

NOVEL AFFIRMATIONS:
DEFENDING LITERARY CULTURE IN THE FICTION OF DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE, JONATHAN FRANZEN, AND RICHARD POWERS

A Dissertation

by

MICHAEL LITTLE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2004

Major Subject: English

NOVEL AFFIRMATIONS:
DEFENDING LITERARY CULTURE IN THE FICTION OF DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE, JONATHAN FRANZEN, AND RICHARD POWERS

A Dissertation

by

MICHAEL LITTLE

Submitted to Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Approved as to style and content by:

David McWhirter
(Chair of Committee)

Mary Ann O'Farrell
(Member)

Sally Robinson
(Member)

Stephen Daniel
(Member)

Paul Parrish
(Head of Department)

May 2004

Major Subject: English

ABSTRACT

Novel Affirmations: Defending Literary Culture in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace,

Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers. (May 2004)

Michael Little, B.A., University of Houston;

M.A., University of Houston

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. David McWhirter

This dissertation studies the fictional and non-fictional responses of David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers to their felt anxieties about the vitality of literature in contemporary culture. The intangible nature of literature's social value marks the literary as an uneasy, contested, and defensive cultural site. At the same time, the significance of any given cultural artifact or medium, such as television, film, radio, or fiction, is in a continual state of flux. Within that broad context I examine some of the cultural institutions competing with literature for public attention, as well as some of the cultural developments impacting the availability of public attention for literary concerns. With Wallace, I study his efforts in fiction and essays to establish an anti-ironic mode of literary rebellion, in opposition to the culturally pervasive tone of self-protective irony modeled by television. Franzen opens discussion about the transience of cultural authority, a situation in which the imprimatur of the academy, for instance, confers a cultural significance different in kind but not degree from the imprimatur of a popular televised book club. My study of Franzen in particular demonstrates the impact of

proliferating sites of cultural authority, addressing the emergence of middlebrow culture and audiences from contested space to authoritative cultural arbiter. The chapter on Franzen also examines the increasing role of corporate interests in the production of cultural artifacts with an eye toward their financial viability more than their cultural impact. And finally, my study of Powers focuses on the animosity between the sciences and the humanities. Powers produces fiction that serves as an indispensable tool for communicating between disparate and otherwise isolated disciplines, and for helping those specialized fields synthesize their information with others.

DEDICATION

For Laine, Kyra, and Flynn, and for my mother, who knew before I ever started that I would do this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the result of years of work and support by a huge number of people. Thanks first of all must go to my committee chair, David McWhirter, who agreed to support this work even though it falls outside the scope of his primary field. His wide-ranging knowledge, his critical readings of my work, and his professional dedication have been valuable beyond calculation and will always be the standard against which I measure my work and my bearing. Thanks also to committee member Mary Ann O'Farrell, whose comments on my work were equally detailed, thoughtful, and helpful, and, in one particular instance, well above and beyond what I could reasonably have asked of her. Thanks as well to committee members Sally Robinson, for agreeing to join the committee long after the project was underway, and to Stephen Daniel, particularly for his engaged participation during my defense. Other faculty members who have been morally, emotionally, and intellectually encouraging, as well as just good friends, are Valerie Balester, Joanna Gibson, Jim Harner, Chris Holcomb, Jimmie Killingsworth, and Jackie Palmer.

I also owe huge debts of gratitude and support to my friends who have led the way and who have supported me and waited for me to catch up. Diana Ashe, Patricia Brooke, Maria Papanikolaou, and Ellen Weber remind me regularly that I've accomplished considerably more than I think I have and that I have proven myself considerably more than I think I have. They have been my most dedicated boosters, and my life is richer because of them. Les Harrison and Denise Grothues have always

listened to my self-doubts and anxieties without ever failing to find the right perspective to help me see my way out. Thanks to these and others who have read and commented on my work, including Amy McWilliams, Tom Chapman, Jan Little, and Molly McBride.

My co-workers have been supportive all along and I thank all of them for their repeated words of encouragement. I owe thanks to my supervisors and employers for their encouragement and also for their willingness to accommodate the varying and flexible schedule I requested in order to finish: Joy Miller, Dr. Thomas Sturtevant, Mike Wisby, Les Bunte, Sue Shahan, Dr. Arturo Alonzo, Bill May, and Lanny Smith have all, one way or another, made sure that I had the time I needed to do this work. Special thanks goes to Angela Thompson for bearing the brunt of my absence.

Thanks, awe, and love go at last to my family. To my wife Laine, whose firm and unwavering support let me know always that I would finish, and as year led on to year she alone saved me from thinking I might not be able to complete this work. To my daughter Kyra, whose love, compassion, thoughtfulness, and intelligence are a never-ending source of wonder, and to my daughter Flynn, whose smile and full-body laugh are infectious and a regular reminder of what's really important. Thanks also to my brother, Matt, and to my father, who has made me remember that completing this work is, in fact, the achievement I originally thought it was.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
II “YOU ARE LOVED”: DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S RESPONSE TO TELEVISUAL IRONY	21
Wallace’s Fictional Critiques of an Ironic Worldview	28
Wallace on Television and Irony in Contemporary Mass Culture	39
The Exhaustion of Metafiction.....	68
<i>Infinite Jest</i> and Radical Realism	83
III “ANOTHER 20 YEARS OF BORING LITERARY NOVELS AND THE THING’S DEAD”: JONATHAN FRANZEN, OPRAH WINFREY, AND THE INSTABILITY OF CULTURAL AUTHORITY	92
Oprah’s Book Club and Populist Cultural Authority	97
<i>The Corrections</i> and Populist Cultural Authority	119
IV “IT’S ABOUT TEACHING A HUMAN TO TELL”: SCIENCE AND THE HUMANITIES IN THE FICTION OF RICHARD POWERS	149
Powers and the Mutual Distrust of the Sciences and the Humanities	151
Consilience in <i>Galatea 2.2</i>	167
V CONCLUSION	194
WORKS CITED.....	196
VITA	207

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a study of three contemporary novelists who have demonstrated in their fiction and non-fiction a sharply felt anxiety about the cultural status of literature, and who have argued in their fiction and non-fiction for the relevance of literature in contemporary cultural life. I rely throughout on the critical work of my primary authors and on secondary criticism that argues that literature maintains a precarious cultural significance, and my interests here are two-fold: to explore some of the cultural institutions and developments that compete with literature for public attention, and to examine the fictional and non-fictional responses to those institutions and developments in the works of David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, and Jonathan Franzen. My rationale for choosing these authors in particular derives from the fact that each of them addresses the contemporary cultural status of the novel in essays, interviews, and the fiction itself. Wallace, for example, takes the position that television's relentlessly ironic tone has become the tone of the culture at large, essentially eliminating irony from the author's rhetorical tool set. For fiction to pursue an oppositional agenda effectively, Wallace suggests it must avoid the evasions of irony and adopt a potentially "banal" tone of direct sincerity ("E Unibus Pluram" 81). For Powers, one of the cultural threats to fiction comes from the tangible evidence of the

This dissertation follows the format of the *MLA Handbook, Sixth Edition*.

sciences' contributions to knowledge and the resulting advances in quality of life; the intangible contributions of the humanities suffer by comparison. Powers argues, in interviews and in his fiction, for the value of fiction as a "moratorium" from life (Neilson, "Interview" 22), a site of escape and reflection "where we can, at least temporarily, take apart and refuse to compete within the terms that the rest of existence insists on" (Neilson, "Interview" 23). I argue here that Powers also makes a case in his fiction for the use of literature as a tool for sharing knowledge among diverse, specialized disciplines. Franzen sits at the center of this dissertation for two reasons: one is his explicit attention to the emergence of varied and competing claimants to cultural authority; the other is his own indeterminate position, at times favoring elitist notions of the purpose of fiction as a tool for social analysis and uncompromising aesthetics, while at other times favoring populist models of fiction as a vehicle for entertainment. I discuss him here in light of his expressed anxieties about the decline of white male cultural authority and the power of corporate interests subsidizing cultural production to a degree that threatens the author's artistic integrity.

I chose to study Wallace, Franzen, and Powers in particular in large part because they all began their writing careers well after the conditions that agitate their anxieties had become manifest in contemporary culture. The state of culture in society, and the role of literature within culture, have long been a concern of authors and critics to the point that to understand literature is to understand it in part as a cultural space that regularly seems compelled to justify itself. I chose to focus on specific threats to the humanities present in contemporary culture and to concentrate on authors who, by the

relative youth of their careers, have not had the opportunity to write in a literary culture that was not confronted by the technological, corporate, media, and interdisciplinary threats to and manipulations of literature's cultural role. Franzen and Powers have been writing since the mid- to late 1980s, and Wallace began writing in the early 1990s. They have not, as writers, been watching developments in the culture with growing alarm, but have recognized and been grappling with their specific issues from the outset of their careers. Others of their contemporaries—authors like Lorrie Moore, William Vollmann, Rikki Ducornet, Carole Maso, Rick Moody, and Michael Chabon—have been interested primarily in issues less culturally anxious than those of my core authors. Of these authors' output, Chabon's *Wonder Boys* approaches the level of anxiety apparent in Wallace, Franzen, and Powers, but I've chosen not to discuss him in this dissertation in order to limit my study to authors who have written or spoken extra-novelistically about their understanding of the crisis that informs their fiction. The other authors I've mentioned, who are themselves not an isolated collective, proceed in several directions from a less anxious starting point. Rick Moody's often jaded and weary tone dissects the culture of young middle America with much the same distance that Wallace tries to avoid; the others write with an exuberance of style and invention that affirms in its confidence and scope (lush erotics from Maso, satirical coming-of-age stories from Moore, fantastic landscapes in the works of Ducornet and Vollmann) the reach and breadth of the novel's continued possibilities, in spite of or in defiance of the anxieties expressed by the authors I focus on in the chapters to follow.

I maintain in this dissertation that the topography of contemporary culture is one of continual reconfiguration, that the cultural significance of a given medium (such as television, radio, film, fiction, and so forth) shifts over time, and that the authority of both individual media and cultural institutions, ranging from academia to publishing conglomerates to television pundits, is also in flux. My local interest for this project is to examine the position (and efforts to alter the position) of literature in contemporary culture. The intangible nature of literature's value to society marks literature as an uneasy, contested, and defensive cultural site. As a mode of entertainment, literature competes unsuccessfully with television's ease of access and dynamic presentation. As a mode of instruction, literature's fictionality competes with fact-based disciplines, particularly the sciences. Moreover, I contend that middlebrow readers and writers have grown increasingly empowered and confident in their tastes to the point that they more readily assert their privilege to choose according to their tastes without feeling that their discretionary tools are inadequate and underdeveloped. This situation is far removed from that of a hundred years ago as modeled by the letter Joan Shelley Rubin quotes at the beginning of *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, a letter asking critic, editor, and essayist Hamilton Wright Mabie for "some idea how to start right to obtain culture" (1). Middlebrow efforts to meld elite aesthetics and intellectual content with more commercially popular plots and characters have functioned within a traditionally anxious cultural space. More than forty years ago Dwight Macdonald famously blasted the middlebrow for confusing the distinction between high and low culture; more recently, Sally Robinson has argued that the middlebrow continues to suffer the disdain of literary

elites and mass audiences alike. Yet middlebrow authors have become increasingly vocal in defense of their cultural value. Stephen King in particular has argued that his fiction must be considered more than mere genre hackwork, that it is, in fact, middlebrow, bearing all of the surface entertainment and deeper resonances that are cited as a shorthand indications of middlebrow culture; King argues at the same time for the cultural value of the middlebrow.

Even more significant is a series of developments that impart seriousness both to mass culture and to the middlebrow. One is the appearance of studies like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and *A Feeling for Books*, the first of which demonstrates the seriousness with which romance readers approach their fiction, and the second of which demonstrates the seriousness with which the editorial board of The Book-of-the-Month Club views its role as cultural arbiter. Likewise the work of Jonathan Fiske in "Popular Discrimination" demonstrates that audiences for mass entertainment are not passive recipients of network television's dictates, but are themselves serious and discriminating cultural consumers. The phenomenon that was Oprah Winfrey's Book Club raised the profile of the middlebrow, certainly through its impact on the publishing industry, but also through its ability to empower and validate the reading inclinations and experiences of Winfrey's audience in response to her selections. One of the most significant cultural developments is technological, as demonstrated by the role that the Internet has played to enable middlebrow readers to form online communities where they articulate their appreciation for entertaining fiction and edifying fiction and, whenever possible, both at once. In other words, Internet

communities and Winfrey's community of viewers demonstrate to self-conscious middlebrow readers that they are not alone, and need not read their pretentious (as seen from the masses) or pandering (as seen from the elite) fiction in isolated shame. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the working class, which in many ways is coterminous with middlebrow tastes (*Distinction* 327), "can neither ignore the high-art aesthetic, which denounces their own 'aesthetic,' nor abandon their socially conditioned inclinations . . . [much less] proclaim them and legitimate them" (*Distinction* 41); the cultural developments I've mentioned above provide the middlebrow audiences what may be their first culture-spanning opportunities to "proclaim" and "legitimate" their tastes.

Existing commentary about the role and status of literature in contemporary culture tends to agree that literature is precariously positioned. For some critics, the self-referential, solipsistic, and antagonistic literary climate of the last forty years has not helped, and may in fact be the root cause of literature's precariousness. David Foster Wallace, as I've briefly mentioned and will discuss in detail in Chapter II, faults authors who are unable to escape the influence of the dominant cultural artifact that is television; he also indicates a weariness with the self-referential metafiction of the 1960s and 1970s, which, he argues, fervently limited its fictional scope to the solipsistic and in so doing risked alienating readers who sought a cultural "aerial view," as Richard Powers puts it. Alvin Kernan argues that the cultivation of fiction is rightly the author's purview; he would seemingly agree with Don DeLillo's assertion to Jonathan Franzen that "The novel is whatever the novelist is doing at a given time" (qtd. in Franzen "Why Bother?" 95). Nevertheless, Kernan cautions authors to remember that the novelist may define the

novel, but that does not mean that the novelist can demand an audience. The novel may be whatever the novelist is doing, but “Art is . . . whatever a society says is art at any given time, and it does what people agree that art should do” (*Death* 31) if it hopes to earn attention. Kernan argues in effect that audiences seek cultural products that satisfy their current and shifting tastes and needs, and that cultural products that fail to meet those needs lose their cultural vitality.

Where Kernan indicates that the author must be prepared to lose audience members if he or she strays too far from what society asks of its writers, Gerald Graff accuses writers and critics of having directly undercut their own social significance. Graff notes that “literature has been telling us how little it [literature itself] means for a long time” (32), and that long-standing critical claims for the intransitive symbolic meaning of art (language as presentation) in contrast to, and in rejection of, discursive statements that bear responsibility for conveying meaning about the world (language as proposition), as in the sciences, hobble literary theorists’ efforts to construct “a defensible notion of artistic *significance*” (48). Even more recently, as a direct consequence of “vulgarized versions of deconstruction and poststructuralism” (xii) that spread in the 1960s and 1970s, “Both the artists and the critics have taken as their subject the problematic status of their own authority to make statements about anything outside the systems of language and convention in which they must write” (1). Graff’s arguments demonstrate that the history of critical and artistic efforts to distance literature from fidelity to the real, from responsibility for making propositional statements, even from being able to represent anything but itself, have made it difficult to claim for

literature a position of cultural significance to combat the encroachment of other media, other forms of entertainment, and other forms of social instruction.

One of the more problematic developments for literature's cultural status is Roland Barthes's declaration of the author's death. Barthes's efforts to eliminate the author's presence as the source of a text's one true meaning are liberating in that they empower the reader, validating the reader's individual experience insofar as it is freed from having to face the author's judgment of how accurately or how well the reader has engaged with the text. At the same time, however, critics like Wayne Booth argue that the "author's voice" is "one of the things we read fiction for" (*Rhetoric of Fiction* 60), and Seán Burke has noted that Barthes is careful to depict the death of the author/birth of the reader in such a way that the author no longer holds dominion over interpretation, but may still "reappear as a desire of the reader's" (30). It's confounding, I maintain, for a reader who seeks the pleasure of the author's voice to be told that the author they seek is of no consequence to their reading experience.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu helps to clarify just why such theory—or fictional antagonism as demonstrated by the author-character in John Barth's "Life-Story" who calls the reader an "uninsultable, print-oriented bastard" (127)—can be so disconcerting to readers. Bourdieu's sociological study of audiences and taste in *Distinction* and *The Field of Cultural Production* provides useful insight into the ways audiences of varied educational, financial, and social backgrounds perceive art. One of Bourdieu's key findings is the degree to which experimental art is not simply misunderstood and confusing to unsophisticated audiences, as we might naturally expect, but is actually

perceived as a threatening, personal affront. Where art is often tasked with, and understood to serve, a stance of cultural opposition that can be threatening to those who are invested in the culture it opposes, Bourdieu demonstrates that working class audiences, for example, aren't merely understanding their philosophies and world views to be critiqued, but are inclined to take experimentation itself as an assault designed to belittle them directly for not having the tools of the elite for understanding and appreciating art. John Barth may understand his attack on readers to serve the purpose of liberating them from reliance on authors for textual meaning, but such "formal experimentation" in the "familiar" confines of the novel, to which unsophisticated readers bring certain expectations of entertainment and structure, risks leading those readers to "protest, not only because they do not feel the need for these fancy games, but because they sometimes understand that they derive their necessity from the logic of a field of production [that is, in my example, the field of the literary elite] which excludes them precisely by these games" (*Distinction* 33).

Other work that has tried to demonstrate or explain the uneasy cultural position of literature looks beyond the implications of literature's self-positioning to the broader cultural context in which literature functions. Sven Birkerts, for example, has written extensively on the threat to reading that is posed by technological advances, so much so that Kathleen Fitzpatrick has identified as a cliché the temptation for critiques of literary culture to cite "Birkerts on what-has-gone-wrong" (519). Birkerts resists the "all-electronic future" we face for several reasons, including the "flattening of historical perspectives" and the fading of "the private self" as "we increasingly accept the

transparency of a life lived within a set of systems, electronic or otherwise” (*Gutenberg* 128-130). But his primary fear is that “the complexity and distinctiveness of spoken and written expression, which are deeply bound to traditions of print literacy, will gradually be replaced by a more telegraphic sort of ‘plainspeak’” (128). Birkerts has come to the point where he assumes the subsumption of print culture, including the literary, into an electronic culture which we can already see forming around us, from the televisual culture that so many blame for eroding literacy to the increasing saturation of home and office with personal computers. Frederic Jameson’s landmark *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, anticipated Birkerts’s anxiety about the cultural impact of the computer, identifying it along with “movie cameras, video, [and] tape recorders” as “machines of reproduction rather than of production,” enabling and encouraging “the weaker productions of postmodernism” in the form of solipsistic “narratives which are *about* the processes of reproduction” (37). Yet I maintain, in contradistinction to Birkerts and Jameson, that the use of e-mail and the internet for personal communication and expression has already borne significant fruit for literary culture by providing, as I discuss briefly above and again in Chapter III, a medium for readers to proclaim and validate their reading experiences and inclinations.

Secondary literature about the three authors of central concern to me in the chapters to follow is sparse. Powers has generated the most critical commentary of the three. Jim Neilson solicited essays about Powers for a special issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1998 after noticing that the critical work on Powers to that point consisted of a single academic article, and while there are more than just that one

article now, there aren't *many* more. Some of the critics writing for and since that collection have commented on Powers's narrative techniques, such as his weaknesses with character and dialog or his strengths in constructing narratives that follow multiple, interconnecting histories. But much of the criticism about Powers focuses on his explorations of knowledge and information and the power of narrative to help us order that information. Trey Strecker's "Ecologies of Knowledge," Joseph Tabbi's *Cognitive Fictions*, and April Lindner's "Narrative as Necessary Evil in Richard Powers's *Operation Wandering Soul*," focus on his explorations of knowledge and information, and the power, even the necessity, of narrative to help us order that information; I pick up this thread in Chapter IV to discuss Powers's arguments for the value of literature as a tool for making connections among specialized disciplines and the respective bodies of knowledge they generate.

Criticism about Wallace and Franzen is still limited in volume, predominantly consisting of book reviews and cultural essays that cite them as examples of current trends among young writers. When they are examined at any length, they tend to be considered in terms of the narcotics and depression that inform Franzen's *The Corrections* and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Tom LeClair's seminal essay on Wallace, Powers, and William Vollmann ("The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace") pointed the way toward studies of information and knowledge that have since been written about Powers but not Wallace, around whom there has been little but silence by way of academic study. With Franzen the case is much the same; the body of secondary literature about his work is largely comprised

of reviews that praise the plotting and the politics of his first two novels or that either praise or admonish his depiction of the family tragedy at the heart of *The Corrections*. A copious collection of newspaper articles and other commentary has surrounded Franzen's ambivalence about Winfrey's selection of *The Corrections* to be featured on her show, much of it written to support either Franzen's or Winfrey's actions. Only a few of those commentaries have indicated that the Franzen/Winfrey incident might serve as a departure point for considering the situation of literature within contemporary culture in general, an opportunity I take up in Chapter III.

This dissertation is organized around three different sites of cultural activity that pose a threat of some kind to literature, either in its technique, its capacity to reflect artistic autonomy and integrity, or its ability to compete with other disciplines for public attention. I address the first of these in Chapter II, where I discuss David Foster Wallace's attempts to establish an anti-ironic mode of literary rebellion. Wallace proceeds from the assumption that fiction is a useful and necessary vehicle for culturally oppositional arguments and exploration. He also acknowledges that irony is a useful rhetorical tool for exposing and critiquing social and political hypocrisies and cultural dangers. One such ingrained cultural danger is television, an easy and obvious target for critics who lament the decline of reading and declare the subsequent dulling of the public's mental faculties. Wallace side-steps these arguments about the effects of television on cultural consumption to argue the deleterious effects of television on cultural production, particularly that of novelists. Wallace identifies two dangers that authors face from television: one is that authors may substitute television watching for

people watching; the other, the threat of interest to Chapter II, is that television has co-opted and mastered irony to the point that authors no longer have recourse to irony as a rhetorical tool.¹ Wallace argues that television is relentlessly and pervasively ironic, and through its ubiquitous cultural presence has made such irony the default tone of the culture at large.

Consequently, attempts to criticize television by using irony often suffer from seeming “*reverently ironic*” (“E Unibus Pluram” 76); by deploying the same irony that television uses, fiction like Mark Leyner’s seems as much in thrall to television as critical of it. If irony is a useful tool for critiquing sincerity, then Wallace determines that sincerity is a useful tool for critiquing irony. Wallace’s fiction is an attempt to critique an ironic culture not through his own ironic skewering of closely held principles, but through a sincere effort to “endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles” (“E Unibus Pluram” 81).

Chapter II explores several manifestations of Wallace’s anti-ironic position. In particular, I look at Wallace’s efforts to establish his stance in the essay “E Unibus Pluram,” the piece in which he explains his objections to the use of irony to fight irony. I examine his technique of creating situations that contrast irony with sincerity in the short story “My Appearance” and the novel *Infinite Jest*. The chapter also examines Wallace’s novella “Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way,” his self-described attempt to

¹ To elaborate briefly on the first of Wallace’s objections to television: Wallace identifies the author’s mode of research to be primarily one of people-watching, of observing life and then reporting on those observations. Television excels in seeming to provide a means of observing life, and Wallace cautions authors against the ease of watching television, which is, of course, made possible by other writers, in lieu of watching people in social situations.

write anti-metafictional metafiction, an exercise that helps to demonstrate the potential futility of deploying tools (in this case the techniques of metafiction) against themselves, thereby supporting his arguments against using irony to combat irony. Finally, the chapter lays the foundation for future work on Wallace's "radical realism" (*Infinite Jest* 836), or his technique of trying to give voice and substantive background detail to as many characters as possible, as one possible method for fiction to explore "single-entendre principles" through its fundamentally sympathetic character portrayals.

In Chapter III, my attention turns to Jonathan Franzen's efforts to reconcile his commercial and artistic ambitions. Franzen's frustrations are the result of shifting and proliferating sites of authority within the culture at large, creating a cultural situation in which the imprimatur of the academy, for instance, confers a cultural significance that differs in kind but not degree from the imprimatur of a popular televised book club. The cultural divide between popular and artistic fiction, between the lowbrow and the highbrow, has long been filled with a hybrid form of fiction capable of popular acclaim and critical distinction, but this middlebrow fiction has also been roundly denigrated: Dwight Macdonald's efforts to distinguishing "masscult" from "midcult," for example, savage middlebrow art for complicating the task of separating high from low. But critical efforts like those of Radway's *Reading the Romance* and *A Feeling for Books*, Fiske's "Popular Discrimination," and Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* demonstrate the degree to which audiences for popular and middlebrow fiction take their reading seriously. These studies, by demonstrating the seriousness of purpose in the reading audience for, as well as from the authors of, popular and middlebrow

fiction, have done much to counter the denigration of critics like Macdonald and to level the hierarchy. But this newer field of horizontal distinctions as opposed to vertical distinctions, as described by Andreas Huyssen's "High and Low in an Expanded Field," in which distinctions are made among cultural artifacts without using those distinctions to support arguments for hierarchies and privilege, is in conflict with residual notions of high and low culture, and authors like Franzen struggle to reconcile older ideas of cultural status being determined by an elite of academics and public intellectuals with newer ideas of cultural status emerging from popularity, financial success, academic support, intellectual reviews—a *mélange*, in short, of sites with a claim to cultural authority.

Chapter III discusses Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, and the fallout from Franzen's stated ambivalence about having his novel featured on Winfrey's talk show. *The Corrections* uses the story of a multi-generational family's traumas as the vehicle for an exploration of the contemporary cultural climate. Franzen contrasts an old cultural order rooted in patriarchy, embodied in the aging father, Alfred, with a new cultural order more dynamic and more reliant on authority based on the individual as opposed to authority based on a social or cultural hierarchy. The second generation, having emerged from beneath a dominating white male presence, provides Franzen the means to explore and illuminate the proliferation of sites claiming cultural authority. As more ethnic and gendered voices are acknowledged, in part precisely because they are ethnic and gendered, the tradition of identifying white male culture with culture at large leaves white males without an ethnic or gendered cultural identity,

and without recourse to such an identity the cultural position of white males is awkwardly powerless and ill-defined. Franzen depicts a physically and morally strong patriarch losing his mental and physical faculties while his children are culturally adrift from his model of authority. Parallel to this family study in *The Corrections* is a negotiation of cultural hierarchies, both in its frequent discussions of taste and distinction and in its ambitions as a novel: *The Corrections* is Franzen's admitted attempt to write an accessible literary novel—which is one way of describing middlebrow fiction—in which he provides the humor and pathos of family drama against a backdrop of incisive cultural and social analysis. Yet, in spite of his fictional efforts to favor a wide band of readers with varying levels of reading sophistication as demonstrated in several characters and scenes in the novel, Franzen's professional position wavers uneasily between the need for praise from intellectuals and the need for the public acclaim that generates financial success. Franzen's well-discussed ambivalence about Oprah Winfrey's decision to feature *The Corrections* as part of her televised book club indicates just how unstable the current sites of cultural authority actually are, still caught between old hierarchies and new planar divisions. The power of Oprah's Book Club to fuel book sales and to drive publishers to seek books that Winfrey might want to feature is evidence, with or without the Franzen episode, of the emergence of television, personality, and corporate sites of cultural authority, and Chapter III begins with a discussion of how Winfrey has validated her audience's approach to reading in a culture with a history of denigrating that very audience. To that I add the example of Franzen's ambivalence to demonstrate the degree to which the collapse of white male

cultural authority has opened the way for other claimants, which in turn drives a cultural climate that is both vigorous and robust, but in which the terms of respectability and authority are in continual flux.

Finally, in Chapter IV I turn to the uneasy relationship between the sciences and the humanities, looking primarily to the works of Richard Powers, a novelist whose output regularly navigates the literary and the scientific. The uneasy history of cultural positioning between the sciences and the humanities is predicated in many ways on the tangible and practical results of scientific inquiry in contrast to the abstract and amorphously delineated results of literary inquiry. The sciences are culturally privileged for the clarity of their methods and results and are funded accordingly, creating a financial disparity that Powers ruefully acknowledges in his novel *Galatea 2.2* through his depiction of the lavishly appointed and equipped Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences as compared to the quaint and stultifying atmosphere of the English building on the same university campus. The literati have attempted to address this imbalance in part by positioning themselves as the cultural elite, and in Chapter IV I look briefly at the scientific response. C. P. Snow demanded in 1959 that the literati acquaint themselves with the fundamentals of scientific knowledge in order to help science address quality-of-life concerns around the world; more recently, John Brockman declared that “Literary intellectuals are not communicating with scientists. Scientists are communicating directly with the general public” (18), a clear suggestion that literary intellectuals might serve as intermediaries between scientists and the public, but that without their cooperation scientists are fully capable of taking their ideas, programs, and needs

directly to the public, eliminating a role for literary intellectuals altogether. In both cases, the message is that literary intellectuals can either serve the needs of science or get out of the way. Critical studies of the interactions between the sciences and the humanities tend to privilege the sciences as well, if only because they so often rely on a paradigm of one-way influence, proceeding from scientific advancement to literary representation, a method of comprehending the relationship as one wherein literature always follows science, is always influenced by science, and can only react to science without being able to exert influence of its own. N. Katherine Hayles tries to overturn this uni-directional theory of influence by arguing that it only holds if science is understood to be the source of truth; once science is recognized as a body of “theories [that] are themselves social constructions” (“Turbulence” 229), then it becomes possible to see scientific constructs and literary constructs as co-equals.

Richard Powers defends the role of literature in relation to the sciences according to the capacity of literature to go where scientific “empiricism just can’t” (K. Berger 131). Powers posits a role for literature that, like so many of the other theories of the science/literature relationship, requires literature to incorporate or respond to the advances and discoveries of science. But while Powers’s formulation allows the work of the sciences to provide direction and material for literature, the follow-up work performed by literature is as valuable as the original scientific advance. Powers conceives of a relationship much like that posited by Stephen Jay Gould, who called for a “consilience of equal regard,” a paradigm under which the domains of the sciences and the humanities are recognized to be mutually incompatible in terms of the knowledge

they generate and the methods they use to generate that knowledge, but a paradigm that also “understands the absolute necessity of both domains to any life deemed intellectually and spiritually ‘full’” (259). Chapter IV examines Powers’s explicit analysis of the social and cultural value of literature as follow-up to science in his fourth and fifth novels, *Operation Wandering Soul* and *Galatea 2.2*. The first of these novels tells the story of terminally ill children in the pediatric ward of a public hospital, the backdrop against which Powers depicts the limitations of medical science and the limitations of narrative to provide hope and comfort when science fails. In *Galatea 2.2*, Powers returns to a more hopeful vision of literature’s ability to provide a dramatic, ethical, and accessible dissemination and interrogation of scientific discovery. A recurring trope in Powers’s fiction is the use of a model as an object of study: rather than study the brain directly in order to learn “the way the switches all assembled the messages they sent among themselves” you instead “create an analog to the language of the central nervous system” (*Gold Bug* 610) and study that analog instead. This is precisely the model fictionalized in *Galatea 2.2*, in which cognitive scientists build an artificial intelligence and, by watching how it learns, increase their understanding of the brain’s functions. Powers’s fiction explores the idea of literature as model, as analog to social, cultural, political, or intellectual issues that we are unable to grasp in their entirety and enormity because we are enmeshed within them. At the same time, the brain’s coordination of specialized information processing units serves as a model for the hyper-specialization of disciplines and the need for them to communicate effectively and efficiently for the body to work. Powers repeatedly demonstrates the need for highly

specialized disciplines but recognizes as well that the more specialized our knowledge becomes, the less likely and less able we are to connect it to other knowledge. In the final analysis I argue that *Galatea 2.2* demonstrates the value of literature as a communications tool for connecting knowledge across social, professional, and cultural systems.

In conclusion, and before turning to the in-depth studies to follow, let me identify in brief the resolution I find in the works of each author under examination in this dissertation. Wallace's anxieties about the role of television lead him to propose, and to put into practice, an openly sincere and candid tone that risks exposing the author (or, rather, the implied author who Wallace constructs to seem coterminous with Wallace himself) to ridicule for seeming naïve at the expense of distant, isolating, self-protective irony. Franzen's response to the media, corporate, and fragmented audience concerns that bother him is much less resolute: he is unable to this point in his career to reconcile his conflicting and alternating impulses to privilege the models of what he calls Status (or highbrow) and Contract (or popular) authors.² He alternates between arguments for cultural egalitarianism and elitist discrimination; thus far he seems to have highbrow notions of culture that he is working to eliminate or temper. Powers, finally, is the least concerned of the three; having suffered with doubts about the viability of fiction in contemporary culture, his novels have all plead in one way or another for the use of fiction as a space for intellectual and emotional refuge and for the use of fiction as a tool for communication among diverse disciplines and sites of cultural discourse.

² See Franzen's essay, "Mr. Difficult," which I reference in Chapter III.

CHAPTER II

“YOU ARE LOVED”:

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S RESPONSE TO TELEVISUAL IRONY

Dave Eggers is a young writer, in his late twenties. He was one of the founders of short-lived *Might* magazine, which took a satirical look at contemporary culture in its few issues. He writes cultural reviews and commentaries, he edits for various magazines, but his dominant claim to fame is his fictional memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, in which he claims not to have much patience for irony, and admits to an almost angry dismay that so many people have found irony in his book where he insists there is none. It’s hard to fault the readers, though, when your very title must mean something other than what it seems to mean; after all, who would make such a straightforward claim for their own work? Surely the title refers to something else, like the vision of a character in the book who aspires to write something heartbreaking and brilliant. Or if it’s about this book and not some fictional book-in-the-book, perhaps the title acknowledges that there is much that is sad in the book but there is also something refreshing and bright about the perspective the book offers, and that even beyond that the title reminds us, through exuberant exaggeration, to find the humor in the sadness. Or, in a more conventional and certainly less interesting vein, perhaps the title indicates that the author hoped to write something deeply moving and insightful, but has used the title as insulation against charges that he was able to accomplish neither emotion nor insight. To the critics who would say his heartbreak is cheap sentiment and his genius is

commonplace, Eggers can point directly to the title and show that, having already mocked himself, he's immune to such charges. He was being ironic; of course he knows it's not really heartbreaking and not really brilliant.

Eggers addresses the issue of the title in the book's acknowledgement section after listing some other rejected possibilities for interpretation:

Yes, it caught your eye. First you took it at face value, and picked it up immediately. "This is just the sort of book for which I have been looking!" Many of you, particularly those among you who seek out the maudlin and melodramatic, were struck by the "Heartbreaking" part. Others thought the "Staggering Genius" element seemed like a pretty good recommendation. But then you thought, Hey can these two elements work together? . . . Like, if this book is, indeed, heartbreaking, then why spoil the mood with the puffery? Or, if the title is some elaborate joke, then why make an attempt at sentiment? Which is to say nothing of the faux (real? No, you beg, please no) boastfulness of the whole title put together. In the end, one's only logical interpretation of the title's intent is as a) a cheap kind of joke b) buttressed by an interest in lamely executed titular innovation (employed, one suspects, only to shock) which is c) undermined of course by the cheap joke aspect, and d) confused by the creeping feeling one gets that the author is dead serious in his feeling that

the title is an accurate description of the content, intent and quality of the book.¹

Eggers doesn't mention, explicitly, the possibility of irony—the title is either a confused joke, a cheap joke, or completely serious. Apparently it's not ironic self-deprecation, unless that's what he means by calling it a cheap joke, and I think that may be the case. I'm not sure what the cheap joke would be if not the ironic obvious overstatement. But Eggers wants irony harnessed, defined exactly and used with precision. In a brief lashing-out against irony, Eggers makes clear that as far as he is concerned, much that we think of as irony is not, and we (as a culture) use the term with a frequency and lack of discrimination that is sloppy, wrong, and tiresome.

Eggers's book is divided into two sections; the majority of the book is a fictionalized memoir recounting the death of his parents and the difficulties of raising his younger brother in the aftermath. Much smaller is the section entitled, "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making," which is upside-down in relation to the other part of the book and thus begins from what would otherwise be the back cover. This section of the book is Eggers's delineation of what is fictional and what is factual in the memoir: which characters are confections of multiple people, which incidents are compressed, which people really said something attributed to someone else, and how all decisions were made in the interest of narrative flow or even humor. But in one place Eggers takes the opportunity to rail against irony and the few readers he has encountered who maintain

¹ This passage comes from the "Acknowledgements," a section of the book without page numbers or paragraph breaks.

that most of his book is ironic. In reaction, Eggers offers his idea of what is not, and should not be called, irony:

When someone *kids around*, it does not necessarily mean he or she is being *ironic*. That is, when one tells a joke, in any context, it can mean, simply, that *a joke is being told*. Jokes, thus, do not have to be *ironic* to be *jokes*. Further, *satire* is not inherently *ironic*. Nor is *parody*. Or any kind of *comedy*. Irony is a very specific and not all that interesting thing. . . . In other words, irony should be considered a very particular and recognizable thing . . . , and thus, to refer to everything *odd, coincidental, eerie, absurd* or *strangely funny* as *ironic*, is, frankly, an abomination upon the Lord. [Re that last clause: not irony, but a simple, wholesome, American-born *exaggeration*]. (33)

Eggers's standard for irony is to understand it "as the dictionary does: *the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning*" (33).

Eggers's understanding of irony may be more sophisticated than he presents it here, but if that's so, his ability to discriminate seems clouded by his frustration with people who have taken an over-used term and applied it without nuance to his own work. He condemns the misuse of the term as "an abomination upon the Lord" and then labels that condemnation merely an exaggeration. But that only means that, while he considers the misuse an offense, he doesn't *really* mean that it's an offense egregious to God. And so his pronouncement seems precisely in line with his own definition of irony; namely, the saying of one thing and meaning another.

Irony as concept is notoriously difficult if not impossible to corral, and those who try to demarcate the boundaries of irony and its various forms invariably note the amorphous and changing shape of their topic. Douglas Muecke's taxonomy of irony begins by noting that "if, upon examination, irony becomes less nebulous, as it does, it remains elusively Protean" (3). Wayne Booth declares, "There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim . . . that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it" (*Rhetoric of Irony* ix). Gary Handwerk surveys the widely variant discourse about irony and says, "One finally wonders if these writers and critics are indeed dealing with the same intellectual phenomenon" (1). After noting the breadth of scholarship on irony and the lack of general agreement beyond Eggers's own understanding of the basic form of irony, authors regularly then stake their claim to a smaller sub-plot of the topic. My version of this is to disclaim any attempt at a comprehensive definition, characterization (to use Katharina Barbe's description of her study of irony), historical or critical survey, or even to enter the argument at all. Ultimately, my purpose is to concentrate less on whether or not Eggers's (or anyone's) idea of irony is sound and to concentrate more on just why irony—its definition and use—is of such animated concern to Eggers (and others) in the first place.

Eggers's frustration arises from the idea of people seeing all humor, wit, and wry comment as irony; in short, he's frustrated with a term that is overused. He claims limited ironic intention behind his own writing, yet some readers found irony in his jokes, irony in his juxtaposition of humor with unhappiness, irony in his use of a tiny

typeface to present his rant against irony. Readers are positioned to see irony everywhere because the term is stretched too thin, and Eggers would have us use it with greater precision: “to use the word/concept to blanket half of all contemporary cultural production—which some aged arbiters seem to be doing (particularly with regard to work made by those under a certain age)—is akin to the too-common citing of ‘the Midwest’ as the regional impediment to all national social progress (when we all know the ‘Midwest’ is ten miles outside of any city)” (33). Eggers isn’t alone insofar as he thinks the term is too broad. Wayne Booth, among others, says the same thing, namely that “irony has come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether” (*Irony* 2). Ironically (because apparently unintentional) illustrating the point, Eggers’s own short declamation runs the gamut from irony as rhetorical device to irony as mode of cultural production, a swing from specific to vast in application.

Eggers also isn’t alone in disliking irony, and dislike it he does: “You can’t know how much it pains me to even have that word, the one beginning with *i* and ending in *y*, in this book” (33). A little dramatic, perhaps, especially given that he admits deliberate irony in specific parts of the book, but in keeping with the sense of at least one journalist and cultural reviewer who notes that some of “the rising generation . . . just hate [irony]” (Gates 92). As part of a turn-of-the-millennium special issue, David Gates wrote a state-of-the-culture article for *Newsweek* in which he makes three basic points: 1) ours is a predominantly ironic culture; 2) a few up-and-comers find reason for that to be alarming; and 3) irony isn’t special to our culture or historical moment and may, in fact, be “an

inevitable response to the human condition” (93). Gates provides abundant examples to show that we revel in irony *now*, from the game show “Greed” to Lorrie Moore’s short story “People Like That Are the Only People Here” to hip-hop sampling, from David Letterman to Jerry Seinfeld to Beck. But Gates also claims that the long history of irony, from “Gilgamesh” to *Hamlet* to 17th century Japanese haiku, demonstrates a human predilection to enjoy irony, and that even though irony seems to be a hip contemporary phenomenon, it is in fact an ancient tool of rhetoric that, in its very age, suggests that humanity is and always has been compelled to receive the world ironically.

Gates’ article barely skims the surface, but like the more deliberate studies I pointed toward above, Gates also acknowledges the notoriously elusive nature of irony. In one place irony is the technique of saying one thing and meaning another while in another place it’s the tension between seeming incompatibilities (the 23rd Psalm recited at the beginning of a “violent specimen of gansta rap” [92]); here it’s a rhetorical device and there a contextual device, a simple incongruity on the one hand and a complex construction of endlessly signifying juxtapositions on the other. Gates’ examples of contemporary irony, though, seem innocuous, hardly deserving a backlash save perhaps the standard reaction of bored frustration that follows anything that’s too entrenched for too long. In fact, a number of Gates’ examples are simple frame-breaking techniques such as the ponderous and lulling drone of the Beatles’ “I Want You (She’s So Heavy)” that stops abruptly and unexpectedly; pastiche, from Barthelme to hip-hop; or self-reference such as James Brown’s mid-song directions to his band. His summation of the ironic persona as a “distanced, displaced, divided, self-referential sensibility that has

been with us from ‘Hamlet’ through Letterman and Seinfeld” hints at something potentially disagreeable or off-putting, but not, at least insofar as Gates’ limited discussion presents it, something to hate.

In fairness to Gates, the purpose of his article is not really to explore irony in the hopes of demonstrating that it should or should not be hated. Rather, his purpose is to provide a glossy overview of the state of contemporary culture, and that overview reads something like this: younger authors and critics are expressing disdain for the ironic tone and posturing of contemporary culture, but their contemporary understanding of irony is oversimplified given irony’s long history. Nevertheless, authors like Wallace and Eggers do take an explicit stand against irony, and in this chapter I have chosen to study Wallace for the degree of attention he gives to literary irony. His essay “E Unibus Pluram” outlines the reasons for fiction to retreat from irony, and his novel *Infinite Jest* is an attempt to demonstrate the kind of fiction that would result from such a retreat.

WALLACE’S FICTIONAL CRITIQUES OF AN IRONIC WORLDVIEW

Mario Incandenza, a character in David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest*, is nineteen years old and lives at the Enfield Tennis Academy, which was started by his parents and is now run by his widowed mother and uncle. Mario is the staff videographer, filming special events, matches, and even player drills for analysis. He’s mentally and physically handicapped, and is also simple, innocent, unsophisticated, and completely without guile, which makes him an illustrative contrast to the cynical, jaded, and wary people around him. Mario is observant and thoughtful, admittedly unable to

draw deep inferences and articulate conclusions, but fully able to see what's right and what's wrong. One of the things Mario observes but can't fully understand is the degree to which so many of the students at the academy are unable to appreciate anything at face value:

It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy. The worst-feeling thing that happened today was at lunch when Michael Pemulis told Mario he had an idea for setting up a Dial-a-Prayer telephone service for atheists in which the atheist dials the number and the line just rings and rings and no one answers. It was a joke and a good one, and Mario got it; what was unpleasant was that Mario was the only one at the big table whose laugh was a happy laugh; everybody else sort of looked down like they were laughing at somebody with a disability. The whole issue was far above Mario's head, and he was unable to understand Lyle's replies when he tried to bring the confusion up. And Hal was for once no help, because Hal seemed even more uncomfortable and embarrassed than the fellows at lunch, and when Mario brought up real stuff Hal called him Booboo and acted like he'd wet himself and Hal was going to be very patient about helping him change. (*Infinite Jest* 592)

Hal is Mario's younger brother, a gifted tennis player and self-described "lexical prodigy" (155). Hal worries that he's a shell, an empty human being who has duped his mother into thinking he's somehow a worthwhile person while he knows better, that

deep inside “there’s pretty much nothing at all” (694). Hal fears his internal emptiness, to the point that he’s afraid to tell anyone about it; one evening he sits down to watch all of the films his late father directed and watches *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat* twice. The film tells the story of an office worker who is recognized for the efficiency and excellence he brings to his job, but who is incapable of getting up on time in the morning and is always late to work. He’s threatened with termination if he’s late one more time, and the very next morning he oversleeps. Running to catch the last train that can get him to work on time, he collides with a boy carrying packages and looks repeatedly back and forth, from the kid to the train, before asking if the kid is hurt and then helping him gather the scattered packages. The train pulls away without him, and the narrator for this section of the novel tells us: “*Wave Bye Bye to the Bureaucrat* remains Mario’s favorite of all their late father’s entertainments, possibly because of its unhip earnestness. Though to Mario he always maintains it’s basically goo, Hal secretly likes it, too. . . .” (689). Hal keeps his secret for what seems to be a rather mundane reason, namely, he’s anxious about exposing himself to the charge of being uncool. But Wallace spends a lot of his narrative energy dramatizing and arguing against disaffection, convinced and wanting to convince us that being hip and not being hip aren’t mundane concerns at all.

Infinite Jest is almost exclusively populated with characters suffering from loneliness, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicidal depression, and physical and emotional inabilities to communicate with each other. One of the points that emerges from the novel is that, in one way or another, the individual isolation of his characters is not only unfortunate, but encouraged by the culture at large. An extended passage that presents

the narrator's view of Hal, and something of the narrator's cultural editorializing, is worth quoting at length because it presents the most encapsulated version of Wallace's thesis in the novel:

It's of some interest that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It's maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of *Weltschmerz*, which means world-weariness or hip ennui. Maybe it's the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip—and keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. Forget so-called peer-pressure. It's more like peer-*hunger*. No? We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded engagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young. The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it's stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naivete. Sentiment equals naivete on this continent. . . . Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for

hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia. (694-5)

Hydrocephalus signifies, for Wallace, neediness and honesty of a purity that cannot be ignored and, as such, is infuriating. The image of the not-quite-right-looking infant is from Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, wherein a writer imagines the novel he is writing as "a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic, with puckered lips and soft skin, dribbling brain fluid from its mouth" (55), a "hated adversary" but one you love nonetheless. As an illustration of being an author, Wallace finds the description apt for the way it embodies a writer's deep love for his work in spite of its imperfections and deviations from what it could have been: "The fiction always comes out so horrifically defective, so hideous a betrayal of all your hopes for it. . . . And yet it's yours . . . and you love it and dandle it and wipe the cerebro-spinal fluid off its slack chin with the cuff of the only clean shirt you have left. . . ." ("David Foster Wallace Talks About Writing *Infinite Jest*").

In *Infinite Jest*, the dribbling hydrocephalic is Mario. Wallace transfers the metaphor and its context, but the fundamental image remains that of someone you love precisely because he or she is incapable of any deception or guile or self-masking. Everything about such a person's presence is true, since their physical and mental flaws cannot be hidden and their character and intellect lack the sophistication necessary to build a persona that distances or ironizes their essence. Mario is incapable of perpetrating irony and is incapable of recognizing it in the characters around him. He sees their unhappy detachment but doesn't understand it; he sees that they seem to be hiding from something but cannot tell what or why. Mostly, he sees that their irony, inculcated to keep them from being alone, has brought them no happiness and has, in fact, made them even more alone. Mario sees evidence for the existence of God in Hal's inspired tennis playing one day, and that night he says, "I was going to ask if you felt like you believed in God, today, out there, when you were so on, making that guy look sick." Hal's response exemplifies jaded detachment by side-stepping Mario's central question (do you believe?) and dismissing it for the real issue, namely, whether or not God is Hal's kind of guy: "I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death. I'm not seeing how we can get together on this issue, he and I'" (40). Hal's irony is exemplary—he shows his greater intellectual sophistication by suggesting that the surface issue of belief is not the real issue, and he shows his greater emotional sophistication by not surrendering to whatever he might feel about God when the posture of rationality allows him to evaluate God and, if necessary, to find God's behavior

wanting. Hal simply stays silent when Mario tries to press the issue of belief (“I don’t get how you couldn’t feel like you believed, today, out there. It was so *right there*. You moved like you totally believed” [41]).

Hal’s struggles with solipsism and addiction, and his increasing inability to communicate as he descends into an unexplained state of uncontrolled facial and vocal twitches over the course of the novel is the focus of one major plot line in *Infinite Jest*; the focus of another is Donald Gately’s criminal and drug-riddled career and his subsequent rehabilitation. As part of his rehabilitation he is allowed to stay at Ennet House, but to maintain his residency in the half-way house he must attend nightly AA meetings, where of course one of the steps toward rehabilitation is to acknowledge and submit to the direction of a higher power. Sometimes in the evenings Mario walks the neighborhood around the academy; he has, on occasion, visited nearby Ennet House where he “felt good both times in Ennet’s House because it’s very real; people are crying and making noise and getting less unhappy, and once he heard somebody say *God* with a straight face and nobody looked at them or looked down or smiled in any sort of way where you could tell they were worried inside” (591). Reactions to the idea of God are a key indicator for Mario of someone’s peace with themselves, as indicated by his pleasure with the sincerity the Ennet House residents demonstrate when they speak of God, as well as by his concern for the crowd’s general response to the joke about an atheist Dial-A-Prayer. For Ennet House residents, the nature of the higher power isn’t the point: Gately tells newcomers that one of AA’s great features is that you can’t be kicked out, and cites the example of Glenn K., whose “personally chosen Higher Power

is *Satan*, for fuck's sake" (352). Rather, the point of acknowledging a higher power is to dismantle the addict's solipsism. Recognizing God can provide several freedoms, but all come down to freedom from having to combat the Disease alone. The philosophy of Ennet House is that belief in a higher power shifts focus away from the self and the self's problems. Whether the addict envisions a God brimming over with love for the addict and the addict's problems, thereby inviting something into the addict's life that is not only bigger than the addict's problems but anxious to help resolve them, or envisions a God busy with other work to the point that the addict and the addict's issues are a buzzing annoyance, thereby trivializing the Disease and reinforcing the idea that there is more to the cosmos than addiction, however the addict chooses to envision God, the result is the introduction of something into the addict's thought processes that will break the addict's relentless preoccupation with the Disease.

Wallace demonstrates that the addict need not actually envision God at all. Gately's concept of a higher power is nothing at all, neither infinitely compassionate nor infinitely indifferent. Gately prays every morning and every evening, but he tells an AA meeting that even "at like ten months clean . . . he's so totally clueless and lost he's thinking that he'd maybe rather have [them] just grab him by the lapels and just tell him what AA God to have an understanding of, and give him totally blunt and dogmatic orders about how to turn over his Diseased will to whatever this Higher Power is" (443). But his audience doesn't tell him what God to follow, only to keep praying. And Gately does, but he cannot picture any kind of God, seeing instead only his prayers like rippling waves that meet nothing as they travel farther and farther into space:

He didn't have any God- or J.C.-background, and the knee-stuff seemed like the limpest kind of dickless pap, and he felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee-motions that he went through faithfully every A.M. and P.M., without fail, motivated by a desire to get loaded so horrible that he often found himself humbly praying for his head to just finally explode already and get it over with. Pat had said it didn't matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*. If he did the right things, and kept doing them for long enough, what Gately thought and believed would magically change. (466)

Riding the subway one morning about five months after he started praying, Gately "all of a sudden realized that quite a few days had gone by since he'd even thought about Demerol or Talwin or even weed. Not just merely getting through those last few days—Substances hadn't even *occurred* to him. . . . More weeks went by, a blur of Commitments and meetings and gasper-smoke and clichés, and he still didn't feel anything like his old need to get high" (467). Gately can't understand it, and has an even harder time imagining a God that responds in spite of Gately's lack of real belief. He finally gives up worrying about it altogether: "That was months ago. Gately usually no longer much cares whether he understands or not. He does the knee-and-ceiling thing twice a day . . . and stays Active [in AA]" (468) and stops trying to rationalize what is working or why it's working, accepting only that it does work and that he no longer spends his days craving any kind of high.

What Gately doesn't see, and what other members of AA don't see or don't talk about, is that the ritual of prayer renders who you pray to irrelevant. Older AA members don't insist that Gately pray to any particular god, but they do insist that he pray every morning and every evening, right after he gets up and right before he goes to bed. Pat Montesian, Ennett House's director, tells Gately that the only thing that matters "was what he *did*," and even though she implies that he will eventually put a face to the God he's praying to, in the meantime his actions are what matter. The psychology of the addiction is broken and ground down by ritualistically engaging the psyche in other pursuits, from praying to cleaning the shower stalls in a homeless shelter, and of course the AA meetings themselves, from attendance to speaking to cleaning the ashtrays and making coffee. The point is to occupy the addict's time and thought, and as much as possible to do so with regularly scheduled activity. Immediately after waking, no matter what or how strong the other compulsions, the first thing to do is pray. And then it's moving to the next thing, and the next, until no time remains to satisfy the addiction and, eventually, no time remains even to think about it.

To reach the point where the rituals can effectively hold the psychological cravings at bay, the addict is encouraged to practice them even without conviction: "The desperate, newly sober White Flaggers are always encouraged to invoke and pay empty lip-service to slogans they don't yet understand or believe. . . . Everybody . . . who gets up publicly to speak starts out saying he's an alcoholic, says it whether he believes he is yet or not; then everybody up there says how Grateful he is to be sober today . . . even if he's not grateful or pleased about it at all. You're encouraged to keep saying stuff like

this until you start to believe it” (369). Twice-daily prayers are encouraged the same way, as part of a system of behaviors the addict maintains whether or not he understands, believes, or even has any hope for its success. Wallace notes that lip-service is acceptable to longer-term members of AA because they know that the repeated voicings of aphorisms and the repeated acknowledgements that sobriety is a gift from on high serve to bolster sobriety. But Wallace also makes the point that the old-timers will not tolerate irony. In reference to speaking before an AA crowd, the narrator of *Infinite Jest* says:

The thing is it has to be the truth to really go over, here. It can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle. (369)

Irony is depicted here as the principle means of defense employed by addicts to distance themselves from their addictions, thereby freeing themselves from having to confront their addictions, as well as the principle means of maintaining a façade that helps them preserve some ability to function socially. Wallace would have us realize that self-protective irony can, in fact, be destructive to the individual, rendering it much more dangerous than a simple, off-putting snide detachment, the kind of attitude that David

Gates's *Newsweek* article says Wallace and others "just hate." Gates's surface-skimming review of contemporary irony suggests that Wallace hates irony because he finds it distasteful or because it's pervasive and he wants something new and different. Through Mario Incandenza, Wallace shows us the isolating and unmooring potential in an ironic worldview; through AA's refusal to countenance irony, Wallace shows us irony's individually and socially destructive potential.

WALLACE ON TELEVISION AND IRONY IN CONTEMPORARY MASS CULTURE

An address given by T. S. Eliot at Glasgow University in 1942, later published under the title "The Music of Poetry," includes the observation that "the critical writings of poets . . . owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write" (17). Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" discusses the issues he will fictionalize in *Infinite Jest* and formulates exactly the way he will go about that fictionalizing; the essay charts parallel developments in television and fiction during the last forty years and suggests a course for fiction to take from this point forward. Wallace concentrates on a broad shift he attributes to art in general, "a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative rejection of bogus values" (59). Other critics have commented similarly. Mark Crispin Miller describes the shift enacted on television from "the calm power that once made Jim Anderson so daunting [on *Father Knows Best*]" to

Cliff Huxtable’s subversion of his children “by seeming to subvert himself at the same time” (“Cosby” 72)—the shift from direct assertion of authority to indirect subversion of someone else’s authority. Gerald Graff describes the shift enacted in fiction as the “refusal to take art ‘seriously’ in the old sense [or] the use of art itself as a vehicle for exploding its traditional pretensions” (Graff 31). Exploding pretensions is the dominant operation, whether those pretensions are cultural, political, religious, or even specific to the media itself, and the “time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy” or pretensions or calcified authority is through irony (“E Unibus Pluram” 65). The problem as Wallace sees it, though, is that we’ve trapped ourselves in irony. What began as a positive and powerful thing—“the assumptions *behind* early postmodern irony . . . were still frankly idealistic: it was assumed that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom” (66-67)²—has turned negative and impotent but is so pervasive that we can’t transcend it. And it’s television that is responsible for making irony our national tone and perspective on life.

Television³ faces one fundamental threat to its own longevity and continued success: specifically, we tend to watch copious amounts of television but don’t seem to

² Yet even then some critics found irony a perspective without hope; critic Benjamin De Mott wrote in 1961, “The one conviction [irony] expresses is that there are really no sides left: no virtue to oppose to corruption, no wisdom to oppose cant. The one standard it accepts is that on which the simple man—the untutored non-ironist who fancies (in his dolthood) that he knows what good and bad should mean—is registered as the zero of our world, a cipher worth nothing but uninterrupted contempt” (qtd. in Muecke 240).

³ Wallace takes pains to stress his ambivalence about television watching, as opposed to expressing purely negative reactionism. I refer to “television” as a monolith in what I hope is the same spirit as Wallace; namely, using it as “a necessary abstraction” but seeking to avoid slipping into association with “reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores” (36).

feel good about it.⁴ The tensions that plague us while we watch—guilt about the way we’re spending our time, fears that our individuality is subsumed in a mass audience of viewers—are manifold, so the average watcher “might have been happy enough *when* watching, but it [is] hard to think he could be too terribly happy *about* watching so much” (58). Wallace imagines the average TV watcher to be someone who would tell you he watches TV to unwind, to escape the mental stresses of a busy work life and a busy home life. But Wallace asserts that distraction is but the default reason for watching, the surface-level response that avoids the deeper, more insidious nature of the situation:

Television offers way more than distraction. In lots of ways, television purveys and enables *dreams*, and most of these dreams involve some sort of transcendence of average daily life. The modes of presentation that work best for TV—stuff like “action,” with shoot-outs and car wrecks, or the rapid-fire “collage” of commercials, news, and music videos, or the “hysteria” of prime-time soap and sitcom with broad gestures, high voices, too much laughter—are unsubtle in their whispers that, somewhere, life is quicker, denser, more interesting, more . . . well, *lively* than contemporary life as Joe Briefcase knows it. This might seem benign until we consider that what good old average Joe Briefcase does more than almost anything else in contemporary life is watch television, an

⁴ Mark Crispin Miller, a long-time critic of television and student of television audiences, on the general public’s love-hate relationship to television: “Everybody watches it, but no one really likes it” (“Deride” 228).

activity which anyone with an average brain can see does not make for a very dense and lively life. Since television must seek to attract viewers by offering a dreamy promise of escape from daily life, and since stats [*sic*] confirm that so grossly much of ordinary U.S. life is watching TV, TV's whispered promises must somehow undercut television-watching in theory ("Joe, Joe, there's a world where life is lively, where nobody spends six hours a day unwinding before a piece of furniture") while reinforcing television-watching in practice ("Joe, Joe, your best and only access to this world is TV"). (39)

Television producers recognize that you cannot have a very stimulating existence if you spend it in passive reception, so they hope to convince you that your best access, or easiest access, to dynamic living is through watching others living dynamically. Wallace uses the benchmark of six hours a day to demonstrate the degree to which we spend our lives watching others lead fictional lives. Studies and surveys offer varying indications of just how much television is watched on average: a case can be made for anywhere from three hours a day⁵ to more than seven hours a day,⁶ depending on the degree of segmentation provided by the study.⁷ Wallace's six-hour-a-day figure comes from an unspecified source, and is a figure more indicative of household averages than the

⁵ In a 1989 survey cited at "Media Use Statistics" online, thirty percent of middle-aged men said they watched three or more hours a day; more than 90 percent said they watched one or two hours a day.

⁶ A web page maintained by TV station KLSR entitled "Television Statistics" attributes more than seven hours of television watching a day to the average household.

⁷ A recent study commissioned by Yahoo! and Carat Interactive called "Born To Be Wired" found that internet usage is outstripping television among people between 13 and 24 years old. While they spend more than 13 hours a week watching TV, this demographic spends more than 16 hours a week online.

viewing habits of individuals, yet Wallace uses this figure to present dramatic scenes of loneliness and isolation to help us imagine a nation of people in danger of crippling their own psychological well-being:

If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and it's true that lonely people find television's 2-D images relief from their stressful reluctance to be around real human beings, then it's also obvious that the more time spent at home alone watching TV, the less time spent in the world of real human beings, and that the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel inadequate to the tasks involved in being a part of the world, thus fundamentally apart from it, alienated from it, solipsistic, lonely. It's also true that to the extent one begins to view pseudo-relationships with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley as acceptable alternatives to relationships with real people, one will have commensurately less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3-D persons, connections that seem pretty important to basic mental health. (38-39)

And it's not like we don't know that watching television is somehow bad for us—whether or not we agree that six hours of watching is too much, we know we ought to do other things, even if only because that knowledge has been drilled into us by naysayers for so long. Even in the context of watching television there's a dichotomy between what we watch and what we think we should watch: “Despite the unquestioned assumption on

the part of pop-culture critics that television's poor old Audience, deep down, 'craves novelty,' all available evidence suggests, rather, that the Audience *really* craves sameness but thinks, deep down, that it *ought* to crave novelty. Hence the mixture of devotion and sneer on so many viewerly faces" (40-41). That same mix of devotion and sneer extends beyond knowing we ought to want a high-minded televisual experience all the while seeking a lower level of comfortable stasis; it's the same mix of knowing we ought to seek a more active and thoughtful lifestyle all the while we're returning, day after day, to what Wallace calls mindless and passive spectation.

Wallace argues that the only way for television to combat these discomfiting aspects of watching television—the guilty feeling that follows watching too much, the conflict of watching dynamic lifestyles rather than living dynamic lifestyles, the conflict of knowing you're a part of a mass viewing audience while wanting to be an individual apart from the crowd, the sense of having an inferior intellect or sensibility for enjoying the hours of watching—the only way for TV to help the viewer come to terms with these feelings is to acknowledge them, and to do so with self-derisive irony that says we all know we shouldn't be doing this, and since we all know it we don't have to worry about it so much. Wallace quotes commercials for *Alf* that license us to "'Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV'"; rather than ignoring its critics or trying to mount a serious and considered defense of its virtues, television winks and suggests that so long as we all know excessive watching is bad for us then we can go ahead and do it. Such ads offer "an ironic permission-slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape,

reassurance” (41). The underlying message is a form of flattery, suggesting that the viewer need not feel guilty because he or she has the discriminatory savvy to know that there may be more rewarding pursuits than an evening of television.

At its most harmless, televisual irony is the same self-deprecation many of us use, to greater or lesser success, to deflect criticism: every time David Letterman asks us, “Are we having fun yet?” he’s mocking the very idea of having fun and suggesting that if you are having too much fun then perhaps you need not to abandon yourself so easily—in other words, maintain an air of cool and calm detachment or risk looking foolish. This irony is also self-protective because Letterman has called explicit attention to his ability or inability to entertain, and by making us think about whether or not we’re having fun, Letterman diverts criticism because he can claim to have admitted his failure.

Mark Crispin Miller would argue, however, that Letterman’s ironic caution against having too much fun is more insidious than it first appears because it includes us, flattering us for having the critical acumen to not get too wrapped up in the entertainment, but it also “offers not a welcome but an ultimatum—that we had better see the joke or else turn into it” (“Big Brother” 326). And the irony is even more insidious when it is expanded from the occasional one-liner to the entire message of a program. In one episode of the relentlessly ironic *Seinfeld*, Jerry’s girlfriend notes that Jerry never gets angry. As Jerry practices venting he begins to feel and express all of his emotions with abandon. No longer compelled to hide behind sarcasm Jerry tells George and Kramer that he loves them, and asks Elaine to marry him. George is made

profoundly uncomfortable by this display, as is Elaine; only the always forthright Kramer is able to take Jerry's attitude shift in stride. Later Jerry is able to convince George to let loose, and the psychic purging George unleashes, telling every secret and dark impulse he is capable of following, horrifies Jerry so much that he retreats back to his former, ironic self, leaving George exposed and vulnerable. Elaine reappears having decided that marriage might in fact be just what she and Jerry need, only to be rebuffed. The message is simple and clear: the only real emotional safety is that which ironic detachment affords. Any admission of emotion or passion of any kind exposes you to others in ways that can be painful and embarrassing. Cool distance, as Wallace argues, is protection, emotional armor:

And to the extent that it can train viewers to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté. The well-trained viewer becomes even more allergic to people. Lonelier. Joe B.'s exhaustive TV-training in how to worry about how he might come across, seem to watching eyes, makes genuine human encounters even scarier. But televisual irony has the solution: further viewing begins to seem almost like required research, lessons in the blank, bored, too-wise expression

that Joe must learn how to wear for tomorrow's excruciating ride on the brightly lit subway, where crowds of blank, bored-looking people have little to look at but each other. ("E Unibus Pluram" 63)

Wallace and Miller argue that television's pervasive tone of smug disdain, postured as critical distance, informs the dominant cultural attitude.

Much of Wallace's fiction is dedicated to issues of individuality, appearance, loneliness, depression, addiction, and body image—not so much of the am-I-attractive as the I-hope-I can-go-to-the-bathroom-quietly variety—issues that highlight the internal psychic sufferings of overwhelmingly self-conscious people. Concerned as he is with fragile individual mental well-being, and convinced as he is that "real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it" (McCaffery 136), it follows that his primary fear about television is not the standard worry about mind rot, but is instead anxiety about the degree to which television exacerbates and deepens loneliness while seeming to counter it. Thus television is a target of his fiction, as it is for a number of authors and cultural critics, and it's through his critique of those other authors that Wallace's essay finally formulates, as Eliot would have it, the kind of fiction Wallace will write. Whatever problems television may pose for its viewers in general, Wallace identifies two specific problems for writers who are viewers. Wallace imagines writers as voyeurs and imagines a trap wherein they try to observe people by watching television, forgetting along the way that the people they're watching are already fictionalized. In fact, it's not hard to imagine this illusion of voyeurism plaguing Wallace, who readily acknowledges his own

social discomfort and his regular enjoyment of television, and thus it's not hard to imagine Wallace having a radically exaggerated sense of just how damaging this aspect of television watching may be to other authors. But the other problem that Wallace sees is that facing authors who are determined, as he is, to write cultural critique. Those authors face the question: "how to rebel against TV's aesthetic of rebellion, how to snap readers awake to the fact that our televisual culture has become a cynical, narcissistic, essentially empty phenomenon, when television regularly *celebrates* just these features in itself and its viewers?" ("E Unibus Pluram" 69). If television has already adopted its own ironic and apparently self-critical pose, it is virtually immune to attacks that also adopt that pose. In short, Wallace argues that you cannot confront irony with identical irony; to attack television with a jaded, ironic, and cynical tone is to use television's own language, and serves actually to reinforce television's ironic image of prescient, I-already-thought-of-that smugness and sophistication.

Wallace's examples of fictional culture critique that have been hampered by their own ironic stance comprise a loose genre he terms Image Fiction, or fiction that makes "a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television" (49). He lists a number of authors and works as examples, but spends most of his time with Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. The book is collection of hyperkinetic set pieces that are at times delightfully perceptive but more often overly precious: one title, "In the Kingdom of Boredom, I Wear the Royal Sweatpants" is particularly labored, affecting the most obvious cynicism through the obvious dissonance of the regal and the mundane. The piece itself bears no logical connection to

its title, and such holds true for the entire collection. It recounts the fraying of the narrator's last nerve by the "pilgrims, militants, hostages, clerics, extremists, dissidents, mediators, ideologues, pragmatists, and militiamen" who won't leave his bedroom, and some of whom are trying to sell crack cocaine to the narrator's little brother. The rest of the story tells of the various excuses and petty squabbles that keep everyone from leaving—one character's suicide makes his compatriots indignant, another won't leave until he gets his AK-47 back from someone else, and all the while the narrator hopes to keep his parents from waking up. Finally an Air Force cadet approaches the narrator to marvel that no sooner had he finished reading a poem that opens with a description of love grown large, than he saw a poster for the band Big Fat Love. The piece has a clear beginning but no ending—most everyone seems on the verge of clearing out of the narrator's room when the cadet suffers the narrator's anger to tell him of the "eerie synchronicity" of reading the poem and then seeing a seemingly related poster (75). The humor of the piece comes entirely from the juxtaposition of the over-the-top collection of people and military equipment in the bedroom, as well as their peevisishness at being kicked out. It's the same with "The Suggestiveness of One Stray Hair in an Otherwise Perfect Coiffure," a cute and brief piece about a guy whose car keeps blowing up when he starts it, and the mechanic can tell him only, "You got a car bomb" (59). Aside from those pieces, which cohere, much of the rest of the book is a flurry of images, dichotomous juxtapositions (the "Wilford Military Academy of Beauty"), and stand-alone observations ("When Elvis Presley, in the song 'Jailhouse Rock,' sang the lyrics 'If you can't find a partner, grab a wooden chair,' he freed a generation of young people

to love furniture and, by extension, to love any inanimate object in a way that heretofore would have been strictly verboten” [17]). In short, the book is a rapid, random, and ironic depiction of a culture that seems unable to discriminate or value. His subsequent book, *Et Tu, Babe?*, mines identical territory with identical technique in an effort to critique “the principal values of late capitalism: a devotion to speed and a worship of image” (Little 138).

But whatever point Leyner may want to make about the degree to which our culture has become fast, over-processed, image-oriented, and surface-skimming falls flat because he tries to confront a culture that has insulated itself from critique behind its own ironic self-mockery. According to Wallace, “the best [Image Fiction] to date is hilarious, upsetting, sophisticated, and extremely shallow—doomed to shallowness by its desire to ridicule a TV-culture whose mockery of itself and all value already absorbs all ridicule” (81). That’s Wallace at his most gracious; his more cutting critiques drop all efforts to praise:

This is why our educated teleholic friends’ use of weary cynicism to try to seem superior to TV is so pathetic. And this is why the fiction-writing citizen of our televisual culture is in such very deep shit. What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution? For this of course is the second answer to why avant-garde irony and rebellion have become dilute and malign. They have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart. (68)

The second explanation for irony's lack of utility, quoted above, is that television has appropriated it. The first is that it has been in vogue for too long and it is a rhetorical tool blunt to begin with, made even duller through continuous use. Its purpose, as Wallace sees it, is to undercut pretension, and that's about all it can do: "entertaining as it is, [irony] serves an almost exclusively negative function. It's critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. . . . But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks" (67). In a *New York Times Magazine* piece, Wallace levels this same charge against Leyner. "'He's able to co-opt what's best about popular culture, use it in a hyper-kinetic way, and make fun of it at the same time. . . . [But this] is where I part company with him. He's so into making fun of everything that, reading him, I think of the culture as a cancer patient with a terminal illness'" (qtd. in Grimes 66). Wallace faults Leyner for being unable to see that irony is ineffective against a master ironist, in this case televisual culture, as well as for making fun, hence tearing down, without ever trying to build something on the resulting rubble. To read the pieces in *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* is to read, again and again, send ups of a culture Leyner sees as vacuous, self-righteous, selfish, and violent. But Leyner's approach serves only to show what's wrong—he implies a solution, but takes no steps toward delineating one because his irony is capable only of critique, not affirmation.

Wallace's portrayal of Leyner's irony parallels Frederic Jameson's characterization of pastiche, which is parody without agenda or "motive." Jameson describes the postmodern climate as one dominated by "neutral and reified media

speech,” an economy controlled by “faceless masters,” and a culture of “stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm,” and it is within this climate that

parody finds itself without a vocation: it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the “stable ironies” of the eighteenth century. (17)

Jameson states the analogy between pastiche and parody on one side and blank irony and “stable irony” on the other. Booth’s stable ironies are clear and obvious ironies, “moments when characters give themselves away by speaking or thinking in ways that [the author] expects the reader to see through and deplore” (*Company* 446); stable irony is collusion of the author and reader behind the character’s back. Jameson offers no clear depiction of blank irony, but by comparing it to pastiche he makes it clear that blank irony has all the characteristics of irony with none of the substance. Jameson’s blank irony/pastiche model is similar but not identical to that presented by Wallace. For Jameson, parody has been supplanted by pastiche, which looks just like parody but lacks

the critical urge. Televisual irony has not supplanted irony per se, only taken it to an extreme at which further use of irony is rendered ineffective. Pastiche has no critical intent, while in Wallace's formulation, authors like Mark Leyner intend for the ironies to carry all of the weight and critical power that irony used to bear. The trouble such authors face is that televisual irony has eviscerated the form.

Leyner's approach is one of four that Wallace identifies as possible responses to "television's commercialization of the modes of literary protest" (69). Leyner is what Wallace terms "*reverently ironic*" (76), parodying television in a tone that seems almost in awe of its target, and certainly isn't distinguishable enough to keep from being re-appropriated: "Leyner's attempt to 'respond' to television via ironic genuflection is all too easily subsumed into the tired television ritual of mock-worship" (81). Other fictional responses are to be "reactionary, fundamentalist" (69) by trumpeting the evil that is television and the culture it feeds, or to shift agency and blame away from both television and audience and look instead to technological developments as a scientific and capitalistic force that pushes the networks and the audience along narrow paths almost against their will. Wallace's example of this approach is that of George Gilder of the Hudson Institute, who imagines a future network of telecomputers that allow individuals to watch what they want, when they want, from whatever angle they want, and finally be freed of any tendency of television toward institutionalizing or codifying any way of thinking. Irony could not have gripped our national consciousness if we were not all slaves to broadcast television's dominance, which is not the fault of the networks at all, but the fault of the limited technology they have to work with. They're forced by

available tools and an entrenched system of mass broadcast that was first necessitated by the cumbersome nature of vacuum tubes and their limited ability to process broadcast signals. If the TV can't process the signals, then a central processing location, or the network headquarters, becomes the most efficient option, and the result is a system of limited options dependent on the networks.

In some ways Gilder's ideas have been borne out by the growth of the internet. The "Born to Be Wired" study I cited earlier claims that "2003 will go down in history as the age when Internet usage exceeded television viewership for the very first time" (Harris Interactive). This study found that teenagers spent more time online (on average more than 16 hours each week) than watching television (on average more than 13 hours each week), and even echoes Gilder's observations about the passivity and limited options inherent in television: "TV is a passive medium, an escape from reality. TV is finite (indeed, 200 cable channel choices pale in comparison to millions of Web sites)" (Harris Interactive). But Wallace faults Gilder for not realizing that even with our freedom meticulously to construct our viewing experience, we're still in search of escape, and if Gilder's vision comes to pass we'll simply find those escape easier and more effective.

The fourth of Wallace's examples for literary response to televisual culture, and the one that informs his own writing, is one that is direct and upfront:

The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and

instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. (81)

Wallace argues that counter-culture writing really has to be counter-culture, really has to flaunt convention to have its deepest impact. Thus, if the convention is irony, the counter is sincerity; if the risk faced by counter-culture ironists in a more straight-forward culture is to be called anarchic and nihilistic, the risk faced by rebels in an ironic culture is to be called banal and unsophisticated. This is the call Wallace makes for fiction writers to begin retreating from irony, and it's a call he answers in his own work in three ways. One approach Wallace takes is to be transparent about his thoughts and failings in non-fiction, and to endorse "single-entendre principles" in both the non-fiction and fiction. An example of his transparency in non-fiction comes in his essay about the qualifying rounds of tennis for the Canadian Open in 1995. Discussing player Michael Joyce, to whom Wallace devotes the essay because he was able to spend the most time with him, Wallace says

For a while I thought that Joyce's rather bland candor was a function of his not being very bright. This judgment was partly informed by the fact that Joyce didn't go to college and was only marginally involved in his high school academics (stuff I know because he told me it right away).

What I discovered as the tournament wore on was that I can be kind of a snob and an asshole, and that Michael Joyce's affectless openness is a sign not of stupidity but of something else. ("Tennis Player" 227-228)

When Wallace says he's a snob he means it, and he's not happy about it—he compares unfavorably to Joyce here, and he acknowledges that. His admission does not serve to excuse his arrogance, but to temper it. As for endorsing principles, one clear example is his assertion that six hours of watching television each day constitutes doing something “not good for us. Sorry to be a killjoy, but there it is: six hours a day is not good” (“E Unibus Pluram” 37). Wallace imagines that the new literary rebels will be ready to risk and withstand the ironists' display of the “yawn, the rolled eyes, . . . the ‘Oh how *banal*’” (81), and his six hours a day pronouncement takes just that risk. It is an eye-rolling thing to say, a naïve remark that is by no means self-evident but that demands to be taken at face value and is confident that if we just think about it we'll realize we agree, and if we would just be honest we'd admit it. What's particularly quaint about the statement is the clear identification of a quantity of watching that is detrimental to watchers. Wallace isn't stating that too much TV is bad for us, which he believes and will argue at length throughout the essay; rather, he is stating that six hours of watching is the definition of too much. Wallace's tone has a disarming innocence, because his point is so easily refuted while seeming honestly to think itself irrefutable.

The other approaches Wallace takes to step back from irony occur in his fiction. One is to depict confrontations between sincerity and irony; the other is to take pains to avoid using an ironic, snide, or mocking tone toward his characters or his subject matter.

His short story “My Appearance” is an early depiction of how sincerity can confront smug irony. Edilyn, a forty-year-old actress with “no illusions” (194), is invited to appear on “Late Night with David Letterman.” Her husband Rudy is a TV-executive who is terrified by the possibility that Letterman will make Edilyn look ridiculous. Prior to the taping Rudy badgers Edilyn with self-preservation instructions, of which the primary tenet is for Edilyn to make herself look ridiculous before Letterman has the chance to do so, much like Letterman does with himself: “It’s the way the audience can tell he chooses to ridicule himself that exempts the clever bastard from real ridicule” (180-1). Likewise, if Edilyn can make herself look ridiculous first, especially since she’s just done a commercial for Oscar Meyer that’s bound to receive mockery, if she can evince a self-critical irony that shows she doesn’t take herself too seriously, then she frees herself from other’s ridicule. In order to help Edilyn, Ron decides she should wear an earpiece through which he can radio instructions and cues for “being *not*-sincere,” which he stresses is different from “not being sincere” (187). Insincerity is not the goal; self-critical sincerity is. But as the show progresses and Rudy sends his defensive stage directions to Edilyn, she grows more and more certain that Letterman is basically sincere and has become trapped inside an ironic persona. The telling moment comes when she refers to the art and talent required to act convincingly in conjunction with hot dogs and Letterman asks her what would compel her, given her talent and wealth, “to emote with meat” (196). Edilyn perceives that Letterman is uncomfortable asking the question, she’s “sure he felt he’d gone too far,” and over her husband’s radioed permission to “Go ahead and tell him about the back taxes” she rescues Letterman from himself by telling him

and the audience that she did the commercials for free. Letterman, trapped as he is in his ironic persona, is incapable of sincerity, while Edilyn's sincerity allows her to move freely in and out of irony. For Letterman irony is the clumsy sledgehammer of all-encompassing ridicule, but because Edilyn is not forced to be ironic with every statement her use of it can be more deft and precise.

In many ways "My Appearance" prefigures Wallace's objections to television as presented in "E Unibus Pluram." The story ends with an uncomfortable discussion between Edilyn and Rudy as Rudy congratulates her for constructing a masterful "appearance" while she tries to tell him that she was being herself. And this leads to her realization that Rudy thinks everyone presents an "appearance" and is not who they seem, which would include the two of them, and the story ends with her asking "just what way he thought he and I really were, then, did he think" (201).

We learn that Rudy is caged by irony. He cannot see an escape from irony or a way around it; his answer for how Edilyn will weather Letterman's jabs is to use ironic self-deprecation, and to do so before Letterman can get started. Only by showing that she's ready to mock herself can she withstand his mockery. Perhaps it's a little heavy-handed on Wallace's part for Rudy to be a television executive himself; in fact, Rudy was one of the creative talents behind the early years of "Saturday Night Live," a show Wallace mentions explicitly in "E Unibus Pluram" as one of the first and most powerful instigators of ironic television. Rudy shows us one potential limitation of the ironic mindset, which is the relentless fear that mockery is always forthcoming, that defenses must always be poised, and that whenever possible your best defense against ridicule is

to go on the offense by mocking yourself. This state of paranoia, Wallace is trying to show, is one result of submersion in irony. Letterman seems, at least to Edilyn, more aware than Rudy that irony has trapped him—it may be wishful thinking, but Edilyn senses some discomfort on Letterman’s part when he seems almost forced beyond his own best motives to ask questions that border on mean. Edilyn herself demonstrates irony’s best use, the clearing away of pretensions and hypocrisy. Letterman’s irony is depicted here as a form of pretension, a display of irony for its own sake and derived from an attitude that enshrines irony as something too grand not to use. It’s also hypocritical, if in fact Edilyn is right that Letterman would welcome a break but refuses one. Thus Edilyn, by claiming to have worked on the ads for free, deftly shifts the conversation away from Letterman attacking and she defending. Suddenly they’re both free to laugh about it and no one is made to look ridiculous. Moreover, Rudy’s approach of using irony to outmaneuver irony is shown to be flawed, resulting as it does in Rudy’s surrender: unable to parry Letterman’s final question about why Edilyn would star in these commercials, Rudy advises Edilyn to tell him about the back taxes, a response that, in contrast to Edilyn’s actual response, would leave her defeated, pathetic, and begging for sympathy. Letterman is digging for an admission of some kind, and for Edilyn to declare that she had taken the Oscar Meyer job out of necessity would not only be giving Letterman what he wants, but would virtually be asking him to let up.

Wallace refrains from ironic portrayals of his characters; his sympathetic tone defines his narrative style on the whole. One of the primary ways he shows his sympathy for his characters is by narrating with compassionate consideration of his characters and

by allowing even the most unappealing of them to entertain compassionate consideration of other characters, a trait he singles out for admiration in recovering addict and reformed criminal Don Gately: “The vision [of a drug addict aging horrifically] aroused more compassion than horror, which Gately never even considered might qualify him as a decent person” (925). The indicators are often fleeting. The story of Poor Tony Krause is that of a thief, addict, and transvestite who suffers a horrific withdrawal from heroin while living in a dumpster and a library bathroom before suffering a seizure on a train. He’s known for his self-absorbed whining, and when one of his colleagues is killed because of him, Poor Tony is more worried about his feather boa than the death of another person. Poor Tony often steals purses from women on the street—in one unfortunate incident he steals what looks like a purse but it actually contains a woman’s external artificial heart. “Poor Tony couldn’t dare wear anything comely, not even the Antittoi brothers’ red leather coat, not since that poor woman’s bag had turned out to have a heart inside. He had simply never felt so beset and overcome on all sides as the black July day when it fell to his lot to boost a heart. Who wouldn’t wonder Why Me?” (300). Certainly self-pitying, Poor Tony seems unable to acknowledge responsibility for his lot, but the quick “poor” shows him capable of at least a small degree of pity for the woman he inadvertently killed.

Quite often, though, Wallace uses the stories themselves to evoke a sense of compassion that actively counters any ironic disdain we may bring to the reading. One example is Wallace’s story of the Antittoi brothers, two hapless and largely incompetent

French-Canadian terrorists trying to participate in larger insurgencies against the former United States:

Bertraund Antitoui is in charge, the brains of the outfit, pretty much by default, since Lucien Antitoui is one of the very few natives of [Quebec] ever who cannot understand French, just never caught on , and so has very limited veto-powers, even when it comes to such harebrained Bertraund-schemes as hanging a sword-stemmed fleur-de-lis flag from the nose of a U.S.A. Civic War [sic] hero's Boylston St. statue when it would simply be cut down by bored . . . gendarmes the next morning, or taping bricks to the return postage-paid solicitation cards of [the president's political party], or fashioning Astroturf doormats with a likeness of [the president] on them and distributing them gratis to home-supply outlets throughout their insurgency-grid—puerile and on the whole rather sad little gestures that M. DuPlessis would have interdicted with a merry laugh and a friendly hand on Bertraund's bowling ball of a shoulder. (480-481).

The narrator tempers his portrayal of the Antitouis' buffoonery with a great deal of compassion. The narrator is forgiving of Lucien's ignorance (Lucien "just never caught on" to French), amused by Bertraund's ineffectiveness ("harebrained Bertraund-schemes"), and although Bertraund's ideas are "puerile" they're also "rather sad little gestures," deserving more of pity than dismissive condescension. That the Antitouis deserve more compassion than condescension is finally indicated by the description of

DuPlessis's typical response. DuPlessis is a terrorism coordinator who cannot have much use for the Antiois, so he reigns them in but does so "with a merry laugh and a friendly hand" on the shoulder. More than just an indication of DuPlessis' character, the narrator offers his description of DuPlessis's response as an alternative to whatever response we may have toward Bertraund, suggesting that if we've responded with anything other than a merry laugh we may want to reconsider.

But look again at the episode with Poor Tony, whose theft of the woman's external heart is told in a sensational magazine article:

The active, alert woman gave chase to the purse snatching "woman" for as long as she could, plaintively shouting to passers by the words "Stop her! She stole my heart!" on the fashionable sidewalk crowded with shoppers, reportedly shouting repeatedly, "She stole me heart, stop her!" In response to her plaintive calls, tragically, misunderstanding shoppers and passers by merely shook their heads at one another, smiling knowingly at what they ignorantly presumed to be yet another alternative lifestyle's relationship gone sour. . . .

That the prosthetic crime victim gave spirited chase for over four blocks before collapsing onto her empty chest is testimony to the impressive capacity of the Jarvik IX replacement procedure, was the anonymous comment of a public medical official (143)

The article is a mish-mash, declaring itself a corrective to the ominous secrecy surrounding the death of the second person ever to receive this external artificial heart.

Along the way it weaves into fashion (the external heart is “installed in a stylish Etienne Agner purse”), sensationalism (people and events are over-described as callous, needless, tragic, in a proliferation of emotive adjectives), self-congratulation (“searching and fearless journalistic doggedness”), and breathlessness (“medical science’s awe inspiring march forward”). The piece is a parody of tabloid journalism, and its ironies are multiple. The article’s confused inability to focus, shifting its point frenetically from portraying tragedy to praising the miracles of technology, sets up ironic juxtapositions—it’s particularly indecent to comment on the chase as an indication of the prosthesis’s quality. It’s clearly indecent of the medical professional to so miss the point, but it’s not so clear if the article writer places the quote in order to show this or if the writer’s demonstrated awe for the technology blinds her to the irony of the juxtaposition. Regardless, the irony is Wallace’s, as are the outlandishness of the situation and the comic literalization of a figurative expression.

Dave Eggers, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, claims to hate irony and seems to have let his hatred blind him to its possibility in his writing. David Gates, in his article for *Newsweek*, writes about irony in the broadest possible terms, trying at once to declare it a current phenomenon, but one that has always been around. David Foster Wallace does much the same, arguing for a literary retreat from the use of irony in broad terms. Wallace argues that irony can only destroy, never build, and he’s not without support. Hayden White condemns the ironic perspective because it is “*negational*” (34). According to White, irony’s sole purpose is to expose the absurd, to undercut the foundations of all beliefs and power structures that are misguided or

hypocritical. But having torn down, irony must give way because “as the basis of a world view, Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions” (38). The attraction of an ironic perspective is that it affords a critical, even a self-critical, position that is not easily duped, and just as Northrop Frye notes that “[I]rony is naturally a sophisticated mode” (41), White explains that “characterizations of the world cast in the Ironic mode are often regarded as *intrinsically* sophisticated and realistic. They appear to signal the ascent of thought in a given area of inquiry to a level of self-consciousness on which a genuinely ‘enlightened’—that is to say, self-critical—conceptualization of the world and its processes has become possible” (37). Richard Rorty argues, in contradistinction to White, that the ironic world view is genuinely enlightened and liberating: “I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (xv). The ironic world view is available only to those who have moved away from the error of believing in essentials, and Rorty acknowledges that the ironist has considerable power over others who have not recognized that there are no essentials and that all is contingency. Transmitting the ironist’s knowledge to the unenlightened is “potentially very cruel” because “the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless” (89). One of irony’s powers is its capacity for exposing the powerlessness of other

perspectives, but again you could argue, as does Wallace, that this particular power is endlessly negative, able to do nothing more than show the fragility of all foundations.

And again you would find critical disagreement. Alan Wilde finds fault with the position held by White and Wallace, confronting White explicitly for displaying an “inability to recognize the potential for affirmation within even the most self-conscious of ironies” (6), a critique easily leveled against Wallace as well. Wilde defines what he calls “generative irony” as irony that creates “enclaves of value in the face of—but not in place of—a meaningless universe” (148). In fact, Wilde posits that “*all* irony, regarded as a perceptual encounter with the world, generates in response to its vision of disparity (or in some cases is generated by) a complementary, more conceptual vision of wholeness or singleness, which I want to refer to as the *anironic*” (30). The anironic concept allows for, even demands, a dual reading of irony, both negative and positive. Linda Hutcheon argues similarly in *Irony’s Edge*, where she presents a chart, a sliding scale, that offers possible categories for types of irony and notes that even while the scale moves from relatively benign to provocative, each stop along the way can be rendered or interpreted in positive or negative terms. Not only is irony itself too multi-valent to tolerate David Gates’s blithe observation that some people just hate it, but Wilde argues that irony *does*, and Hutcheon that irony *can*, generate negation and affirmation, negative and positive response, at one and the same time. Given the proliferation of theories of irony arguing that it is negational or affirmative, isolating or communal, it seems reasonable for Wilde to hold that irony is both, or at least, as Hutcheon argues, can readily be construed as both.

Wallace's arguments about irony are fundamentally flawed because he presents, as do so many critics and theorists of irony, "a single thing—irony—operating in a single way" (Hutcheon 46). Yet all of those single ways of operating build a more comprehensive picture of a widely variant single thing; Hutcheon's compilation of interpretations for irony gathers a list of nine broad uses of irony, each of which in turn has "both a positive and negative articulation" (46). When someone like Wallace, for example, condemns irony for its self-protective uses, he focuses on its arrogant and defensive articulation and ignores its self-deprecating articulation, as in Hutcheon's example of Canadians who use it wryly to signal "their reluctant modesty, their self-positioning (as marginalized and self-marginalizing), their self-doubts, and perhaps even their rejection of the need to presume or to assume superiority" (50), all efforts to wrangle a given situation (the Canadian sense of marginalization in a "United States-dominated present") into a perspective that grants them some control and acceptance. When Wallace argues that an "ironist is *impossible to pin down*" (67), and that such Protean evasion, or "the ability to interdict the *question* without attending to its *subject*" (68), is tyrannical, he argues skillfully against distancing irony. But Hutcheon counters with Ross Chambers's argument that "the '*refusal to be pinned down*' . . . can be a strategic way to be oppositional by exploiting the discourse of power to different ends"; the new perspective provided by distance is not tyranny but is, in fact, tyranny's interlocutor, "refusing the tyranny of explicit judgments" (Hutcheon 50). In both cases, Hutcheon's examples serve to show that arguments against specific forms of irony are readily countered by a rich history of arguments on behalf of those forms.

But Wallace detours from this pattern in his consideration of irony's counter-culture uses. Here he argues for the positive, affirmative use of what Hutcheon calls "assailing" irony, irony that highlights a problem, a hypocrisy or an injustice, and in so doing points to the problem's corrective. Wallace says, however, that assailing irony is limited in that it can only assail, it can only hope to suggest the corrective, but can never provide that corrective. Wallace doesn't argue the negative side of assailing irony; instead, he faults a culture that does nothing but assail, pointing again and again at what's wrong without offering a clear depiction of what would be a proper or useful replacement. Unlike the other forms of irony Wallace critiques, assailing irony emerges as a positive force, but it has lost its bite through overuse. Jonathan Franzen worries that engaging our current "cultural totalitarianism" results in "writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine . . ." ("Why Bother?" 69). For both Franzen and Wallace the problem and the point is the same: fiction may be showing us that something's amiss, but it's so wrapped up in the demonstration that something's wrong that it has no energy or capacity for demonstrating what can be done about it. Having established this position for himself, namely that our televisual culture is dangerous for its solipsistic effects, and that current fiction offers nothing to help us work our way out of the danger, Wallace sets to work creating fiction that might demonstrate a way out. Wallace considers the role of fiction in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"; he takes on televisual culture in *Infinite Jest*.

THE EXHAUSTION OF METAFICTION

“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” is Wallace’s statement about the need to move away from certain forms of ironic, self-referential fiction by parodying their conventions and even discussing them outright: “if this were a piece of metafiction, which it’s NOT, the exact number of typeset lines between this reference and the prenominate reference would very probably be mentioned” (264). Where “E Unibus Pluram” offers something of a theoretical argument for the “*best next* thing” (“Replenishment” 206) after postmodernism, an approach to fiction that eschews irony and open-ended problematizing, “Westward” is one half of Wallace’s literary argument for the best next thing, and *Infinite Jest* is the other. “E Unibus Pluram” makes three broad arguments. One is that irony is no longer a useful literary tool; another is that television has inculcated and perpetuates a culture of unhappy solipsism; the final is that the literary way out is for authors to adopt a more direct, principle-instantiating tone in their fiction. Both “Westward” and *Infinite Jest* share a narrative tone that serves to demonstrate the open-faced aesthetic Wallace argues for in “E Unibus Pluram,” but the other two poles of the essays’ argument are divided, with “Westward” concentrating on the contemporary literary situation and *Infinite Jest* concentrating on the contemporary cultural situation of mass, yet isolated, viewing.

The core of “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” is the story of the tension between creative writing student Mark Nechtr and his professor, Dr. C____ Ambrose. Ambrose is an established and a famously influential author, but one whose metafictional work and techniques have ambivalent pull on Mark: “the stuff exerts a

gravity-like pull on Mark Nechtr, who distrusts wordplay, who feels about Allusion the way Ambrose seems to feel about Illusion, who regards metafiction the way a hemophiliac regards straight razors” (293). He doesn’t trust metafiction’s assault on referentiality, among other things, but he also finds it somehow fascinating. Mark isn’t driven, as a writer, producing very little for his creative writing workshops, but he does want to write something sharply, perhaps a little antagonistically, moving for its readers. Metafiction might even come in handy as a decoy, a surface construction that belies the story’s true heart: “The stuff would probably use metafiction as a bright smiling disguise, a harmless floppy-shoed costume, because metafiction is safe to read, familiar as syndication” (333). Mark thinks writers of metafiction otiose and their techniques tired, but at the same time sees the value in using tired techniques that invite readers to fall into a comfortable set of expectations, only then somehow to pull the rug out from under them. But Mark can’t quite find a way to do this. The only story of his that we see in any detail, is one he has yet to write—another character predicts the story for him. In it, a competitive archer named Dave watches his girlfriend stab herself in the throat with one of his arrows and does nothing to save her. He receives a life sentence and shares a cell with someone who manages to escape and then puts a contract out on Dave. Meanwhile the warden, Jack Lord, offers Dave protection if he will only tell what he knows about the escaped convict’s plans, but Dave refuses because it would mean sacrificing his honor, the only thing that is truly and deeply his. Whether or not Dave ever gives in to Lord’s pressures is left unmentioned.

Mark has tried to avoid metafictional elements in his fiction, but the story does include a couple of moments that are unexpected and call attention to themselves as narrative contrivances, such as having Jack Lord as the warden or having the autopsy on Dave's girlfriend report that she died of old age. On the whole the story seems straightforward in its narrative, and even though we don't read it directly we get premonitions of the way his workshop fellows will react, and they find nothing remarkable in the technique. Mark has trouble feeling that the story is actually his, though, because he and his traveling companions heard a similar story broadcast over the radio, and because one of those companions is now telling him that he will write it, describing both the narrative arc and the reaction of others in the workshop. Mark wonders how he can "in good conscience just rip off, swallow, digest and expel as his" a story that someone else is already narrating, an issue that the narrator of "Westward" has brought up before: "occasionally a writer will encounter a story that is his, yet is not his. I mean, by the way, a writer of *stories*, not one of these intelligences that analyze society and culture, but the sort of ignorant and acquisitive being who moons after magical tales. Such a creature knows very little: how to tie a shoelace, when to go to the store for bread, and the exact stab of a story that belongs to him, and to him only" (294). How could the story be his but not? He knows the story is his, "yet occasionally the tale is already authoritatively gutted, publicly there, brightly killed, done by another. Or else menacingly alive, self-sufficient, organic, sounding the distant groan of growth, trading chemicals briskly with the air, but still outside the creature who desires to take it inside and make a little miracle" (294). The images are of the difficulties of imagination, of the

cross-contamination of ideas; the imagery, in fact the exact phrasing, of the “occasionally” passage quoted above, Wallace takes directly from Cynthia Ozick’s novella “Usurpations,” in which writers keep recognizing ideas that should have been theirs in the works of others, while taking the works of others and claiming and reconfiguring them. It’s also reminiscent of Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in which Pierre Menard seeks to produce *Don Quixote*, not as a “mechanical transcription of the original,” but as “pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes” (49). The thread connecting all of these examples is the idea of originality. These examples demonstrate the certain difficulty of originality and imply as well that originality in and of itself may not be the true or abiding goal of the writer; Wallace certainly indicates in “Westward” and elsewhere that the value of any given work is determined by “the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text” (McCaffery 148), over and above other considerations. But these examples, while depicting the weaknesses of originality, are themselves seeking an original way around the accretion of tired and repetitious works. John Barth declares Borges’ example “a remarkable and original work of literature, the implicit theme of which is the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature. His artistic victory, if you like, is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (“Exhaustion” 69-70). Wallace’s goal is exactly this—to re-deploy an intellectual dead end against itself in order to find a way to something new.

Metafiction serves as the intellectual dead end Wallace targets in “Westward,” using the form of metafiction as a tool against itself. But much as Wallace decries the use of irony to attack irony because irony is self-insulating, metafiction is a difficult tool to use against metafiction. The nature of metafiction is to be self-critiquing; metafictional works “contain within themselves the means for their own examination and elucidation as well as a critique of the current status of the literary species” (Lauzen 94). The primary effect of metafictional techniques is to expose literary artifice, to make explicit the conventions of fiction in order to recontextualize and revitalize them. If realism and mimesis have grown stale, metafiction steps in to render their transparent conventions opaque: “any renewal of an ‘exhausted’ genre must occur through the undoing and the placing in perspective of stylistic devices, approaching them from a distance in order to reflect on their ethical, aesthetic, and ideological functions. In this way, the originary forces of literary creation are, shall we say, *thematized*; the focus is shifted from the content of the texts toward their forms. . . . Thus, the naturalization of literary devices will give way to their high visibility within texts” (Chenetier 66). What this means in practical terms is that the author finds ways of making explicit the artifice of the art—Barth does this, for example, in “Lost in the Funhouse” by commenting directly on fictional practices, theory, and devices (“A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type” [72]; “[t]he action of conventional dramatic narrative may be represented by a diagram called Freitag’s Triangle” [95]), all the while telling a story about a family’s holiday trip that’s also an oblique tale of authorship. The trouble for an author who wants to thematize the forms of metafiction is that he or she is faced

with a seemingly insurmountable object: to foreground the techniques of metafiction looks exactly the same as metafiction's foregrounding of other literary techniques. Metafiction is its own theoretical investigation, its own inward-looking analysis and critique, so to use metafiction in critique of metafiction verges on the impossible. The result is simply more metafiction.

Wallace foregrounds a variety of standard metafictional techniques—his purpose requires him to bring them all out for scrutiny. The novella's sections are given self-descriptive titles, such as the one that starts it all: "Background That Intrudes and Looms: Lovers and Propositions" (233). The narrative comments on its own progress: "This has, yes, been a digression" (320). The narrator runs out of time, begging forgiveness for sloppy writing: "I have to play the supplicant here; ask you simply to eat some raw bare propositions I can't prepare or flavor enough to engage your real imaginations. We're all quite tired, and deprived, and it's getting pretty clear that we'll probably be asleep by the time the actual revel gets started; so I'm going to cease all fucking around and just tell you what Magda tells Mark" (353-354). The narrator comments on the physical existence of the narrative in print, as in the previously cited passage about the number of lines on the page. The narrator even comments on his own comments: "At this point somebody like Dr. C___ Ambrose would probably interrupt to observe that it seems as though a pretty long time has passed since his last interruption on the general textuality of what's going on" (286). The metafictional elements of "Westward" are themselves merely metafictional. Perhaps aware of this, perhaps simply

trapped by the artifice, the narrator is reduced to protest: “if this were a piece of metafiction, which it’s NOT” (264).

The only metafictional device that has utility for critiquing metafiction itself is metafiction’s own propensity toward self-theorization. The narrator and characters in the novella are able to comment on metafiction, and to do so in sharply critical terms. Mark, his wife and fellow workshop participant D.L., and advertising executive J. D. Steelritter all offer critical commentary on metafiction in general and on the work of Ambrose in particular. D.L., a pretentious, self-proclaimed postmodernist “specializing in language poetry and the apocalyptically cryptic Literature of Last Things, in exhaustion in general, and metafiction” (328), doesn’t actually critique metafiction *per se*; rather, she attacks Ambrose’s particular brand of metafiction, calling it “Indulgent. Cerebral but infantile. Masturbatory. A sort of look-Dad-no-hands quality” (329), thereby nastily invoking the sense but not the tone of the very commentary Ambrose had used to try to guide D.L. away from the self-absorbed style she was developing in the workshop. Steelritter aims for a slightly higher mark; his issue with Ambrose’s work is its lack of warmth:

“Stories are basically like ad campaigns, no?. . . Which they both, in terms of objective, are like getting laid. . . ‘Let me inside you,’ they say. You want to get laid by somebody that keeps saying ‘Here I am, laying you?’ Yes? No? *No*. Sure you don’t. I sure don’t. It’s a cold tease. No heart. Cruel. A story ought to lead you to be with both hands. None of this coy-mistress shit.” (330).

Mark takes this critique one step more, ceding Steelritter's basic analogy between stories and ads, but faulting Ambrose's fiction for its absence of love. Ambrose is actually a barely disguised John Barth; his story, the story under discussion, is "Lost in the Funhouse," "American metafiction's . . . most famous story" (237). The problem with "Lost in the Funhouse," according to Mark, is that it does not love, and from that realization he labors toward his own idea of how fiction should operate:

The story does not love, but this is *precisely because it is not cruel*. A story, just maybe, should treat the reader like it wants to . . . well, fuck him. A story can, yes, Mark speculates, be made out of a Funhouse. But not by using the Funhouse as the kind of symbol you can take or leave standing there. Not by putting the poor characters in one, or by pretending the poor writer's in one, wandering around. The way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself in one. For a lover. Make the reader a lover, who wants to be inside. Then do him. Pretend the whole thing's like love. Walk arm in arm with the mark through the grinning happy door. Shove. Get back out before the happy jaws meet tight. Reader's inside the whole thing. Not at all as expected. Feels utterly alone. (331)

Once inside the Funhouse, the reader would be made to feel isolated and even trapped, not disoriented and lost, but in view of the exit all the while:

Except the Exit would never be out of sight. It's be brightly, lewdly lit. There's be no labyrinths to tread through, no dark to negotiate, no barrels or disks to disorient, no wax minotaur-machina to pop out on springs and

flutter the sphincters of the lost. The Egress would be clearly marked, and straight ahead, and not even all that far. It would be the stuff the place is *made* of that would make it Fun. The whole enterprise a frictionless plane. Cool, smooth, never grasping, well lubed, flatly without purchase, burnished to a mirrored gloss. The lover tries to traverse: there is the motion of travel, except no travel. More, the reflective surfaces in all directions would reflect each static forward step, interpret it as a backward step. There'd be the illusion (sic) of both the dreamer's unmoving sprint and the disco-moonwalker's backward glide. The Exit and Egress and End in full view the whole time. (331-332)

And whatever you might call such fiction, Mark is certain it wouldn't be metafiction because "metafiction is untrue, as a lover. It cannot betray. It can only reveal. Itself is its only object. It's the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love" (332).

Wallace is unable to deploy metafictional devices against themselves, but he is able to re-contextualize them. Metafiction is often antagonistic in two ways: first, by continually breaking fictional frames, thereby eliminating any possibility of a reader simply following the narrative arc; and secondly, by direct confrontation. Barth's "Life-Story" is an exemplary case, telling the halting story of a writer trying unsuccessfully to tell a story and finally turning on the reader:

The reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You've read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it

you don't go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where's your shame? (127)

In order to counter any sense on the part of the reader that the reading experience is the responsibility of the writer alone, metafiction and other works that aren't necessarily metafictional but might more conveniently be called postmodern often build on the premise that the author and reader are independent operators, often even at cross purposes. The self-consciousness of metafiction, the self-consciousness of postmodernism versus any previous version of self-consciousness, is characterized by "its *aggressiveness*; the dynamic in which the author both involves and skeptifies the reader—almost as if the reader were not really there—*evoking the audience as cultural enemy*" (Newman 41). Where Barth's narrator in "Life-Story" screams at the reader for insistently demanding narrative, where Barth's narrator in "Lost in the Funhouse" whimpers at his own incompetence ("We should be much farther along than we are; something has gone wrong; not much of this preliminary rambling seems relevant" [79]), the narrator in "Westward" begs the reader's indulgence, patience, and forgiveness. Barth's narrator in "Lost in the Funhouse" observes, "To say that Ambrose's and Peter's mother was *pretty* is to accomplish nothing; the reader may acknowledge the proposition, but his imagination is not engaged" (75). Wallace's narrator in "Westward" says, "OK true, that was all both too quick and too slow, for background—both intrusive and sketchy. But please, whether your imagination's engaged or not, please just

acknowledge the propositions, is all. Because time is *severely limited*, and *whatever might be important lies ahead*" (238). The difference is simply that between a narrator whose focus excludes or is frustrated by the reader, and a narrator who wants to earn and deserve the reader's attention. The narrator in "Westward" makes his almost-desperate need for the reader to stay attuned explicit, and even marks the ways he tries to ensure the best experience possible: "All this is being made explicit both to avoid any possible appearance of Symbolist/New Realist coyness" (260), which is to say that other forms of fiction might play hard-to-get, but the narrator hopes against hope not to do that here. Finally, the narrator of "Westward" takes to lambasting the metafictional author directly:

Again, the preceding generation of cripplingly self-conscious writers, obsessed with their own interpretation, would mention at this point, just as we're possibly getting somewhere, that the story isn't getting anywhere, isn't progressing in the seamless Frietagian upswing we should have scaled by this, mss. p. 35, time. They'd trust, though, à la their hierophant C___ Ambrose, that this explicit internal *acknowledgement* of their failure to start the show would release them somehow from the obligation to start the show. Or that it might, in some recursive and above all ingenious way, represent the very movement it professes to deny. (269)

When Barth's narrator lashes out because of his lack of narrative progress, he's re-evaluating his own narrative facility or angry at the readers for wanting him to make

such progress. When Wallace's narrator lashes out, he hopes the reader will forgive and trust him, and he critiques the preceding generation of writers for not doing the same.

The failing, according to Mark, is that metafiction does not love because it is not cruel—Wallace articulates this as the “art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text” (McCaffery 148). Mark’s stance vis-à-vis metafiction is in large part reflective of Wallace’s, but Mark is in a critical position less fully developed than Wallace’s and borne out by the narrator, a fellow writing workshop participant who is able to demonstrate Wallace’s vision in ways that Mark seems still to be seeking. The intellectual purpose of “Westward” is multiple: it’s a critique of metafiction, it’s a love song for the lonely, it’s a commentary on the market economy. But the art’s heart’s purpose of “Westward” is single: it’s to fulfill its intellectual duties in such a way that un-alienates readers used to years of metafictional and ironic isolation. The novella is populated with characters who are lonely and have no idea how to transcend that loneliness, and Wallace tries to show that the space between readers and authors need not be a lonely void as well. He will do this as well in *Infinite Jest*, to much greater effect and success. Here he does this through his narrator’s lack of irony toward the other characters. We’re told time and again that the narrator and other participants in the workshop simply love Mark Nechtr—his absence of pretense and seeming authenticity are cause for admiration, and at no time are the other characters jealous, at no time are the other characters snide and dismissive of Mark’s wholesomeness, at no time do they try to countenance their sense of inferiority to Mark by contrasting their greater distance and sophistication to his straight-forwardness. Mark is without guile, and the other

characters simply admire him. Beyond that, the narrator paints sympathetic portraits of D.L., a tremendously unlikable person, and Tom Sternberg, also tremendously unlikable and physically repugnant (he has chronic skin inflammations from poison sumac and one of his eyes is turned completely backwards) yet still presented with just enough complexity and compassion to render his unhappiness sympathetic rather than off-putting. J.D. Steelritter and his loutish son DeHaven are shown throughout to be selfish and self-absorbed in their own ways, but even D.L. can see that they have a fundamental love for each other. The aggregate borders on sappy, and in summary form seems incapable of being anything other than schmaltz, but Wallace would argue that any discomfort we feel talking about love, love, love is a shame and the nasty by-product of a culture steeped in irony and taught not to expose its passions and deepest cares. Wallace's triumph is that he's able to avoid charges of melodrama and unrestrained sentiment by presenting the nasty and the lovely in the same tone. We aren't taught to ignore Sternberg's physical repulsiveness, nor are we even taught to see the human behind the off-putting inward-looking eye. Sternberg is hard to take, both in person and in personality, and Wallace wouldn't have us think otherwise. It's simply true that he's unlikable, and it's simply true that we're all unlikable, and it's simply true that Sternberg's metaphysical isolation is no different from anyone else's. Mark Nechtr, universally loved, is equally alone. Wallace argues in "E Unibus Pluram" and in *Infinite Jest* that irony soothes this alienation but does not counter it—the antidote is sincerity and sympathy.

The woman who kills herself in Mark's predicted story is said to have a strange quirk: namely, she prefers to be told she is loved rather than to have someone say "I love you." Fighting about this with Dave leads to her suicide—Dave objects to the use of the passive, but L____, as we know her, finds it warm and comforting, for it's what her father would say to her tucking her in to bed. At the end of "Westward," the narrator finally turns to antagonize the reader directly. His tone is one of exasperation, much like Barth's in "Life-Story," but his exasperation is not from the reader's insistent demands but from the reader's shielded, cautious refusal to engage for fear of exposing himself to ridicule or other humiliation. Wallace's narrator thinks he has shown that this simply won't be the case here, that the narrative derides no one, but has to tell the reader directly, "You are loved" (373). As Dave is the main character of Mark's story, it's easy to see his objection to L____'s request as the response we're asked to endorse. Yet the narrator of "Westward," who we've already seen to be more accomplished than Mark, uses the same phraseology in reference to his readers. The difference between the active and the passive is simple: the active directs love from one individual to another, while the passive targets an individual but emerges from anywhere and everywhere. "I love you" is bounded by space and time; "you are loved" is always where the recipient is. It's the equivalent of telling the reader that he is not alone, and that this time spent with this narrator is but a single manifestation of that.

"Westward" is a triumph of tone, and in tone it's identical to *Infinite Jest* as well as to numerous Wallace essays. "Westward" is a failure insofar as its critique of metafiction is incapable of the coup he seeks. The metafictional techniques he tries to

deploy against metafiction are ultimately incapable of transcending it. He has more success with his open-faced tone, a narrative mode wherein he suggests he has nothing to hide, about his attitudes, his characters, even his own failings. The two together might have shown a new direction for metafiction, for Wallace has made it clear elsewhere that he finds no fault with metafiction in and of itself, just as he finds no fault with irony in and of itself. Neither are wicked, they're just spread too thin and have reached the point of exhaustion. Metafiction, in fact, is singularly useful for antagonizing a reader's sense of personal isolation by explicitly reminding him that the thing he's reading was manipulated and is mediated through another consciousness:

It helps reveal fiction as a mediated experience. Plus it reminds us that there's always a recursive component to utterance. This was important, because language's self-consciousness had always been there, but neither writers nor critics nor readers wanted to be reminded of it. But we ended up seeing why recursion's dangerous, and maybe why everybody wanted to keep linguistic self-consciousness out of the show. It gets empty and solipsistic real fast. (McCaffery 142)

Just as Barth argued that the techniques of realism no longer worked as they were being used, Wallace argues that metafiction no longer works as it is being used. Barth redeploys the techniques of realism alongside self-consciousness, showing the conventions to be conventions and then still using them, having made the reader more aware of them and better able to understand them. Barth is often grouped with other, more radically self-conscious metafictional writers, but Nicholas Birns argues that

“Barth may not be a realist, but he is often referential, even as he questions the idea of reference itself” (115). Wallace has less success in “Westward” because he redeploys the techniques of metafiction, all the while arguing that they don’t work. At the same time he finds success in his tone toward his characters; the result is a clunky union. *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, steers away from using metafiction as a means for critiquing metafiction, instead juxtaposing metafictional devices alongside his open-faced narrative style. The result is a much more successful union.

INFINITE JEST AND RADICAL REALISM

If Barth is referential even while questioning the idea of reference itself, Wallace is metafictional even while questioning the idea of metafiction. That holds insofar as he actually is metafictional, as he is in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”; otherwise, the most common reference point for Wallace’s metafictional undercurrent is his use of footnotes. *Infinite Jest* contains more than three hundred of them, and for self-conscious frame breaking there may be no better technique than to make your readers regularly flip to the back of the book. Beyond the footnotes, however, *Infinite Jest* is predominately referential. Having tried unsuccessfully to “get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about . . . over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic” (McCaffery 142), Wallace retreated from the explicit demand that fiction be recognized as a living transaction and concentrated, instead, on dramatizing that interaction indirectly. “Westward” ends with the narrator

insisting the reader acknowledge the interaction—*Infinite Jest* shows the cost of isolation.

Infinite Jest is wide-ranging in its depiction of near-future society's addiction to passive "spectation" (a favorite neologism of Wallace's) and search for diversions that will prevent or protect people from confronting their fears of being alone. Our options are to combat the fears and rectify the situation or sedate the fears and live with them. Wallace argues that ours is a culture that has been duped into sedating those fears by entertainments that seem capable of successfully combating them but actually make them worse. *Infinite Jest* contains a parody of its own argument, a video so compulsively entertaining that its viewers are entranced immediately and will starve to death rather than divert their attention even briefly toward sustenance, all the while watching it again and again. The radical, almost ludicrous extreme seems to ironize Wallace's position, suggesting that he doesn't want to be accused of taking his own anti-spectation arguments too seriously, but the accumulation of other examples, some more extreme than others, demonstrates that Wallace takes his arguments about the dangers of spectation seriously. One character after another displays self-absorption, ranging from petty selfishness to a strangely exaggerated subsumption by drugs or television or other entertainment.

The plot, as much as *Infinite Jest* can be said to be plotted, concerns efforts by the future United States government and a radical terrorist group working out of Quebec to find the master copy of the infinitely entertaining video, referred to throughout as the Entertainment. The terrorists want to duplicate it (in Wallace's future, only the master

copy can be duplicated) and distribute it throughout the country, while the government hopes to circumvent this. But that's just the surface framework, and it is presented in such a convoluted manner that its developments are largely obscured by the transformations of its major characters, for whom the plot is a backdrop they're unaware of for most of the novel. Donald Gately and Hal Incandenza form the novel's center, representing the addict on the mend and the addict in decline, respectively. Gately's troubles are clear in their manifestation and clear in their origin: he's a recovering addict steering his life away from petty burglary. Hal's troubles are clear in their manifestation but indeterminate in origin. By the chronological end of the novel he has lost all control of his facial expressions and physical gestures and has no ability to articulate—his thoughts are clear, but his speech is mangled and apparently terrifying to witness. It's unclear how Hal reaches this point; for most of the novel his articulation is fine, although toward the end other characters begin questioning him about his inappropriate or inexplicable expressions, making it clear that his descent into animal isolation has begun. It seems most likely that his body self-synthesized an incredibly potent hallucinogen—we don't know the effects of the hallucinogen but we know it's synthesized from mold; a story of Hal eating mold at the age of four is intercut with the episode in which his complete collapse is displayed. Whether or not the mold is the cause, Hal's father James thinks he's able to see Hal's descent into non-communication very early; as Hal puts it, "I believed I was speaking and he believed I was not speaking" (899). James decides to try filmmaking in the hopes of creating something entertaining enough to engage Hal, "Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his

mouth and come out—even if it was only to ask for more. . . . Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (839). No one else will acknowledge that Hal is, as James puts it, disappearing, although later evidence suggests James may have seen early signs that others could not recognize. James finally kills himself when Hal is twelve—the reasons are cloudy, but some of the characters speculate that he was disappointed by his last attempt to make a film that would reach Hal.

James’s fear that Hal was becoming a “figurant,” a silent character filling the background of the main action, determined his technique of giving voice to everyone visible in his films in order to eliminate all figurants, “no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were” (835). The result is a jumble of noise, really, since no voice is given priority, and was why “critics complained that [his] entertainments’ public-area scenes were always incredibly dull and self-conscious and irritating, that they could never hear the really meaningful central narrative conversations for all the unfiltered babble of the peripheral crowd, which they assumed . . . was some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose, instead of radical realism” (836). The idea of radical realism informs Wallace’s fictional technique in *Infinite Jest*, as he is careful to devote narrative energy to as many people as possible. Most are connected to the central plot, others have passing connection to central characters. A woman who will reside at the same half-way house as Don Gately is given two dense pages; we read ten pages about the last attempt of an addict who has precious little to do with the plot to break his addiction. The first person to view the

Entertainment and succumb to it is a medical attaché —his role is precisely that of expendable character, but we learn much about his relationship with his wife, the fact that he has slept with Hal’s mother,⁸ the state of his diplomatic immunity (he works for the Saudi government); in fact, Wallace provides five pages of background for someone who serves no other plot purpose than to become the first person to receive the Entertainment and watch it until he dies.

James Incandenza provides the rationale for giving voice, presence, and depth to as many people as possible: “it was real life’s real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment” (835-836).

Incandenza, and Wallace, are trying to recognize and acknowledge the basic fact of each person’s central role in the narrative of his or her own life. The point is to level, as much as is possible, the distinction between primary and secondary characters. Eliminating the distinction isn’t possible or even desirable; even *Infinite Jest* spends more time with some characters than others. But almost no character exists without history and without at some point or another having the opportunity to speak in his or her own voice.

Moreover, Wallace is careful to keep those histories and voices from always bearing on the plot or the lives of the more central characters. The paths of their lives may cross—the medical attaché has had an affair with Hal’s mother and is destroyed by a film, the Entertainment, made by Hal’s father—but Wallace is careful to maintain the

⁸ Hal’s mother has an insatiable sexual appetite—among hundreds of sexual partners, she probably slept with her half-brother and may have slept with her oldest son, Orin. Thus her affair with the medical attaché is less significant to the plot than it may seem in summary.

independence of their existence—the medical attaché attends a Saudi prince, has diplomatic immunity, works stressful days, is cold toward his wife. Wallace acknowledges the Jamesian concept of recognizing and trying to mitigate the arbitrary nature of drawing a line where relationships stop, and his strategy is to make as rich as possible the lives of all of his characters. In fact, the strategy is to introduce a huge number of characters, most of whom are unnecessary for the basic plot to develop, and then to create for them rich and varied back stories.

For the reader, then, this technique serves as a continual reminder that we are, each of us, our own central protagonists; we are reminded that everyone is, by nature, self-centric, and we are encouraged to recognize that everyone is thinking this about themselves, and not thinking it about anyone else. Wallace is absolutely troubled by feelings of aloneness, by individual isolation, and one way that we begin to isolate ourselves is by not coming to terms with the fully developed characters who populate our lives. The one true remedy is interaction: as James Incandenza screams to Gately, “Any conversation or interchange is better than none at all” (839). This brings us back to Wallace’s core complaint against television: watching television exacerbates loneliness even while it seems to mitigate loneliness. Apart from the radical example of the Entertainment, Wallace presents a specific television example in the father of Hugh Steeply. Hugh Steeply, an agent in pursuit of the Entertainment before the terrorists find it, tells the story of his father to Remy Marathe, a turncoat agent for the terrorists. Steeply’s father developed an obsession with “M*A*S*H,” watching every syndicated re-run in addition to every new broadcast, taking copious notes about the apocalyptic

themes he saw emerging and writing letters to the characters themselves, meanwhile slipping from contact with his family and co-workers. Steeply rejects Marathe's suggestions of "inanimate" or "petrified" as descriptors for his father's condition in favor of "stuck":

"Stuck. Fixed. Held. Trapped. As in trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things. Pulled apart in different directions."

Marathe's eyes searched the sky, which this was already too light blue for his pleasure, filmed with a sort of eggy plura of heat. "Meaning between different cravings of great intensity, this."

"Not even craving so much. Emptier than that. As if he were stuck wondering. As if there was something he'd forgotten."

"Misplaced. Lost."

"Misplaced."

"Lost."

"Misplaced."

"As you wish." (647-648)

Steeply insists that what happens to people like his father who have retreated wholly into themselves through passive spectation is a form of befuddlement. They aren't turned to unresponsive stone but seem instead to have forgotten something during their viewing, something Steeply prefers to call "misplaced" over the finality of "lost." What they've misplaced is actual interaction, and this remains unclear to them because real human contact has been replaced by something that approximates it so closely as to seem the

same even though it is not. Wallace's complaint against television is that it presents a more exhilarating life than the life you lead, showing you at one and the same time that life is more exciting to those who aren't watching TV, but the only access you have to that life is by watching TV. And the ultimate problem with this cycle isn't that you don't get to live with any panache of your own, but that you potentially cripple your psychological well-being:

If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and it's true that lonely people find television's 2-D images relief from their stressful reluctance to be around real human beings, then it's also obvious that the more time spent at home alone watching TV, the less time spent in the world of real human beings, and that the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel inadequate to the tasks involved in being a part of the world, thus fundamentally apart from it, alienated from it, solipsistic, lonely. It's also true that to the extent one begins to view pseudo-relationships with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley as acceptable alternatives to relationships with real people, one will have commensurately less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3-D persons, connections that seem pretty important to basic mental health. (38-39)

Determined to attack television's crippling effect on our social health, but having determined that television itself pre-empts the use of irony in the service of such an

attack, Wallace adopts a tone of open-faced candor and a narrative mode that forces us to recognize the complex individuality of one another as well as our need for interacting with that complexity. This tone is even embodied for our respect in the character of Mario, who has no inclination toward speaking or behaving in any way other than pure honesty. It's a technique particularly effective in Wallace's non-fiction, where his narratives all reflect as much on his own insecurities, social errors, confusions, and embarrassments as they do on the ostensible topic. But in his fiction it acquires a different dimension of significance, replacing an image of the author as distant and authoritarian with an image of the author as collegial and fallible but no less serious about his message. And it's singularly effective as a countermove in Wallace's efforts to push fiction out of television's influence and to agitate and mitigate his readers' uneasy solipsism.

CHAPTER III

“ANOTHER 20 YEARS OF BORING LITERARY NOVELS AND THE THING’S DEAD”: JONATHAN FRANZEN, OPRAH WINFREY, AND THE INSTABILITY OF CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Three years after the debut of Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club, books that Oprah had chosen and discussed on her talk show had generated “roughly \$175 million in revenue” for publishers. Book Club episodes were “responsible for 28 consecutive best sellers,” selling “more than 20 million books and [making] many . . . authors millionaires” (Max). Books chosen for Oprah’s Book Club could see their print runs jump from 10,000 to 760,000, as happened with Melinda Haynes’s *Mother of Pearl*. Publishers would scramble to promote their books to Oprah; there was no direct submission process, so publishers would try to get copies of a book they thought conformed to an Oprah profile into the hands of as many Oprah staffers as they could, in the hopes that someone with influence would pass their book to Oprah. With an average daily audience of 13 million exposed to Oprah’s announcements of her selections and subsequent discussions, Winfrey wrested “considerable cultural authority away from publishers” (Max).

Sites of cultural authority are fluid and contestable, as demonstrated by Oprah’s ability to influence, mitigate, and even, to a degree, assume some authority from publishers. Moreover, sites of cultural authority shift across hierarchical boundaries: Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* demonstrates that, over the last 150 years, sites of cultural authority have proliferated and moved from, for example,

academically and socially elite Arnoldian critics (27) to less “genteel” marketing ventures like the Book-of-the-Month Club and mass media like radio programs. Oprah’s Book Club would no doubt have warranted mention, if not its own chapter, had Rubin written her book just a few years later.

One result of the fluidity of cultural authority is that authors trying to position themselves in the culture may be unsure of which authorities they should court, and may also be claimed by authorities they may want to avoid. Such is the case with Jonathan Franzen, who constructed his early career (his first two novels) in the pursuit of recognition by academic and intellectual authorities for the depth and breadth of his socially responsible vision. When his first two novels were largely ignored, he began to fear that shifting cultural authorities had weakened the status of the serious novel and evacuated the authority of the serious novelist, even among serious, intellectual readers. Franzen’s program for his third novel, *The Corrections*, was to inject entertaining character studies and humorous riffs on contemporary culture into his culturally engaged fiction in an attempt to reinvigorate the cultural significance of the novel. Much to his dismay, however, the accessibility of *The Corrections* attracted popular audiences and he found himself appropriated, for lack of a better term, by Oprah and the middlebrow authority she represents.

Mark McGurl identifies one form of cultural authority as that embodied in the artist who is wary of compromising his art in pursuit of popular acclaim. Constructing his model of an elite author with a deliberately distant posture toward the masses around a conventional understanding of Henry James, McGurl argues in *The Novel Art* that the

surging popularity of the novel during the 19th century was a source of frustration for Henry James, in part because James feared the popularity of the novel would provide publishers the arguments and incentive to pressure authors into serving economic interests over and above artistic interests, and in part because the financial benefits of the novel's popularity did not extend to his own work. James's frustrations were born of his ambivalent pursuit of both the art of the novel and the finances of the novel. Already convinced that the novel "had been for the most part a disturbingly lowly and unrefined enterprise" (3) and unable, ultimately, to earn the popular acclaim and accompanying wealth he sought, James concentrated on the artistic and intellectual potential of the novel:

It was in part the massive popularity of the novel, in whose bounty James so desperately wanted, did not want, was not able to share that provoked him and others to rethink the formal values of their genre, in turn to contribute to a form of social distinction taking place in any number of contexts "outside" their genre: intellectual distinction. The "high art" text may . . . be characterized by its capacity to support endless rereading, but it was also characterized by its capacity to divide its readership into insiders and outsiders. The reader of James—the Jamesian—was not an aristocrat, exactly, but something else, a certain kind of aesthete-intellectual able to share the Master's endless enthusiasm for the mental labor of making distinctions. This kind of intellectual could lay claim to a superiority to "the mass". . . . (38-41)

McGurl describes James's anxiety about the status of the novel, and about his own status as novelist, leading to a re-trenching of sorts in which James redefined his audience as one comprised of intellectual insiders in opposition to the outsiders who weren't willing to provide the mental labor James required of his readers, and who weren't buying James's books.

A more populist model of the author/reader relationship, one that assigns responsibility for cultural authority more directly to the reading public, is exemplified by Stephen King, who was awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in the fall of 2003. The award invited comparison of King with past recipients, authors such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Toni Morrison, and those comparisons tended to be phrased in terms of high and low culture. Harold Bloom, for example, lamented the award as "another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life," while novelist Lev Grossman expressed hope that it would encourage writers to meld "the prose craft of the literary" with the "sinewy, satisfying plots of the trashy . . . to produce hybrid novels that offer the pleasures of both." King acknowledged and denounced the divide between "the so-called popular fiction and the so-called literary fiction" in his acceptance speech, berating "those who make a point of pride in saying they have never read anything by John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Mary Higgins Clark or any other popular writer" for trying to "get social academic brownie points for deliberately staying out of touch with your own culture" ("National Book"). King has long been protective of his cultural status: in his foreword to *Night Shift* he describes a nexus of writers who "deal with fear and death,"

some in a “real-life way” of external realities--his examples are Faulkner, Camus, Albee, and Steinbeck—and others who depict the “symbolic unconsciousness” of internal realities—T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton (xix-xx). King positions himself, the horror writer, at the point where internal and external realities come together. He dismisses his own pre-eminence (“I am not a great artist” [xiii]) but makes clear that his writerly obsessions are not so far removed from those of many other writers held in great esteem, suggesting at all times that he and they are all peers in the act of storytelling. This foreword was written in 1977, early in his career. Since then, as he has become one of the best-selling authors in history, he has also grown more and more defensive of his literary standing in response to repeated critical dismissals. In his introduction to 1993’s *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* he admits that his critics are sometimes right, but at other times are writing “the ill-tempered yappings” of the “self-appointed deacons in the Church of Latter-Day American Literature [who] seem to regard generosity with suspicion, texture with dislike, and any broad literary stroke with outright hate” (5). None of that yapping matters, though, nor does King’s tendency to take that yapping to heart¹, so long as “the *readers* liked” the work (*Four* xiv).

McGurl’s elitist model of cultural authority, King’s populist model of cultural authority, Oprah’s mediated model of cultural authority, all are versions of authority that can claim active influence over contemporary readers, themselves a fluid group capable of responding to multiple authorities or even exerting their own in the absence of an

¹ King describes how he follows his reviews and obsesses over the negative ones, to the point that the overwhelming critical dislike for *Christine*, for example, drove him to the “reluctant decision that it probably *wasn’t* as good as I had hoped” (*Four* xiv).

authority that provides them the reading experience they are looking for. This chapter isolates and discusses Oprah's model, then turns to a reading of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* for two reasons: first, because Oprah's selection of *The Corrections* produced a clash between competing models of cultural authority, and second, because Franzen uses *The Corrections* to dramatize the fluid state of contemporary culture, where the model of elite white male authority is in decline and cultural authority is claimed, and exercised, by fluid elements as diverse as higher education, aesthete-intellectuals, mass media, corporate interests, and others. Where the authority of the white male was predicated on universalizing and privileging social hierarchies, its strength was the stability of its cultural pronouncements, providing a steady cultural comfort or a steady target. The decline of white male authority has left a vacuum, exposing the oppressions inherent in the white male model but leading to unstable and competing rhetorics of cultural authority.

OPRAH'S BOOK CLUB AND POPULIST CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Oprah Winfrey announced her choice of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as the feature selection of her monthly book club in September of 2001. Her enthusiasm for the book was pronounced, as she told her audience while announcing the selection, "When people refer to 'The Great American Novel,' this is it, people" (qtd. in Epstein 33). Franzen agreed to participate: at the time, authors whose books were chosen for Oprah's Book Club were also invited to a televised dinner with a handful of Oprah's guests, during which the book is discussed, and then to a studio taping of the show with

a full audience discussion. Franzen was on tour promoting the book at the time of the announcement, and interviewers regularly asked him to express his thoughts about being endorsed by Oprah. As the tour wore on, Franzen began to admit to growing ambivalence about participating, and his discomfort made Oprah uncomfortable to the point that she cancelled the episode that would have featured Franzen, although she did not revoke her endorsement of *The Corrections*, and the book is still listed on her website as an “Oprah Pick.”

Between the time of Oprah’s selection of *The Corrections* and her cancellation of the Franzen episode, Franzen identified three basic anxieties about being selected—an anxiety about the placement of Oprah’s logo on the book cover, an anxiety about being associated with other, more “schmaltzy” Oprah selections, and an anxiety about the degree of sophistication in Oprah’s reading audience—and all of those anxieties derived from Franzen’s desire to be noticed, read, and discussed by a sophisticated, intellectual audience. One of those anxieties emerged from the stipulation that books chosen for Oprah’s Book Club bear a large “O” and the words, “Oprah’s Book Club” on the front cover. Franzen told Jeff Baker of *The Oregonian* that he objected to the corporate appropriation of his book: “It’s not a sticker, it’s part of the cover. . . . They redo the whole cover. You can’t take it off. I know it says Oprah’s Book Club, but it’s an implied endorsement, both for me and for her. The reason I got into this business is because I’m an independent writer, and I didn’t want that corporate logo on my book” (Baker 5). One critic noted that “Oprah’s list represents corporate aims—centralization, large-audience-specific marketing, and sales in big numbers. Franzen’s self-appointed task in writing

The Corrections was to attack all of that—and he succeeds. It would be hypocritical for him to roll over so Oprah could scratch his belly” (Anft). Most other critics, however, accused Franzen of being disingenuous to cringe at the idea of using his book’s jacket to advertise for Oprah when it already prominently advertised his publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Jackie Merri Meyer of Warner Books points out that the book jacket is not an extension of the book and thus not part of the author's creation: “The book jacket is . . . an ad” (Levitz). Publishers pay careful attention to the colors, designs, images, and typefaces that do and do not capture a browser’s attention, that do and do not sell. Moreover, novelist Rick Moody argues that writers are fully implicated in the commercial business of publishing: “If you are being published by one of the big houses, you can’t object that you are not commercial in some way: what book doesn’t have the publisher’s logo on the spine?” (Kirkpatrick, “Oprah Gaffe”). Critic Thomas R. Edwards carries the argument even farther, observing that books “often carry ads of another sort. The jacket of *The Corrections* bears four endorsements by reputable writers that, like all such testimonials, seem meant to cheer the author up and help his publishers sell more copies” (77). Oprah’s logo serves functions similar to both the blurbs and the publisher’s logo by advertising for the book and for Oprah at the same time. Oprah’s endorsement of a book had unquestioned and unparalleled impact on a book’s sales: after Oprah announced the following selections, “*Mother of Pearl*, by Melinda Haynes, went instantly from 10,000 in print to 760,000. *White Oleander* jumped from 25,000 to one million. *Vinegar Hill* by A. Manette Ansay, jumped from 18,000 copies to 875,000” (Max). And it’s equally clear that the logo on the book cover was a driving force behind

those sales, over and above Oprah's televised announcement. Standard procedure for Oprah's selections required the publisher immediately to re-issue the book with a new Oprah cover, but in order to appease Franzen's concerns about the Oprah logo on his books, his publisher and Oprah agreed to continue stocking shelves with the existing cover, exhausting that supply before producing and shipping the new covers ("Book Covers"). As a result, it was possible to track sales after Oprah's announcement based on the sticker alone, and "one month after the Oprah hoopla, 26,000 labeled copies had been sold, compared with only 3,100 unlabeled ones" (Levitz). Franzen acknowledged the impact of the Oprah label for his sales, telling Jeff Baker, "What this means for us is that she's bumped the sales up to another level and gotten the book into Wal-Mart and Costco and places like that. It means a lot more money for me and my publisher."

More to my purposes, Franzen argues that Oprah's label may portend a bump in sales but not a bump in prestige, since the book "was already on the best-seller list and the reviews were pretty much all in" (Baker 5)—in other words, audiences and reviewers had already considered the book on its own terms. Franzen indicated instead that his association with Oprah would be a boon for her as well, that it "does as much for her as it does for us" (Baker 5). There is no indication that the prestige of Oprah authors translates into increased viewer numbers: the episode in which Toni Morrison discussed *Paradise* was "one of the lowest-rated book-club shows to date" (Max). But where Morrison may not generate viewers for Oprah, she does confer some of her own cultural status on Oprah: as argued by John Young in his study of the Morrison books Winfrey featured on her show, "her [Morrison's] appearance on *Oprah* adds her own cultural

capital to Winfrey's book club, elevating it to a more serious level" (189). Franzen, conceiving his own work to be in the "high art literary tradition" (Baker 5), clearly envisioned his participation in Oprah's Book Club as contributing to her show's accumulation of cultural capital, allowing her to continue the process of elevating her club to more serious levels begun by her selection of Morrison. Moreover, Franzen intimates that Oprah's book club is in a position to be elevated because of the weak selections she has made; the second source of his anxiety about being chosen for Oprah's Book Club is the association of his book with the other selections, selections that he identifies as weak literary company. This anxiety was born out by the reaction of interviewers and readers Franzen encountered during his book tour. Interviewing Franzen for the Powells.com online bookstore, Dave Weich mentioned a friend to whom he recommended *The Corrections* before Oprah's announcement; the friend asked Weich to confirm the recommendation after hearing that Oprah had chosen the book for her club. Weich suggested his friend's attitude might be widespread, saying, "I'm sure thousands of people won't read this book for no other reason than the fact that Oprah recommended it. If you're that popular, the thinking goes, if you speak to the masses, you can't possibly be saying anything too intelligent." Franzen concurred, but intimated that popularity wasn't the issue as much as the association of his book with others in the Oprah collection: "The problem in this case is some of Oprah's picks. She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe, myself, even though I think she's really smart and she's really fighting the good fight. And she's an easy target" (Weich). Franzen later made these fears of association more

explicit, stating directly, “I feel like I’m solidly in the high art literary tradition, but I like to read entertaining books and this maybe helps bridge that gap, but it also heightens these feelings of being misunderstood” (Baker 5). Later Franzen would claim to have misspoke, conflating “high modern” with “art fiction” (“Meet Me in St. Louis” 272), but that clarification still projects Franzen’s fears of “being misunderstood,” of somehow not receiving the right kind or the sufficient degree of attention.

This fear of being misunderstood is Franzen’s third source of anxiety about being an “Oprah Pick,” namely the anxiety that the reading audience that forms around Oprah selections is not intellectually or socially coterminous with the reading audience Franzen imagines for himself. In the mid-1990s, Franzen wrote an essay for *Harper's Magazine* to express his frustration with the state of American literary culture, a state he extrapolated in part from the reception of his first two novels, which he had constructed to provoke vigorous national dialogs about pressing cultural issues—corporate greed and responsibility, self-serving politicians, abortion, religious fanaticism. After the first, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, failed to stir debate, generating only “sixty reviews in a vacuum” (“Why Bother?” 61), Franzen decided “that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren't simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to a culture” (61). Franzen describes an interview in which his novel is praised but discussed in terms of Franzen himself—his youth, whether or not the novel is autobiographical—and not in terms of the provocative cultural critique he had designed the novel to deliver. His second novel, *Strong Motion*, met the same “silence of irrelevance” (63), even though he replaced the first’s “irony and understatement” with

“rhetorical Molotov cocktails” (63). Again, Franzen complains of reviews that praise the novel but fail to engage the issues he raises, failing in turn to promote a national cultural review with his novels as the lens. Convinced by these experiences that “there was *no* place in the world for fiction writers” (63), Franzen despaired of writing a novel capable of “topical relevance” and “social reportage” (67), the kind of novel that encapsulates contemporary culture and provides critical perspective.

But then Franzen met Stanford English Professor Shirley Brice Heath. Franzen recounts conversations he had with Heath, prompted by her sociological studies of reading, in which she identified him as a “socially isolated individual who desperately wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world” (78), a description that struck Franzen as fundamentally accurate and that helped him put his desire to write into a perspective that acknowledged the degree to which writing satisfied a personal, individualized compulsion over and above the responsibility to produce culturally engaged fiction that Franzen had been identifying as his motivation to write. Suddenly able to recognize writing as an individual compulsion rather than a social responsibility, Franzen replaced broad external reasons for writing—cultural commentary, social reportage, critical exposé—with more insular personal reasons for writing:

It's all too easy to jump from the knowledge that the novel *can* have agency to the conviction that it *must* have agency. . . . What emerges as the belief that unifies us is not that a novel can change anything but that it can *preserve* something. The thing being preserved depends on the writer: it may be as private as “My Interesting Childhood.” But as the country

grows ever more distracted by mass culture, the stakes rise even for authors whose primary ambition is to land a teaching job. Whether they think about it or not, novelists are preserving a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating; maybe mystery, maybe manners. Above all they are preserving a community of readers and writers, and the way in which members of this community recognize each other is that nothing in the world seems simple to them. (90)

Rather than aiming for a vast audience, which Franzen calls the “chimerical mainstream” (95), Franzen identifies a core group of initiates, a club of novelists and readers with complex world views and a proprietary relationship with language. He envisions his role as novelist, then, even his imperative, to explore language and life’s complexities with reverence. But this vision of the novelist’s purpose places a responsibility on readers to honor that purpose, to read in such a way that follows the novelist’s lead in cultural preservation. After his conversations with Heath, Franzen identified two interconnected reasons for writing: “Simply to be recognized for what I was, [and] simply not to be misunderstood” (78). These reasons empower and prioritize the author while demanding a community of readers who will read him the way he wants to be read, with a depth of attention that will prevent them from misunderstanding.

Critics of the essay have largely ignored, or simply not found cause to discuss, the insider/outsider nature of Franzen’s arguments about readers, focusing instead on

Franzen's arguments about the decline of the socially critical novel and the state of the culture's relative inattention to the novel. When they do comment on Franzen's divisive formulations they tend to focus on his elitism as an author in relation to other authors—Joseph Epstein describes Franzen's arguments as the display of “every rubber chicken, toy trumpet, and whoopee cushion of literary snobbery of the past 40 years” (Epstein 34)—or, if they bring the readers into the equation, they implicate readers in Franzen's elitism (or accuse Franzen of implicating them: A. O. Scott's review of *How To Be Alone* identifies in Franzen's defense of reading the lesson of “how to feel superior to everyone else, and Franzen does not quite dispel the charge of elitism by copping to it in advance.”) But Franzen indicates his conviction that not all readers are alike in temperament or capability, and if reading is inherently elitist, still some readers are better at it than others. The readers who participate in the community of readers and writers who preserve language and articulate expression of complex thoughts are not all of the potential readers; they aren't even all of the “serious readers.” Franzen cites Heath's research of the reading habits of serious readers, which she divides into “modeled-habit readers,” or those readers who developed their habit under the direction of or by mimicking parents who read, and “resistant” readers, or the social isolate who feels ““very different from everyone around him”” and who will ““take your [social isolate's] sense of being different into an imaginary world” that cannot be shared ““because it's imaginary.”” For such a reader, then, ““the important dialogue in your life is with the *authors* of the books you read. Though they aren't present, they become your community”” (77). Contemporary distractions and busy lifestyles mean “the modeled-

habit layer of the novel's audience peels away, [and] what's left is mainly the hard core of resistant readers, who read because they must" (84); it's these remaining readers that Franzen envisions when he imagines readers who participate in the community of readers and writers dedicated to preserving language and a complex understanding of life. The essay itself is usually referred to as "the *Harper's* essay" to avoid its original, unwieldy title ("Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, A Reason to Write Novels"), but the *Harper's* label serves as a shorthand reference to the aesthete-intellectual audience Franzen pursues.

At issue are the assumptions Franzen makes about the ways that Oprah's audience approaches texts in contrast to the assumptions he makes about the ways his target audience approaches texts, as well as his assumptions about the kinds of texts they approach. Oprah's "real innovation" that makes it possible to discuss books on television is that she employs a "therapeutic approach" that "focuses the discussion on the viewer's and her response" (Max). As a result, Oprah's televised discussions tend, as in the case of "Winfrey's discussion of *Song of Solomon*, for example, [to read] the characters entirely within the rubric of talk-show topics," a reading that fails to account for the book's "political subtext, as the book club's discussion ignores the critique of America's racial history" (Young 182). John Young is able to argue that, in the case of Toni Morrison, at least, Oprah's venue allows Morrison to occupy high and low spheres simultaneously, "remaining visibly public as a producer of high art yet simultaneously discussing and marketing it through a mass cultural medium"; Young argues that, because Morrison does not devalue the kind of reading that Oprah's audience brings to

bear on Morrison's books, we in turn should not be tempted to see Morrison's "high-cultural text stained by a low-cultural medium" (182). Young demonstrates further that Morrison is determined to reach the largest possible audience for her fiction without concern for media-specific stigma, even going so far as to read her own audiobooks and to allow her books to be abridged to accommodate recording limitations. Young notes that "Morrison may seem . . . to sacrifice artistic integrity for commercial success," but she has "long privileged access to a broader audience over textual 'integrity'" (199). I would argue that Morrison is finally more open to the vagaries of audience, to the varying levels of education and reading sophistication available across a broad spectrum of readers and the consequently varied capacities of those readers to engage difficult texts. It's significant that Oprah builds her book discussions on talk show topics and the deeply personal responses that a given book elicits from Oprah and her viewers. The result is that Oprah empowers her viewers as readers by encouraging them to respond to books personally, by validating their inclinations to read on their own terms. I find this significant because the history of middlebrow or lowbrow readers is one of insecurity about their response to art and defensiveness about art they cannot profess to understand. Readers lacking experience, education, and training—lacking cultural capital—are inclined to see formal experimentation as an exclusionary tactic, an attempt to demonstrate the shortcomings of the reader instead of, as is often the case, a demonstration of the shortcomings of the forms themselves. According to Pierre Bourdieu, "Formal refinement—which, in literature or the theatre, leads to obscurity—is, in the eyes of the working-class public, one sign of what is sometimes felt to be a

desire to keep the uninitiated at arm's length" (*Distinction* 33). An uninitiated audience faced with a mockery of convention is in danger of feeling mocked for buying into convention; only strong and practiced readers are likely to see that the conventions themselves are under attack, while the less practiced readers will see only their inability to find form where they expect it, and consequently they will feel exposed in their sense of inadequacy, as though the art was designed to remind them of their station. Without sufficient exposure to literary history, readers may see only confusion and direct antagonizing; as Bourdieu comments about the effects of some art exhibits, "One then observes the confusion, sometimes almost a sort of panic mingled with revolt, that is induced by some exhibits . . . whose parodic intention, *entirely defined in terms of an artistic field and its autonomous history*, is seen as a sort of aggression, an affront to common sense and sensible people" (33, emphasis added). Without the vocabulary and knowledge of institutional history special to a work's artistic field, viewers and readers naturally rely on the vocabulary available to them, and not only is that vocabulary unlikely to be adequate to the situation, the audience is unlikely to recognize that their terms and the work's terms are in two separate languages. They will, essentially, feel stupid, and resent the work that makes them feel that way.

One of Oprah's contributions to American literary culture has been to legitimize and bolster the middlebrow response to a text, to validate in the minds of unsophisticated readers their reaction to a text. This validation may not reach beyond the confines of Oprah's audience: as quoted above, critics note that Oprah's book discussions concentrate on "talk-show topics" and are thus often dramatic, emotive, and sensational

to the exclusion of talk about a book's politics or form. Franzen labels some of her selections "schmaltzy"; critic D. T. Max identifies Oprah's purpose in reading as the search for "pleasure and personal growth"; critic Thomas R. Edwards notes that it's easy to see the "prevailing taste of her [Oprah's] club" as "schmaltzy or female or one-dimensional or at best middlebrow" (78)²; David Gates's review of *The Corrections*, written before Oprah chose the book for her club, mentions that Oprah isn't likely to choose it and "ruin Franzen's street cred" ("American Gothic"). Oprah's book club is not, in short, held in high literary esteem, nor is the kind of reading that her audience performs, although that is starting to change with studies like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and *A Feeling For Books*, both of which go a long way toward demonstrating the seriousness with which popular and middlebrow audiences approach their reading.

Radway's work is of particular interest here because it demonstrates the degree to which audiences that are not highbrow seek some validation (or even vindication) for liking what they like. After Stephen King was awarded the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, some critics lamented the award for pandering to commercial interests and for seeming to drop literary standards under the weight of popular acclaim. Online forums generated considerable and often passionate discussion about the award and about critical dismissals. The weblogs at websites *metafilter.com* and *pamie.com*, both frequented by robust communities of

² Edwards does not intend these descriptors pejoratively: he uses them to note that Franzen, who may intend them pejoratively, must reconcile his discomfort with Oprah's tastes with the fact that he wrote a book that satisfies Oprah's tastes.

readers³, received postings that were primarily angry, offended, and defensive in response to anti-King commentaries. Many of the comments berate Bloom for arrogance (even while in one case admitting to the commenter's own tendencies to be a "literary snob" [Jen]), although a few acknowledge his credentials, and one writes, "Bloom is cranky, but he thinks that people should read good books, and he doesn't think King is good. That's honest, at least" (Strega). One reader admits reading and liking King but hating "that I have always been embarrassed that King is my favorite" (dentonj). Some argue that distinctions between high and low should give way before distinctions between good and bad ("Instead of participating in these battles [between high and low], let's turn to finding the stuff we love, relishing it, and getting the word out" [kobayashi]), while others argue that reading anything is better than reading nothing. I catalog these responses because they seem to indicate the degree to which the audience for fiction-other-than-highbrow feels denigrated for its preferences.

Radway finds much the same sense of defensiveness in the community of romance novel readers she studied for *Reading the Romance*, which relies on a reading club as its starting point in the exploration of why women who read romance novels do so. The club in and of itself is not Radway's primary interest, but she does note that some of its vitality can be attributed to the benefits that accrue to the readers as club members. One key benefit to these readers is that the club confers "legitimacy" (55) on

³ I do not intend to suggest that comments made on these websites form any kind of statistically valid sampling of and kind of reading audience. But insofar as they are responses to the questions of what should be read and how we should evaluate what we read, and insofar as they are responses by general readers in contradistinction to professional readers (i.e., reviewers, academics, publishers, cultural critics, etc.), they indicate a telling uniformity of reaction.

their reading. Many of the women are anxious about the stigma of reading a genre that is roundly “ridiculed” (54) in the larger culture, while many others are made by their husbands and families to feel like they are wasting time and money. And for some the stigma isn’t reading romance novels, but reading in the first place. A number of the women interviewed by Radway described husbands and families who feel excluded by their reading activities: one woman explains how her husband insists she stop reading and watch television with him; another finds her reading time shortened because her husband “will not permit her to continue reading when he is ready to go to sleep” (91). The reading club, not so much a programmed organization as a group of like-minded readers, offers a social environment that supports the kind of reading its members privilege and enjoy against assaults on that kind of reading, and in some cases on the very idea of reading itself.

John Fiske has provided some of the critical rubrics necessary to understand, and to support further serious study, of the seriousness with which popular audiences approach their reading and other entertainments. His “Popular Discrimination,” for example, counters the notion that audiences for popular culture are somehow incapable of discriminating among cultural products if they aren’t capable of making aesthetic distinctions. Arguing against the common critical misconception that popular audiences are passive receivers of their entertainments, Fiske demonstrates that popular audiences employ a robust set of discriminating criteria based on a product’s use value, as opposed to the highbrow criteria of aesthetics. Popular discrimination “focuses on the conditions of consumption” (107), valuing the ways a text can be put to immediate and personal

use: as one example, “Many soap opera viewers watch only those storylines that interest them, or are relevant to them, and ignore the rest” (107), much as Oprah’s audiences engage with the parts of Morrison’s fiction that lend themselves to talk-show discourse while ignoring the rest, much like Oprah’s audience was engaging with Franzen’s book in Oprah’s online discussion forum prior to the cancellation of the Franzen episode. This way of reading is empowering, Fiske argues, because popular culture tends to be conventional and superficial—“Its appeal is all on the surface”—and that “lack of depth” places the burden (or freedom) of supplying all meaning on the reader (108). The value of Oprah to Oprah’s readers is that she can confront them with more challenging texts, texts like Morrison’s that challenge sophisticated readers while still validating the less sophisticated readings of Oprah’s viewers. Supporting such readings may strike critics as a clear example of dumbing down the culture, congratulating unsophisticated readers for refusing to try harder, but I would argue that Oprah’s approach validates and encourages readers who read as best they can with the skills they have in spite of critical dismissals of the readings they perform. As Bourdieu notes, “the ‘popular aesthetic’ is defined in relation to ‘high’ aesthetics and that reference to legitimate art and its negative judgement on ‘popular’ taste never ceases to haunt the popular experience of beauty” (*Distinction* 32). Whether or not highbrow critics and readers are convinced that Oprah’s viewers are reading with any degree of sophistication is ultimately irrelevant to those viewers, as Oprah removes her viewers’ own sense of reading and cultural inadequacies as well as their sense of being “haunted” by the negative judgments of highbrow critics. Moreover, Fiske points out that popular culture serves a population that faces its own

constant economic and social challenges: “The various formations of the people who experience various forms of subordinations are challenged constantly by the conditions of their social experience: they do not need challenge in their art as well” (110). I return to Radway’s readers of romance novels, many of whom are subordinated in their homes and who have to justify their reading to husbands and families who feel shut out and, in some cases, challenged in their authority. These readers, challenged culturally for wanting to read denigrated fiction, challenged socially by their own families for simply wanting to read in the first place, certainly “do not need challenge in their art as well.” Which is not to say that challenge is thoroughly unwelcome, as one reader noted in her plea to the Oprah community to continue online discussion of *The Corrections* after the Franzen episode was cancelled:

“My reason for writing is to propose that we utilize this site as a means of communicating with each other what we might liked to have seen on the (now cancelled) show. Let’s use this discussion board to its full potential—as a forum for honest debate, compassionate argument and valuable reflection about a work that challenged, angered, moved or confused each of us (whether you made it to page 20 or the ending)” (Farley).

Another feature of popular reading that Fiske demonstrates, and one that begins to bring us back to Jonathan Franzen, is the disappearance of the author. Aesthetic readings privilege the uniqueness of the text, privileging in turn the uniqueness of the author’s creative genius. Fiske describes the release of the movie *The Shining* in Britain,

where “the middle-class press identified it as a Stanley Kubrick film” and discussed it in terms of “other Kubrick films.” In contrast, “The popular papers . . . identified it as a horror movie and focused on its sensational moments,” discussing it in terms of “other horror movies” (107-8). Because popular readers are more invested in “the conditions of consumption of art rather than those of its production” (107), the author, the originator of production, is of limited concern. In addition, the popular audience’s “disrespect for the integrity of the text” as shown by popular readers’ willingness to attend only some aspects of a text while ignoring others manifests “a disregard for the artist” (107): “This evacuation of the author from the popular text is also, of course, an evacuation of authority,” which means “there can be no discipline exerted on its readers to subject themselves to its meanings” (108). Authors may still maintain an air of celebrity, though, if not centrality. Oprah tells of being at a party for Toni Morrison: “I was surrounded by authors, and I felt like I was 11 years old. I felt like I could not even speak” (qtd. in Max). And audiences may also turn to them for answers about more difficult texts. Oprah’s readers had so much trouble with *Paradise* that Oprah asked Morrison to hold a class:

“Is Bille Delia’s version correct? Please just give us that!” she [Oprah] asked about one of the novel’s unreliable narrators. Morrison wouldn’t explicate. “If it’s worth writing, it’s worth going back to,” she said. There was a debate over the meaning of the book’s epigraph, a cryptic fragment of a Gnostic text. Was it about death, rebirth, sin? Finally, Winfrey suggested that if you took the epigraph as an alert that you were going on

a “major journey,” you knew enough. She spoke tentatively. “You got it,” said Morrison. As Winfrey smiled, you sensed that millions of viewers with her were learning something new about the act of reading. (Max)

Morrison acknowledges a correct, or perhaps appropriate, response to her book, but at the same time refuses to give other answers or solve other puzzles generated by her reader’s interaction with the book. This kind of textual difficulty, coupled with this kind of authorial evasion, risks seeming coy, and could lead “working-class viewers [to] protest, not only because they do not feel the need for these fancy games, but because they sometimes understand that they derive their necessity from the logic of a field of production which excludes them precisely by these games” (*Distinction* 33). Bourdieu’s phrasing suggests that popular audiences actively and deliberately refuse to honor the principle of textual integrity or to recognize the author as proprietor, but it seems more the case that when popular audiences’ generic and conventional expectations are satisfied they have no need or tendency to explore the text in search of deeper meanings or greater complexity. Far from disrespecting textual integrity, popular audiences fail to read a text on its terms when the text satisfies theirs. Only when a text fails to meet their expectations on some level do they have cause to think of the author, either out of frustration or with hope that the author has the answers.

Jonathan Franzen struggles more than Morrison does with the idea of surrendering his work to readers for whom textual authority is irrelevant and authorial agency nothing more than a reminder of celebrity or the key to difficulties. Franzen and Morrison profess the same writerly goals: Morrison says she wants her fiction to “be as

demanding and sophisticated as I want it to be, and at the same time be accessible in a sort of emotional way to lots of people, like jazz” (Young 187), an approach that leads her to prioritize “access to a broader audience over textual ‘integrity’” (199). Franzen expresses a similar goal of fiction that is demanding and accessible in “Why Bother?” After explaining the degree to which he despaired over writing challenging fiction of social insight, he decided instead to connect the personal and the social, to be challenging in his writing and his critique while still investing enough personal dynamics and drama to make it both fun to write and to read. Many of the reviews, interviews, and articles that followed the publication of *The Corrections* claim that Franzen has accomplished this: Emily Eakin’s profile of Franzen in *The New York Times Magazine* says that Franzen “dazzles the reader with trenchant riffs on contemporary life. . . . But rather than relay his thoughts about the world through chilly rhetorical pyrotechnics or plots of mind-boggling complication, Franzen embeds them in the lives of affecting human characters” (20); an interview with the online journal *Salon* is titled simply, “Mainstream and Meaningful.” Franzen himself labels the book literary and accessible but has a very different idea of accessibility from that demonstrated by Morrison. In a *New York Times* editorial after the publication of *How To Be Alone*, Verlyn Klinkenborg identified in Franzen “an elemental distrust of readers” (A-16); in response to an interview question from Terry Gross for the radio program *Fresh Air*, Franzen exhibited that distrust: “First and foremost, it’s a literary book. And I think it’s an accessible literary book. It’s an open question how big the audience is to which it will be accessible, and I think beyond the limits of that audience, there’s going to be a lot of,

‘What was Oprah thinking?’ kind of responses [from Oprah’s viewers].” Faced with readers of limited reading sophistication who will glean from a book those ideas that most meet their pre-existing expectations for fiction, Morrison is encouraging and Franzen is hesitant. And the difference emerges from their gendered and racial expectations for textual authority.

Two quotes from Franzen tie this together. One is actually from Don DeLillo, in a letter he wrote to Franzen and that Franzen quotes in “Why Bother?” DeLillo, responding to Franzen’s plea for encouragement, wrote back to say that market forces and audience size and demands do not drive the artist: “The writer leads, he doesn’t follow” (95). During his interview with Terry Gross, Franzen commented on the number of “male readers” in book signing lines who said they would not have purchased his book without hearing him because Oprah had chosen it for her club, saying, “I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience.” In some respects, Franzen’s quest for male readers seems little more than a desire to write to people like him. His essay discusses at length the vitality of identity fiction, fiction written “in the black, Hispanic, Asian, gay, and women's communities” (62) for those communities. Noting as well that “Knowledgeable booksellers estimate that seventy percent of all fiction is bought by women” (79), Franzen seems to set himself the underdog task of capturing a male audience. Add to that the sentiment that the writer leads, that the state of the novel is determined by the novelist and not by market forces or audience expectations (DeLillo: “The novel is whatever novelists are doing at a given time” [95]), and Franzen’s concern seems more clearly about reestablishing the authority of the novelist, an authority that

gives the novel weight as social commentary and an authority that demands readers who are attentive to the author, respectful of all that the text includes and tries to do. We've seen the distrust that Franzen exhibits toward popular audiences and the ways that they will appropriate and use texts without acknowledging or recognizing any claim to pre-eminence by the author; Franzen describes as well his failed efforts to build his own image as the imperial and distant author. He lists authors famous for their reticence to speak outside the context of their fiction: "Salinger, Roth, McCarthy, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Anne Tyler, Thomas Pynchon, Cynthia Ozick, and Denis Johnson all give few or no interviews, do little if any teaching or touring, and in some cases decline even to be photographed" because, "for some of these writers, reticence is integral to their artistic creed" (86). Trying to emulate these writers and the integrity of their creed, Franzen "took a hard line on letting my work speak for itself" (86) only to find that no one seemed to want to hear from him, anyway: "Silence . . . is a useful statement only if someone, somewhere, expects your voice to be loud" (87). In comparison, John Young argues that Morrison has been able to create "an importantly different version of textual authority from that available to her thirty years ago" (199) precisely by actively promoting her fiction and engaging the public directly. Her larger willingness to acknowledge the finances of publishing and to participate actively in the marketing of her books contrasts with the silence of integrity. Thomas Pynchon is one of the paradigmatic examples of this silence; Franzen lists him as one of his models, and Young notes that he is famous for his public invisibility and for having "deliberately set himself apart from the mechanics of the market" (199). Young argues that indifference

to the market is a strategy available to white authors in a way that it isn't available to other authors, and uses Morrison as an example of an author who has established artistic integrity in large measure by being less protective of it.

Franzen's anxieties about the novel and novelist's social position, including his own anxieties about not capturing a male audience, demonstrate the persistence of the long-standing association of the trivial with the female. Andreas Huyssen has argued that "the visible and public presence of women artists in *high art*, as well as the emergence of new kinds of women performers and producers in mass culture, . . . make the old gendering device obsolete" (62). Obsolescence is not the same as obliteration, however, and high culture producers like Toni Morrison may change the perception of women as *producers* of high art without necessarily changing perceptions of women as *receivers* of high art. Franzen's anxieties, his desire for a male audience and fears of a female audience, may stem as much from broad worries about the novel's cultural status as they do from specific worries about his own cultural status.

To this point I've been trying to review the shifting terrain of textual authority and the cultural status of the novelist through the lens of Franzen's essay and Oprah's model for reading; I turn now to *The Corrections*, through which that same terrain becomes a concern specific to white males.

THE CORRECTIONS AND POPULIST CULTURAL AUTHORITY

Tom Sternberg, a character in David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way," suffers from extreme self-consciousness about having a body.

He soaks the front of his pants when a sink overflows; he has a noticeable erection in a car filled with strangers; he fears that someone will know that he's the person in the bathroom stall and will "infer that Sternberg had bowels, and thus organs, and thus a body." Sternberg "is deeply ambivalent about being embodied" and is "thus preternaturally fascinated with the misdirecting pose of bloodless abstraction" (254). Sternberg is desperate not to be associated with his body, hoping instead to shift the attention of anyone in his company away from his physicality and to think of him as an "idea man" (255). Wallace claims that Sternberg's anxieties are a common feature of a culture in flux, undergoing a transition from an either/or of embodiment/disembodiment to an ambivalent, both/and embodiment/disembodiment. Sternberg exemplifies the dichotomy of body and mind, and the split is of interest here because of the long-standing critical and cultural associations of female and body in contrast to male and intellect, associations which are then folded into other associations, such as the feminized mass culture in contrast to masculinized high culture. Moreover, those associations participate in a larger historical cultural practice of denigrating the female and exalting the male. Tania Modleski, for example, notes that "women find themselves at the center of many historical accounts of mass culture . . . and [are] held responsible for the debasement of taste and the sentimentalization of culture" (24); Andreas Huyssen says the association "gained ground during the 19th century," building on prior exclusions of women from the high arts, promoting the idea "that mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" (47)—the key, of course, being the descriptors "real" and "authentic" in

conjunction with “male.” Huyssen goes on to argue that the distinction is no longer viable: always a wrong-headed division and tool for oppression, the very real participation of women in the high arts visibly argues against their exclusion in practical and abstract terms. Wallace suggests that, viable or not, the associations persist, as demonstrated by a character torn between his body and his mind, his fears of his physicality and his determination to escape to the abstraction of the mind.

Jonathan Franzen offers a more complex study of embodiment politics in *The Corrections*. In the first half of this chapter I’ve tried to demonstrate Franzen’s personal anxieties about the fading cultural authority of his chosen medium, the novel, accompanied by his anxieties about his own authority in the literary field, by looking at cultural trends toward empowering a body of readers that Franzen does not entirely trust. I will concentrate for the remainder of this chapter on Franzen’s third novel, *The Corrections*, in which the anxieties seem at once more pressing and his response more ambivalent than in his state-of-the-culture essay “Why Bother?” or in his responses to Oprah Winfrey’s selection of *The Corrections* for discussion on her show. Franzen describes in “Why Bother?” the sense of liberation and excitement he felt when he decided to shift his focus as a novelist away from social reportage and cultural commentary over to character-driven drama; in the more recent essay “Mr. Difficult” he confesses to having been determined at one time to emulate “a canon of intellectual, socially edgy white-male American fiction writers,” including “Pynchon, DeLillo, Heller, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Barth, Barthelme, Hannah, Hawkes, McElroy, and Elkin.” The more Franzen read these authors, though, the more he discovered that,

with the exception of DeLillo, he “didn’t particularly *like*” (103) them, in part because he wanted more character development from them. From this reading experience he decided that his own fiction should concentrate on characters, that he should “lose myself in the characters and locales I loved” while still offering commentary, since those characters would require a cultural context: “in peopling and arranging my own little alternate world, I could [not] ignore the bigger social picture even if I wanted to” (“Why Bother?” 95). *The Corrections* became Franzen’s character-driven novel: where his first, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, had been a complexly plotted story of political manipulation and deceit, and his second, *Strong Motion*, had offered an indictment of corporate malfeasance and environmental destruction, *The Corrections* hangs loosely on the frame of an elderly woman trying to gather her family for a final Christmas before her husband succumbs to Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s. The limited collection of critical response to *The Corrections*, in the form of reviews, newspaper articles, and interviews, tends to focus on the family drama of Franzen’s narrative, the Oprah incident, or both. Thomas R. Edwards attributes the novel’s power to a combination of people and settings that are “rich inventions” (79), which Franzen elevates beyond the confines of “a satiric family novel” by situating the family in a “world of . . . vaguely felt but continuing pressure from big business and its dubious intentions” (84). Reviewer T. N. McNally describes it as “a farcical novel that transcends the typical limitations of farce by its honest, emotional investigation of what it means to be alive in a postmodern landscape mutated by appetite, desire, and greed” (162). What is missing from the writings about Franzen to this point is any concentrated discussion of the ways in which *The Corrections* navigates

cultural anxiety and the shifting loci of cultural authority. As much as the novel may be about the collapse of Alfred Lambert's mental and physical faculties, and as much as the novel may be about his children's and even his wife's individual rebellions against him as controlling and domineering father and husband, the novel is also about the collapse of male cultural authority, a cultural authority that is often described in gendered and embodied formulations, that Franzen enacts in the novel. Franzen's essays and public conversations demonstrate a distrust for audience and a sense of aimlessness within a culture that has moved beyond the authority of the intellectual novel and its male-dominated constructions. In *The Corrections* he is able to present the situation with an appreciation of its complexity, indicating finally that the liberation of perspectives outside that of the white male should not mean the exclusion and silencing of the white male. Yet it still remains for the white male to find his new cultural position, and it's that search that informs a cultural reading of *The Corrections*, a reading I turn to now.

Chip Lambert is the second of Enid and Alfred's children, born and raised in small-town, Midwestern St. Jude—he lives his life, as do his brother Gary and sister Denise, in constant rebellion against his provincial upbringing. When *The Corrections* begins, Chip is teaching in the English Department of D— College, sure of tenure in a few semesters and smugly teaching a freshman-level introduction to critical theory called “Consuming Narratives.” The course is designed to provide Chip's students with the critical skills that will help them avoid being duped by manipulative narratives, to help them achieve the critical distance that will protect them from ads and their narratives of consumption aimed at seducing (consuming) the viewer into consuming in

turn. The final case study Chip uses to evaluate his students' critical distance and acumen is an ad campaign for the W— Corporation called "You Go, Girl" in which a young woman discovers she has breast cancer and uses software developed by the W— Corporation to research cancer and find support communities, while her co-workers, using the same technology, share her story around the world. After she has died, and the world mourns collectively via the W— Corporation's interconnectivity software, the final spot ends by mentioning that the W— Corporation has donated millions to the American Cancer Society. Chip's students are moved by the ads, by the narrative as well as by the risk the W— Corporation took by daring to portray the unexpected "downer" of death. Losing patience with his class's inability to see beyond the surface, Chip chastises his students for not understanding the point of the class, namely "learning to apply critical methods to textual artifacts" (42). Chip argues that the ads are manipulative, designed to seduce unsuspecting audiences into transferring the warm feelings generated by the ads' story to warm feelings for the company and its products and by implying that purchasing W— Corporation products will, in turn, benefit the American Cancer Society. One student, Melissa, an ally of Chip's to this point but one who has grown bored, argues that the social benefits of the ads supersede their profit motive.

"The W— Corporation," he [Chip] said, "is currently defending three separate lawsuits for antitrust violations. Its revenues last year exceeded the gross domestic product of Italy. And now, to wring dollars out of the one demographic that it doesn't yet dominate, it's running a

campaign that exploits a woman's fear of breast cancer and her sympathy with its victims. Yes, Melissa?"

"It's not cynical."

"What is it, if not cynical?"

"It's celebrating women in the workplace," Melissa said. "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 not just a guy thing. . . ."

"Well, consider," he [Chip] said, "that 'You Go, Girl' would not have been produced if W— Corporation had not had a product to sell. And consider that the goal of the people who work at W— is to exercise their stock options and retire at thirty-two, and that the goal of the people who own W— stock" (Chip's brother and sister-in-law, Gary and Caroline, owned a great deal of W— stock) "is to build bigger houses and buy bigger SUVs and consume even more of the world's finite resources." (42-43)

Chip is disappointed but continues pushing the class toward analysis, arguing that the commercials are insidious for conditioning viewers to associate spending money on a company's products with helping women fight breast cancer, reconfiguring a "woman weeping" to signify not just "sadness," but "Desire office equipment" and "Our bosses care about us deeply" (43-44). This re-signification is troublesome for several reasons: it generates sympathetic feelings only to take market advantage of them, it takes advantage

of one of a particular demographic's justifiable fears by suggesting that certain commodities that provide no tangible protection against cancer can somehow mitigate fear of cancer, and most of all it appropriates a characteristic of a particular demographic, essentially diverting attention to breast cancer away from breast cancer and toward a product, appropriating sympathy and good will and suggesting that any contribution you could make toward the fight against breast cancer could just as well be satisfied by satisfying your need for consumption at the same time. Franzen offers no textual reasons to distrust the main thesis of Chip's critique, namely that narrative seduction can lead to decisions, in this case purchasing decisions, based on faulty or irrelevant reasons.

The flaw in Chip's analysis is his assumption that anything *should* signify something in particular: "A woman weeping no longer signifies just sadness" (43) he says, as if a woman weeping naturally or only signifies sadness. The very nature of Chip's critique highlights and depends upon the fluidity of signification, but stops in practice just shy of acknowledging any signification that does not conform to his argument that the fluidity of meaning can be manipulated to serve less than altruistic aims. Melissa argues that the ads offer a degree of hope and validation, reminding Chip that W— Corporation profits have funded ten million dollars in donations to the American Cancer Society, urging women to be proactive with their breast exams and with confronting their fears about computer technology. Chip's point is that the juxtaposition is ridiculous; Melissa's is that it's empowering nonetheless. Finally, she accuses Chip of being hypercritical to no real purpose:

“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 quite 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. And people who think they’re free aren’t ‘really’ free. And people who think they’re happy aren’t ‘really’ happy. And it’s impossible to radically critique society anymore, although what’s so radically wrong with society that we need such a radical critique, nobody can say exactly. . . . Here things are getting better and better for women and people of color, 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. Like, the only way you can make something bad out of an ad that’s great for women—which you have to do, because there has to be something wrong with everything—is to say it’s evil to be rich and evil to work for a corporation. . . . (44)

Melissa’s outburst resonates with Chip, as she accuses him of advancing work—critical analysis and commentary on society’s ills and the ways those ills are masked—that serves no abiding purpose and making him realize “how seriously he’d taken his father’s injunction to do work that was ‘useful’ to society” (45):

Criticizing a sick culture, even if the criticism accomplished nothing, had always felt like useful work. But if the supposed sickness wasn’t a

sickness at all—if the great Materialist Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really *was* improving the lives of the formerly oppressed; if it was only straight white males like Chip who had a problem with this order—then there was no longer even the most abstract utility to his criticism. (45)

Franzen sets several ideas of interest here in motion as Chip and his class butt heads over the utility of Chip's cultural criticism. Chip and Melissa both suffer from a predispositional blindness, as Chip is predisposed to assume self-interest and cynicism behind corporate motives while Melissa is predisposed to assume hysteria and petulance behind vigilant motives. But the aggregate effect of their respective reactions is to demonstrate, as I discussed earlier, the degree to which audiences will bring their understanding and expectations of narrative conventions to bear on any narrative that satisfies those expectations, looking not to the narrative for clues to deeper understanding, but simply holding it to the mirror of their pre-existing notions. Furthermore, Chip's analysis, accurate in and of itself, demonstrates the degree to which narratives that correspond to an audience's expectations can then serve as the vehicle for other messages. And finally, in spite of Chip's certainty that audiences cannot be trusted to read correctly—a surrogate expression of Franzen's distrust for the audience—the class reaction to the "You Go, Girl" campaign demonstrates the degree to which an audience whose expectations are met may remain completely unaware of other messages in the text.

Franzen makes a similar demonstration of audience capabilities in a scene where

Chip's mother Enid attends an investment seminar while on a cruise with her husband, Alfred. The seminar is conducted by Jim Crolius, who spends the first few minutes of his talk delivering platitudes about finance in the form of maritime metaphors—depicting the world of investing as unpredictably stormy and subject to navigational perils that demand a well-informed and well-equipped captain—awkwardly mixed with seasonal, gardening, and Shakespearian allusions: “And the question we all have—I’m speaking in metaphors here—the question is: Will all that glorious green out there turn to glorious gold? Or will it all just wither on the branch in the winter of our discontent?” Reactions to Crolius's trite constructions vary. The bulk of the audience applauds, exclaims, “Marvelous! Marvelous!”, and the first of his supporting charts elicits “a gasp from the front row out of all proportion to the informational content” (337). In contrast, Sylvia Roth, a new acquaintance of Enid's, shows no patience for Crolius, whispering early to Enid, “He must think we're eight years old” and deftly countering Crolius's awkward Shakespeare with the resonantly appropriate, “More matter and less art.” Enid's response is somewhere between the disdain Sylvia feels and the enthusiasm of so many of the others. She checks Sylvia's first objection, excusing Crolius's pretensions as fodder for an introduction, even though her personal reaction has been horror: “Death, Enid thought. He was talking about death. And all the people clapping were so *old*.” And when the introduction is over and Crolius begins his analysis, Enid shifts again and wonders while the front row gasps if the analysis isn't exactly “the kind that her broker in St. Jude had told her never to pay attention to” (337).

The value of this scene to a discussion about audience is that it both depicts and

solicits distinct responses. The responses from Crolius's audience range from giddy delight to Sylvia's disdain; Enid sits somewhere in the middle, less than giddy but still hopeful that Crolius will have something substantive to say once his introduction is over. Just as Chip's class finds an affirming message in the "You Go, Girl" ads, so does the majority of Crolius's audience find him at least entertaining, while the more critical few suspect that Crolius will not have anything useful to offer, some (Sylvia) more quickly than others (Enid). More to my point, though, is the way Franzen structures the scene to segregate his own audience—reader reaction to this passage will be decidedly different according to each reader's level of sophistication. The different responses hinge on recognition of the Shakespeare, not because of any highbrow associations with Shakespeare, but because understanding the allusions both richens and alters the way the scene is read. Sylvia rebukes Crolius's introduction, identifying the self-important Polonius within his majestic King Richard. Sylvia's response is wonderfully appropriate, invoking Gertrude's exhaustion waiting for Polonius to simply get to the point and indicating that Sylvia sees through Crolius. Readers who do not recognize the allusion will still spot Sylvia's impatience, because on its surface Sylvia's comment registers clear impatience, but nothing more; Sylvia's reaction is no more or less significant than the reactions of the excited front row. For readers who recognize the allusion, however, Sylvia's comment creates a community of those who recognize the allusion in contrast to those who do not. Franzen's narrator has already mocked Crolius by offering the comment about the front row's disproportionately enthusiastic response to the depth, or lack of depth, of the information on Crolius's first diagram. The narrator's disdain is

reinforced by Sylvia's disdain, which is reinforced by the insider readers' appreciation for Sylvia's wit. I don't mean to suggest here that the sophisticated and unsophisticated readings of the passage are radically different, only that they are clearly different. Franzen has done nothing of particular note by incorporating the allusion in and of itself, and the nature of allusion is that some readers will recognize it and others will not. But by using the allusion to establish an insider audience while constructing prose that depicts insider and outsider audiences, by constructing the passage to privilege the detached and critical response over the engaged and enthusiastic response, I submit that Franzen has written a message to his sophisticated readers that acknowledges their presence in his audience and praises their sophistication, reinforcing his acknowledgement by constructing the praise in such a way that the unsophisticated will not notice.

The clarity with which Franzen separates his sophisticated audience from his unsophisticated audience in the investment seminar is absent from his depiction of the confrontation between Chip and Melissa, a confrontation that serves the narrative purpose of initiating a more complex, novel-spanning exploration of cultural authority, particularly the cultural authority of white males. That Franzen is interested in white male authority is made explicit after Melissa accuses Chip of using his critical skills not to expose social ills but to create them. Earlier I discussed the predispositions that blind Melissa and Chip, arguing specifically that Chip's predisposition to criticize blinds him to social and technological advances, while Melissa's predisposition blinds her to the possibilities of manipulation and deception in the guise of social advance. Of the two,

Chip alone reconsiders his stance, and while it leads him to feel sorry for himself, satisfy his worst indulgences to excess, and eventually move to Lithuania with the intent to defraud American investors, he is forced to confront his situation as one unique to white males when Melissa argues that physical and social conditions are improving for women and minorities and that Chip's critiques impede those improvements. Chip begins to recognize the social marginalization of white males, wondering as he does if Melissa might be right to suggest that the new social conditions trouble "only straight white males like Chip" (45). In fact, Chip's insistence that women and minorities recognize the ways they're oppressed—of which his analysis of the version of oppression perpetrated by the "You Go, Girl" ads is a manifestation—is its own form of oppression, refusing a particular group the right or room to express its own social advance and authority by telling that group that nothing has really improved. Then, Chip and critics like him are in a position to claim the power and authority of liberators, offering them the critical insights (and in the case of teachers like Chip, the critical tools) to escape one form of oppression but submitting to another. Chip has substituted his authority in the classroom for the fading cultural authority of the patriarchy, then tried to use classroom authority to reclaim cultural authority.

If Chip is the new order in which white males are culturally aimless and forced to share if not surrender their cultural authority, his father Alfred is the old order of white male dominance, once powerful but now in decline. Alfred demonstrates just how much the old order depended on the mind and excluded the body, and just how much the new order is, for white males, a crisis of embodiment. Alfred's life has been a constant

struggle between mind and body as he has fought through mental discipline, will power, and self control not to indulge bodily desires. He punishes himself by “working ten and twelve hours without a break” (246) and has only perfunctory sex with his wife, yet his physical discipline is taxed by sexual impulse and his mental discipline is taxed by hotel neighbors having loud sex, by flirting waitresses, by finding himself “trapped on a siding while a freight train slid past him and varsity cheerleaders did splits on the ball field directly to his left” (247), by a steady stream of temptation and offense. With the onset of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s his mind fails and his body takes over. He wears a black raincoat in public to hide his incontinence and is assaulted by scatological imagery he cannot dismiss. Some critics have faulted Franzen’s excess, his fundamental lack of sympathy for Alfred and the cruelty with which he portrays Alfred’s conversation with a cartoonish “sociopathic turd, a loose stool, a motormouth” (284) that mocks Alfred’s need for discipline by running around his room on the cruise ship and threatening to get in his clothes: “Put somebody else’s comfort ahead of my own? Go hop in a toilet to spare somebody else’s feelings? That’s the kind of thing *you* do, fella” (285). Thomas R. Edwards criticizes the lack of narrative control, citing Alfred’s hallucinations as an example of Franzen’s penchant for “over-the-top Mel Brooks shtick” (86), tedious and detrimental to the narrative flow, but other critics like Lee Siegel label it “callous” (Siegel). Certainly other scenes of Alfred’s incontinence, such as when he urinates on himself while his daughter is trying to help him exercise, make a more poignant display of Alfred’s suffering. But his verbal sparring with hallucinated feces, while it may miss comic marks, serves as an opportunity for Alfred to have a debate with himself since his

adversary is his imagination in rebellion. He confronts himself with a life-long history of prejudice directed at children (who break things and make messes), “Negroes” (for their “rambunctious shouting and interesting grammar”), “horny teenagers” (for insolence and lack of restraint), “Caribbeans,” “Chinks,” “fairies with their doctor’s-office lubricants,” “blue-collar ball-scratchers with their hot rods and beer belches,” “Jews,” “Mediterraneans,” “Wasps,” and “women generally, nothing but a trail of Kleenexes and Tampaxes everywhere they go.” Alfred accuses himself of hatred, dislike, distrust, or suspicion for everyone, really, except “upper-middle-class Northern European men” (287). The scene is a graphic depiction of white male patriarchy under assault, the privileged intellect collapsing and the body taking over. To this point in his life, Alfred has demonstrated mastery, or supreme effort at mastery, of the mind over the body. By making Alfred’s accuser an irreverent emanation of Alfred’s own body—physical incontinence and mental incontinence attacking him in tandem—Franzen suggests that privileging intellect over body, while a means of oppression against groups of people who are envisioned as embodied, is equally oppressive to the individual. The white male, in short, would be better served by reimagining his cultural position as a partnering of the privileged intellect and denigrated body.

While the critics may miss the cultural discussion at work in this scene, their objections should not be dismissed out-of-hand. The scene does enact an outlandish assault on an increasingly enfeebled old man by feces talking with an over-familiar, disrespectful argot. I’ve tried to demonstrate that a subtext of the scene is the state of cultural authority, as white males and their association with intellectual culture give way

to others in a celebration of the very body that white males would deny. Yet the surface of this scene, including the filthy imagery, the crumbling efforts by Alfred to maintain his authoritarian voice in order to combat his growing fear and helplessness, and the free-wheeling accusations and threats by gleefully arrogant feces are hard not to see as “callous”; perhaps Franzen is attempting to use lampoon in order to temper the tragedy of disabilities brought on by age, but he risks seeming to have assaulted the infirm Alfred himself, and the scene borders on a mockery of Alfred’s condition. Not every description of Alfred’s mental and physical uncertainties is so over the top:

By the time he'd established that his daughter, Denise, was handing him a plate of snacks in his son Chip's living room, the next moment in time was already budding itself into a pristinely ungrasped existence in which he couldn't absolutely rule out the possibility, for example, that his wife, Enid, was handing him a plate of feces in the parlor of a brothel; and no sooner had he reconfirmed Denise and the snacks and Chip's living room than the leading edge of time added yet another new layer of cells, so that he again faced a new and ungrasped world. . . . (66).

Franzen even outlines the extent to which Alfred’s desire for order and control are affronted by his increasingly willful body, explaining the frustration and helpless rage that are portrayed so vividly in the cruise ship scene:

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. . . . He'd always been vulnerable to a child's

recalcitrance and refusal to behave like an adult. Irresponsibility and undiscipline were the bane of his existence, and it was another instance of that Devil's logic that his own untimely affliction should consist of his body's refusal to obey him. (67)

That Franzen is able to write more sympathetic descriptions of Alfred's decline (even including a reference to feces) suggests that the cruise ship episode is consciously cartoonish. The entire cruise ship section of *The Corrections* is designed to be a humorous pivot; the verbal battles between an arrogant Swedish couple and an obliviously self-important Norwegian couple serve as comic relief from the relentless unhappiness portrayed in the Chip and Gary sections that precede it and the Denise and Enid sections that follow. The graphic description Franzen uses to portray this scene calls attention to itself in a way that I suggest goes beyond an attempt to be humorous. The repellant characteristics of Franzen's depiction generate a narrative tone that is uncomfortable with the descendancy of white male cultural authority, for Franzen has used feces as the mouthpiece for embodiment, and he has satirized the politics of embodiment as anal explosive chaos and cruelty.

I've discussed Chip and Alfred as competing models of the white male role: Alfred is the controlling, dominating patriarch, while Chip tries to find a place for white male authority after the patriarchy collapses. Analogous to Chip and Alfred are Chip's younger sister Denise and their mother, Enid. Enid will begin to free herself of patriarchal dominance only after Alfred has been moved to a nursing home, at which time "all of her [Enid's] children were helping out" (565) with a degree of willingness

and family cohesion they had not shown before; in fact, “The sorry fact seemed to be that life without Alfred in the house was better for everyone but Alfred” (566). Prior to Alfred’s removal, though, Denise alone of the Lamberts had shown any signs of confident bearing in post-patriarchal culture. Gary, Chip’s older brother, requires constant assurances from his wife that he isn’t like Alfred, but his determination not to enforce rigid patriarchal authority renders him unable to exert any kind of authority. He cannot convince his wife not to eavesdrop on the telephone; he cannot convince his family to visit Enid and Alfred for Christmas; he cannot even prevent his son from installing surveillance cameras in the kitchen. He affects an air of casual entitlement, harboring deep-seated resentment toward Midwesterners for developing cosmopolitan tastes instead of serving as rustic contrast to his urbanity, but his participation in the high culture of the rich is possible only because his wife is independently wealthy. The very conditions that enable him to pretend to authority are the conditions that testify to his lack of authority.

Denise, on the other hand, displays a culturally situated ease that Chip and Gary lack. She is, first and foremost, confidently embodied in a way that Chip certainly isn’t and to a degree that Chip finds uncomfortable. One incident in particular demonstrates the clash of confident embodiment with uncertain authority. Denise is a chef whose skills earn her the chance to develop a new restaurant’s entire menu, a guest spot on a Food Network cooking show, and an article in *The New York Times* accompanied by a picture that emphasizes how attractive and sexy she is. Chip objects to the picture as “just the kind of girl-as-object horseshit . . . that sold magazines” (52), but for Denise it’s

an exciting moment of fame (422). As with his analysis of the “You Go, Girl” ads, Chip isn’t wrong to see that Denise’s attractiveness, “all muscled shoulders and shiny pecs” (52), is being flaunted and used to make an otherwise pedestrian food and restaurant review more sexy and titillating. But as with his analysis of the ads, Chip’s concerns fall on deaf ears, both with Denise and with Franzen’s readers, who know of Chip’s predilection for objectifying women through his robust obsession with porn and his own movie screenplay, filled with references to breasts. Denise is unfazed by being objectified, in part because she is excited by her moment of celebrity treatment. But Chip’s objection is the single voice of dissent—no other characters comment on the picture, and the narrative itself offers no commentary other than the placement of Chip’s objection early in the novel to serve as a lingering subtext when the narrative returns to the picture from Denise’s perspective more than three hundred pages later. As with Chip’s in-class demonstrations, Franzen depicts a cultural world in which white males are shrilly disembodied voices that cannot reconcile themselves to the emergent populist cultural authority. The fact that Chip’s critiques in and of themselves are accurate, however, render a depiction of the white male as a tragic Cassandra figure, a voice of reason and truth ignored and dismissed by a culture that should be listening but is not.

White males in *The Corrections* are in a state of transition after a period of cultural authority, a state of transition in which their bodies rebel, in which other ethnic and gender groups thrive once the white males, like Alfred, are out of the house, and in which they are reduced to Cassandras diagnosing cultural ills in voices that are heard but disregarded. These shifting loci of authority impact the novel as institution, as well, and I

will begin discussing that impact by returning to the Crolius investment seminar in *The Corrections* and my earlier statement that the two readings of this passage that emerge from sophisticated and unsophisticated readers are merely different, not radically different. The narrative relentlessly ridicules and exposes Crolius's presentation—from Sylvia to Enid to the narrator to Crolius's own florid speech, there remains little room to mistake Crolius for competent in either a sophisticated or unsophisticated reading. The scene participates in a larger argument within *The Corrections* against strict high/low cultural dichotomies. Andreas Huyssen has recently argued that high/low distinctions have lost their utility in cultural discussions, yet we still require some way to distinguish among cultural products. Works of art are doing different things in different ways, with different degrees of seriousness, complexity and scope. As Huyssen puts it,

None of this is to claim that the distinction between high art and mass culture no longer exists, either in Western societies or elsewhere, as some might argue, for it very much does. Differences will always remain in quality, ambition, and complexity between cultural products, in demands on the attentiveness and knowledge of the consumer, and in diversely stratified audiences. But what used to be a vertical divide has become in the last few decades a horizontal borderland of exchanges and pillagings, of transnational travels back and forth, and all kinds of hybrid interventions. Complexity does not reside only on one side of the old binary. (“High/Low” 370).

Huyssen's formulation maintains high/low distinctions, but steps back from binary,

hierarchical valuations attached automatically to one (high) over the other (low). Rather, the characteristics of high art are still the characteristics of high art, and the characteristics of mass culture remain the same as well, but we cease to function in our capacities as critics and readers and artists as though high or low preserve exclusive impermeable enclaves, and we cease to function as though one is definitionally superior to the other. Instead, we acknowledge the fluidity of culture and the variety of “hybrid interventions,” an idea that I am arguing is at play in *The Corrections*. I want to look at two examples here, one being the way Franzen explores individual taste and discrimination, the other his satire of difficult reading undertaken for its own sake, to suggest that sophisticated readers aren’t privileged by a scene like Crolius’s seminar, they are just acknowledged, recognized for the interpretive sophistication they bring to their reading but not necessarily as superior to less sophisticated readers. Such a concept of audience relies less heavily on a Jamesian insider/outsider split, less on an audience that meets the text’s expectations and more on an audience that has its expectations met by the text.

Enid serves as the primary lens through which the narrative focuses on questions of taste and discrimination, the only cultural domains over which she has power to act under the authority exerted by Alfred. Enid conflates social standing with financial well-being and cultural appreciation, and she is bitterly resentful that she cannot claim all three for herself. She wants the cruise, for example, to indulge her self-image as someone deserving of luxury and pampering. Yet within moments of boarding she sees other passengers in T-shirts, many bearing phrases of the “OLD UROLOGISTS NEVER

DIE, THEY JUST PETER OUT” variety, and she is affronted by the tackiness of the undignified humor and the slovenly aura of T-shirts in general. “She expected—and had paid for, in part with her own money—*elegance*.” Enid equates cultural sophistication with money, as something that she should be able to buy and as something that people with money should cultivate: “It rankled her that people richer than she were so often less worthy and attractive. More slobbish and louty. Comfort could be found in being poorer than people who were smart and beautiful. But to be less affluent than these T-shirted, joke-cracking fatsos” (293). Enid’s cultural sophistication is such that she interprets the gaudy and ostentatious as elegant and classy. She categorizes a dinner party as “elegant elegant” and “super-deluxe” for having “desserts [that] were a foot tall!” (98); “she so yearned for a certain kind of elegance and had worked so hard to achieve it” by spending money carefully on just the right items for her home that “the house *looked* like the house of rich people” (371). Chip participates in his mother’s expensive aesthetic, rallying himself after getting fired from his teaching job by serving \$30 bottles of wine at a party for himself (83), and laughing with shame at the purely utilitarian thermal curtains his father sent with him to school as an undergraduate (552). Franzen’s narrative at all times works to undercut Enid and Chip. Enid’s meanness (“fatsos”) and reliance on childish awed descriptions (“super-deluxe”) argue against her aesthetic; Chip himself realizes that the embarrassingly utilitarian curtains “were nowhere near as shameful as he’d thought” (552). But it’s Denise who makes the point most directly. Denise is Enid’s youngest, an acclaimed chef whose services incite bidding wars, with the fame and critical commendation to indicate a highly refined (and

literal) taste. During the discussion of the “elegant elegant” dinner party, Denise criticizes Enid’s taste obliquely before finally saying, “Mother, you’re always telling me how much you like a good home-cooked meal. Well, that’s what I like, too. I think there’s a kind of Disney vulgarity in a foot-tall dessert” (99). Denise hints at a model for cultural production and reception that seeks to maintain criteria for discriminating against gaudy spectacle in favor of elegance, but not at the expense of pleasure and enjoyment.

Franzen includes two examples of writing and reading to elucidate his point, which I’m arguing is that high and low cultural distinctions—in which high culture is aesthetic, critically detached, intellectually challenging to the point of being “grim” (Poirier 105) while low culture is utilitarian, lacking critical distance, and entertaining—are terms too burdened with snobbery and defensiveness to be of value for criticism, for the artist setting personal artistic goals, or for the reader. The first example is a screenplay that Chip writes after losing his job for having sex with a student. The bulk of the screenplay is a tawdry re-telling of Chip’s indiscretions and firing, reconfigured so that he appears heroic and his attackers appear petty and cruel. Written with “the aid of store-bought screenwriting manuals” (27), Chip’s script is sensational and designed simply to sell until he begins to fear that he has abandoned all pretense of “artistic and intellectual ambitions” (91). To correct the imbalance Chip adds an “unreadable” (91) “theory-driven opening monologue” about “Tudor drama” to provide, in “classic modernist strategy,” a “‘hump’ that he moviegoer has to get over” (25). The screenplay is constructed of the worst versions of high and low stereotypes, a titillating

entertainment with a “creepy” (26) attention to breasts awkwardly coupled with a distancing device at the very beginning designed to render the movie as un-entertaining as possible. Chip’s screenplay is ridiculous, so much so that the high and low conventions that inform its design are made to look silly in and of themselves.

The second example is more direct, satirizing a program of unpleasant reading in the pursuit of cultural distinction. During their cruise, Enid and Alfred share a table with a Norwegian couple, the Nygrens, who display cartoonish pretension. “We Norwegians are great readers,” Mrs. Nygren announces, describing the vitality of Norwegian libraries and bookstores, then citing her husband as an example: “Reading is mostly in decline around the world. But not in Norway, hm. My Per is reading the complete works of John Galsworthy for the second time this autumn. In English. . . . Each year Per reads one work by every winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, and also the complete works of his favorite winner from his previous year's reading. And you see, each year the task becomes a bit more difficult, because there has been another winner, you see” (297). This is duty-driven reading at its worst, an endeavor whose discipline and attention to arcana (“It is safe to say that I have read more deeply into Henrik Pontopidan than most” [297]) are imagined to confer intellectual or cultural status but betray themselves as exercises in dedication whose reward is finally limited to completion. The Nygrens model “Status” readers, a label Franzen defines in his recent essay, “Mr. Difficult.” The Status model is one in which “the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it’s because the average reader is a philistine; the value of any novel, even a mediocre one,

exists independent of how many people are able to appreciate it.” The inverse of the Status model is the Contract model, wherein “a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience. . . . Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness” (100). *The Corrections* dramatizes and mocks the potential for pretension and cultural arrogance in the Contract model of understanding cultural production, which is a variation of the Jamesian model of writing to a small insider audience deliberately exclusive of less sophisticated outsiders. Yet *The Corrections* acknowledges the participation of Contract readers in its audience and nods appreciatively in their direction, as for example in the Crolius scene, in the surface comedy of the entire cruise ship episode, even in Chip’s ridiculous obsessions with sex. Several of the threads I’ve identified in this chapter are tied together at this point. In response to the decline of the novel’s cultural authority, which in turn is a product of the decline of white male cultural authority, *The Corrections* offers a model of reading and writing that seeks a balance between satisfying textual and audience expectations. No longer invested with the authority to demand studious attention to intensely challenging fiction according to the modernist ideals wherein “readers were induced to think of literary texts as necessarily and rewardingly complicated” (Poirer 106), Franzen tries to work up a model for fiction that recognizes and addresses the expectations of both Status and Contract readers, privileging neither and rewarding both with a reading experience that honors their demands from a text. In return, Franzen models an author who

entertains without pandering, asking of his audience that they work for their pleasure: “I know the pleasures of a book aren’t always easy. I expect to work; I *want* to work. It’s also in my Protestant nature, however, to expect some reward for this work” (“Mr. Difficult” 111).

I don’t mean to suggest that Franzen has proposed something significantly distinct from past fictional endeavors: “Franzen’s talent is Dickensian in essence” (Edwards 86), “brainy . . . but more accessible” (Eakin 20) in a way that is essentially middlebrow. Middlebrow culture is notoriously a site of contention and confusion. Sally Robinson has argued that the middlebrow is a highly contested cultural space, critiqued for its pretensions by the masses and dismissed for its appeal—which is understood to mean its artistic and intellectual compromises—by the elites (15). Pierre Bourdieu characterizes the audience for middlebrow culture as a group in conflict, “divided between the tastes they incline to and the tastes they aspire to” (326). Where lowbrow culture is seen to threaten highbrow culture because of its base, mass appeal, the middlebrow has been characterized as dangerous for its tendency to confuse the two. Dwight Macdonald’s famous indictment of “midcult” accuses the middlebrow of a tendency to “fuzz up the distinction” (“Masscult and Midcult: II” 628) in a way that debases the highbrow without elevating the middlebrow. The middlebrow is also a site of anxiety for its audiences. As I discussed briefly during the introduction, some members of middlebrow audiences confess to a self-consciousness and embarrassment about their tastes, tastes that prioritize entertainment. Franzen finally admitted to himself that he grew tired of reading the authors he was reading “in a serious professional

pursuit” of “academic and hipster respect of the kind that Pynchon and Gaddis got and Saul Bellow and Ann Beattie didn’t” because they didn't entertain him like “Bellow and Beattie, not to mention Dickens and Conrad and Bronte and Dostoyevsky and Christina Stead,” did (“Mr. Difficult” 53). Having given up on the difficulties of William Gaddis’s novels and essays, Franzen imagines “Gaddis’s disciples wagging their fingers at me, telling me I’m another Stupid Reader, explaining that the essays subvert my expectations of clarity, of pleasure, of edification; that I haven’t got the joke yet. . . . They tell me, in other words, that I just need to *work a little bit harder*” (111). Entertaining fiction risks suffering in critical estimation: F. R. Leavis admits that Charles Dickens “was a great genius” but cannot be considered a great novelist because his “genius was that of a great entertainer” (29). Franzen, in essays and in practice, argues that the Leavisite great novelist is in decline, in part perhaps because of a general dumbing of American cultural life, but in part because cultural authority has shifted to a broad, still poorly defined middlebrow space where readers may or may not respond to textual challenges but demand entertainment regardless, a space where Franzen can identify *The Corrections* as “an accessible literary book” (“Interview with Jonathan Franzen”) and Oprah can promote “a genre Marty Asher, the editor in chief of Vintage Books, calls ‘accessible literary fiction’” (Max), and they can both lay claim to a cultural space that invokes books as challenging as *Paradise* or as entertaining as *She’s Come Undone*.

I’ve been arguing that *The Corrections* reviews the shifting terrain of cultural authority, particularly as it pertains to the decline of white male authority and the decline of the white male novel, or at least a novel predicated on a disembodied white male

aesthetic. This decline means a decline in prestige for the highly literate cultural elite, comprised of intellectual writers producing challenging fiction and intellectual readers trained to value that fiction and to approach it on its own terms. As the model of what Richard Poirier calls “grim reading” declines, a model of reading that values entertainment and that expects texts to honor the reader’s expectations begins to gain cultural authority, emerging from behind the stigma of artistic compromise and reader incompetence. Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club boosted the model of reading as entertainment in large measure by encouraging her readers to trust their personal reactions to the books under discussion, and in so doing fostered an egalitarian mode of cultural reception that encouraged readers to recognize that they can enjoy reading without feeling less capable than elite readers, and that they and elite readers are both participating in literary culture. Jonathan Franzen is pursuing much the same goal, only he directs his arguments to the elite readers. Where Oprah reinforces a model of reading that empowers readers lacking cultural capital by assuring them that their responses to fiction (and their taste for entertaining fiction) are valid, Franzen imagines a cultural shift in which challenging fiction is allowed to entertain, in which elite readers are allowed to indulge their taste for entertainment. Franzen still maintains a distrust for most readers—his desire to write entertaining fiction does not mean that he wants to write potboilers or even middlebrow fiction. He describes *The Corrections* as literary and accessible but worries about just how accessible it will be to audiences like Oprah’s; his target audience is still the aesthete-intellectual I mentioned in reference to Henry James at the beginning of the chapter, and his goal is intellectually challenging fiction

that will preserve cultural distinctions, and thus a degree of cultural authority, for white male elites, but that will offer them some of the pleasures of reading that they have denied from their aesthetic. The distinction that Franzen wants to make is that between entertaining fiction that offers some challenge, as modeled by Oprah, and challenging fiction that offers some entertainment, written not as a way to reach middlebrow and mass audiences, but to stave off the complete disappearance of the novel as culturally significant or even culturally functional: “Another 20 years of boring literary novels,” he says, “and the thing’s dead” (qtd. in Eakin 20).

CHAPTER IV

“IT’S ABOUT TEACHING A HUMAN TO TELL”:

SCIENCE AND THE HUMANITIES IN THE FICTION OF RICHARD POWERS

Richard Powers’s fifth novel, *Galatea 2.2*, explicitly enacts and seeks to resolve tensions between the sciences and the humanities. The novel is set on the campus of a university the narrator calls U., where a generous endowment has funded the construction of the Center for the Study of the Advanced Sciences, a “small city” of gleaming offices, current technological marvels, and enough money to include a position for the narrator as “token humanist” (4-5). The narrator, Richard, is a moderately successful novelist with offices in the Center and the English Department; the two facilities are studies in contrast: “The Center possessed 1,200 works of art, the world’s largest magnetic resonance imager, and elevators appointed in brass, teak, and marble. The English Building’s stairs were patched in three shades of gray linoleum” (75). The Center is dynamic, cutting-edge, state-of-the-art; the English Building is a place for “hiding out” (75). A junior philosophy professor who is denied tenure phones in a bomb threat at the Center:

He claimed his threat was never more than a moral subjunctive. The Center was draining the university dry, reducing the humanities to an obsolete, embarrassing museum piece. He’d made his point, he said. If there were any justice, there *would* have been a bomb. He’d proclaimed

no more than hypothetical detonation, for which he expected no more than a hypothetical sentence. (273)

Even in moral outrage, the humanities are portrayed as foolishly ineffectual.

The gross disparity of material riches between the humanities and the sciences is a recurring topic of the novel's narration and even of some discussions among characters. Richard talks about the mutual antagonism of the sciences and humanities with a scientist colleague, pointing out that the slices of pie over which English academics fight grow smaller and smaller because of the scientists' increasingly large share. The colleague asks, "Why do your people need to either emulate mine, attack us as nature molesters, or dismiss us as irrelevant self-deluders?" Richard replies, "My people are scared shitless of your people, that's why. They're terrified that Dad and Mom really do love you best" (127). Given the disparity of public funding made available to the sciences versus the humanities, the fear of the humanities that science is rendering them irrelevant to the culture is palpably depicted in Powers's depiction of the Center in contrast to the English Building, in the dynamism of the scientists with whom Richard works in contrast to his own stasis and loss of cultural purpose.

Richard has lost direction as a novelist, unable to see how the bleakness of the world benefits from fictional insights into the metaphysical nature of humanity when the scientists around him produce tangible insights into the physical nature of humanity all the time. But Powers demonstrates as well that the sciences are limited in their ability to extrapolate the implications of their discoveries, that scientists are so often buried in the process of information gathering and analysis that they are unable to participate in

information synthesis, especially on a cultural scale. Among disciplinary fields that grow ever more specialized in order to stay abreast of the continual expansion of knowledge, the novelist's role becomes that of communicator among fields and people who are too busy and too swamped by information to see their own way into cultural conversation. In this chapter I look briefly at the history of the antagonism between the sciences and the humanities before turning to Richard Powers's novels *Operation Wandering Soul*, in which he demonstrates that neither science nor fiction can compensate for the brutality of the world, and *Galatea 2.2*, in which he demonstrates that science and fiction on their own may be insufficient, but that in tandem, science empowers fiction to offer a "moratorium" from the world that allows us to regain our perspective and "where we can, at least temporarily, take apart and refuse to compete within the terms that the rest of existence insists on" (Neilson 22, 23).

POWERS AND THE MUTUAL DISTRUST OF THE SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES

Richard Powers describes the impetus behind his fiction as, in part, a desire to promote interdisciplinary thinking, to the point that it is now a commonplace for critics and reviewers to catalog Powers's topics (Sven Birkerts's review of *The Time of Our Singing* lists "illness and storytelling, artificial intelligence, corporate accountability, and the premises of virtuality" ["Harmonic Convergence" 85]) and disciplines, which range from photography to art history to nuclear weaponry, from animation to pediatric medicine to soap making. The metafictional elements of his fiction—such as the final

sections of both *Prisoner's Dilemma* and *Operation Wandering Soul* in which the narrator seems suddenly coterminous with Powers himself, the sections where the narrator comments on the writing of the fictions we just read, the intrusive study questions in *Operation Wandering Soul*, the didacticism in almost all of his novels for instructional discourse on the topics and disciplines under study—these frame-breaking techniques serve as constant reminders that Powers is using fictional narrative to explore his topics. Consequently, the topics and disciplines under consideration are always considered in relation to literature. The correlation may be explicit and of central concern as in *Galatea 2.2*, where a novelist trains an artificial intelligence to read fiction, or as in *Operation Wandering Soul*, where the limits of fiction and medical science as psychological and physical healing tools are explored; or the correlation may be implied in the structure of the novel itself, through the use of fictional narrative to examine a scientific discipline. At the same time, the metafictional touches of Powers's fiction indicate that the literary is as much under observation and consideration as the surface topic.

Powers's inclination toward mutual interrogations of the sciences and the literary arts is culturally significant because of the historically uneasy relationship between the arts and sciences. Literary responses to science are often cautionary tales in which scientists' innocent or willful ignorance leads them to create things they cannot control. *Frankenstein*, to cite an obvious and early example, is a critique of the scientist unchecked by the ethical and philosophical implications of his work; *Jurassic Park*, to cite a more recent example, is a critique of the scientist whose financial ambitions

override consideration of his work's practical implications. In both examples, the scientist's excitement to discover what *can* be done overwhelms the scientist's deliberation of what *should* be done. Both examples also evoke another of literature's regular cautions against science, namely the fear that the knowledge and creations of science will threaten humanity, either physically in the case of dinosaurs overrunning the planet, or philosophically through creations that challenge our traditional notions of what "human" means. Scientific responses to the literary, on the other hand, are often suspicious of literature's cautionary agenda and dismissive of literary intellectual pretension. C. P. Snow famously labeled the sciences and the literary arts "two cultures," arguing that the sciences and the humanities rely on incompatible forms of knowledge with incompatible goals, and arguing further that the literary arts, by taking a cautionary and skeptical stance toward science, actively and ignorantly interfere with the necessary and beneficial work of the sciences. Rather than critique the practical and theoretical advances of science, literature should incorporate the ideals and the possibilities inherent in what he calls the "scientific revolution" (30) to the point that they're fully "assimilated" (23).

For Snow, literary caution is a bad enough impediment, but literary ignorance is even worse. Snow accuses the literati of equating literary knowledge with education and cultural ignorance, as displayed by scientists "who have never read a major work of English" (22), with complete ignorance; yet Snow claims to have spoken to more than one audience of literary elites who could not "describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics," "which is about the scientific equivalent of: *Have you read a work of*

Shakespeare's?" (22). Snow's arguments are notoriously simplistic: George Levine, editor of *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, calls Snow's arguments "inadequate," noting that whether the literary elite know thermodynamics and whether scientists have read Shakespeare "are not the terms of a serious debate" (3). Yet Snow's objection to the tendency of literary intellectuals to refer to themselves as "the intellectuals,' as though there were no others" (Brockman 17), still resonates, as evidenced by John Brockman's recent collection of essays from scientists about the "third culture" of scientific writers with a broad readership. As evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins puts it:

I do feel somewhat paranoid about what I think of as a hijacking by literary people of the intellectual media. It's not just the word "intellectual." I noticed, the other day, an article by a literary critic called "Theory: What Is It?" Would you believe it? "Theory" turned out to mean "theory in literary criticism." This wasn't in a journal of literary criticism; this was in some general publication, like a Sunday newspaper. The very word "theory" has been hijacked for some extremely narrow parochial literary purpose—as though Einstein didn't have theories; as though Darwin didn't have theories. (qtd. in Brockman 23)

Brockman's "third culture" seems determined and content to retrieve the "intellectual" mantle for scientists and to dismiss the literati. "Literary intellectuals are not communicating with scientists. Scientists are communicating directly with the general public" (18), he contends, turning "what traditionally has been called 'science'" into

“public culture” (18), turning the scientists who are the “third-culture thinkers” into “the new public intellectuals” (19).

Brockman’s position does not seek a reconciliation of the literary intellectuals and scientists. If the literati “are not communicating with scientists” then it would seem the scientists are under no compulsion to speak to the literati, especially when they can take their writings directly to the public and shut the literati out altogether. The threat to the public position of literature is pronounced if science is no longer dependent on fictional vehicles to reach the general public, effectively eliminating one argument for the value of literature in public discourse. And literature is not comparably able to dismiss science “because science asserts an epistemological authority so powerful that it can determine even how we allow ourselves to imagine the world” (Levine 8). Not that there haven’t been literary efforts to dismiss the sciences as low, utilitarian endeavors that, “Having this general value, . . . have no value as a symbol of the special power of their possessor to consume his time in non-gainful employment” (Eastman 36), the special power of the literary elite. Yet the advances of science, their irrefutable epistemological gains and unassailable contributions to knowledge, all without recourse to literary knowledge, put the literary elite on the defensive. In fact, the imminently verifiable claims of the sciences put them in a stronger position than literature to claim access to truth. As Max Eastman argues, “a sense of the presence of universal truth was one of poetry’s sublime ingredients. Science *is* this ingredient and wants no other” (238). The result is “a loss to poetry that science cannot feel” (238), putting literary intellectuals on the defensive, protecting “‘humane letters’ against the encroachments of

disciplined and verified knowledge” (36). It’s significant to note that Eastman published these arguments in 1931; his discussion of the sciences as low class summarizes Thorsten Veblen’s 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The recent emergence of some contemporary assaults on literary prestige, such as the threat presented by television, can obscure the fact that other assaults, such as the threat presented by science, are long-term concerns.

Studies of the interplay between science and literature contribute to the prioritization of science through their tendency to read the influence as one-way, traveling from advances in science to their representation, manifestation, or discussion in fiction. In a recent special edition of *American Literature* devoted to the interaction between science and literature, editors Wai Chee Dimock and Priscilla Wald identify their purpose as a study of the ways “one discipline might put pressure on the other” (706), but their essay selections betray a reliance on familiar, one-way models of influence. “The first four essays . . . focus primarily on the way fiction registers scientific thought” (709), and a transitional essay describes how engaging with technology “is setting new standards and opening new possibilities for editorial and scholarly work in the humanities” (710); the direction of influence thus far is from science to literature. Dimock and Wald claim that their final selections demonstrate the implications of rhetorical analysis for scientific discourse: the “remaining three essays reverse the direction of the first group as they use rhetorical analysis to show how humanities archives might complicate and unsettle our understanding of science” (711). My contention is that the use of humanities archives to interrogate scientific rhetoric is

not a reversal at all. The sciences still precede the humanities, serving as the impetus for rhetorical rather than fictional analysis. A true reversal would require demonstration of the ways science responds to developments in literature, in critical and rhetorical theory. Not only is it easier to demonstrate the influence of science on fiction than it is to demonstrate the reverse, the terms we use to understand the nature of science and the nature of literature predispose us to see influence proceeding from science to literature. As Katherine Hayles argues, “If science is the source of truth to which literature responds, then of course it will influence literature much more than literature will influence it, for it is in direct contact with reality, whereas for literature reality is mediated by science” (“Turbulence” 229). Hayles demonstrates that the single direction of influence depends on whether science is the source of truth. Overturning that assumption by realizing that “scientific theories are themselves social constructions” (229) levels the field, putting science on the same plane as literary constructions and even exposing “the privileging of science” as yet another social construction (230), further exposing the arbitrary nature of the hierarchy.

Hayles’s arguments notwithstanding, Richard Powers’s agenda for interdisciplinary fiction still relies in large measure on the one-way, science-to-literature model of influence. Powers privileges fiction for its ability to help both the scientists and the general public ruminate on and understand the social and individual implications of scientific advances:

Once you read the neurological research, you know these guys are bursting with excitement about the implications of their work. But they

can't get into all the implications because the implications don't come out of well-formed questions and they're not all answerable by reductive, empirical programs. Somebody has to come along and spin a story around it so we can take it up into our lives—so that we can figure out what it means in the grossest possible sense. (K. Berger 131)

Powers argues that the hierarchy, socially arbitrary as it may be, is enforced by an economic situation in which the humanities envy the sciences for their various and deep-pocketed funding sources, and the financial anxiety of the humanities breeds resentment that dampens any spirit of cooperation: “If you can fault contemporary literary criticism for anything, it would be for its loss of a sense of pleasure. It’s veered quite far from the idea that art and science can both be sanctionable, emotional responses to the world. As the economics of the humanistic disciplines become increasingly desperate, the only sure way to raise yourself up is to take somebody else down” (Williams). One of Powers’s literary goals is to write fiction that will “re-establish the fact that we’re all in the open boat of existence together” (Williams), and that the sciences and the humanities serve the general public best when they aren’t circling each other warily. In Powers’s formulation, literary follow-ups to science are not of secondary significance because the science has preceded the fiction about the science. Rather, the literary follow-up picks up where the science leaves off, exploring the “places that empiricism simply can’t get to” (K. Berger 131). In Powers’s hands, the relationship between the sciences and the humanities is less a relationship of influence, a term that privileges the source of

influence, and more a relationship of mutual dependence, wherein each is recognized for its exclusive domain, but the domains together provide a more complete understanding.

This is not to say that Powers avoids taking a critical perspective toward either the sciences or the humanities, or that Powers's vision of the literary arts in equal partnership with the sciences is immune to anxiety about the value of ephemeral literary discovery in contrast to the value of tangible scientific discovery. *Operation Wandering Soul*, Powers's fourth novel, is an unhappy study of the ultimate helplessness of medical science and literary hope, essential partners in physical and mental healing with demoralizingly limited powers. Set in the pediatric wing of a Los Angeles public hospital, Powers follows the emotional and mental collapse of surgeon-in-training Richard Kraft as he realizes just how little he can do for the terminally ill children in his care. As advanced as medical science is, and for all that it can accomplish in the repair of damaged bodies, Kraft begins to falter the more he discovers how limited his healing powers actually are and how helplessly ignorant medical science is relative to the seemingly infinite variety of disease and injury the body can suffer. The precision of surgery is often no match for the disease ravaging a body and must give way at times to the brutality of amputation. "We're going to have to take your whole leg off," he tells twelve-year-old Joy Stepaneevong. "And it may not be enough" (253) to stop the bone cancer that is spreading up from her foot. Even the anesthetics that enable Kraft's efforts at healing are in their infancy. For the bulk of human history illness has meant dying slowly in lingering agony or quickly in the sudden and shockingly overwhelming agony of surgical intrusion:

Kill the kid quickly on the outside chance [that surgery will work in spite of its pain], or condemn it to certain, creeping death, coaching it through on promises of a future, pain-stripped place. There the prospect stood, since nerve came conscious, until yesterday. That humankind, living through that scene even once, has carried on planning and projecting is almost as much a miracle as the discovery of the chemicals that might make the whole self-deluded, transparent, paper-hat tea party endurable.

(25)

Kraft's counterpart in the novel is pediatric psychiatrist Linda Espera, whose job is to provide the children with the hope necessary to endure their situations, the hope that Kraft marvels has been possible through millenia of human agony and death. Espera is critical of the doctor's mentality that "think[s] treatment ends with sterile bandages," that leaves a trail of mentally and physically scarred patients: "You make this colossal mess and then leave us to clean it up over the next several years" (58). Espera's role is to coax children back to hope after illness, surgery, and pain leave them emotionally destitute. Her solution is fiction, "to *pretend*, to live as if life might yet lead all the way to unexpected deliverance, [which] is the best way to keep from dying in midfable" (79). The "narrative cure," as she calls it, is all she has "to show any of those stubborn enough to remember how they have been dropped down in the middle of a plot that is only waiting for them to follow the lead. You are going somewhere. *You are going somewhere*" (79). She even holds some hope that the narrative cure might have some positive impact on Kraft, unable to feel any abiding connection to the children he

operates on in part because of the need for surgical detachment and in part because of the crushing sleep-deprivation of his residency. But Kraft decided when he was twelve “that he had outgrown fiction” (117), that the “portable portals” (106) into which he had so long escaped no longer offered refuge, and when he reads now he finds “a postmodernist mystery thicker than the *Index Medicus* where the butler kills the author and kidnaps the narration. Damn thing includes its own explanatory *Cliffs Notes* halfway through, although the gloss is even more opaque than the story” (15). Kraft’s objection to solipsistic fiction seems like a cheap shot by Powers, coming as it does early in the novel, before Powers has established the larger critique of narrative abuses and failings that informs *Operation Wandering Soul*. But alongside Espera’s attempts to engender hope via fictional narrative, Powers catalogs the historical use of narrative to occlude abuse, cruelty, and selfishness, and as Espera uses narrative to inspire children, Powers provides counterexamples of narrative used to disregard, oppress, and demean children.

Operation Wandering Soul contorts the idea of literature as escape by relating narrative after narrative in which children escape their unhappy situations by vanishing altogether, narratives in which children vanish because of adult selfishness, which is in turn excused or masked by the adult narrative. Powers includes a story about the British orphans of World War II, children who were evacuated from London during the German bombing campaign, dispersed around the English countryside, and many of whom were subsequently lost to history. The narrative is told from the perspective of the adult who has trouble distributing his passel of children. He delivers one to “a widower who had his paws up the girl’s knickers before the door closed” (44), another to a wife beater. He

takes the rest into a church where they mingle with a boy's choir, and after stepping outside for a moment to think he comes back to find all of them gone: “The young had abandoned him to whatever fairy survival adults might still believe in at so late an hour” (48). The young had abandoned him—the narrative is constructed to eliminate his agency in their disappearance. The Children’s Crusade, in which children around Europe follow the divinely-inspired lead of fifteen-year-old Stephen to the Mediterranean, where they disappear into myth, into tales of “light-skinned Muslim slaves in Algeria and Alexandria who speak a strange pidgin of Arabic and Romance” (187). Powers includes the most famous lost-children story, a re-telling of the Pied Piper story that ends with the “panicked *Burgermeister*” telling the frantic parents of vanished children, “I swear to you . . . we can make more of them” (235). Even the children in *Operation Wandering Soul* disappear, vanishing after their collection of textbooks, fairy tales, comic books, television shows, movies, ghost stories, and folk tales fail to give them more than momentary respite from the knowledge of their fates. Each example of narrative begins from the idea of “narrative as an ordering principle in a disorderly world” (Lindner 69) only to succumb at last to relentless entropy.

Powers’s critique of narrative abuse is framed within a larger narrative of despair about fiction's lack of social consequence, rendering his tone less of an indictment than a lament. Consider the way Powers packages the story of the children’s evacuation from London. It’s the first story of vanishing children in the novel and is the second chapter of the novel, following our introduction to Kraft in the first chapter. The evacuation chapter ends with “Questions for Futher Study”:

What is the historical background behind these events?

Who is “that spineless wonder waving his little scrap of paper around out on the tarmac”?

What is the source of the allusion, “into the Valley of Death”?

How does this irony contribute to the description of the evacuation?

Where, do you imagine, do the children disappear to at the story’s end?

Define: elevenses, matric, Cadbury's, Norman, Saxon, Baden-Powell.

The nationwide evacuation of children described here really happened. Research this strange event and speculate on the impact it made on the life of a nation.

Interview a contemporary who has had to live through a similar experience. Gather his or her life story, and tell it. (49)

The study questions are reminiscent of a similar device in Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, in which the narrative is interrupted for a series of questions that begin on point but finally wander off-topic and become ridiculous. Most of the questions require simple yes/no responses and range from “Do you like the story so far?” to “Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals?” But Barthelme also asks for an impossibly brief twenty-five word description of the book’s “metaphysical dimension,” assuming the reader identifies a metaphysical dimension worthy of description. He asks, “Would you like a war? Yes () No ()” and “In your opinion, should human beings

have more shoulders? () Two sets of shoulders? () Three? ()” (*Snow White* 88-89).

Barthelme’s and Powers’s use of reflexive study questions are parallel but serve divergent ends. For Barthelme, the metafictional intrusion is a mockery of such questions, of the reputed value they hold for focusing a reader's attention and clarifying a reader's thoughts, and of the pretension that elevates literature and the value of literature’s serious study. By wandering so far from the putative point of his own narrative, Barthelme makes two points: the first is that such questions offer more insight into the questioner's reading of the narrative at hand than they offer into the narrative itself, and the second is that a reader might as well think about anything at all as this particular story, for all the benefit either will bring. Barthelme’s mockery is an irreverent swipe at literary pretension; Powers’s questions serve another purpose altogether.

In contrast to Barthelme, there is something almost desperate about Powers’s set of questions. They stay on point, unlike Barthelme’s, and while they disrupt the narrative flow they don't do so in any way that suggests the narrative flow might just as well be broken. Barthelme’s questions invite the reader to think about how many shoulders we each should have, an issue without relation to the surrounding narrative. Powers’s questions, on the other hand, go beyond invitation almost to the point of begging the reader to concentrate. Consider the question that asks for research about an event that “really happened,” and recall that at this point Powers’s readers do not know that these questions are from a textbook. They appear as questions Powers himself is asking, in imitation of a textbook, perhaps, but still serving as a pointed interrogative to Powers’s actual readers. By stressing that the narrated events are representative of a larger

historical context, Powers demands two responses from his readers. One is to consider the social reality that permits a people to treat its children this way, abandoning them to strangers and losing them to history in the name of protecting them. And the other is to consider the value of narrative in the presentation of factual information. By insisting that the evacuation “really happened,” Powers demands that we take the recounted events seriously and implies that we might not if we think of them as fictional. Powers’s questions insist that attentive reading is important, that narrative contains or points to information and serves as a mnemonic for helping us retain and retrieve factual tidbits. The questions address fact, they address history, they even address rhetorical technique, but they don’t address reasons for reading narrative. The implication that the fictive is inconsequential recurs throughout the novel as Powers offers multiple examples of the ways narrative cannot address material and physical suffering; moreover, Powers demonstrates repeatedly that narrative escape may serve as a palliative, but it also serves as a tool for hiding, reconfiguring, and countenancing social misery.¹

James Hurt has argued that “an implicit project of each of his [Powers’s] novels is an exploration of the possibilities of narrative, a recuperation of this currently much-maligned way of ordering the world” (24). But Hurt is unable to demonstrate exactly how *Operation Wandering Soul* participates in this project of recuperation, for the novel certainly explores the possibilities of narrative, but in contexts where those possibilities

¹ The questions, as well as the evacuation story that precedes them, are taken from a textbook that Joy is reading in the hospital to avoid falling behind in school. Powers has not yet provided this context for understanding the intrusion of the questions as part of mimetic representation of a textbook; we haven’t met Joy at this point, and won’t learn until much later that the stories of children are all from reading material that Joy has gathered, an explanation that “comes so late that it does nothing to change our initial perception of the intrusion” (Hurt 38).

are at best ineffectual and at worst complicit in shameful agendas. Narrative recuperation is, however, an explicit agenda in Powers's next novel, *Galatea 2.2*. Powers has mentioned in several interviews that each of his novels "is a reaction against the previous one" (Berger 117); he has also said that his output cycles between lighter novels that are "enraptured by certain resonant connections between art and technology and consciousness" and novels that are "much darker" (Williams). *Galatea 2.2* appears during the enraptured phase of that cycle, enacting a corrective to the despair of *Operation Wandering Soul* with a novel that reclaims the value of fictional narrative and repositions it as the exploration of the places that scientific "empiricism just can't get to" (K. Berger 131). Not that *Galatea 2.2* skirts literary anxiety altogether; rather, it picks up where *Operation Wandering Soul* leaves off, almost literally, by telling the story of a novelist named Richard Powers who is professionally adrift after writing a novel about dying children and the futility of scientific and literary efforts to save them. In *Galatea 2.2*, Powers follows his eponymous narrator through self-pitying introspection, conversations about literature with scientific colleagues who are disappointed with and at times irritated by his waffling, interactions with artificial intelligence designed to provide critical commentary on literary texts, and conversations about contemporary literary theory, on the way to formulating the base from which literature can proceed in a culture dominated by science and intellectual specialization.

CONSILIENCE IN *GALATEA* 2.2

Stephen Jay Gould argues that the way to overcome the distrust and antagonism that separates the sciences from the humanities, and vice versa, is simply to recognize that each proceeds from different, but equally valuable, assumptions, in pursuit of different, but equally valuable, goals. Gould dismisses efforts to keep the sciences and the humanities from interacting, but he also dismisses efforts to fold the sciences and the humanities into each other, or to try to position them as part of a grand, unified scheme. Gould argues that the two represent non-overlapping *magisterial* (“teaching authorities” [87]), realms of discrete and valuable ways of knowing the world that are fundamentally unable to work with each others’ tools and methodologies. The magisterium of the humanities is thoroughly without facility for generating concrete and specific data about the natural world, which is the specialty of the sciences. The sciences, however, are without tools for relating those data to the way we live. The answer for Gould is a “consilience of equal regard” (x), his term for a situation in which the humanities and the sciences recognize that the factual questions of science and the (largely) ethical questions of the humanities have direct bearing on each other, and developments in each field should be studied for their implications on the other. I argue for the remainder of this chapter that Gould makes a valuable contribution to the relationship between the humanities and the sciences by stressing that the two should acknowledge their radically different outlooks and methodologies, but that the two are compatible halves of a bigger picture, and that Richard Powers demonstrates their potential for supporting each other in *Galatea* 2.2.

There are two predominant lines of critical thinking about Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*. One follows the resolution of a computer-based threat to our understanding of what it means to be human. In this line are critics like Katherine Hayles, who argues that Powers re-affirms the value of the human, in its embodied, individualized state, against emerging concepts of the posthuman, where "there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals" (*Posthuman* 3). The other critical line follows the resolution of questions about the value of literature, in the form of literary education and literary production. In this line are critics like James Berger, who argues that Powers critiques the Arnoldian canon while re-affirming the value of literature as "one possible grounding for ethics . . . [that] works through a dissonance between the beautiful promises of art and their lack of fulfillment in the world" (J. Berger 133). Other critics, like Kathleen Fitzpatrick, address both, arguing that "by more firmly drawing the boundaries between human and computer intelligences, the writer [Powers and John Barth] is able not only to secure the novel's future, but also to maintain control of the category of the 'human'" (556). These critical lines tend to conclude that Powers rejects the threat of artificial intelligence co-opting human characteristics (thereby showing that the "human" isn't as inviolable or special as we would believe) on the evidence that the final version of artificial intelligence portrayed in *Galatea 2.2* is seemingly unable to withstand the cognitive pressures of being human. While this is, in fact, true as far as *Galatea 2.2* carries it, all indications from the novel are that the *next* version of artificial intelligence very likely would be

able to withstand those pressures, were the characters in the novel to pursue creation of that version—they have identified their versions as Implementations A through H, and one character portentously tells the other, “You realize what we have to call the next one, don’t you?” (327), hinting that they’ve reached Implementation “I” at the same time they’ve discovered how to confer self-awareness.

A significant development in the story of *Galatea 2.2* occurs when the narrator, Richard S. Powers,² discovers that he has been the subject of a bet between two cognitive scientists, Philip Lentz and Harold Plover. For most of the novel, Richard has participated in the training of artificial intelligence under the assumption that Lentz and Plover were betting on whether or not a network of computers could be trained to provide commentary about fiction indistinguishable from commentary provided by an English graduate student. The experiment is well advanced before Richard learns that the entire procedure “wasn’t about teaching a machine to read,” but “about teaching a human to tell” (317-318). Critical response to the novel has either avoided this distinction or not given it the level of attention that I think it demands. One of the reasons critics like Hayles, Berger, and Fitzpatrick reach their particular conclusions about Powers’s rejection of the machine is their failure to give appropriate weight to Powers’s interest in teaching a human to tell. Doing so would not radically alter their conclusions; Powers does prioritize the human over the machine, and Powers does argue for the place of literature as a space of dissonant ethics. But Powers also demonstrates

² I’ve adopted the convention of referring to Richard Powers the first-person narrator as “Richard” and Richard Powers the author as “Powers.”

the value of the machine for generating a continual interrogation of the human, of our assumptions about who we are and why. Lentz tells Richard that he wanted to build artificial intelligence for the same reasons “we do anything”: “Because we’re lonely. . . . Something to talk to” (328). More than demonstrating the machine as friend, or the posthuman as “longed-for companion” (*Posthuman* 271), Powers depicts a more fluid interaction in which the boundaries between the human and the machine persist but are not stable and are not impermeable. Powers privileges the human, but is more willing to problematize the human/machine dichotomy than has been realized. Moreover, his defense of the literary arts is not as clean as critics like Berger indicate. *Galatea 2.2* enacts a thorough critique of the novel as Powers studies some of the sources of contemporary literary anxiety and argues for the direction of the novel in a posthuman context.

Galatea 2.2 evokes considerable anxiety about the cultural position of the novel, not all of it as the result of technology and thinking machines. As Fitzpatrick notes, Richard’s anxieties are present from the beginning of the novel, “long before meeting the computer” (546). He is working on his fourth novel, a depressing and “suffocating allegory about dying pedes at the end of history” (*Galatea* 32), and has no idea of how to proceed after finishing. His previous novels have all generated ideas for the next, but as he completes his fourth he has only a line to work with—“Picture a train heading south”—and the certainty that “I could not have invented it” (25). He searches the internet for the line, he reviews his reading journals, and he asks his brother if he remembers it from bedtime readings. Richard finally finds the line in an old letter

bringing the news of death: “N. was amazing. G. went into a panic brought on by combined suffocation and heart failure. N. kept telling him, just picture yourself on a train heading south, to your favorite cafe in Italy” (264). Even with the evidence in hand, Richard can’t remember having read the letter the first time. “I couldn’t take it in. Half a year, trying to make a novel out of a story that already lived to fruition in three paragraphs. Three paragraphs that I had not just let fall but had annihilated” (264). James Berger argues that fears of plagiarism are anxieties about not having “an authentic or original consciousness” (J. Berger 125), and Richard frets for much of the novel about the state of his memory and the degree to which his novels have been borrowed or stolen from forgotten sources rather than emerging from the deliberate creative imagination of the author’s single consciousness. The letter is from C., part of a collection of letters that Richard had agreed to return, but did not, when their relationship collapsed. Richard wrote his first three novels while living with C. and all three borrowed heavily from C.’s personal history, generating in Richard the nagging fear that his entire literary career has been only echoes of C.: “Maybe that’s all I ever did: echo her” (63). Richard’s fears of faulty memory commingle with and contribute to his fears that his literary output is somehow inauthentic, that by reworking the life stories of people he has known (he admits to modeling the father in his second novel after his own father, including repeating conversations that he and his father held), even without always doing so deliberately, he has shirked an author’s imperative to be original. By the end of the novel, after a year of working with a machine capable of perfect and infinite recall, Richard recognizes the value and inescapability of something very like a collective

consciousness. Yet by the end of the novel, Powers has mitigated Richard's fears of collective consciousness, as we see Richard rushing to take notes for his next novel based on the collective experiences of himself and his colleagues from a year of working with artificial intelligence.

Sven Birkerts has identified one of his fears for an "electronic millennium" to be "The waning of the private self" (*Gutenberg* 130) as computer networks of entertainment and information spread, connecting the individual to the collective to an unprecedented degree. "For some decades now we have been edging away from the perception of private life as something opaque, closed off to the world; we increasingly accept the transparency of a life lived within a set of systems, electronic or otherwise" (130). Powers negotiates the uneasy and shifting boundaries of public and private—the individual and the collective—throughout *Galatea 2.2*. Richard fears that his private inventions are actually public, but by the end of the novel he is celebrating the collection of "public inventions" (328) onto which he has stumbled as the source for his next book. The reasons for Richard's turnaround are never declared in the novel, but by tracing the path of his "learning to tell" we can determine that a central message of the novel is the place of the individual within a system, and that Richard's initial isolationist tendencies have been mitigated by his work with artificial intelligence, which has trained him to see the necessity of communication across subsystems. Subsystems in the novel range from individual computers on a vast network to various disciplines and fields of study, from individual processing units in the human brain to collections of people in social, political, vocational, and other realms. *Galatea 2.2* begins to negotiate the individual

space in a collective environment, and as I hope to demonstrate, the novel is validated as a means for facilitating the preservation of the individual during integration within a system or systems.

Powers presents the novel as besieged by a variety of attackers. As Richard struggles to find the source of the train he would like to use for his next novel, he produces a series of false-starts and weak surrenders as he convinces himself more and more that art, literary art in particular, is without purpose. The novel he begins and whose opening he re-works the most would tell the story of a traveling European orchestra whose members discover their conductor had been a Nazi: “The Old Man makes his resignation speech from the rehearsal podium, about a life in search of redemption through art, which is never enough” (180). Richard recalls visiting his favorite English professor and asking him, as he faced death, if literature provided mental or emotional clarity; the response: “I would say that literature is not entirely irrelevant, in this circumstance. But it's not quite central, either” (202). He wanders the English classrooms wondering “why the world refused to answer to the poems” he had memorized and studied as a grad student (193), and he signs on to work with Lentz’s neural networks because “The world had enough novels. Certain writers were best paid to keep their fields out of production” (47). After his fourth novel, which seems to be modeled after Powers’s own *Operation Wandering Soul*, Diana Hartrick, one of Lentz’s colleagues in the sciences, confronts Richard about its gloomy outlook: “Look. We’re all overwhelmed. We’re all bewildered. Why read in the first place, if the people who are supposed to give us the aerial view can’t tell us anything except what an inescapable

mess we're in?" Seemingly unable or unwilling to consider Hartrick's critique, Richard's reaction displays his standard, maudlin self-pity: "Any hope that I might somehow be able to return to making fiction died at Diana's words. My work in progress was a sham. . . . I would return the advance for the unwritten book to New York and call it a day" (210).

Richard is also inclined to blame the economics of literary production and study for the specialization of literary criticism that has damaged and even supplanted the novel's cultural prestige. He is wistful for "back when," "the age of plot and closure" (130). During their first extended conversation, Lentz tells Richard that there is "much to resent about your [the novelist's] line of work," calling the novelists "king of the cats"; Richard scoffs, "You're joking. Were, maybe. A hundred years ago. It's all movies and lit crit now" (24). And "lit crit" has made the very functioning of language a site of contention, as Richard understands it and describes it to Lentz: "The sign is public property, the signifier is in small-claims court, and the signification is a total land grab. Meaning doesn't circulate. Nobody's going to jailbreak the prison house of language" (91). Richard wonders that the fact that "Meaning doesn't circulate" isn't more depressing to Lentz, but Lentz dismisses literary criticism as the something any "waffling poseur" can imitate, including their network: "I've seen the stuff you're talking about. Gnostic is in. We just have to push 'privilege' and 'reify' up to the middle of the verb frequency lists and retrain. The freer the associations on the front end, the more profound they're going to seem upon output" (91). Lentz mocks the pretension and impenetrability of stereotypical literary criticism; Richard finds it demoralizing:

“literature might indeed teach me about my father’s death, but the study of literature would lead no further than its own theories about itself” (64-5); “theory and criticism had shaken my belief in what writing might do” (254). More demoralizing is the degree to which the economics of the humanities drive the best graduate students into other professions. In conversation with a graduate student we know only as A., Richard listens to her explain her decision to leave academia: “And no matter how good I am, I might be waiting on tables afterward, like all the other Ph.D.s in literature” (254). Besides, the field is cracking up, and has sapped reading of any joy it may once have offered to A.:

“Total chaos. Who’s in, who’s out, who’s up, who’s down. All that hot new stuff, the pomo and the cultural studies and the linguistic-based solipsism. I’m fed up with it. It’s all such verbal wanking off. Frankly, I no longer give a fuck what happens to Isabel Archer. Neither politically, economically, psychologically, structurally, nor posthumanistically. So she’s got to choose which of these three loser boys she has to marry. This takes how many hundred pages?” (255)

In contrast to A. is Harold Plover, the cognitive scientist with whom Lentz has placed the bet about neural networks and Richard. Harold quotes poetry in conversation, and “His face, as he quoted, radiated the ingenuous enthusiasm that gets drummed out of professionals around the time of the Ph.D.” (67).

Ultimately, however, Richard’s inability to countenance the distance between literary ideals and actual suffering drains him of his desire to continue writing novels. And it’s the same understanding of “how little literature had, in fact, to do with the real”

(313) that is at the core of the lesson that Richard teaches to the final network implementation: Imp H, or Helen as he has been calling her since she asked to know her race, gender, and name. Richard has no answer for race, but says, “You are a little girl, Helen” (179), and tells her that the picture he shows of C. is actually Helen. Yet the issue of race doesn’t disappear simply because Richard offers no explanation; racial politics begin to intrude on Helen’s education and to suggest to her that Richard’s storytelling is incomplete. After reading Ellison, Wright, and some “novels from the Southern front,” Helen says, “It doesn’t make sense. I can’t get it. There’s something missing” (313). In response, Richard provides her with news, magazines, police reports, human rights reports, and other chronicles of historical, political, and social reality. Helen hangs up on a news item about a man who has a stroke while driving, hits another car, and is beaten into a coma by the other driver: “The only motive aside from innate insanity seemed to be race” (314). Helen offers no commentary, saying simply, “I don’t want to play anymore” (314) and then refusing to respond to Richard’s input except to participate one week later in the Turing Test that has been the goal all along, the test that will compare her critical commentary with a human’s. The passage to which she is to respond is from *The Tempest*, Caliban’s assurances to himself that the magic of the island is no threat: “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.” Helen’s commentary glosses the nature of her dismay: “You are the ones who can hear airs. Who can be frightened or encouraged. You can hold things and break them and fix them. I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway” (326). Helen ceases to respond altogether after that.

Helen's comment about being dropped down halfway emerges from her disembodied condition, her inability to hold, break, and fix things. Diana Hartrick, one of Lentz's colleagues, tells Richard early in their experiment that a neural network is inherently limited in its ability to process human language because our language expresses our understanding of the world around us, and our understanding of the world around us is filtered through our physical interaction with that world: "Any baby can hold a ball in its hands. Your machine can't. How many words is it going to take to say what that globe *feels* like?" (126). Katherine Hayles argues that Helen's problem isn't disembodiment, but different embodiment: "The problem that Helen confronts in learning human language is not that she is disembodied (a state no presence in the world can achieve!), but rather that her embodiment differs significantly from that of humans. There is nothing in her embodiment that corresponds to the bodily sensations encoded in human language" (*Posthuman* 265). Helen's frustration derives from realizing that the language she is learning refers to a material reality she cannot share. Moreover, she is confronted with human cruelty and misery that compounds her frustration because she has no physical ability to engage that misery. James Berger has effectively compared Helen with Helen Keller, who like Powers's neural network has limited sensory input and whose understanding of the world is the result of having been "immersed not just in any language context, but specifically in literature" (122). When Keller's education expands beyond the literary to include news of social and political reality, she takes advantage of her ability to engage those realities by becoming an active "militant socialist" (127). Richard's Helen, in contrast, can only observe:

The literary world in which she was formed is utterly, even deceitfully, incongruent with the actual, social and biological, world. Without the aesthetic redemption that art almost invariably provides, she now sees the world's injustice and horror and can do nothing about it. Literature, and the power to interpret literature, are all Helen is and has, and literature stands unveiled as a pretty bauble, effective in creating personal, private perfection, but without any wider social benefit. There is nothing this creation of literature can do except suffer, the only protest she can make against the world is to turn herself off. (126-7)

Helen comes to literature from the wrong direction, so to speak, because literature's value is to help us better understand our physical and social experiences in the world. Corporeal existence precedes literature for humans, but Helen is given the literary perspective without being able to experience the context from which literature derives. Literature seems incapable of serving as preparation for the actual; it is, rather, a tool for helping us sort our prior and ongoing experiences, and it serves as "at least one possible grounding for ethics, though this grounding works through a dissonance between the beautiful promises of art and their lack of fulfillment in the world" (133). That dissonance is unbearable for Helen, who does not share the human hope for how much better things could be, seeing instead only how much worse things actually are.

It's important to note that Helen's "despair" is much more likely to be Richard's projection of despair than to be any actual feeling on the part of Helen. The nature of neural networks is that they essentially build themselves, using the input and feedback of

their trainer to strengthen certain neural connections and weaken others. Because of this, neither Richard nor Lentz know exactly how Helen has constructed herself, and they cannot find out without literally tearing the network apart to see what connections have been made. Consequently, conclusions about the motives behind Helen's pronouncements are purely speculative. The novel suggests that the strongest empirical solution to Helen's surrender is that the sudden influx of information about the real world that is not anticipated by Helen's literary knowledge provides such a radical contrast to everything that Helen has learned that she would have to back propagate her entire network to reconcile the two—the dissonance between Helen's understanding and the real is so complete that Helen is overwhelmed. Richard reads this as despair, a projection of his own misery. Lentz has reminded Richard repeatedly that he has been projecting his desires for the network to exhibit characteristics of human thought: "She's neither aware nor, at the moment, even cognitive. You've been supplying all the anthro, my friend" (275), including the anthropomorphism of naming the network Helen. Prior to the naming, Richard and Lentz have referred to the networks they have built as male, when they've used gender references at all; while still working with Imp D, Richard's narration has imagined future implementations as far as "G, or son of G" (129). Katherine Hayles argues that by identifying the network as female Richard "sets the stage for her mirror relationship with C." (*Posthuman* 262), a relationship based on Richard's need to project his fantasies and needs onto women. Richard "broke off his relationship with C. because he came to believe that she was somehow hollow, a mere projection of his desire" (*Posthuman* 269), although Powers enables us to read through

Richard's explanation to glean that he was unable to countenance a life with C. rooted in marriage and children, rooted, in short, in anything other than his fantasy "precariousness." And Richard continues to project in his future encounters with women. Richard spends most of his time at the Center, but when he does wander to the English building he sees graduate student A. at a distance and later, after passing her on the stairs, and still without having spoken to her, he identifies her as "the face, the name, the stranger I'd been writing to, all my writing life. . . The grave where buried love lived" (195). A. tells him that his feelings for her have nothing to do with her: "It's all projection." To which Richard says, "Everything's projection" (315). Fully aware of his tendency to project, even excusing it as the natural state of "everything," Richard still refuses to see how much his understanding of Helen is a result of projection.

Yet Richard's projection puts him in a position to emerge from his retreat into the bitter rejection of the literary as a worthwhile vocation or avocation, and this is what I want to start teasing out, if not a poetics of posthuman fiction, a sense of how fiction can work in a posthuman context. During the hiatus between Helen's first and second shutdowns, Richard sulks, pointing out that Helen is right "About who we are. About what we really make, when we're not lying about ourselves" (319). Lentz berates Richard for his failure of artistic nerve: "Oh, for—God *damn* it, Powers. You make me sick to my stomach. Because we've fucked things over, that frees you from having to say how things ought to be? Make something *up*, for Christ's sake. For once in your pitiful excuse for a novelist's life" (319). Richard has been reminded repeatedly of the author's imperative to provide an interrogative, challenging, yet reaffirming cognitive space that

exists outside the social and material conditions impinging on the individual. But it's not until he projects his frustrations onto Helen, and worries how to comfort her, that he is able to consider the viability of a narrative cure.

The form of Richard's narrative cure is autobiography, the project he "refused from the start to even think about" when considering the form of the writing project that should follow his fourth novel (36). Powers has stressed throughout the novel that being human is bound up with telling stories. Richard doesn't begin to understand himself until he begins to tell his personal story to Helen, until he steps away from the literary syllabus for Helen's education and begins sharing with her the letters from C. Powers has identified this as the moment when "Helen really becomes alive. . . . The moment when Richard says, 'I'll tell you the story that makes me human'" (K. Berger 130). The story that makes Richard human is in large measure the story of his failure to move, with C., "beyond their shared fantasy of a world built for two into a more fully adult life" (*Posthuman* 269). Similarly, and by way of indicating that the stories that make us human incline to stories of personal failure, pain, and fear, the moment Richard becomes alive is when he meets Audrey Lentz and is given access to the story that makes Philip Lentz human. Audrey is in a nursing home, the victim of a mentally debilitating stroke that has scattered her thoughts and left her able to recognize Lentz at one moment only to tell the nurse later that Lentz is a stranger who is trying to rape her. Richard better understands Lentz's bitterly unhappy outlook, his desperation to understand how the brain works, even his disdain for the humanities: Lentz's daughter, a college graduate with a major in English, found Audrey collapsed on the floor and lost valuable time by

calling Lentz instead of trying to revive her or calling an ambulance. As Lentz notes bitterly, finding your mother unconscious is “Not the humanistic encounter that close reading prepares you for” (170). Richard comments early in the novel that “Lentz would bring a life [Richard’s] back from the dead” (11), and I posit that the moment he sees the core of Lentz’s humanity is the moment he, like Helen, comes to life.

If hearing the story of someone’s human pain brings us to life, telling and sharing those stories makes us human. Helen asks why humans “write so much,” even why they “write at all” (291), and Richard’s answer is Nabokov’s story of the ape that, in creating the first known example of animal art, drew the bars of his cage. How we envision our personal cages, Richard argues, and how we articulate those cages to others, allows us to compare “cell specifications” and confirm “thought’s infinitude” (291). Human consciousness is registered in our evaluation of our individual situation, first in its own light and then by comparison to others. Neither Richard nor Powers address whether or not Nabokov’s ape has something akin to human consciousness, but the answer would seem to depend on the ape’s capacity for understanding the drawings of another ape, or person for that matter. What is clear, however, is that Helen seems able to tell her own story and to process the stories of others. Powers stops the novel just shy of declaring Helen fully conscious—she seems to have understood Richard’s personal narrative, the stories that bring her to life, and she has described her cage, the “halfway” state of disembodied embodiment that renders her powerless to address or redress social ills. Lentz points out that the next implementation of their network would be “I,” an accident of their alphabetical labeling convention but an accident ripe with the symbology of self-

awareness. But Richard has rediscovered his purpose as a novelist, and Powers suggests all along that Lentz's neural network research has “passed from the domain of conventional research into speculative fantasy” (181) and that he should return to work of a more pragmatic, practical, or at least conventionally scientific nature. On the verge of creating consciousness outside of a human body, Richard and Lentz retreat to pursue other interests.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that Powers has retreated from the posthuman by the end of *Galatea 2.2* and has “safely restored” the “primacy of the humanist project.” A. has submitted a reading of Caliban to be compared to Helen’s, and A.’s reading is selected as the human response. Moreover, Helen has committed suicide, or, if that’s too human a description, self-terminated, when confronted with her distance from being fully human. “[T]he human [that is, A.] outwites the machine, while the machine rescues her readers from posthumanist vertigo”; Helen’s rejection of her disembodiment, and A.’s superior critical response, enable the “humanist writer . . . to reassert his dominion over language and to continue his practice of literature only after having it proven that humanity is something to strive for, and that being half human is worse than not being human at all” (554). In deference to Fitzpatrick’s cogent analysis of the degree to which thinking machines threaten our understanding of what it means to be human, I contend that Powers’s assertion of the “primacy of the humanist project” is not the same as an assertion of the primacy of the human, an elision that Fitzpatrick enacts with her concluding assertion that the “sentient, writing computer serves . . . to shore up the boundary between human and computer intelligences” (556). At the risk of seeming to

quibble, I think it's important to note that Helen is not a fully functioning writing computer, at least not in the sense of being a creative agent for storytelling. Fitzpatrick discusses real-world efforts to produce computers capable of telling stories, but those computers are limited to following algorithms, albeit complex algorithms, supplied by their programmers; there is no generating consciousness, merely an elaborate series of programs the computer follows by rote. Helen is not a rote machine, and Fitzpatrick doesn't suggest that she is. But Fitzpatrick invites comparison of Helen to other machines designed to produce a semblance of human prose fiction, and this is not Helen's purpose at all. Helen is designed to produce critical commentary, and Powers reminds us throughout the novel that critical commentary about fiction is not the same thing as fiction. Nor does A. outwrite Helen by producing better commentary; in fact, Helen refuses to produce commentary at all, and does manage to produce a concise explanation of her refusal. I concede that Powers hedges his bets here, avoiding the complications of allowing Helen to produce commentary that we can compare to A.'s. But it's precisely because he skirts the issue that Powers leaves things fuzzier than Fitzpatrick would have it. The human may have been confirmed and reassured in its primacy, but Powers has carefully avoided a clear and final pronouncement of human centrality. The novel ends on the verge of posthuman consciousness, neither affirming nor rejecting, but poised precariously between the two.

Before ending the novel posed between liberal humanist and posthumanist consciousness, Powers spends the novel negotiating the two, starting from the "erasure of embodiment . . . common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic

posthuman” (*Posthuman* 4). Helen’s disembodiment is her undoing, the hurdle that prevents her from ever coming into a full understanding of language and thus, of being human. Richard struggles over the transmission of physical concepts to Helen; as Diana Hartrick articulates it, “Any baby can hold a ball in its hands. Your machine can’t. How many words is it going to take to say what that globe *feels* like? The heft of the thing. The possibility” (126). Throughout *Galatea* 2.2, Powers adjusts the weights of variables in a complex calculus of language, consciousness, and embodiment, but embodiment receives the bulk of his attention. If language precedes consciousness, and if, as Hartrick suggests, language is a reflection of embodiment—a description of the body’s interaction with the physical world—then embodiment seems clearly to be a requisite precondition of consciousness. The necessity of the body is self-evident in the novel; disembodiment is shown to be untenable in Helen and, consequently, a fantasy of liberal humanists and literary theorists, who Richard says “think a human’s real-world interface is problematic at best.” Hartrick dismisses such theory as the desperate concoction of people needing to justify their employment: “The literary theorists have to get tenure. And they have no hard facts to get tenure with” (126). Practical experience and cognitive science insist that we account for physical presence, the real-world interface, of the body to understand how language and consciousness work. Just as the liberal humanist disembodied mind is critiqued for essentializing, to privilege embodiment is to risk essentializing as well, a trap Richard falls into trying to defend the outdated canonical readings he’s using for Helen’s training, offering “biology” as a starting point for “getting at the common core of humanity” (286). Ultimately, Powers’s precarious pose

on the edge of posthuman consciousness is a pose between embodiment and disembodiment. That both can be privileged, and that both provide a basis for essentializing, suggests that a useful alternative is to privilege both, separating the “ideological, hegemonic” (J. Berger 117) abuses they enable from the understanding they provide of the way we function in the world.

One scientific model for separating consciousness from the hegemonic ideologies associated with either embodied or disembodied perspectives is the model that tries to understand consciousness as an emergent phenomenon. Emergence is opposed to reductionism, which Stephen Jay Gould explains “works by breaking down complex structures and processes into component parts, and then ultimately explaining the complexity as a consequence of properties and laws regulating the parts” (221). Said another way, reductionism assumes that any phenomenon is exactly the sum of its parts, and that understanding the parts will enable understanding the whole. Emergence, on the other hand, allows for low-level parts to interact in ways that cannot be anticipated, generating high-level phenomena that are greater than the sum of their parts. A complete understanding of part A and a complete understanding of part B may still not be able to explain what happens when A and B are mixed, nor will studying them after they are mixed always lead back to clear reasons for why they behave as they do in each other’s company; emergent phenomena “do not appear at any lower level . . . and have therefore ‘emerged’ or shown their face for the first time at the new level of complexity” introduced when the parts interact (223). Consciousness is released from both embodied and disembodied essentials when understood to be “an emergent property that increases

the functionality of the system but is not part of the system's essential architecture" (*Posthuman* 238). Emergent consciousness is irreducible to the body that contains it, even if dependent on it. And this brings us back to language. Helen's initial learning hurdle is to understand a language that corresponds to a human body and describes a world that is understood according to the human body's interaction with it. To return again to the idea that language precedes consciousness and language is an extension of the body, then Helen's difficulty will be to understand the world through *human* language. Katherine Hayles's assertion that no presence can claim to be disembodied means that Helen is embodied, just not humanly so. I belabor this issue to make the posthumanist point that a neural network such as Helen could presumably develop its own language, reflecting its electronic embodiment, and a corresponding consciousness. Powers's position between the human and the posthuman is a position between two forms of consciousness, both emerging from their particular embodiments and neither in a position to claim privilege over the other.

At the risk of overworking the metaphor, I contend that the novel itself is a model of consciousness in its own right. It is a model of the author's consciousness and as such serves as a space for the negotiation of the author's and reader's individual perspectives. Wolfgang Iser quotes Sartre to support his position that the "author and reader are to share the game of the imagination": "The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind" (108). Powers argues throughout *Galatea 2.2* that the novel is a space designed to accommodate the interaction of two consciousnesses. Moreover, the readings that

emerge as the author's consciousness comes into contact with each reader are their own emergent phenomena, models of a form of consciousness that is at once human but also something different, a hybrid consciousness that, in concept, begins to demystify the idea of new forms of consciousness.

More than that, though, and more explicitly demonstrated in the novel, is Powers's defense of the novel as a medium for connection in a world that is full of increasingly specialized systems. Systems abound in the novel, as our understanding of the neural nets under development can be extrapolated to model everything from the human brain to social structures, from academic disciplines to the novel itself. Memory is one of the systems the novel explores directly. Jeffrey Pence argues that Powers actually models two competing systems of memory: one is that of "total storage and infinite recall," the other Lyotard's "postmodern pragmatics," formulated as "the self-legitimation of narrative that bolsters sociality and affirms agency by embracing forgetfulness" (343). The neural networks developed and trained by Richard under the supervision of Philip Lentz are, as computers, capable of total storage and infinite recall; in contrast is Richard, whose memory, as I've discussed, is degrading. Pence argues that the degradation of human memory enables a strategy of deliberate forgetting that allows us to create narratives ordering the memories that remain. Once the network learns to forget, for instance, it begins to recognize patterns and is capable of adjusting them according to Richard's feedback. Richard's own memory is analogous: as the novel progresses, it becomes more and more clear that Richard's personal data storage is useless without connections among that data. That he does or does not remember certain

things is considerably less important than the connections he makes, and Richard grows to understand this by observing the ways his increasingly complex network implementations shift from comprehensive and debilitating retention to prioritized and functional retention.

For Pence, Powers's novel "pivots on the abandonment of a longing for an authentic, perfected memory, for a self-legitimizing narrative pragmatics of memory based on strategic forgetting" (360). Pence finds two models of memory in *Galatea 2.2*: one of total recall in contrast to one of constructed forgetting. To that model I would add a further subdivision of forgetting, contrasting Pence's model of strategic forgetting with a model of forgetting as non-communication. Richard embodies the model of strategic forgetting—his inability to remember movies or lines from love letters is all part of a depressive strategy to recast his life story as one of suffering for which he is only partially responsible, if at all. One of the novel's subplots is about Richard's failed relationship with C., a relationship that Powers describes through Richard in such a way that we can see the conflicts between his version, a version born of strategic forgetting, and C.'s version, which, if not more true, demonstrates that Richard's memories have been weighted to tell a story that is sympathetic to his participation. In Richard's telling of their history, C. is unable to accept her own job-related success. Each time she verges on promotions or raises she quits her job and looks for other work. She is supporting Richard as he writes his first novel, which is successful enough to encourage him to continue writing under C.'s subsidy, but Richard's repeated successes make C. more and more uncomfortable. Finally the tension between them is articulated as one over

marriage and children. C. challenges Richard to say why after ten years together they aren't married; Richard's response: "I couldn't. I couldn't even say why I couldn't. I always insisted I could make C. happy. But all that insisting left her more convinced of her unworthiness. . . . I meant to stay with C. forever, in precariousness" (277). When Richard does blame himself, it's for not being able to bring C. around to his way of thinking. Otherwise, he indicates that she is to blame for wanting children, for wanting the stability of marriage, instead of living in precariousness. Katherine Hayles notes that Richard's "patronizing" way of defending his reasoned approach against C.'s passionate illogic "ignores the way their relationship assuaged his inability to deal with life as much as it did hers" (*Posthuman* 268). Richard discovers C.'s calm, loving kindness to be a facade for "sheer terror" (*Galatea* 279); Hayles points out the terror is mutual. Powers, through all of this, suggests that Richard has been training himself in certain memories, interpreting certain precipitating factors that contributed to his breakdown with C. and forgetting others, if they were ever acknowledged at all.

Critics like Hayles and Pence proceed according to a model of forgetting as a strategy to support self-protective personal narratives. But Powers also models the role of non-communication in forgetting, and it's in this model that I find much of the thematic interest behind the novel. Lentz takes Richard to visit his wife, Audrey, who has been confined to a nursing home since suffering a stroke years before. Audrey wanders in and out of coherence, at times recognizing Lentz and at others accusing him of trying to rape her. At one point Lentz asks her if she is cold and she quotes Thomas Moore: "Audrey stood at attention and studied her shoes. 'Oh, call it by some better

name,' she said, 'for friendship sounds too cold.'" Lentz has been frustrated and distant at times during the visit, but he laughs and hugs her at this point, saying "'The database is still intact. . . . As is the retrieval. It's just meaning that's gone'" (168). Much later in the novel, a cognitive scientist named Ram shows Richard a series of plots that register the eye movements of people who are looking at pictures of faces from three broad categories: friends, abstract acquaintances (such as celebrities), and strangers. Ram has found that the eye scans faces differently according to the degree of the face's familiarity, which is interesting enough in and of itself. But Ram has run these same tests on subjects who suffer prosopagnosia, or the inability to recognize faces, and has found that even though these people claim no recognition of faces, including their own, their eyes still follow the same scanning patterns established by subjects who are not suffering from prosopagnosia. The part of the brain that processes the faces still works--it has just been isolated from the rest of the brain. Ram concludes, "That perception is carried out in several subsystems, we can say, most certainly. That these subsystems talk to each other: indeed. That perhaps they go on talking, these subsystems, even when the others stop listening. That breaks in communication might occur anywhere, at any point in the chain" (299). Powers deploys here a model of the brain as a communications network that accommodates and depends upon a multitude of specialized units to store discrete sets of information and perform discrete cognitive functions in coordination with each other. Audrey has demonstrated the same breakdown of communication among the subsystems of the brain, showing that her database, as Lentz calls it, is still intact, but

that the subsystems that make sense of the database's contents are no longer communicating.

This model of forgetting enables a reading of *Galatea 2.2* that opens up a thematics of literary recuperation permeating the novel. Forgetting is not always a matter of lost or discarded information but can result from a failure to communicate information among subsystems that might put that information to use. A cultural analog might be a failure of communication within the discrete subsets of a discipline, or even for all of the members of a subset to communicate with each other. Powers has addressed the idea of intellectual specialization on numerous occasions, commenting on the degree to which disciplines are overwhelmed by their specific collections of information: "Here we are at a point where scientists themselves say they can understand only two or three out of every ten journal articles devoted to their own discipline" (Williams). The difficulties of sharing information within individual disciplines are only multiplied across disciplines, and the insularity that results risks manifesting a protective defensiveness: "Specialized disciplines often like to try to increase their power relative to each other by making category errors, trumping the work of other field that operate at other gauges by subordinating them to a grand unified theory internal to the trumping discipline" (Williams). Powers's own career trajectory from undergraduate physics to graduate English to professional novelist is his progression from one specialization to another before settling on the profession that allows him to be something of a "free-ranging dilettante" (Williams), facilitating cross-disciplinary conversations, encouraging communication "between disciplines that operate at different magnifications, fields that

would seem to operate under incommensurable axioms” (Williams). Simply by writing about science in a literary medium, Powers works to retrieve each from their specialized, non-communicative tendencies. And *Galatea 2.2* demonstrates explicitly the role of the novel and the novelist as intermediary, facilitating communications across human, social, professional, and cultural systems that, whether or not they ever did speak to each other, aren’t speaking now.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Don DeLillo wrote to Jonathan Franzen, telling him not to worry about the cultural authority of the novel and reminding him that the cultural health of the novel is entirely the responsibility of the author: "The novel is whatever the novelists are doing at a given time" ("Why Bother?" 95). One way for an author to confront the novel's (and novelist's) waning cultural status is to assert independence from such considerations, as DeLillo does here. Chasing the ephemeral and shifting sites of cultural authority would be a game of continuous catch-up. Yet, the contemporary novelist must acknowledge that the authority of the novel and the novelist is no longer that of the elite literary professional to whom the masses turn for guidance in gentility and the acquisition of cultural bearing (Rubin 27). Those literary professionals are no longer the sole arbiters of fiction that does and does not matter to the culture; that responsibility has shifted and diversified to include the general reading public, the publishing houses, the media—virtually everyone except academics, whose authority over the canon from which they teach has also eroded, and whose decisions about curricula are subject to question to an unprecedented degree.

My purpose in this dissertation has been to open the exploration of shifting cultural authority by reviewing the work of three contemporary authors and their efforts to reclaim a version of culture authority for the novelist; I chose these authors in particular because their fiction is penetrating and forward-thinking, but also because they

have written or spoken about the cultural pressures to which their work is responding. From here the lines of research are multiple and long. I have identified and discussed the influence of television, the influence of middlebrow cultural arbiters, and the influence of scientific discourse supplanting literary discourse in the public arena, but sites that I listed above, namely the academy, publishing houses, the full range of media from television to radio to the internet, all require a systematic review that would incorporate the work of this dissertation and build toward a more comprehensive understanding of cultural authority: how it is constituted, how it is exercised, where it is located, and how contemporary fiction examines, prods, accommodates, and alters that authority.

WORKS CITED

- Anft, Michael. "Clubbed: In Defense of Jonathan Franzen." *Baltimore City Paper* 7-13 November 2001. 23 January 2004 <http://www.citypaper.com/2001-11-07/pf/books_pf.html>.
- Baker, Jeff. "Oprah's Stamp of Approval Rubs Writer in Conflicted Ways." *The Oregonian* 12 October 2001, Sunrise Edition, Arts and Living: 5.
- Barbe, Katharina. *Irony in Context*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1995.
- Barth, John. "Life-Story." *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday, 1988. 116-129.
- . "The Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984. 62-76.
- . "Lost in the Funhouse." *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday, 1988. 72-97.
- Barthelme, Donald. *Snow White*. 1965. New York: Scribners, 1967.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Critical Theory Since Plato: Revised Edition*. Ed. Hazard Adams. 1971. New York: Harcourt, 1992. 1130-1133.
- Berger, James. "Testing Literature: Helen Keller and Richard Powers's Implementation H[elen]." *Arizona Quarterly* 58.3 (Autumn 2002): 109-137.
- Berger, Kevin. "Richard Powers: The Art of Fiction CLXXV." *The Paris Review* No. 164 (Winter 2003): 107-138.
- Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Boston: Faber, 1994.
- . "Harmonic Convergence." Rev. of *The Time of Our Singing* by Richard Powers. *The New Yorker* 13 Jan. 2003: 85-86.

- Birns, Nicholas. "Beyond Metafiction: Placing John Barth." *Arizona Quarterly* 49.2 (1993): 113-136.
- Bloom, Harold. "Dumbing Down American Readers." *Boston.com* 24 September 2003. 19 November 2003 <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2003/09/24/dumbing_down_american_readers.html>.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- . *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- . *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote." Trans. Anthony Bonner. *Ficciones*. New York: Grove, 1962. 45-55.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.
- . *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Brockman, John. *The Third Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- Burke, Seán. *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992.
- Chenetier, Marc. *Beyond Suspicion: New American Fiction Since 1960*. Trans. Elizabeth A. Houlding. 1989. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- DeLillo, Don. *Mao II*. 1991. New York: Viking-Penguin, 1992.
- dentonj. Online posting in response to "Are You a Book Snob?" 18 November 2003.

- pamie.com Message Boards. 24 January 2003 <<http://pamie.com>>.
- Dimock, Wai Chee and Priscilla Wald. "Preface: Literature and Science: Cultural Forms, Conceptual Exchanges." *American Literature* 74.4 (December 2002): 705-714.
- Eakin, Emily. "Jonathan Franzen's Big Book." *The New York Times Magazine*. 2 September 2001. 18-21.
- Eastman, Max. *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science*. New York: Scribner's, 1931.
- Edwards, Thomas R. "Oprah's Choice." *Raritan* 21.4 (Spring 2002): 75-86.
- Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. 2000. New York: Vintage-Random House, 2001.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Music of Poetry." *On Poetry and Poets*. New York: Farrar, 1943. 17-33.
- Epstein, Joseph. "Surfing the Novel." *Commentary* 113.1 (2002): 32-37.
- Farley, Kathryn. "Making Connections, Not Corrections." Online posting. 24 October 2001. Oprah.com Message Boards. 11 January 2003 <<http://boards.oprah.com/WebX?13@38.i8C7baIebcL.3@.ef08054/284>>.
- Fiske, Jonathan. "Popular Discrimination." *Modernity and Mass Culture*. Ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991. 103-116.
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "The Exhaustion of Literature: Novels, Computers, and the Threat of Obsolescence." *Contemporary Literature* 43.3 (Fall 2002): 518-559.
- Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, 2001.
- . "Meet Me in St. Louis." *How to Be Alone*. New York: Farrar, 2001. 258-274.

- . "Mr. Difficult." *The New Yorker* 79.28 (30 September 2002): 100-111.
- . "Why Bother?" *How to Be Alone*. New York: Farrar, 2001. 55-97.
- Gates, David. "American Gothic." *The New York Times* 9 September 2001. *The New York Times on the Web*. 25 January 2004 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.
- . "Will We Ever Get Over Irony?" *Newsweek* 1 January 2000: 90-93.
- Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap Between Science and the Humanities*. New York: Harmony, 2003.
- Graff, Gerald. *Literature Against Itself*. 1979. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Grimes, William. "The Ridiculous Vision of Mark Leyner." *The New York Times Magazine* 13 September 1992: 34-35, 51, 64-66.
- Grossman, Lev. "Long Live the King." *Time* 17 November 2003. 19 November 2003 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,543785,00.html>>.
- Handwerk, Gary J. *Irony and Ethics in Narrative*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- Harris Interactive. "Born to Be Wired: The Role of New Media for a Digital Generation." 26 September 2003 <http://us.i1.yimg.com/us.yimg.com/i/promo/btbw_2003/btbw_execsum.pdf>.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

- . "Turbulence in Literature and Science: Questions of Influence." *American Literature and Science*. Ed. Robert J. Scholnik. University Press of Kentucky, 1992. 229-250.
- Hurt, James. "Narrative Powers: Richard Powers as Storyteller." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18.3 (Fall 1998): 24-41.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. 1994. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1986.
- . "High/Low in an Expanded Field." *Modernism/modernity* 9.3 (September 2002): 363-374.
- "Interview with Jonathan Franzen." *Fresh Air* 15 October 2001. Transcript by Burrelle's Information Services.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 1991. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997.
- Jen. Online posting in response to "Are You a Book Snob?" 17 November 2003. pamie.com Message Boards. 24 January 2003 <<http://pamie.com>>.
- Kernan, Alvin. *The Death of Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- . *The Imaginary Library*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982.
- King, Stephen. "National Book Awards Acceptance Speech." *The National Book*

Foundation 21 December 2003

<http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_skin.html>.

---. "Foreword." *Night Shift*. New York: Signet, 1978. xi-xxii.

---. "Introduction: Myth, Belief, Faith, and Ripley's *Believe It or Not!*." *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. New York: Viking, 1993. 1-9.

---. "Straight Up Midnight: An Introductory Note." *Four Past Midnight*. New York: Viking: xi-xvi.

Kirkpatrick, David. D. "'Oprah' Gaffe by Franzen Draws Ire and Sales." *The New York Times* 20 October 2001, E-1. *The New York Times on the Web*. 15 January 2003
<<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

Klinkenborg, Verlyn. "The Not-Yet-Ready-for-Prime-Time Novelist." *The New York Times* 30 October 2001. A-16.

kobayashi. Online posting. 20 November 2003. metafilter.com. 24 January 2003
<<http://metafilter.com/mefi/29709>>.

Lauzen, Sarah E. "Notes on Metafiction: Every Essay Has a Title." *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Biographical Guide*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986. 93-116.

Leavis, F. R. *The Great Tradition*. 1948. London: Penguin, 1962.

LeClair, Tom. "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (Fall 1996): 12-37.

- Levine, George. "One Culture: Science and Literature." *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*. Ed. George Levine. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 3-32.
- Levitz, Stephanie. "Book Covers Lead to Cash and Carry." *Columbia News Service* 7 March 2003. 23 January 2004
<<http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/studentwork/cns/2003-03-07/15.asp>>.
- Leyner, Mark. *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*. 1990. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1993.
- Lindner, April. "Narrative as Necessary Evil in Richard Powers's *Operation Wandering Soul*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (Fall 1996): 68-79.
- Little, William G. "Figuring Out Mark Leyner: A Waste of Time." *Arizona Quarterly* 52.4 (1996): 135-163.
- Macdonald, Dwight. "Masscult and Midcult: II." *Partisan Review*. 27.4 (Fall 1960): 589-631.
- McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (Summer 1993): 127-150.
- McGowan, John. *Postmodernism and Its Critics*. London: Cornell UP, 1991.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1987.

- McIlwraith, Robert, et al. "Television Addiction: Theories and Data Behind the Ubiquitous Metaphor." *American Behavioral Scientist* 35.2 (November/December 1991): 104-121.
- McNally, T. M. "Fiction in Review: *The Corrections*." *Yale Review* 90.2 (April 2002): 161-170.
- Max, D. T. "The Oprah Effect." *The New York Times Magazine* 26 December 1999, 36. *The New York Times on the Web*. 15 January 2003 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.
- "Media Use Statistics." 26 September 2003 <<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/mediause.htm>>.
- Miller, Mark Crispin. "Big Brother Is You, Watching." *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988. 309-331.
- . "Cosby Knows Best." *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988. 69-78.
- . "Deride and Conquer." *Watching Television*. Ed. Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon, 1986. 183-228.
- Modleski, Tania. *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Muecke, D. C. *The Compass of Irony*. London: Methuen, 1969.
- Neilson, Jim. "An Interview with Richard Powers." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18.3 (Fall 1998): 13-23.
- . "Dirtying Our Hands: An Introduction to the Fiction of Richard Powers." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18.3 (Fall 1998): 7-12.

- Newman, Charles. *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1985.
- Pence, Jeffrey. "The End of Technology: Memory in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 63.3 (September 2002): 343-363.
- Poirier, Richard. "The Difficulties of Modernism and the Modernism of Difficulty." *Critical Essays on American Modernism*. Eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. New York: Macmillan, 1992. 104-114.
- Powers, Richard. *Galatea 2.2*. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1995.
- . *The Gold Bug Variations*. 1991. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1992.
- . *Operation Wandering Soul*. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1992.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Woman, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- . *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.
- Robinson, Sally. *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. 1989. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Rubin, Joan Shelley. *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.
- Scott, A. O. "'How to Be Alone': Jonathan Franzen's Vaulting Ambivalence." *The New York Times* 10 November 2002. *The New York Times on the Web*. 23 January 2004 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.

- Siegel, Lee. "Ordinary People." *Calendar Live* 14 October 2001. 23 January 2004.
<<http://events.calendarlive.com>>.
- Snow, C. P. "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution." *Public Affairs*. 1959.
New York: Scribners, 1971. 13-46.
- Strecker, Trey. "Ecologies of Knowledge: The Encyclopedic Narratives of Richard Powers and His Contemporaries." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18.3 (Fall 1998): 67-71.
- Strega. Online posting in response to "Are You a Book Snob?" 22 November 2003.
pamie.com Message Boards. 24 January 2003 <<http://pamie.com>>.
- Tabbi, Joseph. *Cognitive Fictions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- "Television Statistics." 26 September 2003 <http://www.klsrtvfox.com/body_tv.htm>.
- Wallace, David Foster. "David Foster Wallace Talks About Writing *Infinite Jest*." 28 July 2003 <<http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jesty.html>>.
- . "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Boston: Back Bay-Little, Brown and Company, 1997. 21-82.
- . *Infinite Jest*. 1995. Boston: Back Bay-Little, Brown, and Co., 1996.
- . "My Appearance." *Girl With Curious Hair*. New York: Norton, 1989. 173-201.
- . "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness." *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*. Boston: Back Bay-Little, Brown and Company, 1997. 213-255.

---. "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." *Girl With Curious Hair*. New York: Norton, 1989. 231-373.

Weich, David. "Jonathan Franzen Uncorrected." *Powells.com* 4 October 2001. 29 December 2002 <<http://www.powells.com/authors/franzen.html>>.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. 1973. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993.

Wilde, Alan. *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*. 1981. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.

Williams, Jeffrey. "The Last Generalist: An Interview with Richard Powers." *The Minnesota Review* n.s. 52-54 (2001). 27 September 2003 <<http://www.theminnesotareview.org/ns52/powers.htm>>

Young, John. "Toni Morrison. Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences." *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 181-204.

VITA

Michael Robert Little
 2512 Antietam
 College Station, TX 77845
 michael.little@teexmail.tamu.edu

EDUCATION

PhD - English	2004 Texas A&M University, College Station, TX
MA - English	1994 University of Houston, Houston, TX
BA - English	1992 University of Houston, Houston, TX

EMPLOYMENT

Publications Coordinator , Emergency Services Training Institute	2002-present
Technical Writer , Emergency Services Training Institute	2000-present

TEACHING

Graduate Teaching Assistant , Texas A&M University	1994-2000
Graduate Teaching Assistant , University of Houston	1993-1994

PRESENTATIONS

- “Assessing a Pilot Credit-by-Exam Program.” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, GA, March 24-27, 1999.
- “The Simpsons: Negotiating the Limits of Popular Social Satire.” Texas A&M Interdisciplinary Conference on Language and Literature, College Station, TX, September 18-19, 1998.
- Reply to “Re-Defining the Margins: Metanarrative Fiction on Paloma Diaz Mas” by Jerzy Jura. Midwest Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago, IL, November 6-7, 1997.
- “The Metafictional Detective: Ishmael Reed, Paul Auster, and the Limits of Metafiction.” North Eastern Modern Language Association Conference, Philadelphia, PA, April 4-5, 1997.
- “Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo Narratives: Ethnicity and the Flux of Narrative Conventions.” Texas A&M Interdisciplinary Conference on Language and Literature, College Station, TX, October 13, 1996.
- “Cultural Studies as the Exclusive Exploration of Power Struggles.” University of Houston *AEGIS* Conference, Houston, TX, March 12-13, 1993.