic, efficient, and highly organized. She has creative energy and a fine sense of style. Enid has none of those qualities. Enid is unequivocally heterosexual. Denise gives heterosexuality a thorough try, but it is only after she begins having sex with women that she understands “what all the fuss” over sex is about (414). She loves her father (523) but “could not remember a time when she had loved her mother”

(423). Other than an extraverted orientation toward seeking pleasure, underlying similarities between Denise and Enid would be hard to identify.

The forced effort to align Denise with Enid is just collateral damage to the crude dichotomization at work in the comedic resolution. “The sorry fact seemed to be that life without Alfred in the house was better for everyone but Alfred” (564). With Alfred out of the house, Enid becomes less conventional, accepts Denise’s sexual orientation, stops being deluded about her children’s failures and weaknesses, and finds no further need for “fretting and punitive judgment” (563). She has fun at Chip’s Jewish wedding and is sorry to reflect that “if Alfred had been with her at the wedding, she *would* have found fault and she *would* have condemned” (564). Alfred, as the source of all negativity, must also be the source for all Enid’s faults of personality and character. Released from the patriarchal heteronormative disciplinary regime, Enid becomes a completely different person. The fairy-tale character of this transformation reveals the distorting force of Franzen’s thematic commitments.

### The Prodigal Son

Franzen’s depiction of Alfred’s relation to Chip reflects contradictory needs. Franzen wants both to repudiate Alfred and to draw on his authority to validate the perspective that Franzen shares with Chip. In concord with his general stance of refusal, Franzen needs to depict Alfred as cold, remote, and controlling, out of touch emotionally with the people closest to him. But he also needs Alfred to affirm his love for Chip and validate Chip’s identity. Part of the solution is to depict a man who has a compulsive need for control, so that love and punishment go hand in hand:

His affliction offended his sense of ownership. These shaking hands belonged to nobody but him, and yet they refused to obey him. They were like bad children. . . . Ir-responsibility and undiscipline were the bane of his existence. . . . Alfred took pleasure in the imagination of chopping his hand off with a hatchet: of letting the transgressing limb know how deeply he was angry with it, how little he loved it if it insisted on disobeying him. . . . [But he also felt] an inclination to weep for this hand that was his, that he loved and wished the best for, that he’d known all his life.

He was thinking about Chip again without noticing it. (67)

The other part of the solution is to use Chip as naïf—to make him blind to his father’s love. The Christmas visit includes a revelation that Chip is Alfred’s favorite child. He is astonished at how glad his father is to see him. “Chip couldn’t see what everyone around him could: that if there was one person in the world whom Alfred did love purely for his own sake, it was Chip” (523). Franzen thus has it both ways. Like Gary (171), Chip claims to reject everything for which his father stands, but like Gary, he still needs his father’s approval. Chip asserts theoretical dominance over his father, by proxy, through Franzen’s depictions of his father. He

nonetheless receives the paternal approval he has always craved—craved enough to have committed fraud, as a child, to obtain.

Alfred never knew about his son's dishonesty in faking his science projects. Had he known, he might have been less hopeful about Chip providing a satisfactory answer to "a very important question." Before Christmas, Alfred contemplates killing himself with a shotgun but decides it would leave too big a mess behind.

He was also afraid it might hurt.

And there was a very important question that he still wanted answered. His children were coming. Gary and Denise and maybe even Chip, his intellectual son. It was possible that Chip, if he came, could answer the very important question.

And the question was:

And the question was:

(464)

Alfred not only does not know the answer. He cannot even formulate the question. Presumably the question has to do with death, "the only plausible portal to the infinite" (464). Possibly also it has to do with life—what matters in life, how to live, what the meaning of it all might be. One can only wonder just how satisfied Alfred would have been, when he still had his wits about him, with the answers Chip might have provided. If Alfred had read *The Corrections*, would he have felt that the novel got at some deep truth in the representation of his own inner life? Or would he, rather, have perceived a certain continuity between the dishonesty through which Chip attained his science fair prizes and the way Franzen depicts Alfred in the novel?

Refusal is a bond between Alfred and Chip, a bond so close that Franzen himself becomes confused about the difference in perspective between Chip and Alfred. As Alfred falls into the ocean from the cruise ship, he is thinking of evenings he had spent reading to his children. "These were evenings, and there were hundreds of them, maybe thousands, when nothing traumatic enough to leave a scar had befallen the nuclear unit. Evenings of plain vanilla closeness in his black leather chair; sweet evenings of doubt beneath the nights of bleak certainty" (335–36). That statement, in free indirect discourse, is a voice-over for Alfred's thoughts. The "nights of bleak certainty" are meant to be Alfred's nights of deconstructive terror and existential isolation. But it is not Alfred who is permanently scarred by traumatic evenings at home. It is Chip, sitting at the table, refusing to eat, who reflects on how sitting too long "could scar the nerves permanently" (268).

Franzen says that Alfred's memory of reading to his children were "forgotten counterexamples" (336) that come to mind in his crisis. It seems more likely that it is Chip, under pressure from his refusal, who willfully suppresses the memory of the good evenings at home. Even while Alfred is remembering these moments of

benevolent paternal care, Franzen's thematic structure exerts a distorting pressure on the memory. Alfred might have spent "thousands" of evenings reading to his children, but such episodes register only as emotionally neutral events, events that do not leave a scar. The good is only "doubt"—minor, subordinate—over against the "certainty" of evil. It is as if Franzen cannot let himself quite register the positive emotional content in the disciplinary patriarchal regime against which he has set his face. And that refusal, his own refusal, he casts back on Alfred, who is supposedly the embodiment of all negativity. Chip and Franzen envision all of family life as an alternation between emotionally neutral evenings and evenings that leave permanent scars. But it is to Alfred that Franzen explicitly attributes this negatively valenced vision of family.

While equivocally rejecting the actual family he depicts, Franzen creates a utopian surrogate in the form of an idealized vision of Denise's experience as a cook. "A good crew was like an elective family in which everyone in the little hot world of the kitchen stood on an equal footing . . . and even in the midst of the most sweaty togetherness each family member enjoyed *privacy* and *autonomy*" (376). Ask people who have actually worked in high-pressure kitchens, and it is unlikely that many will produce reports confirming this little utopian fantasy of a world without hierarchical structure, a world of perfect cooperation in which each individual, though autonomous, also operates in harmonious concord with all other individuals. Such fantasy images are products of a theoretical perspective that refuses to face up to the inherent conflicts built into every kind of social relationship. Excluding Alfred from the complex of positive thematic values means not just excluding the idea of hierarchy. It means also excluding any tough-minded understanding of actual force in the real world. It means rejecting the very idea of reality and thus giving a license to escapist fantasy.

### **A Miraculous Transformation**

At the beginning of the main narrative sequence, the fall and early winter before Christmas, Chip acknowledges to himself that he lacks the "emotional maturity" he recognizes in his sister (79). Franzen would have us believe that by the end of the story he has achieved emotional maturity. Like the depiction of Denise's shift of allegiance from Alfred to Enid, the depiction of Chip's emotional development has a perfunctory look about it. The only passage in which Franzen explicitly describes that development summarizes Chip's relationship with middle-class prostitutes in Vilnius. The prostitutes have ordinary daytime lives and work at night:

Chip was surprised by how willing these women were, while they dressed and fixed their hair, to speak to him like a human being. He was struck by how much pleasure they seemed

to take in their daytime lives, how blah their night work was by contrast, how altogether meaningless; and since he himself had begun to take active pleasure in his daytime work, he became, with each therapeutic (trans)act(ion) on the massage mat, a little more adept at putting his body in its place, at putting sex in its place, at understanding what love was and wasn't. With each prepaid ejaculation he rid himself of the hereditary shame that had resisted fifteen years of sustained theoretical attack. (438)

The hereditary shame is presumably the marital discord to which Chip attributes his own immaturity. We are evidently to understand that prepaid ejaculations heal that internalized discord and help Chip grow up.

What to make of a coming of age that consists of casual conversation with prostitutes? Such experience, repeated often, probably would produce a more casual attitude toward sex, but how could it teach someone "what love was and wasn't"? One need hardly visit prostitutes to ascertain that bought sex and casual conversation are not love. But would that negative conclusion enable one to infer what love actually is? Franzen never answers these questions. Presumably we are not meant to ask them. Still, it is Franzen who raises the issue—what love is and isn't. He just fails to make good on his tacit claim to have anything worthwhile to say on the subject.

Chip's bitterness at being compelled to sit over unpalatable food was sufficient, we are told, to "scar the nerves permanently" (268). The image of him coming of age by chatting with Lithuanian prostitutes looks like a perpetual adolescent's notion of what growing up might be like, were he able to manage it. He seems at least partly conscious that he cannot manage it. Sitting alone by the fire in his parents' home at Christmas, he has a bleak epiphany. "The world was colder and emptier than Chip had realized, the adults had gone away" (545). When only Chip is there, no adults are present. Nonetheless, Chip too is shoehorned into the comedic resolution. Enid's life improves dramatically once Alfred has been removed from the house. "It made a difference, certainly, that all three of her kids were helping out. Chip in particular seemed almost miraculously transformed" (563). That miracle is like the miracle that transforms Enid from an embarrassing nag and pestilence into an embodiment of open-hearted humanity. Laws of physics and economics apply. The amount of *work* accomplished by a transformation is equal to the amount of work put into it. You get what you pay for.

### **The Oppositional Writer**

Franzen regards Don DeLillo as one of "the most original and farseeing novelists of our own day" and approvingly quotes DeLillo on the necessity of adopting an oppositional stance to any governing system. "We need the writer in opposition,

the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation” (*How To Be Alone* 177). That valorization of the oppositional stance reflects a Foucauldian notion of “power” as always inherently evil. Hence the elimination of hierarchy from Denise’s utopian kitchen. “Sooner or later,” Franzen tells us, “all social organisms move from anarchy toward hierarchy” (178). Russia provides the model for this stripped-down range of possible political forms. For “the writer in opposition,” there are only two possible social conditions: anarchy and totalitarianism, “the Bolshevik revolution” or “the Stalinist totality” to which it gave rise (178). That political range makes no allowance for participatory democracy. Late capitalism in the West is merely another version of “Stalinist totality.” The capitalist version looks and feels very different to the people involved in it, of course, and is thus all the more urgently in need of oppositional writers.

In Franzen’s Foucauldian vision, the all-encompassing character of late capitalism precludes appealing to human life history for concepts of well-being, maturity, or health. Chip objects to “‘using the word “health” like it has some kind of absolute timeless meaning’” (31). Such objections reflect a binary opposition between moral absolutism and historical relativism. Hence the culminating moment in the spurious revelation of Alfred’s inner life, “the suspicion that everything was relative” (272). This is the cartoon version of a false dichotomy: biology vs. culture, human nature vs. history. In reality, there is no human culture that is not constrained by biology; and there is no genetically transmitted human behavioral disposition that is not modified by culture. To give a true account of its subject, cultural critique must necessarily be biocultural critique.

Cultures vary widely in their degree of medical knowledge, but there is no culture in which gangrene is considered healthy, no culture in which cholera is not recognized as an illness. In that sense, “health” can indeed have some kind of absolute timeless meaning. In rejecting timeless meanings for the word “health,” Chip is conducting a Foucauldian critique of psychiatric pharmacology. That critique depends on a purely cultural, ideological vision of human life—a vision in which cultural values are not constrained by biological realities. Chip declares that “‘The very definition of mental “health” is the ability to participate in the consumer economy’” (31). In his essays, Franzen adopts Chip’s stance toward mental health:

Health really is the issue here. The pain of consciousness, the pain of knowing, grows apace with the information we have about the degradation of our planet and the insufficiency of our political system and incivility of our society and the insolvency of our treasury and the injustice in the one-fifth of our country and four-fifths of the world that isn’t rich like us. . . . You become depressed. And then you see what technology can do for those who become depressed. It can make them undepressed. *It can bring them health.* And this is



the moment at which I find myself: I look around and see absolutely everyone (or so it seems) finding health. They enjoy their television and their children and they don't worry inordinately. They take their Prozac and are undepressed. . . . I begin to doubt myself. I seem to myself a person who shrilly hates health. I'm only a phone call away from asking for a prescription of my own . . .

(*How To Be Alone* 200–201)

For both Chip and Franzen, culture, specifically the culture of late capitalism, is an all-encompassing episteme. Within the system, being healthy is merely becoming acculturated to the sickness of the system itself. The only possible alternative is to be the oppositional writer who insists that ““the structure of the entire culture is flawed”” (*Corrections* 31).

In contrast to the Foucauldian vision of “mental health” as a purely fictive, cultural construct, a biocultural perspective would envision a parallel between physical and mental health. Illness can be defined as conditions in an organism that diminish or destroy the organism’s capacity to fulfill the basic functions of life—survival, growth, reproduction. Specifically human life history involves being able to function socially, deploy skills, form sexual pair-bonds, and sustain long-term intimate bonds of family. Mental illness—schizophrenia, major depression, bipolar disorder—do indeed diminish and sometimes destroy a person’s ability to fulfill those functions. Emotional immaturity is a much milder condition. One might or might not call it an “illness,” but it is in any case a failure fully to realize the potential for growth within the human life history trajectory. Stunting is not a disease, exactly, but it is not a condition of health, either.

Growing up into an emotionally mature adult usually requires having forged strong emotional bonds with adult caregivers (Ainsworth; Bowlby). In the persona projected by Franzen, as the implied author of *The Corrections*, immaturity seems to reflect weak attachments to both maternal and paternal imagoes. The depiction of Enid suggests inadequate maternal bonding that results in a defective power of intimate affiliation. “The chaos of warm things,” in this novel, reduces itself to a thin trickle of hedonism. That quality of feeling reveals itself in Denise’s impulse to give sexual caresses to her elderly mother. The depiction of Alfred suggests inadequate paternal bonding that results in a reflexively antagonistic stance toward paternal authority. Chip becomes reconciled with Alfred only after Alfred has sunk into dementia, has lost all pretense to authority, and has become merely ridiculous and pathetic. In parallel with their stance toward Alfred, Chip and Franzen adopt a stance of reflexive hostility to all forms of political authority.

If Franzen is a good index of ideological fashion among many readers of serious fiction, we can make a few broad inferences about the values and attitudes of those readers. We can infer, to begin with, that they are deeply sympathetic

to correcting injustices and frustrations inherent in the mid-century patriarchal bourgeois family. In their eagerness to make those corrections, they often go too far in opposite directions. Caught up in the logic of simple moral dualities, they fail in poise and balance. Preoccupied with a major transition in the social roles of the two sexes, they sometimes indulge a morose pleasure in denigrating characteristically masculine forms of constructive effort. Suspicious of all governing authority and confident in their own refined moral sensibilities, they find rhetorical satisfaction in round-house declarations that “the structure of the entire culture is flawed.” Fascinated by the way cultures vary, they habitually overlook the deep underlying commonalities in human experience. Nonetheless, they are so eager to discount the moral achievements of their own culture that they fail to notice differences between a society in which discourse is controlled by a few people who own guns and a society in which free speech is carefully protected by an elaborate system of laws that has developed over centuries. Determined to display liberality toward diverse forms of individual experience, they are reluctant to acknowledge that some conditions are indeed pathological—harmful to the people who have them or to others. Unwilling to acknowledge ineradicable conflicts built into human life, they too readily accept pseudo-explanations that attribute all evil to “the system,” and especially to the individuals—typically upper-class males—who personify power within the system. Driven by the logic of this moral scapegoating, they necessarily envision the general populace as helplessly supine, inert, utterly passive before the power wielded by the few. Consequently, they feel no shock of revulsion when Franzen absolves a drug-crazed thief of all moral responsibility for torturing and murdering a woman he is robbing. They think it politically sophisticated to depict the torturer as a helpless victim of “social injustice” (*Corrections* 305).

### **The Canon and the *Zeitgeist***

Franzen’s novel clearly satisfies the demands of contemporary taste. In 2005, *The Corrections* was included in *Time* magazine’s list of the 100 best English-language novels (Grossman and Lacayo). Bret Easton Ellis declares that *The Corrections* is “one of the three great books of my generation” (Birnbaum). Philip Roth says that among the great American novelists in the generations that followed his own, “the greatest is Jonathan Franzen.” A reviewer in *Esquire* affirms that *The Corrections* is “that rarest thing, a contemporary novel that will endure” (Birkerts).

Novels that endure typically situate their contemporary cultural concerns within an intuitive understanding of human life history. They do not typically distort the inner lives of characters in the service of fashionable ideological reductions. Canonical authors have often been profoundly hostile to ruling class systems—

Dickens comes readily to mind. They do not, however, flinch from recognizing the sources of power in nature and human life. They do not take refuge in facile utopian fantasies.

Franzen's novel succeeds best when at its most farcical. As the comic strips in daily newspapers suggest, most concerns of our daily lives have a cartoonish aspect. Distracted by the comedy, we might for a time overlook Franzen's failure to understand love and respect, to grasp the logic of human life history, or to construct an intellectually mature critique of political power. As the ideological mood of our current generation passes away, though, the shallowness of Franzen's vision will, I think, make itself felt ever more strongly.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *Complete Review* lists dozens of reviews of *The Corrections* and for many of them provides links to online sources.

<sup>2</sup> For correspondences between Franzen's family members and the characters in *The Corrections*, see his memoir *The Discomfort Zone*; his essay "My Father's Brain" in *How To Be Alone* 7–38; and his essay "On Autobiographical Fiction" in *Farther Away* 119–40.

<sup>3</sup> On the general theory of imagoes, see McAdams, *Power* 176–214, *Stories* 117–61. On the crucial character of parent-child relations in the formation of adult identity, see Ainsworth; Bowlby; Diamond, Fagundes, and Butterworth; and Posada and Lu.

<sup>4</sup> For more extensive accounts of Foucauldian cultural critique from a biocultural perspective, see Carroll, *Evolution* 35–40, 154–55, 244–45, 390–92, 410–35, 445–48; and Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger 59–69

<sup>5</sup> For examples of evolutionary research on family psychology, see Geary and Flinn; and Salmon and Shackelford. For examples of evolutionary research on social psychology, see Boehm; Gintis; Goleman; Haidt; Tomasello; and Wilson, *Social Conquest*. For expositions of evolutionary epistemology, see Carroll, *Evolution*; and Lorenz.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Burn (101–08) offers an elaborately detailed analysis of the way this story line is divided into narrative segments.

<sup>7</sup> A similar observation provides the leading thread in Jason Polley's account of *The Corrections*.

<sup>8</sup> Robert McLaughlin presupposes the validity of Alfred's Derridean vision but believes that only English professors truly get it. Writers like Franzen partially get it. Ordinary people don't get it at all. "Language, narrative, and the processes

of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human. . . . The vast majority of Americans are not aware of the role language plays in constructing the roles they perform in this culture of despair” (67). Hence the need for English professors such as Martin Hipsky, who explains that Alfred’s Derridean night terrors “are integral to the tragic realism of the character’s *Innerlichkeit*” (section 10).

<sup>9</sup> Susanne Rohr argues that Franzen’s description of Enid’s clutter is “a moment of *mise en abîme*”—an encapsulated self-reflexive image—for “the deep structure” of *The Corrections* as a whole (96).

<sup>10</sup> Critics well satisfied with the ideology of the novel include Burn; Chatterjee and Neelakantan; Hipsky; Polley; Poole; and Rohr. Critics who feel that Franzen is not sufficiently single-minded in his critique of “the entire culture” include Annesley; Green; Hawkins; Hutchinson; and Toal. Hutchinson, who approvingly cites Annesley and Green, argues that Franzen is at present the writer “who most embodies the figure of the compromised and conflicted white male liberal” (191). As a “much-desired resolution and transcendence” of Franzen’s imperfect radicalism, Hutchinson offers the formula “transgressive collective action” (205). He does not specify what such action might involve, though, or what the word transgressive might signify. Presumably, Hutchinson’s usage has some connotative overlap with the meaning of the word in the title of the journal to which Chip contributes while living in New York, the *Warren Street Journal: A Monthly of the Transgressive Arts*. Hawkins cites Hutchinson’s transgressive formula and calls it “intriguing” but insists that resistance to “consumer capitalism” should be located within a “metanarrative” of “universal love” (84).

### Works Cited

- Ainsworth, Mary D. “Attachment and Other Affectional Bonds across the Life Cycle.” *Attachment across the Life Cycle*. Ed. Parkes, Colin Murray, Joan Stevenson-Hinde and Peter Marris. London: Routledge, 1991. 33–51. Print.
- Annesley, James. “Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the “Novel of Globalization.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.2 (2006): 111–28. Print.
- Birkerts, Sven, and Bryan Mealer. “Man at His Best: Books.” *Esquire* 136.3 (2001): 71. Print.
- Birnbaum, Robert. “Bret Easton Ellis.” *The Morning News*, January 19, 2006. Web. <<http://www.themorningnews.org/article/bret-easton-ellis>>.
- Boehm, Christopher. *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism, and Shame*. New York: Basic Books, 2012. Print.

- Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- Brown, Donald E. *Human Universals*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991. Print
- Burn, Stephen J. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. London, England: Continuum, 2008. Print.
- Carroll, Joseph. "An Evolutionary Paradigm for Literary Study." *Style* 42.2-3 (2008): 103–35. Print.
- . *Evolution and Literary Theory*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1995. Print.
- . "Human Nature and Literary Meaning: A Theoretical Model Illustrated with a Critique of *Pride and Prejudice*." *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 187–216. Print.
- . "Literature and Evolutionary Psychology." *The Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*. Ed. Buss, David M. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005. 931–52. Print.
- . "Meaning and Effect in Fiction: An Evolutionary Model of Interpretation Illustrated with a Reading of 'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'." *Style* 26.3 (2012): 297–316. Print.
- . "The Truth About Fiction: Biological Reality and Imaginary Lives." *Style* 46.2 (2012): 129–60. Print.
- Carroll, Joseph, Jonathan Gottschall, John Johnson, and Daniel Kruger. *Graphing Jane Austen: The Evolutionary Basis of Literary Meaning*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Print.
- Charles, Ron. "That Warm Family Feeling." *The Christian Science Monitor*. September 13, 2001. Web. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0913/p19s1-booo.html>>
- Chatterjee, Srirupa, and G. Neelakantan. "'Forever Fearful of a Crash': Family Vis-à-Vis Materialism in Jonathan Franzen's the Corrections." *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 37.4 (2007): 6–9. Print.
- Complete Review, The. "*The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen." 2001–2012. Web. <<http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/popus/franzenj.htm>>.
- Diamond, Lisa M., Christopher P. Fagundes, and Molly R. Butterworth. "Intimate Relationships across the Life Span." *The Handbook of Life-Span Development*. Ed. Lamb, Michael E. and Alexandra M. Freund. Vol. 2. New York: Wiley, 2010. 379–433. Print.

- Flinn, Mark V., David C. Geary, and Carol V. Ward. "Ecological Dominance, Social Competition, and Coalitionary Arms Races: Why Humans Evolved Extraordinary Intelligence." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 26.1 (2005): 10–46. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Sheridan, Alan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977. Print.
- . *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Trans. Bouchard, Donald F. and Sherry Simon. Ed. Bouchard., Donald F. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977. Print.
- . "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx." Trans. Schrift, Alan D. *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*. Ed. Ormiston, Gayle L. and Alan D. Schrift. Albany: State U of New York P, 1990. Print.
- . *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Ed. Gordon, Colin. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. Print.
- Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.
- . *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.
- . *Farther Away*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Print.
- . *Freedom*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. Print.
- . *How to Be Alone: Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Print.
- Geary, David C., and Mark V. Flinn. "Evolution of Human Parental Behavior and the Human Family." *Parenting: Science and Practice* 1.1/2 (2001): 5–61. Print.
- Gintis, Herbert. *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests: The Foundations of Cooperation in Economic Life*. Economic Learning and Social Evolution. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 2005. Print.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. New York: Bantam, 2006. Print.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

- Grossman, Lev, and Richard Lacayo. "All-Time 100 Novels." *Time* October 16, 2005. Print. < <http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/#how-we-picked-the-list>>.
- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012. Print.
- Hawkins, Ty. "Assessing the Promise of Jonathan Franzen's First Three Novels: A Rejection of 'Refuge.'" *College Literature* 37.4 (2010): 61–87. Print.
- Hipsky, Martin. "Post-Cold War Paranoia in the Corrections and the Sopranos." *Postmodern Culture* 16.2 (2006): section 10. Web. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/pmc/v016/16.2hipsky.html>>
- Hutchinson, Colin. "Jonathan Franzen and the Politics of Disengagement." *Critique* 50.2 (2009): 191–207. Print.
- James, Henry. "The Art of Fiction." *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*. Ed. Edel, Leon. New York: Library of America, 1984. 44–65. Print.
- Lorenz, Konrad. *Behind the Mirror: A Search for a Natural History of Human Knowledge*. Trans. Taylor, Ronald. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. Print.
- McAdams, Dan P. *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*. New York: Guilford, 1988. Print.
- McAdams, Dan P. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: William Morrow, 1993. Print.
- McCormick, Christopher M., Sally I-Chun Kuo, and Ann S. Masten. "Developmental Tasks across the Life Span." *Handbook of Life-Span Development*. Ed. Fingerman, Karen L., et al. New York: Springer, 2011. 117–40. Print.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Sympløke* 12.1-2 (2004): 53–68. Print.
- Muehlenbein, Michael P., and Mark V. Flinn. "Patterns and Processes of Human Life History Evolution." *Mechanisms of Life History Evolution: The Genetics and Physiology of Life History Traits and Trade-Offs*. Ed. Flatt, Thomas and Andreas Heyland. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. 153–68. Print.

- Polley, Jason S. *Jane Smiley, Jonathan Franzen, Don DeLillo: Narratives of Everyday Justice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2011. Print.
- Poole, Ralph J. "Serving the Fruitcake, or Jonathan Franzen's Midwestern Poetics." *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 49.3 (2008): 263–83. Print.
- Posada, German, and Ting Lu. "Child–Parent Attachment Relationships: A Life-Span Phenomenon." *Handbook of Life-Span Development*. Ed. Fingerman, Karen L., et al. New York: Springer, 2011. 87–115. Print.
- Rohr, Susanne. "The Tyranny of the Probable"—Crackpot Realism and Jonathan Franzen's "the Corrections." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 49.1 (2004): 91–105. Print.
- Roth, Philip. Blurb on Dust Jacket of Jonathan Franzen's *Farther Away*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012. Print.
- Salmon, Catherine, and Todd K. Shackelford, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Family Psychology*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.
- Toal, Catherine. "Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy." *Journal of European Studies* 33.3–4 [130–131] (2003): 305–22. Print.
- Tomasello, Michael. *Why We Cooperate*. A Boston Review Book. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 2009. Print.
- Wilson, Edward O. *On Human Nature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978. Print.
- . *The Social Conquest of Earth*. New York: Liveright Pub. Corporation, 2012. Print.
- Wrangham, Richard W. *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*. New York: Basic Books, 2009. Print.