Straight from the Heartland:
New Sincerity and the American Midwest

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Abstract

As more and more critics now write about postmodernism in the past tense, the "New Sincerity" of a group of late twentieth-century American writers, led by David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers, has been championed as one of its successors. In response to these increasingly widespread views, this dissertation argues that much more can be learned about these three writers when we stop thinking of their work within this "end of postmodernism" discourse. Instead of attempting to make claims about its novelty, this thesis conducts a literary-historical inquiry into the New Sincerity, arguing that its roots extend across postmodernism and reach back to regionalism, in particular from the midwestern provinces that all three authors grew up in and that occupy a central place in their work. Though regionalism's subject matter, small-town America, is commonly believed to have died in the postwar period, it is this "death of the prairie town" and its symbolic afterlife that have opened up new literary possibilities outside the realm of conventional regionalism. The powerful feelings of loss and nostalgia that its death has engendered are precisely those of which Wallace, Franzen, Powers, and the New Sincerity in general make creative use. The thesis examines how they do so in a series of three extended chapters, each of which focuses on one author. The first chapter pays careful attention to Wallace's re-imagining of the Midwest over the course of his career and reveals how he constantly deviated from the literary trajectory he had outlined in his essay "E Unibus Pluram," a key text in the "end of postmodernism" discourse. The second chapter explores what role the Midwest plays in Franzen's authorial self-presentation and his contradictory attempts to balance "high-art" status with an anti-elitist image. The third and final chapter gets to the root of Powers's problems with flat characters by examining how he all too readily relies on the Midwest and its stereotypical associations with all-American goodness in his attempts to create endearing characters. Here, as well as in the other two chapters, it is the construction of a symbolic "heartland" that plays a central role in the creative process behind the author's New Sincerity writing.

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This dissertation follows the guidelines of the seventh edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

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Any movement, group, party, program, philosophy or theory that goes under a name with “New” in it is just begging for trouble.

— Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (37)

Introduction

New Sincerity and the American Midwest, or, How Postmodernism Bought the Farm

> "Is this heaven?"
> "No. It's Iowa."
>
> — *Field of Dreams* (28:12-28:18)

Every end has a start, and the summer of '75, it seems, marks the beginning of the end of postmodernism. That is, if we were to believe an unsigned "letter to a literary critic" published in the 11 August 1975 issue of *The New Yorker*. Its author claims to remember exactly where he was when he realized that postmodernism had "bought it," namely in his study with a cup of tequila and William Y's new book *One-Half* (19). After getting over the initial shock of his discovery, he appears to have quickly grasped its professional implications, judging by the letter's opening paragraph:

> I am spreading the news as rapidly as possible, so that all of our friends who are in the Post-Modernist "bag" can get out of it before their cars are repossessed and the insurance companies tear up their policies. Sad to see Post-Modernism go (and so quickly!). I was fond of it. As fond, almost, as I was of its grave and noble predecessor, Modernism. But we cannot dwell in the done-for. The death of a movement is a natural part of life, as was understood so well by the partisans of Naturalism, which is dead. That was a great category, Naturalism (was it not you, my friend, who did the first Swedish translation of Zola's *Le Roman expérimental*?). (Ibid.)

Clearly, this letter is actually a send-up of literary criticism or, more specifically, a parody of periodization—and a highly provocative one at that. After all, at the time of its publication Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* had barely been out for two years, and the first comprehensive studies of postmodernism had not even been written yet.[1] To top it all off, its anonymous author turned out to be none other than Donald

[1] The first edition of Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, for example, only appeared in 1977, and the original French edition of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* would not be published until 1979, after which it still took another five years for the English translation to become available.

Barthelme, whose playful and self-referential work is now generally considered to be exemplary of the very postmodernism whose death knell the letter had sounded.

Seeing that endings have possessed postmodernism from the outset, be it the death of the novel or the end of history, it should hardly come as a surprise that its own end can be traced all the way back to its beginning. But it is important to keep this in mind now that, at the turn of the millennium, literary criticism appears to have finally caught up with the above piece of "vintage *Barthelmismo*," to use Pynchon's memorable phrase (xv).[2] More and more critics now write about postmodernism in the past tense, as evidenced most clearly by John Frow's 1997 essay, "What Was Post-Modernism?," and Brian McHale's 2007 paper of the same title.[3] In tandem with this development, an entire industry has emerged around the search for postmodernism's successor, which some, like Jeffrey Nealon, have simply termed "post-postmodernism," while David James and Urmila Seshagiri, for instance, have opted for the more fanciful "metamodernism," and yet others prefer to drop the reference to modernism altogether in favor of, say, Raoul Eshelman's "performatism."[4] This, too, was anticipated by Barthelme, who concludes his letter by gently poking fun at this rush to trademark the next big thing. "So we have a difficulty," he writes:

> What shall we call the New Thing, which I haven't encountered yet but which is bound to be out there somewhere? Post-Post-Modernism sounds, to me, a little

[2] Barthelme appears to have been especially pleased with his parodic letter, seeing that he included it in his rare, 1978 book *Here in the Village*, re-used it for his "Writer at Work" speech at New York University in 1982, and finally incorporated it into his 1985 essay for *The Georgia Review*, "Not-Knowing," where the letter is turned into an exchange between Alphonse and Gaston, the letter's addressee (Herzinger 322).

[3] Contrary to Frow, McHale does emphasize that his titular question "could have been asked, and was asked, almost as soon as the term 'postmodernism' had emerged into general circulation in the mid-seventies" (McHale). And yet, he chooses to illustrate this point with an example from 2001, namely from Raymond Federman's novel *Aunt Rachel's Fur*. He cites an exchange between the novel's main character, who is a version of Federman himself, and an assistant editor named Gaston, who has just rejected the manuscript for Federman's 1958 debut novel on the grounds that it is too "postmodern," even though the term would not be in circulation for quite some time. What McHale seems not to have realized here is that this anachronistic set piece, in the spirit of what Federman has elsewhere called "playgiarism," playfully recycles Barthelme's abovementioned parody, complete with a cameo appearance of Gaston, the addressee of later versions of Barthelme's letter ("The Word-Being"). The relevant set piece can be found on pp. 245-246 of Federman's novel.

[4] For "post-postmodernism, see Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012); for "metamodernism," see James's and Seshagiri's "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution" in volume 129, issue 1 of *PMLA*; and for "performatism," see Eshelman's *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008). Of course, this is by no means an exhaustive list. For a more detailed overview of some of the neologisms that are currently in circulation, see p. 305n186 of Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016).

> lumpy. I've been toying with the Revolution of the Word II, or the New Revolution of the Word, but I'm afraid the Jolas estate may hold a copyright. It should have the word "new" in it somewhere. The New Newness? Or maybe the Post-New? It's a problem. I await your comments and suggestions. If we're going to slap a saddle on this rough beast, we've got to get moving. (19)

Fittingly, one of the names that have gained widespread currency over the last few years does, in fact, have the word "new" in it. This popular coinage is the "New Sincerity," and it is precisely its "newness" that is the main focus of this dissertation, which examines the work of a trio of late twentieth-century American writers who have, so to speak, come to be regarded as its poster boys: David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers.

But my intention in citing Barthelme's spoof is not just to lead up to the New Sincerity and introduce its core authors, whose work will be discussed at length in the three extended chapters that follow. I also mention it to indicate straightaway that I wish to maintain a critical distance from the current debate on the "end of postmodernism" to which many scholars of American literature have contributed in earnest. One such contribution, Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters*, is worth a brief mention here not because it has put in a particularly strong bid to name the New Thing, but rather because its final chapter includes some interesting reflections on precisely the high-stakes hunt for novelty that the critic himself participates in. Collapsing the present's cultural and economic logic into each other in a way that is highly reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's historical-materialist view of postmodernism as "the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism," Konstantinou argues that the tight academic labor market "forces critics to evaluate the marketability of their precarious work" and, as a result, they are increasingly made to "become literary trendspotters, workers who bank on the timely recognition and reification of literary patterns" (Jameson 46; Konstantinou 239). This development, he writes, manifests itself in the rapid expansion of the field of contemporary literary studies and in the drastic reduction of the delay between a novel's publication and "the rise of its peer-reviewed critical industry" (Ibid.). The current "end of postmodernism" discourse, I suggest, plays right into the hands of such

critics-turned-trendspotters. It creates the ideal conditions for what Jameson, paraphrasing Henri Lefebvre, has called "the increasing primacy of the 'neo,'" which can be observed in such postwar neologisms as the *nouveau roman*, the New Journalism, and of course the New Sincerity, to name just a few (18). By a curious paradox, this capitalization on the "end of postmodernism" is, in the Jamesonian sense, quintessentially postmodern.[5]

The basic premise behind this dissertation, therefore, is that it is of little interest to draw a sharp period boundary around the New Sincerity and to define it as postmodernism's successor. At this stage, much more can be learned from exchanging the trendspotter's forward look for the literary historian's retrospection. A literary-historical inquiry into the New Sincerity reveals that its roots extend across postmodernism and reach back to regionalist writing, in particular from the defiantly untrendy Midwest that Wallace, Franzen, and Powers grew up in and that occupies a central place in their work.[6] Though small-town America is widely believed to have been among the many casualties of what Nealon aptly calls "the never-ending end of everything" that the postwar period ushered in, its symbolic afterlife under postmodernism has opened up new creative possibilities outside the realm of conventional regionalism, which has come to be thought of as a "narrow, static, elegiac, eminently predictable genre" (Nealon ix; Foote, "The Cultural" 27). Much like the postwar "death of the novel" discourse has been shown by Mark Greif to have actually "inaugurate[d] the phase of the 'big, ambitious novel' in which we still exist," so too, I argue, has the "death of the prairie town" come to function as an enabling fiction for Wallace, Franzen, Powers and the New Sincerity in general (22). It has engendered

[5] Nowhere is this contradiction more immediately visible than in Nealon's *Post-Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, whose very title is only a minor variation on that of Jameson's 1991 monograph, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Indeed, in his book's acknowledgments, Nealon gives special thanks to Jameson, who apparently visited him at a turning point in his writing. He accounts for the many similarities to Jameson's book by arguing that the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism is not a radical break. Instead, post-postmodernism is "an intensification and mutation within postmodernism," an acceleration that is reflected in Nealon's substitution of "just-in-time" for "late" capitalism (ix).

[6] Throughout this dissertation, the Midwest will be defined, in accordance with the U.S. Bureau of Census, as North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio.

powerful feelings of loss and nostalgia and, as we shall have ample opportunity to observe in the course of this thesis, the work of this trio of American writers makes creative use of precisely these feelings of nostalgia, albeit to varying degrees of success. To explain how they are able to do so, this introduction will provide a brief overview of the evolution of the Midwest's popular image over the course of the twentieth century, but not before we have first had a chance to take a closer look at the concept of the New Sincerity, the relevant details of its brief history and cultural context.[7]

The New Sincerity

The best way to introduce two crucial aspects of the New Sincerity is to begin with a public talk by the cartoonist and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman. As part of his appearance at the International Comic Art Festival and Small Press Expo in 2002, Spiegelman gave a slide presentation of a selection of his graphic work, and one of the pieces he presented was an unused cover illustration that he had planned for the 2001 Thanksgiving issue of *The New Yorker*. He explained that the image was supposed to be a "parody of the Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving picture," by which he meant the iconic painting "Freedom from Want" that originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* of 6 March 1943 (253). The illustration, Spiegelman continued, "was an interesting example of something I've now started calling 'neo-sincerity'" (Ibid.). And with that, we get our first glimpse of the creative impulse behind the New Sincerity, which typically leads to a nostalgic reworking or recovery of a cartoonishly straight, small-town America populated with "good people." It is this creative impulse, which has so far not

[7] Although the term New Sincerity seems to have originated in the alternative rock scene in Austin, Texas, in the mid-'80s, this background information bears little relevance to the general argument developed in this thesis, save, perhaps, for the basic idea that this musical New Sincerity was "deeply rooted in the traditional importance placed on sincerity in *country* music" (Shank 139; italics added). For this reason, I have chosen not to include the concept's musical context. Readers who wish to know more about this should consult Barry Shank's *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (1994).

been properly conceptualized or articulated, that I wish to explore in greater detail. But let us first consider the rest of Spiegelman's comment, in which he suggested that "neo-sincerity"

> is using the arsenal of ironic techniques perfected by *Mad*, which have now become the same techniques that are used to sell cigarettes and soap, to say something worth saying, rather than just say "everything sucks," which is what it's degenerated into. (Ibid.)

With this brief remark, Spiegelman identified a second key feature of the New Sincerity, namely an ambivalence toward irony. This aspect has been much more widely discussed, not least by Spiegelman himself, who had already drawn attention to it in an interview with Calvin Reid for the 16 October 2000 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, where he complained that "'an entire generation has become so ironic that it's almost catatonic'" (228).

As a cartoonist, Spiegelman explained his generalizations about irony by way of a comic book that had a profound influence on him. He singled out *Mad*, an American satirical magazine whose fictitious cover boy, the gap-toothed Alfred E. Neuman, stands in stark contrast to the straitlaced youngsters pictured by Rockwell. Similar or, perhaps, even broader generalizations about irony's deleterious effects on Generation X have been made by literary scholars and critics who, using John Barth as their preferred punching bag, have blamed irony's supposed degeneration on its "emerge[nce] as postmodernism's dominant mode" (Kelly, "Dialectic"). James Wood, for example, writes that a "certain kind of postmodern novelist (like John Barth, say)" has practically turned his back on the world by using self-reflexive, ironic techniques to repeatedly point out its artificiality (*How* 86).[8] Such criticism of irony has cleared the

[8] Here it is worth pointing out that, again, there is nothing so "new" about these criticisms as to suggest a period break that supposedly reflects a growing dissatisfaction with postmodernism. Once more, it is Barthelme who puts things in perspective for us, though this time it is by way of his 1982 "Writer at Work" speech. In his report on Barthelme's talk, Herbert Mitgang of *The New York Times* gives the following verbatim account of Barthelme's summary of the objections made against postmodernism in the early '80s: "'The criticisms run roughly as follows: that this kind of writing has turned its back on the world, is in some sense not about the world but about its own processes, that it is masturbatory, certainly chilly, that it excludes readers by design, speaks only to the already tenured, or that it does not speak at all, but instead, like Frost's Secret, sits in the center of a ring and Knows'" (qtd. in Mitgang C15). These exact comments would later be included in "Not-Knowing."

way for the trendspotters' one-word summary and casual dismissal of an entire chapter in American literary history that covers "1960-1990," one that Amy Hungerford has called "the period formerly known as contemporary" (Steiner 425; Hungerford 410). But as Konstantinou's timely intervention in this debate about irony and American literature has shown, irony has never been the cultural dominant. "At best," Konstantinou argues, "we might say that within certain social and cultural worlds, at particular historical moments, irony has achieved a prestigious status" (14). And even when irony did enjoy great prestige in the early '70s, a self-reflexive work of literature produced back then (Barth's *Chimera*, say) was still worldly, still "peopled with characters, laden with moral propositions, thick with affect, and obsessed with history" (Ibid. 37).

Nevertheless, the debate about the New Sincerity has so far centered on irony and its discontents. One essay, in particular, has been highly influential in this regard. So much so that, more than twenty years after its publication, the editors of the recent essay collection *Postmodern/Postwar—and After*, for instance, still mention its "programmatic power" in the very first sentence of their book (Gladstone and Worden 1). The piece in question is David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction"; and although I discuss it as a turning point in Wallace's career in the first chapter of this dissertation, I have intentionally avoided taking it as my example in this introduction precisely because it has such a tight grip on the debate. In its dominance, however, Wallace's essay is indicative of how central a figure the author has been to the debate about the New Sincerity. Nowhere is this more evident than in Adam Kelly's first and most widely read essay on the subject, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." Kelly's basic argument is that the New Sincerity entails a "reconfiguration of the writer-reader relationship" (146). Sincerity, in this reconfigured relationship, is no longer dependent on the writer's authenticity or truthfulness to himself, but it can also be achieved as part of an other-directed performance in which the author anticipates what will sound true to the reader. Yet, because there is great potential for manipulation here, such a performance is

ultimately based on a kind of blind faith. The author, Kelly writes, will "never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either" (140).

Though couched in the language of Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Kelly's argument closely follows Wallace's own commentary in his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, to whom Wallace explained that "[t]here's some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-up-on-me-relationship between the reader and writer, and both have to sustain it" (25). Similarly, Kelly's expanded version of his essay, which appeared in the "Peer Reviewed" web publication of the "Post45" collective under the title "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," never quite breaks away from Wallace's sphere of influence. And in his chapter on Benjamin Kunkel for the 2013 essay collection, *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction*, Kelly still returns to "E Unibus Pluram" and uses its generalizations about "irony, self-consciousness and alienation" as the shaky foundation for a revision of the descriptive poetics that Brian McHale, borrowing the concept of "the dominant" from Roman Jakobson, developed in his 1987 monograph *Postmodernist Fiction* ("From Syndrome" 54).[9] "If," Kelly concludes, "modernism is characterized by an epistemological dominant and postmodernism by an ontological dominant (see McHale 1987), then the equivalent dominant in New Sincerity writing is the ethical" (Ibid. 65). Here we do well to pause for a moment and ask: how could Kelly possibly think a novel like Kunkel's *Indecision*, which tells the story of a preppy twenty-something's quarter-life crisis, is somehow more predominantly ethical than such postwar classics as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, all of which ask profoundly ethical questions about World War II and the strategic bombing of civilian populations?[10] Kelly's hasty conclusions, I suggest, reveal just how much

[9] Citing Jakobson's 1935 lecture on "The Dominant," McHale takes this concept to mean "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (Jakobson qtd. in McHale 6).

[10] In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, moreover, the disturbing effects of the narrator's seemingly blasé or ironic response to death and destruction with the recurring phrase, "So it goes," are a great example of how irony and cynicism can actually serve to deepen a work's concern with ethical issues (Vonnegut 1, 5, 7, 16, 17, etc.).

Wallace's views on irony and his Bloomian misprision of the work of his immediate precursors have affected the debate about the New Sincerity.

The question, then, is how to make an effective intervention in this debate. How to open interpretive avenues that have so far remained closed, in large part because of critics' adherence to Wallace's views? The short answer is by exploring those largely unarticulated strategies behind the New Sincerity that I began this section with, which is to say, those that involve a nostalgic reworking or recovery of a small-town America populated with "good people." We can begin to conceptualize these strategies with the help of a footnote to Kelly's first essay, a footnote in which he acknowledges his source for the phrase "New Sincerity." It reads as follows:

> I should note here that the term "New Sincerity" has been employed before, by Jim Collins in a 1993 article on film theory. However, Collins uses the phrase to characterize early-nineties films, such as *Dances with Wolves* and *Field of Dreams*, which reject a postmodernist awareness of mediation in favor of the direct revision of American myths of origin. In Trilling's terms, this would be better described as a rejection of irony in favor of authenticity rather than sincerity, and indeed there is little to link this genre of film to the kind of new sincerity I identify with the work of Wallace and his contemporaries. ("David" 136fn3)

With this brief aside, Kelly creates the impression that, apart from the actual term, "there is little to link" the New Sincerity that Collins examines to the writing of Wallace and his peers (Ibid.). Surprisingly, no scholars whose work is in conversation with Kelly's—Konstantinou, Iain Williams, Allard den Dulk, to name three of them—have returned to his source material to see for themselves whether there is indeed no discernable connection.[11] As a result, Kelly has practically acquired sole ownership of the term "New Sincerity," and Collins's essay has rapidly faded from view.

But as it turns out, Collins's piece contains highly relevant observations that can help us gain a much broader and, at the same time, more nuanced understanding of the subject matter. Titled "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New

[11] Iain Williams responds to Kelly's scholarship in his article for the third issue of volume 56 of *Critique*, titled "(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's 'Octet." And Allard den Dulk engages with Kelly's work in chapter 6 of his book, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers, and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (2015).

Sincerity," the essay is part of an edited collection, *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, which was published in the same year "E Unibus Pluram" originally appeared in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*—a coincidence that can be neatly pictured as a fork in the road of the New Sincerity debate. As indicated in its title, Collins's piece is a discussion of genre film in the early '90s, and as such it identifies two generic forms: "eclectic irony" and "New Sincerity." The first one is described by Collins as a genre that "is founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtapositions of elements that very obviously don't belong together," and it is exemplified by the 1990 sci-fi Western mash-up, *Back to the Future III* (242). Outside the realm of Hollywood blockbusters, *Mad* magazine or *Slaughterhouse-Five* could well be thought of as early examples of this genre of "ironic hybridization" (243). The second form, New Sincerity, is defined by Collins as a genre that it is "obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony [… and] rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity" (242-243). Although we will see that the New Sincerity never rejects irony quite as strongly as Collins suggests here, his definition already shows a close affinity with that recovery of a "good people" America that was the impulse behind Spiegelman's "neo-sincere" reworking of the Rockwell picture.

But before I elaborate on this by means of Collins's examples, I should emphasize that, according to Collins, these "two divergent types of genre film coexist in current popular culture" (242). This idea of coexisting genres is a useful alternative to the linear narrative that has been imposed on American culture by Kelly and other trendspotters, who seem to think that an ironic model of literature has now been wholly superseded by a sincere one, just as postmodernism has now been allegedly swept aside by its successor. In fact, Collins has something interesting to say about this last point, too. In his conclusion he stresses that the two generic forms he has identified

> do not mark the beginning of post-postmodernism or late postmodernism, especially since the latter might turn out to be as much of a misnomer as Late Capitalism. One could just as easily argue that what we have seen of postmodernism thus far is really a first phase, perhaps Early Postmodernism, the first tentative attempts at envisioning the impact of new technologies of

> mass communication and information processing on the structure of narrative. (262)

Taking my cue from these concluding remarks, I also consider the New Sincerity to be a genre that developed under postmodernism alongside the more widely discussed genre of "eclectic irony" that is often simply equated with postmodernism. I suggest that the emergence of the New Sincerity does not mean that postmodernism died; rather, it means that, to literalize the old euphemism, postmodernism "bought the farm."

This rural element is not yet there in the first example that Collins discusses, namely Steven Spielberg's 1991 modern-day retelling of the Peter Pan fairytale, *Hook*. But what the movie's account of the Banning family's departure to Neverland does show—much like the occasional allusions to the Land of Oz that we will identify in the work of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers—is the escapist fantasy that is at the heart of the New Sincerity and its nostalgic pursuit of lost purity. By portraying Neverland as a place of respite from the frenetic life in a techno-corporate American metropolis, in this case San Francisco, *Hook* neatly illustrates how the New Sincerity "purposely evad[es] the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity" (Collins 257). The second and more subtle of Collins's examples is the 1990 epic Western *Dances with Wolves*, which exchanges *Hook*'s intertextuality for an American "Ur-textual[ity]" (Ibid. 259). Here the Neverland fantasy is projected onto the more realistic setting of the western frontier, though it should, of course, be noted that this frontier setting is no less imaginary. Based on Michael Blake's 1988 novel of the same title, the story of *Dances with Wolves* takes place in the American West in the year 1864, or as Collins aptly puts it, "before the Western 'got to it'" (257). Its main protagonist, Union Army lieutenant John Dunbar, is sent to the remote outpost of Fort Sedgewick, where he begins to keep an ethnographic record of his encounters with the region's Lakota Indians. One such encounter serves as the focal point for Collins's analysis of the film, namely the so-called "harmony scene" in which Dunbar watches how the Lakota ride off into the sunset and appear at one with their environment. "'It seems every day ends with a miracle here,'" he recounts in his voice-over narrative

(2:12:19-2:12:22). "'I'd never known a people so eager to laugh, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other, and the only word that came to mind was "harmony"'" (2:12:38-2:12:47). With this romanticization of a "simple" life, a life of the soil, we are squarely in pastoral territory, and pastoral idealization is precisely the impulse behind the New Sincerity, even though its nostalgic reworking of rural life is typically more modern and based not on the western frontier but on the midwestern small town.

Collins's third and final example demonstrates this point as well as the larger one about the New Sincerity's emergence as a result of postmodernism's having "bought the farm." The film in question is the 1989 domestic drama *Field of Dreams*, an adaptation of W. P. Kinsella's 1982 novel *Shoeless Joe*. It tells the story of Ray and Annie Kinsella, a couple who met at the countercultural high point of the '60s while studying English literature at the very center of student activism, UC Berkeley, whose liberal campus is, of course, vividly described by Oedipa Maas in Pynchon's postmodern classic *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) as "teeming with corduroy, denim, bare legs, blonde hair, hornrims, […] long paper petitions dangling to earth, […] students in nose-to-nose dialogue" (71). The decision of the Kinsellas, these "children of the revolution," to leave that subversive life behind and buy a farm in Iowa is, therefore, of symbolic importance. It is communicated to the viewer in the film's opening shot of sepia-tinted family pictures and black-and-white footage that immediately evokes the sense of nostalgia that the rest of the film indulges in from the moment the plot is set in motion by a mysterious voice in the cornfields, which tells Ray: "'If you build it, he will come'" (04:48-04:51). Ray takes this to mean that, if he turns part of his cornfield into a baseball diamond, his late father's old baseball hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson, will come to play. After the construction of this "field of dreams" is complete, Shoeless Joe does indeed appear, and before he leaves again he asks Ray, "'Is this heaven?,'" to which Ray replies, "'No. It's Iowa'" (28:12-28:18). This exchange, which paints Iowa as a kind of heavenly dreamscape, serves as the epigraph to this introduction because it is a crucial example of how the Midwest has become a symbolic geography over the course of the twentieth century, as we shall see in the next section. It is in this shape of

an “imagined heartland” that the region plays a central role in the New Sincerity writing of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers.

We can trace the outlines of this symbolic Midwest by way of a monologue that is delivered near the end of *Field of Dreams*—a monologue that Collins also brings up in his essay. The speaker is Terence Mann, a retired African-American writer of protest novels whom Ray has invited over from Boston in the hope that his Iowan “field of dreams,” which has now become the hang-out for a whole group of undead major-league stars, will offer some spiritual healing. Terence makes the following prediction about the field:

> “Ray, people will come, Ray. They’ll come to Iowa for reasons they can’t even fathom. They’ll turn up your driveway not knowing for sure why they’re doing it. They’ll arrive at your door, as innocent as children, longing for the past. Of course, we won’t mind if you look around, you’ll say, it’s only twenty dollars per person. They’ll pass over the money without even thinking about it, for it is money they have and peace they lack. […] And they’ll walk up to the bleachers and sit in shirt-sleeves on a perfect afternoon. They’ll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the baselines where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. And they’ll watch the game, and it’ll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they’ll have to brush them away from their faces.” (1:24:01-1:25:11)

Judging from this speech, it is not hard to see why the film drew scorn and derision from one reviewer for *TIME*, who called it a “male weepie at its wussiest” (Corliss 78).

Then again, with its mention of a twenty-dollar entry fee, the monologue itself already provides a brief, ironic example of how the Midwest is marketed as such a space of sentimentality, as the nation’s collective storehouse of good old-fashioned virtues. It neatly captures the almost mythical shape that the Midwest has assumed in the American imagination, while also leaving us with a slight sense of unease about the capitalization on this popular image. The novel’s original version of this speech, with its nod to “Christmas carols,” “apple-cheeked children,” and the “coffee-and-oil smell of a general store,” is, if possible, even more of a caricature of small-town America (Kinsella 233-234). In the book, however, the monologue is delivered by a fictionalized version of the reclusive author J. D. Salinger who, for legal reasons, had to be substituted with the

wholly made-up character of Terence Mann in the film adaptation. This substitution with what can only be described as the film's token minority inadvertently draws attention to another aspect of the "imagined heartland" setting, which is its cartoonishly straight, white, and predominantly male image.[12] It is this straight heartland that typically serves as the backdrop for Wallace's, Franzen's, and Powers's New Sincerity writing, too.

The idea behind this highly selective representation of the Midwest emerges most clearly from the final scene in *Field of Dreams*, which Collins does not mention in his analysis of the film. The scene in question plays out when it has dawned on Ray that his real purpose for the "field of dreams" is to bring back his deceased father for one more game of catch. Just as Shoeless Joe appeared as a kind of surrogate-father at the beginning of the film, so too does Ray's actual father, John Kinsella, now make a magical appearance on the field. After Ray has introduced John to his wife Annie and his daughter Karin, the two of them have a brief talk that is obviously meant to echo the earlier exchange between Ray and Shoeless Joe. John asks Ray:

> "Is this heaven?"
> "It's Iowa."
> "Iowa?"
> "Yeah."
> "Could've sworn it was heaven."
> "Is there a heaven?"
> "Oh yeah. It's the place dreams come true." (1:38:38-1:39:10)

After John speaks these last words, Ray slowly turns away from the nostalgic dreamscape of the baseball field, on which the past has magically been allowed to intrude into the present, and he looks at his wife and daughter on the front porch of his white frame house with a white picket fence, the very archetypes of all-American, middle-class domesticity and contentment. He concludes: "'Maybe this is heaven'" (1:39:31-1:39:32). It is this moment, I suggest, that perfectly illustrates one of the popular forms in which the Midwest captured the collective imagination of late twentieth-century America—one that the New Sincerity has inherited and with which it

[12] This also did not escape the attention of the *TIME* reviewer, Richard Corliss, who pointed out that Mann is "a crusty black author […] who doesn't mind that all the old major-league players were white" (78).

maintains an ambivalent relation. How exactly the Midwest came to assume this shape will be the main question for the second half of this introduction.

"The Death of the Prairie Town" and Its Afterlife

Let me rebegin, then, with another end.

This time, it was *Coronet* that had the scoop, not *The New Yorker*. In its July 1941 issue, the magazine published an obituary titled "The Death of Arrowsmith," of which the following citation is an excerpt:

> Sinclair Lewis, who died peacefully in his sleep yesterday afternoon, at his small country place in North-Western Connecticut, has, at the age of eighty-six, been rather generally forgotten. [… H]e seems to have left no literary descendants. Unlike his celebrated contemporaries, Theodore Dreiser (1871-1952) and Colonel Ernest Hemingway, who was so dramatically killed while leading his mixed Filipino and Chinese troops in the storming of Tokyo in 1949, Mr. Lewis seems to have affected but little the work of younger writers of fiction. Whether this is a basic criticism of his pretensions to power and originality, or whether, like another contemporary, Miss Willa Cather, he was an inevitably lone and insulated figure, we have not as yet the perspective to see. (Lewis 115-116)

Of course, a 1941 notice that mentions Dreiser's date of death as 1952 and Hemingway's as 1949 should immediately be regarded with suspicion, and all the more so, given that Sinclair Lewis lived to read this very obituary.[13] The report of his death, to paraphrase Mark Twain's famous quip, had been grossly exaggerated.[14] It turns out, though, that the one who had exaggerated it was Lewis himself, presumably to draw attention to the sad truth that, almost as soon as he had made history as the first

[13] Perhaps it is good to briefly state the facts here: Dreiser died on 28 December 1945, Hemingway on 2 July 1961, and Lewis lived from 7 February 1885 to 10 January 1951, which means he never reached the age of 86 that was mentioned in the *Coronet* piece.

[14] According to his biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's reply to a rumor that he had fallen gravely ill while on a speaking tour in London in May 1897 was as follows: "'the report of my death has been grossly exaggerated'" (qtd. in Paine chap. 197). Another version of this well-known witticism has the phrase "grossly exaggerated" substituted with "greatly exaggerated." Both are incorrect, though, and Twain's actual comment is much less witty. His reply to Frank Marshall White of the *New York Journal*, published in its 2 June 1897 issue, was: "'The report of my death was an exaggeration'" (qtd. in White 1).

American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1930, his work had begun to slide into obscurity, just as his great subject matter, the prairie town, had begun its descent into the afterlife with the start of the Great Depression.

How different things seemed back in 1920, when the small town apparently still had life in it—enough, at least, to provide Lewis with the material for a bestselling novel that launched his career. Delicately poised between romanticism and satirical realism, *Main Street* captured the spirit of an archetypal midwestern town that was undoubtedly inspired by Lewis's hometown of Sauk Centre, Minnesota. With 180,000 copies sold in its first six months and an estimated two million by the end of 1922, the novel was a publishing sensation as well as a critical success that won Lewis early praise from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and H. L. Mencken, who affectionately called him the "red-haired tornado from the Minnesota wilds" (Hutchisson 9; Bode 166). What made the book such a literary phenomenon was its attention to the sociological undercurrents of life in a prairie town, whose Main Street, according to Lewis, should be seen as "the continuation of Main Streets everywhere" (8). It exposed the divisions that had been covered up by regional "boosting," a practice that would later be documented in the 1929 sociological case study *Middletown* as "the muzzling of self-criticism by hurling the term 'knocker' at the head of a critic and the drowning of incipient social problems under a public mood of everything being 'fine and dandy'" (Lynd and Lynd 222).[15] Already in its opening pages, *Main Street* put the record straight with a bold announcement that reflected readers' growing disillusionment with small-town life: "The days of pioneering, of lasses in sunbonnets, and bears killed with axes in piney clearings, are deader now than Camelot; and a rebellious girl is the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest" (9).

[15] Ironically, a classic example of this practice of "boosting" involves *Main Street* itself. Soon after Lewis's novel had been published, the Minnesotan village of Alexandria made its public library ban the book outright in the mistaken belief that its own community had been the model for the novel's Gopher Prairie, thereby proving that Lewis's criticism had clearly hit the mark (Dregni 61). The novelist would return to the subject of "boosting" in his 1922 follow-up *Babbitt*, whose main protagonist George F. Babbitt is the very embodiment of this practice. The caricature was so successful that the word Babbitt entered the English language as a reference to "a materialistic, complacent businessman who conforms unthinkingly to the views and standards of his social set" ("Babbit, n.2.").

It is this rebellious spirit, according to Carl van Doren, that characterizes a much broader "revolt from the village which brought a new tone into American fiction" as Lewis's fellow midwesterners—among whom were Edgar Lee Masters, Anderson, and Fitzgerald—also turned against that culturally stifling, middling, and complacent Midwest for which "Main Street" soon became shorthand (295).[16] In fact, Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* draws our attention to one of the larger implications of this revolt. In its opening chapter, there is a sentence that Wallace underlined in his personal copy of the novel, which is now part of the Harry Ransom Center's special collections. In that sentence, Nick Carraway recounts how, after World War I, his attitude toward his native heartland changed as follows: "Instead of being the warm centre of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so I decided to go East" (Fitzgerald 7). And so, we might add, did many other disaffected young people. Indeed, the "roaring twenties" was a decade in which, for the first time, more Americans now lived in urban centers than in rural villages, and that shift toward urbanization is reflected in the arts of the time.[17] The '20s gave rise, for instance, to city symphony films like Charles Sheeler's and Paul Strand's *Manhatta* (1921), and the year of *Gatsby* also saw the publication of John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, a novel that Sinclair Lewis, of all people, championed as the likely "foundation of a whole new school of novel-writing" ("Manhattan" 65). The country, in other words, was forced to concede more and more ground to the city.

But not only that, it also saw its local territory encroached on by urban ways of life. This development appears to have been on Willa Cather's mind when she complained in her essay for the 5 September 1923 issue of *The Nation* that the

> generation that subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie is passing […]. The generation now in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to

[16] Edgar Lee Masters came to be in the vanguard of the revolt with the publication of his 1915 collection of free-form poems, *Spoon River Anthology*, and Sherwood Anderson joined the revolt with his 1919 short-story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio*. The trail was cleared, however, by Theodore Dreiser and his 1900 work of naturalist fiction, *Sister Carrie*. That "great first novel," as Lewis put it in his Nobel Lecture, "came to housebound and airless America like a great free Western wind" ("The American").

[17] The United States Census Bureau reports that, at the time of its 1 January 1920 census, 51.2 percent of the population lived in urban centers. Ten years later, the Bureau's 1 April 1930 census reported that this percentage had increased to 56.1 (U.S. Census Bureau 20).

> live and die in an automobile, scudding past those acres where the old men used to follow the long corn-rows up and down. They want to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure. ("Nebraska" 238)

Cather's grievances, shared by her regionalist contemporaries, are based intellectually on what Robert Dorman, in his study *Revolt of the Provinces* (1993), has called a "catastrophist" view of American history, which states that "as folk-regional societies differentiate into more complex stages of modernization [… they] are threatened with dissolution" (84-85). And yet, it is from this very danger that regionalism derived its main impetus: as locals began to fear that their customs were under serious threat from the forces of modern development, "self-conscious efforts to conserve them emerge[d], either as a political strain of sectionalism or as the art of regionalism" (Ibid.). Paradoxically, regionalism was enlivened by the very idea that the region was on life support. This is the main reason why, as Richard Brodhead points out, the genre thrived in the postbellum years against a backdrop of nationwide modernization, brought about by the industrial revolution, and national standardization that followed the Civil War, which was essentially a "contest over the form the local [in particular the South] would be allowed to take in an emerging United States" (*Cultures* 121; "The American" 48). In the case of midwestern regionalism, this "catastrophist" view also explains how the genre was so successful at a time when its main subject, the prairie town, was in its death throes.

The prairie town's fate was ultimately sealed with the start of the Great Depression, and it is at this point that the "midwestern ascendancy," to use Ronald Weber's phrase, "was at its end as a major regional movement within American writing" (3).[18] I argue, however, that the end of the conventional midwestern novel of local manners also marked the beginning of its postwar afterlife, which, in turn, laid the

[18] Weber notes that southern regionalism, on the other hand, had just "begun its brilliant period" with the appearance of William Faulkner's 1929 novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (3). What he neglects to mention, though, is that Faulkner's work was largely overlooked until it rose to canonical status in the postwar period, starting with Faulkner's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1949, after which several National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes followed. One reason why the southern regionalist tradition—maintained, most notably, by Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty—has outlived the midwestern one is that its practitioners could continue to draw from the South's own distinct history and identity.

foundation for the New Sincerity. In keeping with the metaphorical "death" of the prairie town, we might say that the Dust Bowl years were purgatory, after which the prairie town eventually reached the great beyond in 1955. In that specific year, just when William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*—"an ur-text of postwar fiction"—dramatized a growing confusion between reality and its imitation, Walt Disney's "imagineers" completed their postmodern land of make-believe in the shape of the first Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California (Franzen, "Mr. Difficult" 246). On 17 July 1955, the park was officially unveiled during a special, televised preview-event, for which Walt Disney gave a personal dedication speech. His venue of choice was neither the park's futuristic Tomorrowland, with its perfect setup for a platitudinous talk about a "better tomorrow," nor the adventurous Wild West of Frontierland, with its wealth of possibilities to wax patriotic about America's pioneer past. Instead, Disney chose the unspectacular and comparatively uneventful Main Street, U.S.A., the Disneyfied reincarnation of the midwestern small town.

Complete with horse-drawn streetcars, a downscaled but fully functional railroad station, and rows of brightly colored turn-of-the-century houses built to five-eighths real size, Main Street, U.S.A. is Disney's nostalgic reworking of the social and commercial heart of Marceline, Missouri, the prairie town where he spent some of the happiest years of his childhood (Watts 3). In a special "Walt Disney Issue" of *Wisdom* magazine published in 1959, Disney explained the creative impulse behind Main Street, U.S.A. as follows:

> Many of us fondly remember our "small home town" and its friendly way of life at the turn of the century. To me, this era represents an important part of our heritage, and thus we have endeavored to recapture those years on Main Street, U.S.A. at Disneyland. Here is the America of 1890-1910, at the crossroads of an era, where the gas lamp is gradually being replaced by the electric lamp, the plodding, horse-drawn streetcar is giving way to the chugging "horseless carriage." America was in transition: the discoveries of the late 19th century were beginning to affect our way of life. Main Street represents the typical small town in the early 1900s—the heartline of America. (qtd. in Watts 43)

Here we see that fond memories played a major part in Disney's airbrushed reconstruction of a prairie town, which explains why it already comes so close to the New Sincerity's recovery of a cartoonishly straight, small-town America and why it bears little resemblance to that Main Street whose divisions and social problems Lewis exposed in his 1920 novel.

Indeed, the contrast between these two versions of Main Street demonstrates how conventional midwestern regionalism and its postwar counterpart emerged from different yet adjacent literary-social worlds, for which Brodhead has coined the useful phrase "cultures of letters" (*Cultures* 5). Lewis's *Main Street*, first of all, was published in the dying days of a culture of letters in which writers appealed to and participated in a "tourist economy" that was primarily run by what Nancy Glazener has referred to as "the *Atlantic* group," consisting of such prestigious east-coast periodicals as *The Century*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *Scribner's*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, which in the 1870s was famously presided over by the Dean of American Letters, William Dean Howells (Ibid. 146; Glazener 229). Published alongside, say, Henry James's literary dispatches from his grand tour of Europe, regionalist writing aimed to capture the reader's imagination by reporting on local communities from inside America instead. Documenting the nation's own provinces in this way, such regionalist writing does not depict "a familiar, timeless, and shared agrarian past," as Stephanie Foote rightly observes, but rather, it "*defamiliarizes* narratives about the origins of national identity in the United States" (*Regional* 6). Its principal aim, as Brodhead puts it, "is to produce a world marked as foreign," a world to which the regionalist has privileged access and whose foreignness can be conveyed to the reader as part of a career-funding literary enterprise ("The American" 55). Curiously, this meant that African Americans and women writers found themselves at a considerable advantage in this tourist economy precisely because of their disadvantaged, peripheral social status, which they could now convert into valuable literary capital. Minority and women local-colorist, to borrow Ann Douglas Wood's rather colorful wording, "were sucking artistic life from the nearby moribund body of the provincial society about which they wrote" (28).

Wood takes the New England regionalist Sarah Orne Jewett as an example, but I will explain my comments about conventional regionalism by briefly referring to one of Jewett's literary heirs, Willa Cather, and her 1918 novel *My Ántonia*. As the possessive pronoun in the book's title already suggests, the life story of Ántonia Shimerda, the oldest daughter of a Bohemian immigrant family who have made their new home in Black Hawk, Nebraska, is focalized entirely through the novel's other main character, Jim Burden. In fact, in her original introduction Cather pretends that "the following narrative is Jim's manuscript," his memoir of Ántonia, "substantially as he brought it to me" (244). Orphaned at age 10, Jim moved from Virginia to his grandparents' farm in Black Hawk, where he developed a close friendship with Ántonia, until he moved away to finish his studies at Harvard University and to pursue a legal career in New York. Given his bi-regionalism, so to speak, Jim is in an ideal position to help an east-coast readership understand that different world of the midwestern Great Plains, whose foreignness Cather underlines when she writes in her introduction that "*no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it*" (1). The region actually appears doubly foreign to many readers because it is presented as an admixture of rich European heritages, as a world of prairie land cultivated by Bohemian farmers and small towns whose households are run by Scandinavian "hired girls." Through Jim's familiarity with the pain and hardships of prairie life, which drive Ántonia's father to suicide, and his awareness of the vulnerability of young immigrant "hired girls" to sexual abuse, scandal, and betrayal, Cather is able to make this foreign region come alive to readers unfamiliar with both its charms and perils. In doing so, she converts her own peripheral, Nebraskan background into valuable literary capital.

I suggest that the "death of the prairie town" and the beginning of its postwar afterlife mark a crucial break with this culture of letters in which the Midwest's foreignness was the basis for its literary representation. The culture of letters that emerged in the postwar era is one in which the prairie town is (re)imagined as the nation's cultural common ground, an all-American locale; and the New Sincerity, as we shall see, both draws on this (re)imagined Midwest and critically engages with it

alongside its prewar counterpart. The small town's change in cultural meaning is clearly evident from the addition of the acronym "U.S.A." to Disneyland's Main Street. While there is no denying that Main Street, U.S.A. participates in a tourist economy, too, it does so not by defamiliarizing the prairie town, but rather by capitalizing on a growing postwar tendency to view it through the rose-tinted lens of "a familiar, timeless, and shared agrarian past," thereby turning the basic premise of conventional regionalism on its head (Foote, *Regional* 6). In its Disneyfied afterlife, the midwestern small town has assumed the shape of America's collective home at the center of an anachronistic, idealized heartland in which the nation's virtues, core values, and moral fiber are safely preserved in the face of sweeping technological and socio-cultural changes. Of course, this new cultural meaning did not come out of nowhere. It was already hinted at in Lewis's introduction of Gopher Prairie's Main Street with the phrase, "[t]his is America," and his description of it as an archetype of Main Streets everywhere (8). But the prairie town's synecdochic qualities remained latent until they were brought to the fore when the rate of urbanization increased again during the postwar economic boom, that is, when for many rural migrants the lived realities of small-town life receded into the distance, making way for nostalgic recollection. Divorced from a reality of ethnic divisions and the socio-economic problems that had caused its death, the prairie town gradually turned into "an abstract, deracinated, ideological form," to use a phrase from Ryan Poll's 2012 study *Main Street and Empire* (5). It is this process of abstraction that made it possible for the prairie town to be turned into a symbolic geography, and to fulfill the emblematic role that it has continued to play in its postwar afterlife.

One major contribution to this postwar shift away from regional particulars and toward collective geographical symbolism was made by Henry Nash Smith, whose monograph *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* was published five years before Disneyland opened its doors and is now regarded as a foundational text of American Studies. Taking his examples from both "high" and "low" culture—as I have done in this introduction and will continue to do throughout this dissertation—Smith examined "collective representations" of the American West to see how they

contributed to a mythology of the region, which he defines as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (Smith xi). For our purposes, his account can be read as a useful prehistory of the prairie town's symbolic afterlife. Smith found that the American Interior was collectively imagined as "the Garden of the World," and in that shape it became one of "the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society," one that "embod[ied] group memories of an earlier, a simpler and, it was believed, a happier state of society" (123, 124). The most influential early myth-maker that Smith identified was the Wisconsin-based historian Frederick Jackson Turner. In his 1893 paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner proposed his well-known "frontier thesis," which describes in evolutionary terms how the continuous westward "advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, [and] a steady growth of independence on American lines" (Turner 4). In short, Turner's argument implied that when American pioneers pushed the frontier farther and farther westward, they left in their wake a Midwest more cultivated than the western wilderness ahead and more "American" than the "European" settlements along the urbanized East Coast that the pioneers had left behind.

Though it has been challenged and revised by a later generation of "New Western Historians," Turner's thesis has played a central role in the nostalgic postwar (re-)imagining of the Midwest as a symbolic heartland that, according to cultural geographer James Shortridge, has assumed the status of "the most American part of America" (33).[19] Clearly, it is the basis for Andrew Cayton's and Peter Onuf's 1990 study *The Midwest and the Nation*, which offers a compelling explanation for the Midwest's symbolic centrality by establishing a connection with its cultural and economic importance in frontier times. Cayton and Onuf point out that, unlike New England, the South, and the Southwest, the Midwest had no prior European colonial

[19] Two good examples of these revisions and challenges are a pair of anthologies published in the early '90s. The first of these is *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, an edited collection that appeared in 1991. And the second is *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, which was published a year later. The criticism that both of these anthologies launch against Turner's thesis is that it does not account for matters of gender, racial diversity, and class difference. See below for a discussion of this kind of selectivity.

communities, which is of course what Turner argued when he spoke of how the advance of the western frontier would lead to the cultivation and, above all, Americanization of U.S. soil. But while Turner described this Americanization in pastoral terms, Cayton and Onuf suggest that it ultimately came down to the Midwest being "settled and developed in tandem with the establishment of commercial capitalism in the United States," which meant that the "rise of middle-class values and the institutions of capitalism were synonymous with the rise of the Midwest," making it the "truest and fullest expression of a liberal, capitalistic society" (117-118, 85). I should add here that these pastoral and capitalist visions were, in reality, closely intertwined. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of barbed wire, an invention whose history Olivier Razac explores in a 2002 study. In a passage that Wallace marked in his personal copy of the book, Razac stresses that barbed wire "was a pioneering element in capitalism and industrial progress" (81). After all, it enabled pioneers to make a division between themselves and the Native Americans, who, with the aid of barbed wire fences, were dispossessed of their lands, which in turn would become the basis for capitalist land speculation.

This image of barbed wire separations and divisions, moreover, brings me to a crucial point about the postwar construction of an imagined heartland that I already touched on in my discussion of *Field of Dreams*, namely its highly selective or exclusive character. In a study that is greatly indebted to the so-called Myth and Symbol School for which Smith's abovementioned work laid the foundation, Victoria Johnson explores what she calls "the Heartland myth" alongside Raymond Williams's concept of "selective tradition" (Johnson 12). In the introduction to her work, Johnson cites Williams's definition at length, and it is worth reproducing the citation here not only because it is central to Johnson's cultural analysis but also because my own study of the heartland's symbolic afterlife and its role in the New Sincerity builds on Williams's concept. Selective tradition, according to Williams's 1977 work *Marxism and Literature*, is

> an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. […] From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. Yet, within a particular hegemony, and as one of its decisive processes, this selection is presented and usually successfully passed off as "the tradition," "the significant past." […] It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of predisposed continuity. (Williams 115-116)

This understanding of selective tradition offers a convincing explanation for the shape that the Midwest and the prairie town have assumed in their postwar afterlife. Compared to their representation in conventional regionalism, their postwar Disneyfied appearance as an all-American locale populated with "good people," the home of the nuclear family, and the storehouse of "traditional" American values has meant that the region's history has had to be significantly reworked "to excise urban life and culture, 'non-white' populations, and marked class differences" (Johnson 115). This means that the region's industrial history, outlined in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), and the diverse populations of manufacturing cities are frequently ignored in favor of rural or, more and more often, suburban, white middle-class families. It is precisely this selective reworking, I suggest, that we find in the noticeably, and often self-consciously, straight heartland of the New Sincerity.

Here it is useful to briefly turn to William Gass's novel *Omensetter's Luck*, since its narrative is a dramatization of, and a conscious meditation on, the process of exclusion that is behind the postwar construction of this straight heartland. Published in the same year as Pynchon's *Lot 49*, Gass's novel could be seen as a direct precursor of the New Sincerity, just as Pynchon's work could be regarded as an early example of "eclectic irony."[20] Set in the 1890s, the story takes place entirely in the fictional town of

[20] The importance of Gass's work to Wallace, in particular, is evident from Wallace's heavily annotated copy of *Omensetter's Luck*, which he appears to have mined for what, in a separate notebook, he has called "Midwesternisms." Page 60 of his edition of the novel, for instance, is marked with the initials "SJF," an acronym that refers to one of Wallace's working titles for his posthumous novel *The Pale King*, namely *Sir John Feelgood*. He also seems to have listed the novel alongside Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* (1979) as a source of inspiration on the second page of his "Evidence Notebook," which contains various bits of freewriting, descriptive phrases, and story ideas. One such story idea can be found on page 36, which describes his idea for an "Omensetterish guy" as a main character in *The Pale King*, presumably Shane Drinion (Wallace, "Evidence" 2, 36). These notes will be discussed in more detail in chapter 1.

Gilean, Ohio, a prairie town that, as R. V. Cassill rightly observed in his 1966 piece for *The Kenyon Review*, "seems to have been conceived as an intentional stereotype of the Midwest" (563). Cassill was not the only one to comment on Gass's apparently self-conscious use of a stereotypical small-town setting. Frederic Morton of *The New York Times*, for instance, also noted that "Gilean is 'Amurrica' at its squarest," a world that "has long been exhausted, you would think, not only by Sinclair Lewis but by the likes of Sherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters" (5). What upsets the inhabitants of this exaggeratedly square town is the arrival of an outsider named Brackett Omensetter, of whom we quickly learn that he is so many things to so many people. To his landlord Henry Pimber, he is an "inhuman" creature of the soil whose unselfconscious way of being in the world drives Pimber to suicidal envy; to Pimber's wife, he is simply "a beast," "an animal," "a poor stupid bastard"; and his happy-go-lucky attitude inflames the Reverend Jethro Furber (Gass 67, 61, 62). He even appears in different guises to different reviewers: *Kirkus Reviews*, for example, went so far as to identify Omensetter as "a Negro," even though there is no conclusive textual evidence of his skin color (*Kirkus*). Still, the bottom line is that Omensetter is in the broadest sense "foreign," which means that he has no place in that selectively (re-)imagined heartland of Gilean, Ohio. In fact, it is only when his luck inevitably runs out, and he is forced to leave, that the square villagers can resume the stereotypical business of a picturesque prairie town. And that, it seems, is the point.

So Gass's novel still actively challenged the prairie town's postwar pretensions to all-American status. Eight years later, however, that Disneyfied, all-American image would be uncritically reproduced on a larger and larger scale, most notably as part of Garrison Keillor's quaintly nostalgic radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*. In particular, the show's regular storytelling segment "The News from Lake Wobegon" rapidly grew in popularity. Consisting of a twenty-minute monologue delivered by Keillor himself, the segment chronicles the ordinary lives of the average citizens of the archetypal heartland community of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. In piling on these stereotypes, as it were, it confirms the prairie town's image as the nation's collective

home and its storehouse of “traditional” American values. It was not until May 1980, though, that Keillor’s segment and its now famous opening line, “it’s been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown, out on the edge of the prairie,” could be listened to outside the actual region of Minnesota (Songer 5; Keillor 0:00-0:07). But from that first satellite broadcast on, the show rapidly gained nationwide popularity, on which Keillor was able to capitalize with his 1985 bestselling novel *Lake Wobegon Days*, which earned him a place on the November 1985 cover of *TIME* (Songer 5, 7). Just before *A Prairie Home Companion* went on a five-year hiatus in 1987, the show was broadcast on two hundred stations, had approximately four million listeners, and tickets for the live theater recordings were sold out so far in advance that Keillor struck a deal with the Walt Disney Company, aptly enough, to televise his show (Ibid. 8, 9). We might say, then, that at this point in the prairie town’s afterlife, its status as an all-American locale was largely settled.

It is precisely against this backdrop that I situate the New Sincerity writing of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers in the three extended chapters that follow. After all, each of the three authors made his literary debut at the tail end of Keillor’s hugely successful first run in the mid/late-1980s. For all three of them, representations of a symbolic heartland played a central—though certainly much more ambivalent—role in their mid/late-’90s breakthroughs, after which their work achieved canonical status. The first of this trio, David Foster Wallace, is the focus of chapter 1, which examines how the symbolic geography of the Midwest and its “good people” came to figure more and more prominently in Wallace’s career-long efforts to follow the trajectory that he had outlined in “E Unibus Pluram,” that is, to move away from the self-conscious, experimental writing of his early career and toward a more direct prose style aimed at capturing his protagonists’ rich interior lives and bespeaking their sincerity. The chapter draws from a large body of Wallace’s fiction and non-fiction, as well as his personal library, letters, and a selection of his manuscripts, to trace this development and the Midwest’s complex role within it. Special attention is paid to Wallace’s use of journalistic personae to interrogate his and his implied readers’ views on the Midwest in

his non-fiction, and the selective processes behind the drafting of these essays as well as many of *The Pale King*'s key set pieces that focus on the people of Peoria, Illinois. The chapter culminates in a detailed analysis of the creative tensions between Wallace's penchant for self-conscious irony and his attempts to reduce this tendency in several drafts of *The Pale King*'s "Good People" chapter, whose final version is one of the book's few pieces that Wallace published in the last years of his life.

The second of the three chapters examines Jonathan Franzen's fiction, non-fiction, and interviews alongside his well-publicized dispute with Oprah Winfrey to explore what role the Midwest plays in his authorial self-presentation as well as in his convoluted and often contradictory attempts to position himself as a "high-art" writer on the one hand and as a bestselling anti-elitist on the other. The chapter argues that Franzen's construction of a straight heartland laid the foundation for a model of authorship that, in a counterintuitive way, presents conservatism or conventionality as if it were subversion in a complex effort to revalue the outmoded novel of local manners and renegotiate the very terms on which fiction can gain prestige. From his first book on, Franzen has increasingly placed a supposedly square but sincere Midwest in dialectical opposition to the hip and ironic East Coast. In doing so, he has found a vantage point from which to imagine the midwestern periphery as a site of resistance against what he has called the "technocorporate, postironic, cool, late-late-late East-coast world," while at the same time still mocking the Midwest for its staleness ("Jonathan Franzen" 76). What finally emerges from Franzen's writing, then, is a complex use of allusion to the Midwest's popular image and its association with an authentic but uncool "heartland sensibility."

And finally, in the third chapter of this dissertation I turn to Richard Powers's fiction, essays, and interviews to examine what role his often stereotypical depiction of the Midwest and its inhabitants has played in his response to mounting criticism of his work. Summed up with the pithy phrase, "the Powers Problem," the oft-mentioned shortcoming of Powers's work is the disparity between its in-depth exploration of its intellectual subject matter and the superficiality or predictability of its main characters.

In his response to these criticisms, Powers has stated that his novels are attempts at a hybrid fiction, which he has repeatedly characterized as a maximalist novel of ideas that successfully wraps inside itself a minimalist novel of character. But by paying careful attention to the strong midwestern presence in these so-called hybrid fictions, this third chapter reveals that Powers all too readily relies on the heartland and its popular associations with all-American goodness to do the emotional work of a minimalist novel of character for him. By examining the role of "good people" characters in his midwestern domestic drama *Prisoner's Dilemma*, his "Main Street versus Wall Street" novel *Gain*, and his post-9/11 novel *The Echo Maker*, the chapter is able to answer how it is that critics have seen Powers's body of work as a continuous failure to deliver on his promise of a fiction that manages to strike a balance between head and heart, ideas and character. Here, as well as in the other two chapters, it is the construction of a symbolic heartland that plays a central role in the creative process behind the author's New Sincerity writing.

Chapter 1

"A Place to Fear and Love":
David Foster Wallace's Change of Heartland

> A writer must have a place where he or she feels this, a place to love and be irritated with.
>
> — Louise Erdrich, "A Writer's Sense of Place" (43)

Most bids to define the "legacy" of David Foster Wallace, as it has already been called, have at least one thing in common: the author, many agree, will be remembered as the voice of an entire generation. As for the tone of that voice, its rhythms, its color, there is considerably less agreement, even among the author's peers. "This is Dave's voice, American," said Don DeLillo in his speech for Wallace's memorial service in New York in 2008—words that echo the opening line of *Underworld*, his Great American Novel ("Informal" 24). "His voice was regional," wrote John Jeremiah Sullivan, whose own upbringing in Indiana may explain his more finely tuned ear for the sounds of the midwestern provinces (Sullivan). Wallace himself found a middle ground. "I happen to have two native English dialects," he wrote in his 2001 essay on American usage: the standard American of his "hyper-educated parents" and the "hard-earned Rural Midwestern" of his Illinois home ("Authority" 99). Ever conscious of the former, he spent his later years documenting the latter with the enthusiasm and dedication of a local colorist. Wallace recorded these "midwesternisms" in a special "Midwesternisms Notebook" as well as in various research binders, all of which are now held at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) in Austin, Texas. But as great as his interest in the Midwest was, only few critics have so far drawn attention to it. Paul Giles, for one, has described Wallace's writing as "a new kind of American regionalism," and Mark McGurl has called it a "strategic reembrace of rooted provinciality" ("The Institution" 28; *The Global* 175). Yet for both critics, these

comments amount to little more than a metaphorical throat-clearing, and as their main arguments get underway, it is Wallace's American voice that is given the final word.[21]

Not so in this chapter, which explores how Wallace's broader views on subjectivity, sincerity, and literary sensibility shaped and were shaped by his sense of the Midwest as both a lived environment and a symbolic construct in American culture. As his (ideas about) writing changed over the course of his career, so did the significance of the Midwest in his fiction and creative non-fiction. These changes became increasingly noticeable after his return to Illinois in 1993 and after the publication of "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in that same year. In the essay's well-known conclusion, Wallace sketched out a move away from the self-conscious, experimental writing of his early career and toward a directness and earnestness that he came to associate with the plain-spoken midwesterners of his Illinois home. But careful attention to the way he imagines and re-imagines the Midwest reveals that Wallace continually deviated from this literary trajectory, even though there is still a progression from his early work, with its geographically and spiritually desolate heartland as an emblem of existential dread, to his later writing, which performs a renewed appreciation of the small-town Midwest and the values of its "good people." What emerges from Wallace's unfinished novel *The Pale King* in particular, as well as the letters, notebooks, and draft materials held at the HRC, is that this renewed appreciation is far from the whole-hearted one that it has been made out to be. Wallace, in fact, remained ambivalent toward the Midwest throughout, and as we shall see, this attitude was intimately connected to his creative efforts.

To get an early impression of the author's ambivalence toward the Midwest, it is useful to begin with some insightful biographical comments made by his sister. In an interview with Paul Quinn and Geoff Ward, conducted for a BBC Radio 3 documentary

[21] One of the few exceptions is Paul Quinn's contribution to *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, published in 2013. Titled "'Location's Location': Placing David Foster Wallace," Quinn's thought-provoking essay maps out the process of geographical refraction that characterizes Wallace's creative non-fiction in particular. Quinn relates this process of refraction to the fractured novelistic form that Wallace developed over the course of his career, a form that he calls the "tornadic" (87). Though its analysis of the creative process behind *The Pale King* is hampered by the fact that Quinn did not consult the Wallace Papers at the HRC, the essay still provides a perceptive insight into Wallace's use of the Midwest, which is why I make repeated reference to it throughout this chapter.

two years after the writer had taken his own life, Amy Wallace draws attention to her brother's deep-rooted feelings of being a geographical outsider. She explains that, because their parents were transplanted east-coast academics, she and her brother were never treated as natives by the midwestern children with whom they grew up (qtd. in Quinn 95). Strictly speaking, David Foster Wallace was indeed no native midwesterner, since he was born in upstate New York, where his father, James Wallace, was finishing a Ph.D. in philosophy at Cornell University in Ithaca (Max 1).[22] He was six months old when the Wallace family relocated to Champaign-Urbana, twin cities in the state of Illinois, where the author grew up between, on the one hand, the cornfields of the towns' rural community and, on the other, the academic institution of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where his father was Professor of Moral Philosophy (Ibid.; Harris, "David" 186). Curiously, however, Amy Wallace also notes that when her brother had eventually moved to the East Coast to attend Amherst College in Massachusetts, his new classmates saw him as an outsider, too: they "treated him like a hayseed," which left the young author feeling that maybe "he was from a place no one else was" (qtd. in Quinn 95). His Midwest must have been "*somewhere in the middle*," Amy Wallace concludes, "*neither here nor there*" (Ibid.).

Her observation, I suggest, gives us a first clue as to Wallace's inclination to write about an imagined heartland that would end up reflecting "a better truth," as his father put it in a message to Charles Harris, Chair of the English Department at Illinois State University (ISU) that hired the author just a few years before he would make his 1996 breakthrough with *Infinite Jest* (qtd. in Harris, "David" 186). A good example of this tendency to imagine a better version of his midwestern home presents itself in the first non-fiction piece of his that was published in *Harper's* in 1991, namely "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood." In this pseudo-autobiographical essay, Wallace claims that he did not grow up in Urbana but in the nearby town of Philo, Illinois, and he maintained this claim until the very last years of his life, as

[22] For many of the biographical facts that are mentioned throughout this chapter, I rely on the first authoritative biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (2012), by D.T. Max.

evidenced by the draft materials that were published in 2011 as the posthumous novel *The Pale King*. Understandably, then, this piece of biographical invention found its way into the first wave of Wallace scholarship, where it lingered on until James Wallace settled the matter once and for all in his email to Harris, whom he assured that "[n]one of us, including David, ever set foot in Philo" (Ibid. 185). As for the reason behind his son's fabrication, he suggested to Harris that Urbana may have seemed too ordinary or unsophisticated a place and Philo may have been more attractive because of its ancient Greek place name, whose meaning of "love," moreover, befits a heartland town.

Assuming that his father is right in believing that Wallace sought to give himself a veneer of sophistication, why did the author not opt for the much grander and slightly more biographically correct Ithaca with its obvious potential for high-cultural, Homeric allusions to "home"? Why did he not follow the example of, for instance, the title story of William Gass's 1968 collection *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, whose author persona exaggerates the backwardness and ordinariness of the rural town of Brookston, Indiana, and contrasts it with the intellectual city of Byzantium as depicted in W. B. Yeats's 1928 poem, "Sailing to Byzantium"? After all, Wallace later named Gass's debut novel *Omensetter's Luck* as one of "five direly underappreciated U.S. novels" and carefully mined it for midwesternisms and story ideas, which he noted down in both his "Midwesternisms Notebook" and his "Records Notebook," complete with page references to his own, heavily annotated copy ("Overlooked" 203). One such midwesternism, "Rural IL—houses fastened to fields," is clearly lifted from the opening lines of "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," which read: "So I have sailed the seas and come … / to B … / a small town fastened to a field in Indiana" (Wallace, "Records" 195; Gass, "In the Heart" 172).[23] And in his own copy of the collection, Wallace even appears to have dog-eared a page of the author's preface in which Gass reflects on precisely his ambivalent attitude toward the Midwest: "I had

[23] With regard to the story's references to Yeats's "Byzantium," compare this opening sentence to the following lines by Yeats: "And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium" (ll. 15-16).

become suspicious of my own detachment. Could I write close to myself, or would the letter B, which my narrator said he'd sailed to, stand for bathos?" (Preface xli).

Wallace seems to have felt a similar ambivalence toward his home in the Midwest. "Ithaca," his father admits, "is a name to conjure with, but David felt a very close connection with Illinois," so he may have settled on his imagined hometown of Philo as a compromise (qtd. in Harris, "David" 185). Despite his frequent protestations, Gass too would openly admit to a certain fondness for the region, especially in the years following the publication of his 1995 magnum opus *The Tunnel*, a novel set in an unnamed midwestern university town. In his 1998 interview with Michael Silverblatt, for instance, he says that when he was younger he "always tried to get out of the Midwest" ("Lannan" 6:49-6:51). "Now," Gass continues, "I like it quite a lot—I realize it is the source" (Ibid. 7:03-7:10). Such wavering is actually far from unusual for authors from the region. A quick look at other writers from Gass's generation shows that Kurt Vonnegut expressed similar sentiments about his native Indiana. His essay "To Be a Native Middle-Westerner" is full of praise for Indiana and the way in which its alleged self-sufficiency with respect to the arts and humanities "has produced so many artists of such different sorts, from world-class to merely competent" (Vonnegut). And yet, Vonnegut still felt it necessary to pursue his own artistic career on the East Coast, where he spent his entire writing life.

The apparent advantages of such an escape from the Midwest in pursuing a successful literary career must have already been on Wallace's mind when he wrote his very first letter to Frederick Hill Associates, where a literary agent named Bonnie Nadell would take on the author's debut novel *The Broom of the System*. Its prominent midwestern setting notwithstanding, Wallace described his first novel in this letter, dated 28 September 1985, by making a clever nod to the work of the literary Brat Pack, a group of jaded east-coasters that was primarily centered on Bret Easton Ellis, David Leavitt, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz:

> I've been advised by people who seem to be in a position to know that <u>The Broom of the System</u> is not only entertaining and salable but genuinely good,

> especially for its being the first major project of a very young writer (though no younger than some—Ellis, Leavitt—whose fiction has done well partly because of readers' understandable interest in new, young writing). (Wallace)

Here the aspiring novelist seems willing to downplay his book's midwestern background—not to mention his own—for the opportunity to reach the same Generation X audience as these east-coast writers. Barely a year after the 1987 publication of *Broom*, however, he would admit that his own "new, young writing" really did not have a lot in common with that of these "Conspicuously Young" east-coasters ("Fictional Futures" 37). As he put it in an essay for the Fall 1988 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (*RCF*), "it's weird: all we C.Y. writers get consistently lumped together" (Ibid. 41).

Over the years, Wallace would repeat this process of taking an initial geographical standpoint and subsequently backing away from it, thereby painting a series of highly ambivalent literary portraits of the Midwest. This ambivalence complicates a rather broad claim made by Paul Giles, who has argued that Wallace's work signals a clear transition to an entirely different "phenomenology of place" ("All Swallowed" 10). In a related article, Giles explains this new phenomenology with the bold statement that, at the turn of the millennium, we may "have moved beyond the spatial dialectics that structured twentieth-century culture" ("Sentimental" 327). In particular, he suggests that Wallace's work "tends to flatten this distinction" between center and periphery altogether and that Wallace "envisages American space as a level playing field" (Ibid. 327, 328). But if there is anything that Wallace's continually shifting attitude toward the Midwest illustrates, it is that America's hierarchical division into center and periphery—East Coast and Midwest—is still very much in place. Wallace made frequent attempts to adorn, ridicule, or overcompensate for what he feared were the unsophisticated midwestern fringes, even as the Midwest itself came to take center stage in his writing. He remained, as he wrote of one of his characters, "married to the land," but an extended analysis of his work reveals just how troubled

this marriage truly was, providing valuable insights into the author's constant deviations from the literary trajectory that he had laid out for himself ("Westward" 300).

Out of Place

Once *Broom* had found a publisher in Penguin, the young Wallace's midwestern background seems to have moved to the fore, judging by the publisher's 1987 press materials. These include a promotional blurb by Richard Elman, visiting professor at the University of Arizona where a 25-year-old Wallace was then in the final year of the MFA in creative writing. In the blurb's opening line, Elman writes that "[t]he American heartland often spontaneously produces its own lovely and promising Menippean satires, and David Wallace's young genius is one undimmed" (qtd. in "January 1987" 2). Journalists at the time certainly picked up on this strong midwestern presence and all the creative promise it held. In one of the first in-depth pieces on Wallace, a feature for the 24 April 1987 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, Helen Dudar made the astute observation that Wallace may have set *Broom* in Cleveland, Ohio, a city that he had never set foot in, because "he wanted a heartland city that he could imagine instead of describe" (10). In order to see how such an imagined heartland might match Amy Wallace's description of her brother's Midwest, which was neither here nor there but somewhere in the middle, and what role this imagined Midwest would eventually come to play in Wallace's work, I will begin by examining *Broom* within the biographical context from which it emerged. This should offer especially useful insights, given that the author described the novel, in an interview with Larry McCaffery for the Summer 1993 issue of the *RCF*, as his "coded autobio" ("An Expanded" 41).

Wallace started his first novel as one of his two undergraduate theses at Amherst College, where he majored in both philosophy and English.[24] The fact that he

[24] Wallace's philosophy thesis, a logical refutation of Richard Taylor's abstract "fatalist" argument that man's future is always predetermined, was posthumously published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An*

was working on not one but two theses means that there must have been some interesting cross-pollination between his creative and his philosophical writing, which is most noticeable in the strong presence of the Austrian logical positivist Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Broom*. I will touch on this Wittgensteinian presence shortly, but let us first take a closer look at Wallace's college life, of which we now have a detailed reconstruction thanks to D.T. Max's recent biography. The image that emerges from Max's book is that of a mostly quiet and devoted student, an image that is consistent with Wallace's own remarks, made in an interview with *Amherst Magazine*, that he was "cripplingly shy" and therefore did not enjoy or "have much to do with the life of the College" ("Brief Interview"). Though Wallace would now and then surprise his roommates by opening their windows in the morning and shouting into the quad, "I love it here!," these bursts of happiness were overshadowed by his homesickness (Max 17). Both his parents remember that he missed the Illinois farmland of his midwestern boyhood and once wrote them that "the mountains in Massachusetts were 'pretty' but the terrain wasn't beautiful 'the way Illinois is'" (Ibid.).

A fictionalized version of these mixed feelings about the author's time at Amherst inevitably found its way into *Broom*. One of its main characters, an Amherst alumnus by the name of Rick Vigorous, reflects on his time at Amherst in a journal entry that reads: "I hated it here. And I have never been as happy as when I was here. And these two things confront me with the beak and claws of the True" (207). But, strangely enough, Rick also says about his midwestern childhood that he can remember "being young and feeling a thing and identifying it as homesickness, and then thinking well now that's odd, isn't it, because I was home all the time. What on earth are we to make of that?" (78). What his therapist, Dr. Curtis Jay, makes of this is that Rick is "the watcher, the observer, looking on from a spatial-dash-emotional elsewhere" (344).[25] He gives Rick the most oxymoronic of diagnoses: "you are

Essay on Free Will (2010). The publication includes a stimulating introduction by James Ryerson, which pays particular attention to how Wallace's early love for philosophy and modal logic had a lasting influence on his fiction and non-fiction (2).

[25] Wallace would return to the concept of "the watcher" in several of his major works, among which his celebrated essay, "E Unibus Pluram," in which he describes fiction writers and, by implication, himself as part of "a species [… of] oglers. […] They are born watchers" (21).

intrinsically Outside, here" (Ibid.). Of course, both this diagnosis and Rick's own comments about his homesickness bear a striking resemblance to Amy Wallace's description of her brother's not belonging to either his midwestern rural community or the east-coast academic community of Amherst. Wallace's feeling of non-belonging was, incidentally, brought into sharp focus in the year of *Broom*'s publication, when the author returned to Amherst as an adjunct teacher. On 20 September 1987, he wrote to Nadell that he "had forgotten how much he hated Amherst College" and described himself "wander[ing] around Rick-like, remembering diasters [sic]" (Wallace). It is no surprise, then, that *Broom*'s imagined Cleveland setting constitutes Wallace's first major attempt to reflect on these feelings.

The novel's fractured narrative shows Wallace trying to find out what he wants the Midwest to mean in his work, seeking different answers to Rick's abovementioned question about his midwestern home: "What on earth are we to make of it?"—a question that, as we will see, reappears in one of the novel's important meditations on the region's possible significance. To be exact, Wallace completely invented two midwestern geographies for the purpose of this critical reflection, namely the suburb of East Corinth and the man-made Great Ohio Desert. The former is the hometown of the novel's main protagonist, Lenore Beadsman Jr., a young switchboard operator fresh out of Oberlin College, Ohio, whose family is a major corporate player in nearby Cleveland and whose grandfather, Stonecipher Beadsman II, is the actual founder of East Corinth.[26] Wallace's choice of Lenore's *alma mater* is, I suggest, no coincidence, for he himself had had his first admissions interview at Oberlin College before he went for an interview to Amherst, whose academic offer he ended up accepting (Max 13). Lenore, on the contrary, chose Oberlin over Amherst. In some ways, therefore, she could be thought of as Wallace's fictional alter ego, the character through whom he might, perhaps, have asked how he would have come of age if he had stayed in the

[26] Here we see the earliest example of the pattern that Wallace was to repeat in his *Harper's Magazine* essay on his Midwestern boyhood: Cleveland, like Urbana, may have been too normal a setting for the author. Hence, the novel's plot unfolds in the made-up suburb of East Corinth, whose name derives from the ancient Greek city of Corinth, known for its many appearances in the New Testament as well as for the Peloponnesian War it waged with what is now the island of Corfu, an island that is mentioned several times in the novel and serves as one of its Pynchonesque, high-cultural red herrings.

Midwest. Taking this question into consideration, the novel follows Lenore around her midwestern hometown as she attempts to resolve a series of personal crises that eventually contribute to the *bildung* that Wallace referred to when, in the abovementioned interview with McCaffery, he called *Broom* a "sensitive little self-obsessed *bildungsroman*" ("An Expanded" 41).

The first and most important of these crises is the disappearance or, to use the novel's own term, "mislocation" of Lenore's grandmother, Lenore Beadsman Sr., from East Corinth's Shaker Heights Nursing Home (*Broom* 36). Interestingly, the nursing home's administrator, a character by the telling name of *David* Bloemker, poses a question about the Midwest that is almost identical to Rick's, namely "what are we to say of this area of the country?" (142). Mr. Bloemker's various answers to this question are some of the novel's most thought-provoking attempts to make sense of what he calls this "volatile mixture" that is the Midwest (Ibid.). Consider, for instance, the following quotation from a conversation between Lenore and Mr. Bloemker about the regional roots of the patients or "residents" of the Shaker Heights facility, which, throughout the novel, is significantly referred to simply as "Home" or "the Home" (34, 74, 99):

> "They are also Midwesterners," continued Mr. Bloemker. "As a rule, almost all of them are Midwesterners." He stared off. "This area of the country, what are we to say of this area of the country, Ms. Beadsman?"
>
> "Search me."
>
> "Both in the middle and on the fringe. The physical heart, and the cultural extremity. Corn, a steadily waning complex of heavy industry, and sports. What are we to say? We feed and stoke and supply a nation much of which doesn't know we exist. A nation we tend to be decades behind, culturally and intellectually. What are we to say about it?" (141-142)

It is this key phrase, "both in the middle and on the fringe," that encapsulates a lot of the young Wallace's ambivalence toward the region.

The phrase underlines *Broom*'s first main thesis about the Midwest and its meaning. It suggests how, at the start of his writing career, Wallace may have tried to map out the "*cultural* location" of his midwestern home and considered the region's

cultural and intellectual contributions to be of little to no significance on the national stage (Quinn 95). Mr. Bloemker's reflections on the Midwest's in-betweenness are consistent with a general trend in critical thinking about the Midwest as "the nation's middlescape" and about its local residents as "being lost in the middle" (Barillas 4; Barlow and Cantonwine 12). Observations comparable to Bloemker's can be found in many geographical and socio-cultural studies of the midwestern region. The historian Jon C. Teaford, for instance, writes that the term "Middle West," besides its topographical denotation, also "implie[s] the dual sense of centrality and isolation characterizing the region" (254). What is more, William Barillas remarks that midwesterners take pride in identifying as "Americans," which, on the one hand, bespeaks a certain level of confidence, while, on the other, it "betrays a weak sense of regional identity" (19). This would suggest that one of the difficulties faced by the young Wallace revolved around the question of how to define himself when the Midwest he grew up in is itself so hard to define.

The author neatly anticipates this problem and, again, voices his concerns through the observations of Mr. Bloemker, who believes that the Midwest, "a place that both is and isn't," makes for "truly bizarre [… and t]roubled people," especially when they grow old and become conscious of themselves as "parts of this strange, occluded place" (*Broom* 142). In the company of Lenore and a rather timid character named Brenda, David Bloemker asks the following question:

> "How to begin to come to some understanding of one's place in a system, when one is part of an area that exists in such a troubling relation to the rest of the world, a world that is itself stripped of any static, understandable character by the fact that it changes, radically, all the time?" (143)

To drive home his point about a troubled and hard-to-define Midwest, Wallace ends the conversation between Mr. Bloemker and Lenore on a "truly bizarre" note. When Lenore is about to leave, she discovers that the overly quiet Brenda is in truth an inflatable doll. Still, Mr. Bloemker insists he had absolutely no idea: "I thought she was simply extremely shy. A troubled Midwesterner, in an ambivalent relation …" (144). As a

midwesterner conjured out of thin air, Brenda is quite literally a prop that Wallace uses to satirize the very idea of a serious discourse on the Midwest. Brenda may be the author's idea of an airhead, and Bloemker is nothing more than his mouthpiece, which means that the young Wallace treats not just Brenda but both of these characters as mere props in his satirical commentary on the Midwest, its cultural location and identity.

This brings us to *Broom*'s second thesis about the meaning and significance of the Midwest. This one emphasizes that the region does have its own identity and national importance but that they are inextricably linked to the distant past—a strategy that is not unlike Gass's abovementioned exaggeration of the Midwest's backwardness in the title piece of his 1968 book of stories about the heartland. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that the midwestern "Home" on which Mr. Bloemker bases many of his observations is a home for the elderly, and that Mr. Bloemker compares the Midwest to "[m]emories: things that both are and aren't" (142). To this he adds that the "residents, the people who are very old now, have really made our culture what it is" (143). "They were pioneers," says Mr. Bloemker, yet now they have been reduced to "people in wheelchairs with blanketed laps" (144). To be sure, David Bloemker is not the only one who implies that the region has gone old and stale. Rick offers at least two noteworthy descriptions of Cleveland as long past its expiry date, so to speak. Early on, he mentions that he lives in "Cleveland, Ohio, between a biologically dead and completely offensive-smelling lake [i.e. Lake Erie] and a billion-dollar man-made desert" (57). And on a flight from Amherst to Cleveland, Rick mentions that he can even "sense the closeness of Cleveland" (267). He asks, "'Can you smell that? A smell like removing the lid from a pot of something that's been left in one's refrigerator a little too long?'" (267-268).

In this emphasis on the Midwest's staleness, *Broom* conforms to established views on the area. As Robert Wuthnow puts it in his recent socio-cultural study of the Midwest, "[t]hat America's heartland is a thing of the past is a long-standing refrain in treatments of the region" (10). An appropriate case in point is Ronald Weber's dismissive comments on the region's literary tradition. He writes that the Midwest had

its “day in the literary sun” long ago, from 1890 to 1930, which period brought us Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson, but “was not particularly long lasting” and did not “run particularly deep” either (3). The young Wallace appears to agree that the Midwest seems a rather unlikely place to find the culturally new and exciting, let alone the literary voice of a new generation. A character by the Pynchonesque name of Judith Prieth, for example, mockingly asks: “‘Who ever heard of a publishing house in Cleveland?’” (51). But even so, the novel also includes characters who are more appreciative of the Midwest, characters such as Neil Obstat Jr., who insists that “Cleveland gets underrated” (301). “You guys in the East,” he continues, “forget that significant cultural stuff goes on in the Midwest” (Ibid.). Wallace’s dismissal of the Midwest could therefore just as easily be regarded as the author’s first strategic move toward establishing himself as the region’s literary rejuvenator. To use Wallace’s own pithy phrase, the novel’s exaggeration of the region’s anachronistic character may be the writer’s first attempt to find in the Midwest “any *garde* of which to be *avant*” (“Westward” 304).

The novel’s most significant avant-garde transformation of the Midwest comes not in the shape of East Corinth, which, as one of the author’s most Pynchonesque pop-cultural adornments, is built as a large-scale reproduction of Jayne Mansfield’s head.[27] Rather, it comes in the form of a vast emptiness embodied in the man-made wasteland of the Great Ohio Desert or simply the G.O.D. Exactly how central a place the G.O.D. is supposed to occupy in the novel is illustrated by the fact that *Broom* “had begun, at Amherst, as *The Great Ohio Desert*” (Max 71). Wallace even briefly considered the title, *Three Deserts*, which, as he later explained to his editor, Gerry Howard, referred to “Rick, Lenore, and the G.O.D.” (Ibid.). The latter of these two working titles implies that the desert’s vast emptiness refers to both space and character, is both geographical and spiritual—an interpretation that critics have mostly

[27] In *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, the first monograph on Wallace’s work, Marshall Boswell rightly compares the Jayne Mansfield-shaped suburb of East Corinth to the imagined city of San Narciso in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a novel that left a big impression on the young Wallace. When, in Pynchon’s novel, the female protagonist, Oedipa Maas, has her “first ‘overhead’ encounter” with San Narciso, she observes that it resembles a “circuit card” (Boswell, *Understanding* 215; Pynchon 14).

ignored in favor of a more broadly symbolic one. Marshall Boswell, for instance, writes that the G.O.D. "seems to be poking fun at what Derrida would call a *logocentric* view of language or […] 'referent-based signification,'" which states that at the heart of any linguistic system lies a stable point or object of reference (34). The G.O.D., Boswell argues, is the novel's "primary symbol for the emptiness of logocentric thinking," and he suggests that Wallace opts for the late-Wittgensteinian alternative that is modeled on community-based contextual signification, which posits that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Ibid. 50; Wittgenstein par. 43). This certainly helps explain the philosophical overtones of a novel that Wallace himself, after all, described to David Lipsky as "a conversation between Wittgenstein and Derrida" (*Although* 35).

But Boswell's interpretation turns the desert into yet another prop in a novel of ideas, a space that is, to cite Wallace's self-critical assessment of *Broom*, "all about the *head*" (Ibid.) It provides no explanation for the desert's geographical location in the heartland. By cross-referencing the novel's description of the G.O.D. with one of Wallace's later pieces that is explicitly about the Midwest, it is possible to locate *Broom*'s desert within Wallace's evolving views on the region. In the below passage, which is taken from a meeting between the governor of Ohio, two of his aides (one of whom is Neil Obstat Jr.), and the vice president of Industrial Desert Design, the governor describes the G.O.D. as follows:

> Gentlemen, a desert. A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of.[28] A place without malls. An Other for Ohio's Self. Cacti and scorpions and the sun beating down. Desolation. A place for people to wander alone. To reflect. Away from everything. Gentlemen, a desert. (54)

The emphasis on the site's "desolation" and especially the use of the phrase "away from everything" anticipate Wallace's appropriately named essay, "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All," first published in *Harper's* as "Ticket to

[28] Here the governor refers to the way the state of Ohio "was historically hewn out of wilderness" (*Broom* 53). The phrase appears a number of times and is most likely a play on the surname of the founder of Cleveland, "General Moses Cleaveland," whose skeleton is interred in the cement sidewalk in front of the Bombardini office where Lenore works as a switchboard operator (46).

the Fair" in 1994. In this essay about the 1993 Illinois State Fair, the Midwest is repeatedly described as an "empty, lonely" region in which "[y]ou can go weeks without seeing a neighbor" ("Getting Away" 84). "Here," Wallace adds, "you're pretty much Away all the time" (Ibid. 108).

In particular, "Getting Away" includes the following observation about the author's Illinois home, which is remarkably similar to the barren wasteland of the G.O.D.: "Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness starts to become both physical and spiritual" (91). To make this twofold emptiness abundantly clear, Wallace stresses that it "is not just people you get lonely for. You're alienated from the very space around you" (91-92). Just as the G.O.D. is an empty Other for Ohio's Self, so too are midwesterners alienated from the desolate land that they have nevertheless made their home, making it a "place to fear and love." This empty Midwest is referred to in *Broom* as "pathetic-Christian-TV-viewer-land," which, of course, provides a possible explanation for Wallace's choice of the acronym G.O.D. to name the man-made wasteland (382). The barrenness of the G.O.D.'s "blasted region" suggests that there is a spiritual emptiness at the heart of the Midwest's religiosity, and nowhere is this hollowness made more obvious and judged more harshly than in the book's final pages, which contain a set piece about the peculiar phenomenon of televangelism. Presented as a broadcast transcript, this scene features the Reverend Hart Lee Sykes, who attempts to capitalize on his viewers' geographical and spiritual loneliness by requesting them to become members of his "Partners with God Club" for a not-so-nominal fee. The Reverend's on-screen assistant turns out to be Lenore's foul-mouthed cockatiel Vlad the Impaler, which, under its new name of Ugolino the Significant, spouts obscenities that Reverend Sykes willfully misrepresents as divine messages. The total absurdity of this penultimate scene ridicules the hollowness of a religious devotion that was, in the young Wallace's view, particular to the rural Midwest.

And yet, the Reverend's comforting message to his spiritually and geographically isolated viewers—"I promise that no player will feel alone"—is one that

would resonate with Wallace more and more strongly as he set out to address the broader theme of solipsism, which he would treat as "a metaphor for isolation and loneliness," in his later work (*Broom* 466; Ryerson 27). Just how central a theme loneliness or solipsism would become for him is emphasized by his fellow midwesterner Jonathan Franzen, with whom Wallace had struck up a correspondence after having read and been thoroughly impressed by his 1988 debut novel *The Twenty-Seventh City*. In his speech for Wallace's memorial service in New York in 2008, Franzen had the following to say:

> But that "neutral middle ground on which to make a deep connection with another human being": this, we decided, was what fiction was for. "A way out of loneliness" was the formulation we agreed to agree on. ("Informal" 178)

Wallace confirmed the theme's centrality in his essay for the Summer 1993 issue of the *RCF*, "E Unibus Pluram," where he offers up fiction as a primary means to connect with "the average U.S. lonely person" (23). But between *Broom* and the publication of this essay, it was his 1989 story collection *Girl with Curious Hair* that marked the next big step in his development of this theme.

Lost Between the Funhouse and the Farmhouse

In fact, the novella-length story that rounds off this book, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," is the first of Wallace's published works to explicitly mention solipsism. The word's thematic importance has often, and quite rightly, been related to the story's overall critique of metafiction, defined by Patricia Waugh as writing that explicitly and self-consciously "draws attention to its status as an artefact" (2). Wallace leveled his criticism against John Barth in particular: already on the copyright page of *Girl*, he announces that "Westward" was written "in the margins" of "Lost in the Funhouse," the title story of Barth's 1968 collection of experimental and self-reflexive

short fiction. I suggest, however, that it is equally important that "Westward" was written *about* the margins, namely the author's home turf of Central Illinois or, to borrow an apt phrase from the actual story, "the fringe that is the country's center" (242). As its plot progresses westward, the story's characters are headed for Collision, Illinois, an imagined small town "equidistantly central to rurally Depressed Champaign, Rantoul, and Urbana" (258). The town's name, of course, hints at Wallace's plans for a symbolic "Armageddon-explosion" that would, in his own words, blow "out of the water my whole sort of orientation to writing" ("An Expanded" 41; *Although* 63). In the following analysis of "Westward," I investigate what such a spatial reorientation might look like, what role Wallace's Illinois home would play in it, and how it would relate to his idea of using fiction to combat loneliness. In doing so, I begin not with Barth but with Berkeley.

"Westward," as Philip Coleman originally pointed out, borrows its title from Bishop Berkeley's 1726 poem "Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," whose final stanza contains the line "Westward the course of empire takes its way" (l. 21).[29] In this poem, Berkeley juxtaposes the decaying empire of Europe with the new and "happy climes" of America (l. 5). The poem's opening stanza should give the reader a good idea of Berkeley's approach:

> The Muse, disgusted at an age and clime
> Barren of every glorious theme,
> In distant lands now waits a better time,
> Producing subjects worthy fame. (ll. 1-4)

Throughout the poem, Berkeley traces the Muse's westward movement away from the European Old World and toward the American New World, described as the "seat of innocence" where "shall be sung another golden age" (ll. 9, 13). Given the bishop's

[29] Max speculates that Wallace may have first encountered the poem through the famous early advertisements for a farm implement, which Wallace knew: "The Plough That Broke the Plains … McCormick Reaper / Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (314n1). Max also confirms that Wallace knew Emanuel Leutze's painted mural, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," on display in the U.S. Capitol (Ibid.). In addition, Wallace was certainly familiar with the bishop's philosophical work, since he refers to Berkeley in *Everything and More* (2003) as a "major empiricist philosopher and Christian apologist (and a world-class pleonast)" (*Everything* 138 fn27).

musings on the virtues of a newly established America, Coleman suggests that we read Wallace's "Westward" in the "context of ideas about the meaning of 'America' and 'Americanness'" (66). This is essentially what most critics have so far done when considering Wallace's writing within the general framework of American letters. Giles, for example, has argued that in the majority of his work Wallace reflects self-consciously on "what it means to be an 'American' writer," and we have already seen that DeLillo primarily thought of "Dave's voice" as "American" ("All Swallowed" 4; "Informal" 24).

But it should be apparent from the above analysis of *Broom* that, from the very start of his career, Wallace meditated on what it means to be a midwesterner, too. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that in *Broom* the author ended up reflecting on what it means to live in late twentieth-century America by commenting on local midwestern sites such as the imagined wasteland of the G.O.D. In "Westward" Wallace tried to develop this approach further by scaling down the international scope of Berkeley's poem to a regional level that is more in line with the frontierism and Manifest Destiny of Emanuel Leutze's 1861 Capitol mural, which was similarly inspired by Berkeley's poem. Following Turner's influential "frontier thesis" and its central claim about how the western pioneers left in their wake a land that was more "American" than the "European" settlements back on the East Coast, Wallace would ideally be able to comment on both America as well as the Midwest. For this method to work, though, "Westward" would need to find the right balance in its depiction of the Midwest's exceptional features as well as its typical qualities so as to set the region apart from the rest of the United States without having it lose its archetypal status. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the story's comparative method turned out to be a complicated and often contradictory one—all the more so, because the writer was only just beginning to work out the actual direction of his own literary project.

Before examining these complications, however, let us first consider the story's basic narrative method and midwestward course, since we can see in them the outlines of a more programmatic approach at this stage of Wallace's career. Whereas

in *Broom* a character such as Neil Obstat Jr. tentatively remarks that east-coasters often overlook and underrate the Midwest, the author makes a much bolder statement in "Westward," where he writes that the main character, an MFA student and "born watcher" named Mark Nechtr, travels westward toward Collision "with the forward simplicity of a generation for whom whatever lies behind lies there fouled, soiled, used up, East" (248, 355). Far from depicting America as a "level playing field," Wallace tries to map a perceived generational gap onto a geographical binary, as the following quotation most plainly demonstrates: "Ocean City, in the past […] Vs. Illinois, in the present, the here and now" (Giles, "Sentimental" 328; "Westward" 243-244). Here Wallace's own Central Illinois region is favorably compared with John Barth's Ocean City, the east-coast setting of "Lost in the Funhouse." Remarkably, it is now the Midwest that Wallace seems to identify with the present, while, in *Broom*, it is still tied to clichés of backwardness and staleness.

Wallace attempts to sustain the Midwest's favorable comparison with the East Coast throughout most of the story by extending it to very specific geographical details of both locations. At various points in "Westward," he mentions that Barth's Ocean City Park is "enclosed," whereas Illinois is depicted as "the most *dis*closed, open place" (243, 242). And Illinois's highly fertile land is contrasted with the barrenness of Barth's coastal city and, by implication, the worn-out message of "The Literature of Exhaustion," his 1967 manifesto for a metafictional alternative to the "used-upness" of the realist tradition (64). Illinois's fertility means that the majority of its communities have "their origin and reason in the production of nourishment" ("Westward" 257). Barth's Ocean City Funhouse, on the other hand, will serve as the corporate blueprint for a chain of discotheques spread all across America, the first of which will be opened at a ceremony in Collision, following a reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald's commercial. The link between fast-food advertising and Barth's Funhouse is no coincidence: it is Wallace's way of hinting at metafiction's imminent used-upness and inevitable transformation into "*Meatfiction*," which, unlike the corn of Illinois's farmland, provides little actual nourishment (310). The story, in other words, appears

to mark a decisive movement away from the East Coast and toward the Midwest, away from Barth's generation and toward an as yet undefined "new" era. Here the ambitious young Wallace tries to take his next big step, to "sing to the *next* generation" (Ibid. 348).

Yet the story soon adds another level of depth and complexity to what at first appears to be a straightforward and simplistic black-and-white comparison between a bright midwestern future and an east-coast establishment in bad decline. Wallace's portrait of the heartland actually remains ambivalent throughout, and the author refrains from excessively praising or readily siding with the periphery. Just like *Broom*'s G.O.D., the Central Illinois of "Westward" is made to double as the embodiment of the loneliness and emptiness that Wallace believed to be inherent in American life at the end of the twentieth century. So, when the author asserts that "Illinois is, by no imaginer's stretch, a Funhouse," he means to stress the Midwest's difference from the East Coast but also highlights the emptiness and boredom he believed to be at the heart of America (242).[30] Another example of the author's ambivalence toward the Midwest is his description of the region's fertility, which at first seems a positive quality that distinguishes it from the coastal region and the supposed unwholesomeness of metafiction, until Wallace mentions that the region's corn surplus means that there is "(weirdly) too much of it to be worth anything" (268, 299-300). Furthermore, the disclosed Illinois landscape may strike readers as liberating, but its emptiness, its "flat blanket of soil," is one of the only things that a character named J. D. Steelritter "truly fears" (242). Even the decision to open the first Funhouse in Illinois is a sign of the author's ambivalence, for it is representative of a conventional understanding of the Midwest as the all-American region that serves as "the ideal headquarters, test market, and trial base" for the United States as a whole (Rosen 21).[31] Ultimately, it is double-edged descriptions like these that reveal how Wallace

[30] Boredom would turn out to be one of the central themes of *The Pale King*, which is largely set in the midwestern town of Peoria, Illinois. See below for an in-depth study of what is surely the most ambitious of Wallace's works about the Midwest.

[31] I will discuss this notion of the Midwest as test market in more detail in my analysis of *The Pale King* and its portrait of the all-American city of Peoria, Illinois.

adds more and more complexity to his narrative design. The writer's allusions to the popular idea of the Midwest as an archetype of American culture complicate any programmatic attempts to segregate the region from the rest of America and to compare it favorably with the East Coast.

These complications and contradictions are also part of the story's main intertextual references to Barth. The celebrated writer makes an appearance in "Westward" as Professor Ambrose, a teacher at the East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program. Several of his MFA students have been invited to the aforementioned reunion. One of these students, a self-proclaimed *artiste* named Drew-Lynn (D. L.) Eberhardt, has recently decided to quit the writing program because both Professor Ambrose and her fellow classmates have shown a complete lack of interest in her experimental writing. But before she quits, D. L. decides to criticize Ambrose's own work, "Lost in the Funhouse," by writing an epigram on the classroom's blackboard. This epigram, which evokes the opening sentence of Barth's story, "For whom is the Funhouse fun?," helps us get a clearer understanding of the possible criticism that Wallace directed against Barth, and its relation to Wallace's spatial reorientation (Barth, "Lost" 69). The epigram is as follows:

> For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.
> For phonies, the Funhouse is love.
> But *for whom*, the proles grouse,
> Is the Funhouse a house?
> Who lives there, when push comes to shove? (239)

Who lives there? This, I suggest, is the vital question. It shows the first tentative signs of a turn toward people and their representation as fleshed-out characters, as well as toward normative family environments and the idea of "home" that would preoccupy Wallace throughout his later years.

In "Westward," on the other hand, the author never really follows up on the question. He merely voices his criticism of the apparent absence of any three-dimensional human element from Barth's metafiction—an absence that he explicitly

relates to solipsism, judging from the following comment made by Mark Nechtr: “Solipsism affects him like Ambrosian metafiction affects him” (303). Not only does “Westward” refuse to give any answers, but it actually replicates those very alienating effects associated with Barth’s story. Whereas its Central Illinois setting could, as a logical part of the story’s initial comparative method, be expected to act as the complete opposite to any metafictional hall of mirrors, it is eventually turned into a geographical equivalent of Barth’s Funhouse. Wallace ends up mapping the solipsism of Barth’s Funhouse onto a geographical space, thereby transforming the Midwest into a “concrete human theater of human loneliness,” to borrow a phrase from his review of David Markson’s 1988 novel *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* (“The Empty” 108). This spatialization of solipsism enables Wallace to imagine a scenario that he later described in that same review: “What if somebody really had to *live* in a *Tractatus*ized world,” in which he or she wakes up one day “to being the last and only living thing on earth” (Ibid. 77, 78)? “Westward” portrays such a solipsistic *Tractatus*ized world in the shape of the vast and scarcely populated farmland of Wallace’s Illinois home, a boring and completely disclosed region “in the middle of nowhere,” settled by ghost-town bedroom communities connected to one another by rural roads that are identified by numbers and directions only, causing the story’s main characters to get lost on their journey through a land so flat, vacant, and featureless, that “there’s nothing to hold your eye[;] you have to pan back and forth, like a big No, your eyes so relaxed and without object they almost roll” (“Westward” 307, 244).

After having established such a connection between the midwestern landscape and this “central delusion” of solipsism first in *Broom* and then, more explicitly, in “Westward,” the author would reinforce this connection in “Getting Away,” whose landscape descriptions contain the following reminiscence about the Midwest, with a notable reference to George Berkeley (Ibid. 304):

> One of the few things I still miss from my Midwest childhood was this weird, deluded but unshakable conviction that everything around me existed all and only *For Me* […] that everything exterior to me existed only insofar as it affected me somehow. [… T]his is the sort of regally innocent solipsism of like

> Bishop Berkeley's God: all things are nothing until his sight calls them forth from the void. ("Getting Away" 89)

And yet, in "Getting Away" Wallace did try to formulate an answer to the question "who lives there?" by closely observing the midwestern visitors of the 1993 Illinois State Fair. This human element is almost entirely absent from "Westward." For that reason, it never manages to do what it accuses Barth's metafiction of not doing either, namely to elicit in an unironic way a very immediate, emotional response from the reader. No matter how close a comparison Wallace draws between a writer and a Cupid-like archer whose arrow, "aimed with all sincerity just West of the lover, is on line with his heart," no matter how much emphasis he puts on the story's last line, "You are loved," the ironies and complexities of his narrative design mean that he never strikes directly at the reader's heart (333, 373).

According to Alfred Alcorn, this applies to the book's other pieces, too. In his review of Wallace's collection for the *Harvard Book Review* in 1990, he criticizes Wallace's stories by arguing that "[t]heir verbal richness doesn't make up for what might be called a lack of heart" (15). "Fiction," Alcorn writes, "ought to be memorable in the literal sense—ought to be like places, people, events, feeling[s] to which you can return with a sense of nostalgia" (Ibid.). It is precisely such a nostalgic turn toward places and people, I suggest, that comes to characterize Wallace's literary project from roughly this point on. And his aforementioned piece of creative non-fiction about his native Midwest, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood," is the first significant step in this direction. To borrow a memorable phrase from the author's 11 July 1989 letter to *Playboy*'s Alice Turner, it shows how Wallace gradually resurfaces after he had "plunged Lucifer-like into the rut of 'self-conscious trendy meta-shit' you seem to think is my one interest and forward gear" (Wallace).

Surface Reflections

Interestingly, the same issue of the *Harvard Book Review* that includes Alcorn's criticism of *Girl* also contains a review by Wallace himself. The book he reviewed was *Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler's List: Indiana Stories* by Michael Martone, an Indiana-born writer who was then Briggs-Copeland Assistant Professor of Fiction at Harvard University and has since established himself as a veritable patron of midwestern literature.[32] Reading these two reviews back-to-back makes for a stark contrast: where Alcorn criticizes Wallace's tales for their lack of heart, Wallace praises Martone's stories for depicting "people [who] are unique and 3-D and worthwhile not only because of their studied normalcy […] but because they're drawn with the animating care which sheer talent can confer" (13). While Alcorn found that a nostalgic sense of place and people was missing from *Girl*, Martone's "emotional cartography of a region" seems to have evoked such strong feelings of nostalgia in Wallace that he deemed it necessary to warn his readers "that the reviewer, who's from rural Illinois, might be prejudiced by sentiment," adding that "some of Martone's Midwestern portraiture [may] not have the same emotional resonance for an East-Coaster" (Ibid.). One of Martone's stories, "Pieces," would even make it into Wallace's syllabus for his 1992 "Introduction to Literature" course at Boston's Emerson College ("LI 123"). In light of his great admiration for Martone's work, it is all the more significant that in a 1991 letter to Nadell he mentions that it was "a Harvard guy named Martone" for whose anthology on the Midwest he wrote the piece about his rural childhood (Wallace).[33] The essay, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," is therefore best understood alongside Martone's work and within the explicitly midwestern context of Martone's 1992 collection

[32] For a recent example of Martone's reputation as midwestern editor-in-chief, see Martone's edited collection of short stories by several well- and lesser-known midwestern authors, titled *Not Normal, Illinois: Peculiar Fictions from the Flyover* (2009), dedicated to the memory of David Foster Wallace. This book, to which I return in chapter 3, includes stories by Max Apple, George Saunders, and other midwestern writers. Notably, it was Saunders's 1997 story collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* that Wallace claimed to be "highest on right now" in an interview with Laura Miller for *Salon* (Wallace, "The Salon" 63).

[33] Although Wallace's letter to Nadell is undated, the year in which it was sent can be deduced from Wallace's mention of "a request to review some weird German guy's novel about some girl's buttocks for the NYT Review" (Wallace). The book Wallace refers to is F. J. Fiederspiel's 1991 novel *Laura's Skin*, which Wallace reviewed in the 5 May 1991 issue of *The New York Times*.

Townships—even though an abridged version of the piece did appear in *Harper's* first.[34]

It is particularly instructive to read Wallace's pseudo-autobiographical account alongside Martone's own contributions to *Townships* as well as an earlier volume of his, *A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest*, which Wallace may well have consulted in preparation for his own essay, since the original 1988 edition of it is among his personal books held at the HRC. The latter of these two essays by Martone is a short, impressionistic piece titled "The Flatness" that describes the lay of the midwestern land in relation to the region's "plane geometry" or grid-like geography (29). This attention to the midwestern grid is consistent with one of two common perspectives on the region. "The average view of the Midwest," William Barillas explains, "is as seen driving seventy miles an hour down an interstate highway, or flying over in a jet, noting how the Cartesian survey grid creates a patchwork of perfectly rectangular fields" (19-20). Of course, we have just seen that most of "Westward" was written from a windshield perspective, but Wallace had so far only made a brief mention of the bird's-eye view of the Midwest's survey grid in *Girl*'s "Here and There," where the main character remarks that "[w]e flew away over the flat summer board games of Indiana and Ohio" (157). This aerial view of the Midwest as a chessboard is explored more thoroughly in "Derivative Sport," which opens with a description of Wallace's midwestern boyhood as growing up "inside vectors, lines and lines athwart lines, grids" (3).

These grids have very specific historical origins. According to Martone's introduction to *Townships*, they are the product of the mathematical mind of Thomas Jefferson, who sat on two government committees, one of which was charged by Congress with the task of locating new American land and "drawing up" methods for its sale under the Land Ordinance of 1785 ("Correctionville" 1). Martone writes that

[34] The full draft would later be reprinted in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* under the same title as in *Townships*. Because the various differences between the two are either negligible or not relevant to the present discussion, all the following citations refer to the essay as it appears in *A Supposedly Fun Thing*.

Jefferson's contribution to the completion of this task consisted of drawing straight lines on a rough map of the midwestern territory and "lay[ing] out squares of space that would eventually add up to new states that needed naming" (Ibid.). With the Ordinance of 1785 and the creation of the post of Geographer of the United States, the new lands were subdivided into "six-by-six-mile squares called townships" (Ibid. 2). From this angle, it is no wonder that Wallace's "part of the Midwest always looks laid down special, as if planned" ("Derivative" 6). Geometric planning is, after all, at the very heart of the heartland's design, which explains Wallace's observation that "[c]ollege math evokes and catharts a Midwesterner's sickness for home" (Ibid. 3). It is this midwestern survey grid, whose origins are outlined in Martone's introduction, that underlies Wallace's essay's focus on what Paul Quinn has described as the "vexed relationship between the abstraction of cartography and the empirical fact of real country" (88). Contrary to Geoff Ward's observation that Wallace's writing is like no other work of regionalism because it "translates the great Midwestern outdoors […] into mathematical or scientific terms," it seems that "Derivative Sport" is very representative of midwestern writing precisely because of its mathematical perspective and emphasis on abstractions ("Endnotes" 12:55-13:00). It turns out that the Midwest, more so than any other American region, combines the space of the mind with the lived environment of the rural landscape.

With regard to this combination, Martone makes several striking observations that seem to have resonated strongly with Wallace, seeing that he underlined them in his copy of *A Place of Sense*. The first of these, which Adam Kelly also mentions in his online piece "The Map and the Territory: Infinite Boston," is the third sentence of "The Flatness," in which Martone remarks that "[t]he geometry of the fields suggests a map as large as the thing it represents" (29).[35] This sentence relies for its effect on the well-known metaphor of the map and the territory, which reappears, in slightly altered form,

[35] Kelly's piece, which appeared in the online literary magazine *The Millions* on 13 August 2013, relates his reading of Wallace's annotated volume to his experience of participating in the inaugural "Infinite Boston" tour, a re-enactment of William Beutler's "ruminative travelogue and photographic tour of key locations in and around Boston, Massachusetts," that are depicted in Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* (Beutler).

in Martone's introduction to *Townships*.[36] There Martone describes his view of the township of Correctionville, Iowa, as that of a "map more detailed than the thing it represents," and he remarks that "[w]e are Midwesterners because we think ourselves into the map of the place" ("Correctionville" 11, 6). Both Kelly and Quinn have rightly noted that Wallace devised his own elaborate play on this conceit of the map and the territory in one of the tragicomic set pieces that are part of *Infinite Jest*. The piece to which they refer depicts a group of tennis students playing a game of Eschaton, which can best be pictured as an unlikely mix of tennis, trigonometry, "summer board games," and model United Nations ("Here" 157). The game ends in total chaos when several players refuse or are unable to see the difference between snow on the map and snow on the territory (*IJ* 321-342). What Kelly and Quinn have overlooked, however, is that Wallace first relates this confusion between the map and the territory to his midwestern home. In "Derivative Sport," the author first entertains the idea of a tennis court as a map of the territory, in this case, of Central Illinois. While reminiscing about his tennis-playing years, Wallace mentions that the cracked rectangular surface of the local midwestern courts, with their lines and lines athwart lines, had "the eerie look of well-rivered sections of Illinois, seen from aloft" (7). A map of the Illinois region is inscribed in its territory, as it were, causing the lived environment to resemble a space that is all about the head.

Martone provides the appropriate context for this view of the Midwest in his preface to *Townships*, where he writes that "[t]he power of the grid that overlays it often prevents us from seeing the place itself" ("Correctionville" 5). An awareness of the geometric grid thus prevents midwesterners from accessing the lived space of their midwestern homes, leading Martone to describe the grid as "this plane geometry that enmeshes us" or even as a "cage of reason that has never quite fit" (Ibid. 11). That idea of the survey grid barring some inhabitants from accessing the emotional

[36] This metaphor of the map and the territory is part of a larger discourse on representation and simulation, to which several authors have made important literary contributions. Surely the two most famous contributions are by Lewis Carroll, whose novel, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), plays on the possibility of a map on a one-to-one scale, and Jorge Luis Borges, whose short story, "On Exactitude in Science" (1960), offers a mock-historical account of a group of geographers who set out to draw a map of the Empire that is so accurate it covers the whole of the Empire's territory.

geography of the Midwest may well have appealed to Wallace as an elegant metaphor for his feelings of being an "intrinsic outsider"—feelings that surfaced in *Broom*, where Rick Vigorous mentions that in his midwestern boyhood he suffered from homesickness even though he was home all along. Wallace himself implies that there is such a link between the grid and his feelings of alienation when he writes that he "liked the sharp intercourse of straight lines more than the other kids I grew up with," and he thinks that "this is because they were natives, whereas I was an infantile transplant from Ithaca" ("Derivative" 8). What this suggests is that, for Wallace, his status as outsider directly relates to his awareness of the midwestern survey grid, an awareness not shared by native midwesterners, whom he imagines to be unselfconsciously connected to, or rooted in, the region. Here, we find one of the first important hints of Wallace's later views on provincial midwesterners and their supposed ability to go about their daily lives with unconcerned ease.

But it is still only a hint of Wallace's later ideas, for the author is mostly preoccupied in "Derivative Sport" with clarifying his own lack of a connection to the Midwest, that is, his own "[a]lienation-from-Midwest-as-fertility-grid" (Ibid. 14). The reader will recall that he frequently compares these feelings of alienation, experienced by Rick Vigorous, Mark Nechtr, and that peculiar "species" of fiction writers, to being a "born watcher" (*Broom* 344; "Westward" 248; "E Unibus" 21). It is important to keep this in mind when considering another of Martone's observations that Wallace marked in his copy of *A Place of Sense*. As Kelly has also noted, Wallace underlined two sentences near the end of "The Flatness" in which Martone relates how he "grew up in a landscape not often painted or photographed. The place is more like the materials of the art itself—the stretched canvas and paper" (33). The explanation that immediately follows these two sentences gives us an idea of the implications of Martone's comparison between the midwestern region and the visual arts. Martone explains that "our response to the geology of the region might be similar to our response to the contemporary walls of paint in the museums" (Ibid.). A cursory look at modern art theory may help us understand what he most likely meant here. In a subsection on

"Grids" that is part of her 1985 study *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Rosalind Krauss offers the following account:

> In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. (9)

Krauss's explanation of the visual effects of grids turns out to be wholly applicable to the perceived abstraction from lived experience that Wallace, following Martone, ascribed to the midwestern survey grid, which serves as a metaphor for Wallace's self-professed status as observer, outsider, or born watcher.

The important conclusion to be drawn from this comparison is that this same sense of experiential abstraction underlies what Quinn has called "Wallace's habitual mediation of his region," that is, his inclination, which we have so far seen both in *Broom* and "Westward," not just to consider his midwestern home as a subject in itself but also to imagine it as a medium for expressing his broader artistic ideas about the emptiness and loneliness of late twentieth-century American culture (Quinn 94). It is therefore significant that Wallace scribbled the following remark in the margins of Martone's abovementioned comparison, a remark that did not escape Kelly's notice either: "Not object but medium" ("The Flatness" 33). Here, Wallace himself acknowledges the possibility of the Midwest as medium, which, of course, is in line with Amy Wallace's description of her brother's Midwest as neither here nor there, and the fictional David Bloemker's thoughts on *Broom*'s midwestern setting as a middlescape that is hard to define in itself: "a place that both is and isn't" (142). By relating these thoughts about his midwestern boyhood, his self-professed outsider status, and the symbolism of the grid in "Derivative Sport" to Martone's observations, we might be led to conclude that Wallace merely crystallized a lot of his early ideas about the Midwest, its intangible qualities, and its in-betweenness. It may seem, in that case, that he settled on the Midwest's role as a largely two-dimensional plane onto which he could

project his larger ideas about America. But that would be to overlook, as Kelly seems to have done, the significance of a number of highly relevant passages from Martone's "The Flatness" that Wallace also underlined.

In the first of these, Martone describes how "[i]n the whiteout of the passage through the flatness, dreaming can take over. The dull colors richen. The corn in the field begins to sparkle like the cellophane corn on the set of *The Wizard of Oz*" (32).[37] Without getting ahead of ourselves too much here, it is worth noting that this transition from bland, monochrome scenery to a rich, Technicolor dreamscape is the effect Wallace was presumably after in his unfinished novel *The Pale King*, judging by one of his notes about how moments of crushing boredom can heighten the senses: "Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color" (*TPK* 546). This idea of heightened sensory perception is the central metaphor of Martone's piece, as evidenced by another annotated passage that Kelly does not mention. In this rather lengthy passage, Martone explains that he "dislike[s] the metaphor of the Heartland," not because of its emotional undercurrents but because it "implies that, here at some exact center, lies something secret, hidden and important" (32). In fact, feelings do play a large part in Martone's own idea of the Midwest "as a web of tissue, a membrane, a skin. […] The Midwest as hide, an organ of sense and not power, delicate and coarse at the same time. […] It is the place of sense" (32-33). This entire paragraph, which Wallace underlined and marked for himself, directly relates to Martone's conclusion, which Wallace also underlined: "Forget the heart. In the flatness, everywhere is surface. […] We stare back at it. Beneath our skins, we begin to disassemble the mechanics of how we feel. We begin to feel" (33). The Midwest's flatness, in other words, makes its residents all the more three-dimensional in a way to which Wallace responded so strongly in his review of *Fort Wayne*.

At this point, then, it is useful to return to the question that D. L. asks in "Westward," which is: Who lives there? It would seem that, with this question in mind,

[37] Wallace also appears to have reworked this phrase into one of the midwesternisms that he noted down in his "Records Notebook," which reads as follows: "IL summer late afternoon or after rain: light gets saturant and the corn glitters like Oz's cellophane corn" ("Records" 203).

and with his sights set squarely on the Midwest after having read and reviewed Martone's work and having just written his own piece for Martone's anthology, Wallace now began to formulate his artistic statement about how literature should, as he put it in his interview with McCaffery, "addres[s] and antagoniz[e] the loneliness that dominates people" ("An Expanded" 31). He did so most explicitly in his essay "E Unibus Pluram," which was published alongside his interview with McCaffery. Both halves of this "essay-interview nexus," to use Kelly's phrase, have since come to occupy a central place in scholarship on Wallace's writing (Kelly "The Death"). As we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, the essay is considered by many to be "the crucial text" in Wallace's oeuvre, in large part because of its oft-cited final paragraph, which has come to be seen as an outline of Wallace's own literary project and is therefore worth citing at length (Burn, *David* 15). "The next literary 'rebels' in this country," Wallace concludes,

> 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 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. ("E Unibus" 81)

One of the first critics to stress the essay's importance was A.O. Scott, who argued that it is "Wallace's most rigorous attempt to cure his aesthetic headache and wriggle free of the metafictional trap" that he had set for himself with "Westward" (39).

Though Scott expressed his reservations about whether or not Wallace counted himself among these anti-rebels, critics such as Kelly and Lee Konstantinou have argued emphatically that Wallace successfully implemented these anti-rebellious characteristics in his own work, which Kelly has grouped under the concept of the New Sincerity and for which Konstantinou has coined the phrase "postironic belief" (Konstantinou, "No Bull" 85). In the second half of this chapter, however, it will become

more and more apparent that Wallace's literary efforts to stick to this blueprint, which he himself had sketched out, were not at all as simple, unironic, or straightforward as they have been made out to be. Careful attention to a likely source of inspiration for Wallace's artistic statement, which has remained largely overlooked, reveals how he continually added levels of complexity and play to his own views on an anti-rebellious literary future. Only recently did Wallace's biographer suggest that midwestern "[n]ostalgia seemed to play a part" in Wallace's formulation of his literary manifesto (Max 157). Max argues that in "E Unibus Pluram"

> Wallace was signaling that cultural health lay in a return to the earnestness he'd grown up with. Back then in his midwestern childhood, a person said what he or she meant. It did not matter that he had never really been that person nor that his mental health issues had walled him off from ever becoming that person; it was reassuring for him to imagine it. (Ibid.)[38]

Given that in a lot of writing about the Midwest "the reigning motif is nostalgia for a pastoral village-based America," I argue that Max was definitely onto something when he recognized in Wallace's call for old-fashioned principles and open-heartedness an element of nostalgia for the author's midwestern home and, more importantly, the plain-spoken people whom Wallace imagined to be the inhabitants of this Midwest that, in his father's aforementioned words, reflects a "better truth" (Wuthnow 10; qtd. in Harris, "David" 186).

Max was not the only one to make this connection to the Midwest. In her review essay on *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), which is included in her 2009 book of essays *Changing My Mind*, Zadie Smith makes the following astute observation:

> As city dwellers yearn for Virgil's pastoral, so intellectuals will tend to romanticize the pure relationships they imagine exist between simple people. Wallace was on guard against this as he was against everything […] and yet still it slips through, here, as well as in the non-fiction, where we find instinctive sportsmen, service-industry workers, farmers and all kinds of down-home folks

[38] Max also mentions that Wallace was aware that Franzen's thinking had clearly influenced him, which is why Wallace sent Franzen a copy of the essay (Max 157). As we will see in chapter 2, Franzen expressed very similar ideas about anti-rebels in "Perchance to Dream" and his breakthrough novel, *The Corrections* (2001), in which he makes an explicit connection between this sense of anti-rebellion and the conservative citizens of the midwestern suburb where he grew up.

> (usually from his home state of Illinois) receiving that warmness Wallace could never quite muster for hyper-reflexive intellectuals more or less like himself. (283)

Especially her comment about Wallace's idealization of the "down-home folks" of Illinois is, I suggest, a crucial one: while it is true that Wallace's formulation of his anti-rebellious literary project was never grounded directly and explicitly in midwestern reality, it appears to have nonetheless been reassuring for Wallace to imagine a Midwest whose positive, small-town values could serve as a counterbalance to the freneticism of life in America at the turn of the millennium. These values, for instance, closely match *The Pale King*'s later emphasis on the virtues of the Illinoisan "good people" and the civic principles of the "small-*h* heroes" working for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in Peoria, Illinois (*TPK* 37, 127). More immediately, Wallace's nostalgic imagining of his midwestern home points toward two of his human-interest pieces about the state of Illinois, namely his 1994 essay "Getting Away From Already Being Pretty Much Away From It All" and his still unmentioned post-9/11 article "The View From Mrs. Thompson's," which first appeared in the 25 October 2001 issue of *Rolling Stone*.

Into the Interior

Before we go on to examine these two pieces more closely, it is useful to make one last reference to Martone's "The Flatness," or rather, to a 2000 reprint of the essay that was included in the volume *The Flatness and Other Landscapes*. A photocopy of this reprint is among Wallace's teaching materials held at the HRC, and scholars seem to have entirely overlooked it so far. While most of his annotations are the same as those contained in his copy of the 1988 volume in which "The Flatness" debuted, there are two new notes in the top margin of its title page. The first of these reads: "Q: Who is this for? Non-natives, or natives (to appreciate the beauty of their own land) or

both?" (Martone 1). And in the note below it Wallace asks: "Or is this just some exercise for some cool descriptions? Q: Is there a point? Does it need to have a point?" (Ibid.).[39] What these notes seem to suggest is that, at this later stage of his career, Wallace was much more conscious of an implied reader and of how the point of view in a regionalist text like Martone's can either make or break a connection with this reader. On that same first page, for instance, Wallace circled the word "they" twice, while on the second page he circled the word "I" in "I grew up on a plain" and wrote in the left margin: "shift from they to I" (Ibid. 2). Clearly, the difference between insiders and outsiders was very much on Wallace's mind in preparation for his class.

A piece for the November 2008 issue of *Harper's* gives us a good clue as to why this may have been so. Titled "It All Gets Quite Tricky," this publication is made up of several replies Wallace wrote to questions from students in Anne Fadiman's advanced non-fiction writing classes at Yale University in the previous two years—questions that are all on the topic of Wallace's essay "Getting Away." In reply to a query about finding a balance between self-mockery and making fun of others in his report on the Illinois State Fair, Wallace admits that he "got some pissed-off letters indeed from Midwesterners, along with some aggrieved press mentions in the Midwest—'Local boy goes off east and writes smart-ass article for hip New York mag.' etc." ("It All" 32). It is not difficult to see how this experience may have made the author even more self-conscious and mindful of how such local reporting is, to cite another part of his reply, "a dangerous kind of piece to do, because it sets up Narrator Persona challenges, more specifically the Asshole problem" (Ibid.). These Narrator Persona challenges and their relation to Wallace's feeling, in his sister's words, "neither here nor there," are precisely what I want to focus on in the following analysis of "Getting Away" and "The View," both of which signal a major departure from his early writing by presenting a view from rather than of the Midwest. This shift in

[39] Funnily enough, in writing "Q." before each of these questions, Wallace unknowingly performs one of those very midwesternisms that he recorded in his "Midwesternisms Notebook," namely that of "[p]receding a question with 'Question': 'Question, why aren't office supplies a revenue expenditure instead of an operating expense'" ("Midwesternisms" 1).

perspective, I argue, coincides with both a literal change of scenery and a more subtle change in Wallace's literary views.

Since his matriculation at Amherst College in 1980, Wallace had lived the greater part of a decade away from the Midwest, mostly on the East Coast and briefly in Arizona, and he had only paid infrequent visits to his Illinois home, visits that were overshadowed by his first serious bouts with depression (Burn, "Chronology" xx). As a result of his increasingly heavy substance abuse in the years after he graduated from the University of Arizona, this chronic depression became more and more severe until it reached a critical point in October 1989 (Max 135). Only months after he had returned to east-coast academia to do graduate work in philosophy at Harvard University, Wallace had to be hospitalized at McLean, a university-affiliated psychiatric institute in Belmont (Ibid. 134). There the 27-year-old writer was confronted with the grim reality that, if he were to continue his current lifestyle, he would not make it past the age of 30 (Ibid. 135). Following this bleak diagnosis, Wallace agreed to be transferred to Granada House, a halfway house in nearby Brighton where, significantly, he found himself completely outside his comfort zone, attending regular Alcoholics-Anonymous (AA) meetings with ex-convicts, vagrants, and prostitutes. "Most of the guys in the house are inmates on release," the author wrote in a letter to his former Amherst mentor Dale Peterson, "and while they're basically decent folk it's just not a crowd I'm much at home with" (qtd. in Max 138). But as discomfiting as his stay at Granada House may have been, it must not have taken long for Wallace to realize the artistic possibilities it afforded him. The stories that many of his fellow residents were eager to share with Wallace provided him with "the sort of access to interior lives a novelist could not get elsewhere" (Max 141).[40] It was at this point that the writer started his first serious work on what would be his breakthrough novel,

[40] Max writes that, at Granada House and his Boston AA meetings, Wallace appears to have been particularly drawn to a resident nicknamed "Big Craig," who, to Wallace's surprise, "turned out not only to come from a different world but also to be quite sensitive" (Max 141). A fictionalized version of Big Craig appears in *Infinite Jest* as Don Gately.

Infinite Jest, a book that prominently features a Brighton halfway house and relates the complex interior lives of several of its residents.

Yet his experience at Granada House offered Wallace more than just inspiration for a single east-coast novel. It prompted him to try and readjust his literary sensibility and left a lasting impression on the author, whose knowledge of "anything other than middle-class academic life [had been] minimal" (Ibid. 136). He would bring these newfound insights midwestward when, in the spring of 1993, he took up the position of Associate Professor in Creative Writing at ISU in Bloomington-Normal, twin cities approximately one hour away from his childhood home (Ibid. 173). Wallace bought a house near the open land at the edge of town, not far away from a trailer park, and allegedly took great delight in its "Rural Route 2" address (Ibid. 200).[41] He did have his initial doubts, though, about moving back to Illinois. "I thought it would be very boring here," he confessed to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1996, "and I'd only stay here a couple of years" ("The Next" 57). But in the same interview he says he soon realized that he "like[d] this much better than the East Coast" (Ibid.). At least he seems to have liked it enough to stay in Illinois for nearly a decade, which turned out to be his most prolific period. During his tenure with ISU, he completed the 1079-page novel *Infinite Jest*, finished his second book of stories *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, wrote some of his best-known essays, and made several false starts in writing the material that would be published posthumously as *The Pale King*. Only in the summer of 2002 was Wallace eventually lured away from the Midwest by an offer of the Roy E. Disney Professorship of Creative Writing at Pomona College in Claremont, California (Burn, "Chronology" xxi). This brought to a close his highly successful Illinois residency.

In this context, "Getting Away" and "The View" are interesting because they are the bookends to Wallace's Bloomington period, and in their two distinct ways they

[41] This trailer park may well have provided the inspiration for the setting of some of the episodes in *The Pale King*, particularly §8, a part of which appeared in *TriQuarterly* as a stand-alone piece titled "Peoria (9) 'Whispering Pines'" (2002). In this section, Wallace describes the run-down trailer park where an IRS employee by the name of Toni Ware grew up (*TPK* 53-65). See below for a more detailed analysis of this part of *The Pale King*.

show how Wallace tried to incorporate a new literary sensibility into his view from the Midwest. Let us start, then, by taking a closer look at "Getting Away," which, in Wallace's own words, shows him in the guise of an east-coast journalist doing "pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish," namely the 1993 Illinois State Fair and, more importantly, its visitors ("Getting Away" 83). "Fresh in from the East Coast," the author takes care to point out early on in the essay that he "grew up in rural Illinois but ha[s]n't been back for a long time" (83, 84). In doing so, he calls attention to the role of geographical outsider that he will play throughout the entire piece of creative non-fiction, in which "the operative word," like in "Derivative Sport" and most of his other non-fiction, is definitely "*creative*" (Harris, "David" 186). It is in this role of outsider that Wallace makes remarks on his childhood home such as "[I] can't say I've missed it," a remark that the reader, in light of Max's aforementioned biographical account of Wallace's recurrent homesickness, will surely recognize for the deliberate piece of artistic license that it is (84). In fact, Wallace stays in character throughout "Getting Away": his east-coast persona's distant attitude toward the Midwest and its inhabitants pervades the entire essay, leading up to the east-coast Wallace's conclusion that he is "not spiritually Midwestern anymore" (132).

Here it seems that we are on familiar territory, namely that of "the alienated Midwesterner Wallace" that we saw in "Derivative Sport" (Ribbat 191). But the difference, this time, is that the author does not only stage his alienation from the spiritually and geographically empty Midwest with which we have become familiar through Wallace's imagining of *Broom*'s G.O.D., the Central Illinois of "Westward," the survey grid of "Derivative Sport," and several of the aforementioned landscape descriptions taken from "Getting Away" itself. In addition, "Getting Away" stages Wallace's east-coast persona's feelings of alienation from the midwestern people. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the following, exceptionally acid comments on a specific group of fairgoers:

> This is going to sound not just East-Coastish but elitist and snotty. But facts are facts. The special community of shoppers in the Expo Bldg. are a Midwestern

> subphylum commonly if unkindly known as Kmart People. […] Kmart People tend to be overweight, polyestered, grim-faced, toting glazed unhappy children. […] They are sharp-voiced and snap at their families. They're the type you see slapping their kids in supermarket checkouts. […] I'm sorry, but this is all true. I went to high school with Kmart People. I know them. ("Getting Away" 120-121)

As an extremely judgmental episode in Wallace's writing, and a textbook example of the abovementioned "Asshole problem," this passage raises the question of why the author decided to make his journalistic persona dismiss these midwestern provincials as Kmart People. This question is especially important, given that the above description is the total opposite to that of the earnest and neighborly Illinoisans to whom Wallace, according to Max, had looked with nostalgia in the conclusion of "E Unibus Pluram."

Paul Quinn suggests that a possible explanation for Wallace's apparent disdain can be found by paying close attention to the fact that he prefaces his comments by stating that they are "East-Coastish." We should make a note of this detail, Quinn writes, because Wallace repeatedly mentions that his essay was commissioned by a "swanky East-Coast magazine," which is the author's slightly mocking description of *Harper's*, the magazine that first published his essay under the title "Ticket to the Fair" ("Getting Away" 83, 101, 117). Although Giles posits that Wallace takes particular care to point this out so as to foreground his role as a "compromised observer," by which he means someone who is "being paid for his reportage," it seems to be more directly related to Wallace's desire to stage himself as an east-coast outsider (*Global* 168). As Quinn argues, Wallace primarily defines his journalistic persona in "Getting Away" by the cultural location of his east-coast employer, whose editors, Wallace imagines, every so often "slap their foreheads and remember that about 90% of the United States lies between the Coasts" (Quinn 97; "Getting Away" 83). From this point of view, Wallace's exaggerated east-coast elitism and aloofness draw attention to the center-periphery dialectics that underlies most accounts of the Midwest presented by "writers [who are] sent by newspapers and television stations to record their observations for distant audiences" (Wuthnow 7). It reveals that Wallace was aware of

that “tourist economy” in which, as we saw in the introduction to this thesis, regionalist writing for *Harper’s* and other east-coast members of the so-called “*Atlantic* group” traditionally participated (Brodhead, *Cultures* 146; Glazener 229).

Still, it would seem too much to call Wallace’s persona’s elitism an outright parody of the standard point of view of midwestern local color writing, since it is never quite clear how much ironic distance there is between the author and his persona. We might say, then, that it is a pastiche that is at least not *un*ironic. It draws attention to the difficulty of overcoming what Wallace specifically calls “East-Coast cynicism” and a sense of irony that has been “honed East-Coast keen” and that is often employed by reporters to simply pander to their cultured readers’ expectations about the periphery’s banality and lack of sophistication (“Getting Away” 89, 96). These concerns certainly occupied a central place in Wallace’s writing at this stage of his career. They are, for instance, a major theme in *Infinite Jest*, on which the author was putting the finishing touches while drafting his essay on the Fair. Although that novel explores these issues in the rather different environment of Boston AA, it is easy to see from the following passage about members’ on-stage speeches at AA meetings how Wallace went on to explore *Infinite Jest*’s concerns with irony and sincerity against the midwestern backdrop of “Getting Away”:

> 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 a 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. (*IJ* 369)

Here, one of the novel’s AA veterans warns against the use of self-protective irony to avoid speaking openly about, in this case, addiction. In “Getting Away,” on the other hand, this ironic mode comes to the fore because it is part of east-coast Wallace’s

attitude, his “Asshole problem,” which brings to our attention some of the more pernicious effects of such rhetorical, “calculated crowd-pleaser[s]” (Ibid.).

Funnily enough, a great example of this kind of ironic or detached journalistic attitude toward the Midwest can be found in David Lipsky’s feature on none other than Wallace himself. Commissioned by the east-coast magazine *Rolling Stone*, the piece never actually appeared in that publication during Wallace’s lifetime. Instead, the full transcript of Lipsky’s interview with Wallace, conducted on the last leg of his *Infinite Jest* book tour, was turned into a posthumous book, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* (2010), which in turn served as the basis for the 2015 film adaptation *The End of the Tour*, starring Jason Segel as David Foster Wallace. In the book, which is not as sugar-coated as the film, the New York reporter reveals his own and, by implication, his cosmopolitan readers’ cliché-ridden expectations about the Midwest’s narrow-mindedness and lack of sophistication. He observes more than once, and much to his disgust, that there is “smoking everywhere in Illinois,” and he asks Wallace whether the “*Midwest* [*is*] *more homophobic*” than other regions (47, 44). Of course, *Harper’s* has a much longer and richer tradition in local-color reporting than the magazine that commissioned Lipsky’s feature, but presumably its readership is as cosmopolitan. Wallace certainly thought as much when he mentioned in his abovementioned Q and A with Fadiman’s students that the essay was “an attempt to explain, for the mainly cosmopolitan readers of *Harper’s*, some of the effects rurality, physical distance, lack of stimulation, etc. have on people” (“It All” 32).

So the haughty tone of “Getting Away,” I argue, may well have been part of a Lipsky-like journalistic persona that Wallace created to first accommodate and then challenge his own prejudices and, more importantly, those of his non-midwestern readers. In order to achieve the full east-coast potential of this journalistic version of himself, Wallace carefully erased most traces of his midwestern roots, and he repeatedly understates his indelible midwesternisms in the actual essay. By contrast, the piece greatly exaggerates the midwestern qualities of Wallace’s companion, Kymberly Harris, who was his girlfriend at the time and joined him for the first day of

his outing to the State Fair (Max 184). Referring to Harris as a "colorful local," Wallace pretends she accompanies him as a much-needed "Native Companion" who knows her way around the area and is familiar with the region's customs ("Getting Away" 90). In truth, however, Wallace must have been as familiar with the Fair's Springfield location and its regional idiosyncrasies as his partner, which means that the caricature of Native Companion must have served an additional purpose. Conveniently, her exaggerated midwestern qualities provide a stark contrast to Wallace's east-coast journalistic persona, making his snooty and detached attitude that much more repugnant and, consequently, effective at challenging his readers' own attitudes.

A good example of this contrast is the author's description of how "Native Companion cusses and laughs when people step on her feet," whereas Wallace claims that "[s]omething East-Coast in [him] prickles at the bovine and herdlike quality of the crowd" (103-104). Another, striking example is that of Native Companion taking a free spin on one of the Fair's carnival rides, a "Ferris Wheel on amphetamines" called The Zipper (98) While the ride is in full swing, the male operators abruptly suspend Native Companion in mid-air so that they can have a good look up her dress. Afterward, Wallace complains about what he perceives to be an outrageous element of sexual harassment, but his companion simply shrugs it off, leading Wallace to suggest that this "may be just the sort of regional politico-sexual contrast the swanky East-Coast magazine is keen for" (101). What these two instances show, in other words, is how Native Companion's contrasting, non-judgemental attitude toward the Fair's Kmart People serves to heighten the non-midwestern elitism and east-coast cynicism of Wallace's caricature, which, in turn, interrogates the readership of that "swanky" east-coast magazine for which Wallace originally wrote the article.

In addition to presenting his readers with a caricature of these regional differences in the "politico-sexual" domain, Wallace also uses the trope, recurrent in postwar literary and (tele)visual representations of an imagined heartland, that the region's population is almost cartoonishly, homogeneously white. The noticeable absence of minorities comes up rather early on in "Getting Away," when Wallace

observes that, “[t]hough the Fair’s ostensibly unopen, troupes of kids mysteriously appear and engage in rather rehearsed-looking play as we approach. Two of the kids are black, the first black people I’ve seen anywhere on the Fairgrounds” (88). In other words, when the Fair is apparently closed to “regular” visitors, Wallace spots two black kids. He does not seem to make much of this, given that he offers no follow-up comments. But as casual as his observation may seem, it appears to be a good example of the selective tradition behind the “Heartland myth” that we discussed in the introduction. It calls to mind Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, in particular the scene in which Paul D takes Sethe and Denver out for a visit to the local Ohio carnival on what is called “Colored Thursday” (58). As the name suggests, it is on that day that the African American locals get a chance to visit the fair on the implicit, or perhaps even explicit, assumption that they remain out of the picture on “regular” days. With that in mind, I suggest that Wallace’s comment is not as casual as it at first appears. This becomes clear later on, when he mentions a visit to Club Mickey D’s 3-on-3 Hoops Competition and notes that “three of the six basketball players are black, the first black people I’ve seen here” since the previous encounter (107). His repetition of that phrase, “the first black people I’ve seen,” and his stereotypical depiction of black people as basketball players raise the question: are they meant to invite *Harper’s* cosmopolitan readers to judge the Fair for its apparent lack of inclusivity? Or are they a criticism of typical local-color reports for “swanky” east-coast magazines and their representation or under-representation of non-white populations? It is difficult to judge what exactly Wallace means to say here.

Because of all these questions, criticisms, and dismissive comments, it is all the more striking when Wallace’s journalistic persona does, in the end, show signs of open admiration for the midwestern provincials, their values, and local customs. This admiration really comes to the fore in Wallace’s account of his second day at the Fair, during which he goes to watch a traditional midwestern clog-dance competition. At this point in the essay, Wallace temporarily switches to a rather different approach: his persona now shows, and makes a show of, his admiration for what he describes as

the provincial midwesterners' sincerity and communal values. In his description of the competition, east-coast Wallace makes sure to point out his complete fascination with the communal and unpretentious character of the traditional dances: from his point of view, the dancers seem to form "a collective, with none of the narcissistic look-at-me grandstanding of great dancers in rock clubs" (125). In contrast, the writer later describes the dancers at a "Captain Rat and the Blind Rivets" concert as "bored in that hip young East-Coast-taught way, facing in instead of out, not touching their partners" (126). To this initial observation he adds that, "after the clogging, the whole thing looks unspeakably lonely and numb" (Ibid.). Here east-coast Wallace experiences a moment of critical self-reflection, which is presumably set up to bring about a similar moment of self-reflection in *Harper's* cosmopolitan readership.

Interestingly, this is not the first time Wallace used the example of dance to reflect on the narcissism and loneliness that he feared had become an inevitable part of mainstream culture. The planned nationwide chain of Funhouses in "Westward" is described as a chain of cutting-edge discotheques designed to "offer a whole new dimension in alone fun," which, of course, ties in nicely with the story's critique of metafiction (354). A second example can be found in *Infinite Jest*, which features a particular scene in which several party-goers are dancing the so-called Minimal Mambo, "this autumn's East Coast anticraze, the dancers appearing to be just this side of standing still" (229). What these three very similar descriptions of east-coast dances show, in Wallace's eyes, is a terrifying aloneness or solipsism that has been made into a supposedly harmless, pop-cultural lifestyle choice. The communal setting of the traditional midwestern dance, on the other hand, is established to offer midwesterners a welcome break from a sense of loneliness with which they are confronted in their daily lives amid the emptiness of their surrounding environs. The clog dance is their opportunity to get away, both physically and spiritually, from already being pretty much away from it all. But it is not just the clog dance that functions as a midwestern social hub; it is also the State Fair in general that appears to Wallace's journalistic persona as a celebration of "a grand-scale togetherness," that is, "as a

conscious affirmation of real community" (91). Ultimately, it is these traditional community values that the alienated midwesterner Wallace uncovers in, and appreciates about, the State Fair and its visitors.

In its emphasis on the provincials' sincerity and community values, "Getting Away" shows early signs of what Christoph Ribbat has called the writer's late-career "turn toward the Kmart People," a turn that Zadie Smith's earlier comment about Wallace's idealization of down-home Illinoisans also seemed to identify (194). Ribbat locates this turn specifically in Wallace's famous 2005 commencement speech delivered at Kenyon College, Ohio, in which Wallace illustrated his thoughts about living a compassionate life by asking the Kenyon graduands to imagine having to go shopping after a long day's work while choosing "to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line" (*This* 89).[42] This very lady, according to Wallace, may well be "the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a nightmarish red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness" (Ibid.). So what Ribbat describes as Wallace's turn toward the Kmart People mostly revolves around the writer's choice to focus on the average person's kindness. This choice, I argue, is already just as noticeable in Wallace's treatment of his Bloomington neighbors in his second human-interest piece on the Midwest, "The View," which first appeared in what is perhaps an even "swankier" east-coast magazine than *Harper's*, namely *Rolling Stone*.

Unlike "Getting Away," in which Wallace frequently relies on the construct of a Native Companion to stand between his east-coast persona and the midwestern fair and fairgoers, "The View" presents itself as a sincere attempt to eliminate the distance between the author's east-coastish caricature and the midwestern residents of Bloomington, or at least it starts off this way. Printed in all capital letters, its first line, "LOCATION: BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS," boldly announces that the essay's setting is

[42] Wallace's 2005 commencement address was posthumously published under the title, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (2009).

the author's own midwestern neighborhood rather than any surrogate hometown or made-up heartland location (128). This makes "The View" a unique text within Wallace's body of work. It is the only piece in which he provides a seemingly up-close-and-personal account of his actual midwestern place of residence, which perhaps explains why, in his first handwritten draft, Wallace played around with two puns for his title, namely "View from the Interior" and "Interior Views" ("The View" MS 1). In keeping with these two working titles, Wallace appears in the rather different guise of a resident who expresses an unprecedented level of closeness to and solidarity with his provincial neighbors, even though "there isn't much public community" in Bloomington and it seems, at first glance, that the town's sense of regional identity is rather precarious ("The View" 133).

The essay begins with Wallace puzzling over why, in the days following the September 11 attacks, everyone in Bloomington has American flags out. When he asks his next-door neighbor Mr. N— why this is so, Mr. N— replies "(after a little moment of him giving [Wallace] the same sort of look he usually gives [his] lawn), 'to show our support towards what's going on, as Americans'" (130). Another of Wallace's neighbors confirms that it is to "'show we're Americans and we're not going to bow down to nobody'" (Ibid.). So in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the locals seem to define themselves primarily by their "Americanness" rather than any midwestern sense of place. Hence, we might be tempted to say of Bloomington what Andrew Cayton said of the Midwest in general, which is that it "so thoroughly embodie[s] the fictions of the *national* discourse that there [i]s no sense of regional isolation" and, consequently, little sense of regional identity (157). And yet, this "midwestern nationalism," as Barillas calls it, is still driven by neighborliness and a local community spirit (19). After all, the essay's entire setting is a neighborhood get-together on 11 September 2001 at Mrs. Thompson's, "one of the world's cooler seventy-four-year-olds" who, Wallace writes, is one of the "members of my church"

(135).[43] This last comment is important because it shows how Wallace acknowledges his membership of a regional community that is predominantly "working-class Bloomington"—all the more so, knowing that "church" was actually Wallace's disguise for his AA recovery group ("The View" 137fn1; Max 263).[44] Locals whom he may so easily have dismissed as Kmart People, or as residents of "pathetic-Christian-TV-viewer-land," are now presented to us as basically decent folk.

Of course, with this change in perspective Wallace shows off his increased appreciation for the rural Illinoisans. But it must also be said that, by grouping his neighbors together as honest, God-fearing people, Wallace seems to have made his idealized portrait of the Midwest conform to the "Heartland myth." Just as William Gass's "The First Fourth Following 9/11" opens with a childhood memory "as real as if it had been drawn by Norman Rockwell," so does Wallace's essay risk coming across as a depiction of a cartoonishly straight small-town Midwest (Gass 25). For one thing, its only mention of a non-white resident is of the Pakistani owner of a convenience story named "KWIK-N-EZ," a store that is suspiciously similar to the "Kwik-E-Mart" in *The Simpsons*, which is owned by the Indian-American Apu. In light of this, it is fascinating that Wallace's manuscript drafts do present a much more socio-culturally and ethnically divided Bloomington. On page two of his first, longhand draft, Wallace writes that the "city's appearance is corporate and affluent, at least on the East side, the West side being poor and black and full of police cars. Signs on all roads at the city limits say ~~RACISM~~: Not in Our Town" (2). And in the top margin of the next page, Wallace writes that there is "a perfusive, never-mentioned separation of races and classes. Most of the low-income housing development is way out West by a Purina plant whose smell keeps everyone who doesn't have to live there away" (3). And, finally, on that same page he writes that the abovementioned "sign is inoffensive only because it's sincere: the people who put it up in diners and cafés where men in BEED-

[43] The journalist Frank Bruni describes Wallace in precisely such a neighborly midwestern setting before the start of his book tour for *Infinite Jest*. Bruni's 1996 feature for *The New York Times Magazine* shows Wallace visiting two members of his "church" to "watc[h] *The X-Files* […] in their living room [while …] eating Kentucky Fried Chicken and Italian heroes on trays" (41).

[44] Mrs. Thompson, according to D.T. Max, is Wallace's pseudonym for the mother of Francis B., who was Wallace's best friend from recovery (263, 201).

company caps drink coffee and socialize and where the waitresses all call you honey sincerely believe there is no racism here because they never go to the west side of town" (3). All these notes never made it into the published version of "The View." So while "Getting Away" at least offered brief glimpses of black people at the Fair, which raised questions of representation and under-representation, Wallace made a conscious decision to simply excise any racial and socio-economic differences from his portrait of Bloomington in "The View." In doing so, he ironically ended up reinforcing the idea that "there is no racism here" because we never get to see the west side of town.

But despite his careful omission of these divisions in order to emphasize a sense of collective identity, Wallace's alienation from this united Bloomington front eventually also surfaces in the published version of "The View," albeit in a less (visibly) provocative or offensive manner than in "Getting Away." When, for instance, Wallace writes that his having to explain New York's urban layout to the old ladies at Mrs. Thompson's "is the start of a feeling of alienation," he stresses that the neighbors from whom he feels alienated are "good people" (139).[45] In fact, it is now the provincials' overwhelming goodness and sincerity rather than their ignorance and lack of sophistication that make Wallace feel out of place. While the TV plays a constant rerun of the horrific footage of the terrorist attack, Wallace marvels at the "lack of cynicism in the room": nobody apart from him and Duane Bracero, the twenty-five-year-old son of one of the older ladies, seems to think about lodging "the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before," a complaint that, not coincidentally, would single out both Wallace and Duane as born watchers (139, 140). "The View," in other words, entails a role reversal that shows Wallace in a bad light and portrays his midwestern neighbors not as Kmart People but as sincere and naïve "good people" whose positive character traits are nearly identical to those of the literary anti-rebels whom Wallace praises in the closing pages of "E Unibus" (139).

[45] The phrase, "good people," would resurface in one of *The Pale King*'s most polished episodes, published in *The New Yorker* in 2007 as a short story, titled "Good People." I will discuss this episode in great detail in the following section on *The Pale King*.

With regard to this sense of alienation that Wallace experiences among these "good people," there are two revealing passages in his handwritten draft of "The View." Together they make up the following, lengthy observation about the people of Bloomington in general and the ladies at Mrs. Thompson's in particular:

> In fact there aren't many people in Bloomington to vent cynicism or po-mo sophistication on, which in some respects is a good thing. ➦ Layered under the shock is the same self-consciousness as at a funeral. Am I upset enough—am I doing anything inappropriate. There are no jokes on the reporters' expense. These ladies are pure heart and just <u>feel</u>, all one layer. (5)

That last observation about the ladies' ability to just feel is even more striking when considered alongside a comment that Wallace scribbled in the left margin of the next page: "Worry—I don't feel anything" (6). Here Wallace is thinking of a divide between the ladies' heartfelt sympathy and what he suspects is his own apathy or emotional detachment. In the published version of "The View," he presents this as an apparent divide between Wallace the self-confessed east-coast cynic and his midwestern neighbors' idealized sincerity. It leads to the essay's conclusion, which shows Wallace at his most critical both of himself and his cosmopolitan readership: "part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, […] and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies'" (140).

Ultimately, what this post-9/11 essay demonstrates is that Wallace's treatment of the Midwest still changed considerably in the course of the decade following his move back to Illinois and his report on the 1993 State Fair. One explanation for the differences between "Getting Away" and "The View" is that the former's "sneering at ordinary people" may, despite its strategic role in Wallace's use of a Narrator Persona, still be an honest reflection of the author's interior views and his initial reluctance to return to Illinois (Miller, "The Road" 11). It is not unlikely that Wallace overemphasized the provincialism of other fairgoers for fear of appearing to be provincial himself or, even worse, for fear of being seen as a local writer participating in the Fair's Babbitt-

like boosterism: “Us showing off for Us” (“Getting Away” 108). This status anxiety, this fear of appearing to be anyone other than a privileged member of the educated middle class, was one that Wallace would never really manage to overcome. Even in “The View,” which, as we have seen, clearly stages the author’s first sustained attempt to turn toward the Midwest and refrain from passing judgment on its inhabitants and their way of life, Wallace still portrays himself as the east-coast outsider who never truly fits in with his Bloomington neighbors. It is this continued ambivalence and anxiety that played a central role in Wallace’s creative struggle to write his third novel, whose incomplete manuscript would be pieced together posthumously by his editor Michael Pietsch and published in 2011 as *The Pale King*.

A Living Archive

As early as 1995, several months before *Infinite Jest* was even officially published, Wallace already expressed his frustration with writing new material for a third novel. In a letter he sent to DeLillo on 10 October, he makes the following complaint:

> I struggle very hard with my desires both to have Fun when writing and to be Serious when writing. I know that my first book was the most Fun I’ve ever had writing, but I know also that the only remotely Serious thing about it was that I very Seriously wanted the world to think I was a really good fiction-writer. I cringe, now, to look at how so much of my first stuff seems so excruciatingly obviously exhibitionistic and so Seriously approval-hungry. (Wallace)

DeLillo, who was still deep into the writing of his own doorstop novel *Underworld* (1997), took time nonetheless to reply to Wallace on 6 November and reassured him: “All right, your first book was more fun but that doesn’t mean you’ve left pleasure behind forever” (DeLillo). He explained that, for a novelist, the writing process is one of constant doubt and self-criticism because “[t]he novel is different” (Ibid.). “The playwright,” DeLillo suggests, “doesn’t begin to die until <u>after</u> he writes his play; that’s

when the fuck-ups happen. We die indoors, and alone, and I don't mean to sound overdramatic but you know what I'm talking about" (Ibid.). In closing, he pays Wallace the following compliment:

> When I say the novel is a killer, I am reserving this designation for writers who are smart enough, sensitive enough and good enough to realize the dangers and consequently to respect the form. You have to be good before you even sense the danger, or before you can understand what it takes to succeed. Let the others complain about book tours. (Ibid.)[46]

As much as these words may have calmed Wallace down, the immediate success of *Infinite Jest* upon its publication in February 1996 appears to have caused long-term anxiety, judging by several entries in Wallace's notebooks and comments in his manuscript for *The Pale King*. One of his pieces of free-writing, for instance, contains the note "May '01 – over 6 years after delivering IJ – panic," and in the margins of one of his character outlines Wallace wrote "31 May 2005 Soon Ten Years After" and "Please help me with this fear" ("Notes on Reagan" 1; "Notes on Characters" 2). His "Records Notebook" even includes a print-out of a 1999 *Slate* "Book Club" piece on Wallace himself, in which a reader named Seth writes that "a mature, character-driven story […] that's what I want from his next book" ("Interesting"). For Wallace, the very difficulty in writing such a story was that, as Max rightly observes, "[i]n more ways than he cared to acknowledge he remained the author of *The Broom of the System*," the playful, Pynchonesque work that he had apparently had the most Fun writing (281). So that approval-hungry, aspiring avant-gardist, who had been largely dismissive of the Midwest, had likened it to a "blasted region," had described its inhabitants not as "good" but "troubled people," and had ridiculed midwesterners' religiosity by calling the area "pathetic-Christian-TV-viewer-land," was still an immutable part of Wallace (*Broom* 54, 142, 382). It is this continued presence, and the ways in which it makes itself known again and again in the draft materials for *The Pale King*, that I want to focus on

[46] Incidentally, with that last comment about book tours DeLillo lives up to his reputation as a "postmodern prophet," since Franzen would make precisely such complaints in 2001 with the publication of *The Corrections*. The following chapter discusses this episode in Franzen's career in great detail.

in the final section of this chapter in order to show how Wallace never really embraced that "better truth" of a midwestern sensibility that he had himself created, both implicitly and explicitly, over the course of his writing career.

One look at Wallace's early outlines for the novel is enough to see how exhibitionistic and downright puerile his initial work on *The Pale King* still was. In its earliest stages, the book appears to have been planned as a "porn novel" titled *Sir John Feelgood, or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*, based in part on the "Notes from Porn Essay" that Wallace made in 1989 when, as his close friend Mark Costello recalls in the same 1993 issue of the *RCF* that includes "E Unibus," he was conducting "research for a massive nonfiction piece about porn actors" (Wallace, "SJF.00"; Wallace "Sir John" 1; Costello 235).[47] A rough outline for *Sir John Feelgood*, often referred to by the acronym *SJF*, lists IRS Special Agent Shane Drinion as the titular Great Lover who makes a career for himself as a "blank" male actor in Peoria's virtual-reality laser-disc porn business because he is "unusually easy to erase from shot[s]" or "[u]nnaturally pale"—a career that, quite fittingly, has itself been erased from Drinion's story in the published work, even though there seems to be a trace of it left in the book's title, *The Pale King* ("Sir John" 3). "Drinion," Wallace summarizes, "becomes the void the viewer is projected onto" (Ibid. 4). It is at this point that his sketched-out story gets more and more convoluted and self-reflexive, for Wallace now imagines Drinion viewing one of his own adult scenes from which he has been erased. In viewing the video, the IRS agent falls in love with his own absent or ghostly image, at which point Wallace inserts the enigmatic phrase, "Every love story is a ghost story," which Max chose as the title for his biography (Ibid. 5).[48] This play on solipsistic self-love bears

[47] Interestingly, while Wallace began work on his porn novel, Robert Coover was nearing completion of his own pornographic metafiction titled *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director's Cut*, a book that had taken him thirty years to write. Published in 2002, this novel in nine "reels" centers on Lucky and his attempts to escape the X-rated film in which, he suspects, he is forced to be the lead actor. The fact that Wallace's own ideas for a self-reflexive porn novel came so close to those of Coover, a core member of a generation of writers from whom Wallace had intended to distance himself, just goes to show how much of a metafictionist he still was.

[48] D. T. Max would later use these words as the title for his biography of Wallace. For his attempt to trace the origins of this phrase, which Wallace wrongly attributed to Virginia Woolf, see Max's article for the 11 December 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* titled "D.F.W.: Tracing the Ghostly Origins of a Phrase."

more than a passing resemblance to *Broom*, which Wallace described to Lipsky as a book about "presence versus absence" (*Although* 35).

More remarkable still, Wallace's ideas for an increasingly self-reflexive story appear to have led him straight back to the Funhouse and its hall of mirrors, which he was supposed to have left behind in "Westward." His "Klimt Notebook," for instance, describes the IRS Exams facility in Peoria as an "old mirror factory—Midwest Mirrorworks" ("Klimt"). And in that same notebook entry, Wallace writes that the facility's "inside [is] filled with mirrored plate. But covered over with IRS fake-wood paneling. Some of the paneling falls off—working in a mirrored space has galvanic effect (either good or bad) on examiners" (Ibid.). A clue as to the thematic ideas behind this mirrored space can be found in his "Butterfly Notebook," where he writes that "[m]irrors start being produced in Renaissance, along w/ idea of individual consciousness—'I'" ("Butterfly"). "Mirrors, cameras, etiquette, codes of conduct," Wallace continues, "all involve being <u>seen by others</u>" (Ibid.). Consciousness and, more importantly, self-consciousness were still very much on his mind, then, which is why he may have come up with the idea that Drinion owns a "fake mirror," one that is actually a photorealist painting of the room it faces, but with Drinion left out of the picture ("Sir John" 5). Drinion's self-image, according to the outline for *SJF*, may be thematically connected to his absent father, but this backstory is later exchanged for a more developed one in which the young Drinion suffers hot-water burns on his genitals, a story that appears as "Incarnations of Burned Children" in the 2004 collection *Oblivion*. Finally, when Wallace asks himself in another typescript draft whether "Drinion's penis is huge because after he got burned by hot water spilling into his diaper the doctors had to inject him with steroids, and this caused hypertrophy of the dick," he has literally stooped to the level of penises on steroids, meaning that these early drafts can safely be called exhibitionistic ("SJF.7" 11; removed all-capitals).

The Wallace who wrote these drafts appears no different from the one who had peopled *Broom* with characters like Andy "Wang-Dang" Lang and endowed Rick Vigorous with a "freakishly small penis" (*Broom* 137). The author himself seems to

have been aware of this, too, seeing that he apparently sought a workaround by making his story revolve around a Narrator Persona in a way that is highly reminiscent of the creative non-fiction of his Bloomington period. Wallace made several false starts in creating such a persona: in one draft he presumably tried to deflect responsibility for his exhibitionism onto a narrator who is a writer for *Money and Skin* magazine going "undercover as an IRS agent"; and in another draft he seems to have wanted to impose restrictions on himself by creating an unskilled, boring narrator who announces that he is not "a professional writer, nor even a very gifted amateur, I fear, and that the following ~~document~~ memoir is not characterized by the graceful prose and skillful dramatic structure of what one might characterize as a 'literary' memoir" ("Factual Foreword" 3; "Disclaimer" 3-4). Judging by its high level of finish, the scenario that Wallace apparently settled on is the one depicted in the published "Author's Foreword," which, true to both rosters of parts included in his "Rugrats Notebook," appears not at the start of the book but several chapters into it. Along with a handful of other self-referential chapters, this foreword shows the novelist in the guise of the "real author," wrestling with his former self, namely the Wallace from Amherst's class of '85 whose English thesis would be turned into his Pynchonesque debut novel in 1987 (*TPK* 66).

In the mid-'80s Wallace purportedly worked for the IRS at their Midwest Regional Examinations Center (REC) in Peoria, Illinois, over a period of thirteen months in the years 1985 and '86, and *The Pale King* is supposed to present a memoiristic account of these months. While Max's biography leaves no doubt that, in reality, the writer had never worked for the IRS, the fictional employee David Foster Wallace nevertheless appears to be a rather accurate reconstruction or embodiment of that mid-'80s avant-gardist from whom the author tried so hard to distance himself later on.[49] For this reason, it is crucial to make a distinction between Wallace the mid-'80s

[49] To make up for his lack of first-hand experience with tax accounting, Wallace had started taking accounting classes at ISU in Bloomington immediately after the publication of *Infinite Jest*. According to Max, he "went from beginning financial accounting in the fall of 1996 […] to federal income taxation in summer 1997 and advanced tax that fall" (256). And among Wallace's personal books at the HRC are works on taxation ranging from *The U.S. Income Tax: What It Is, How It Got that Way, and Where We Go from Here* (1999) to *Federal Taxation: Practice and Procedure* (1998) and the *Complete Internal Revenue Code of 1986: Including Changes Made by the Medicare Catastrophic Coverage* (1988).

taxman and the contemporary Wallace, who describes himself as "the living human holding the pencil," writing from his home office in Claremont, California, in 2005 (66, 256).[50] Such a distinction between two personae appears to have been a central part of the narrative's design, judging by the following literary disclaimer in the published version of the "Foreword":

> Much of the book is actually based on several different notebooks and journals I kept during my thirteen months as a rote examiner at the Midwest REC. ("Based" means more or less lifted right out of, for reasons that will doubtless become clear.) (69-70)

This comment, which may well have been inspired by Wallace's initial work on a porn novel based on notes that he had "lifted right out of" his 1989 research, warns the reader not to automatically conflate the past Wallace's views with those of the present Wallace. It becomes clear why this is important when the present Wallace apologizes for the memoir's unusually disjointed narrative structure and explains that "many of the notebook entries on which parts of this memoir are based were themselves literarily jazzed up and fractured; it's just the way I saw myself at the time" (73-74). We are told that the novel's embellished account, with its self-referential trickery and fragmented story, should therefore not be seen as "some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher" (67).[51]

The past Wallace, in other words, is made into the embodiment of the author's weakness for ironic self-reference and judgmental commentary. He is there to solve the by now familiar "Asshole problem," and his observations about the Midwest and Peoria in particular are very much in the spirit of those harsh and condescending remarks made by Wallace's east-coast caricature in "Getting Away." When he recalls his school

[50] For the sake of clarity, I will, throughout this section, stick to "past Wallace" and "present Wallace" to refer to Wallace the IRS employee and Claremont Wallace respectively.

[51] This idea of multiple Wallaces is, of course, mocked in the actual story when another David F. Wallace is eventually introduced into the narrative of *The Pale King*. This Wallace, whose full name turns out to be David Francis Wallace, is actually "a high-value transfer from Philadelphia" with whom "the twenty-year-old ephebe from Philo" named David Foster Wallace is bureaucratically mixed up at Peoria's REC (413fn4, 412). The confusion between the young David Foster Wallace and this high-grade employee serves as the main plot point in the sections of *The Pale King* that center on the young Wallace's thirteen months at the Midwest REC. There are even typescript notes among the draft materials that suggest the introduction of yet another Wallace: "Mr. Yeagle is actually Mr. Wallace, Gary Wallace" ("WPF Core" 1).

years in his imagined hometown of Philo, for instance, the past Wallace gives the following account, which is of course relayed to us by the present Wallace:

> In Philo, educating yourself is something you had to do in spite of school, not because of it—which is basically why so many of my high school peers are still there in Philo even now, selling one another insurance, drinking supermarket liquor, watching television, awaiting the formality of their first cardiac. (*TPK* 293-294)

This criticism of the Kmart People of Philo is even harsher in earlier drafts, which include the description of these high school peers as "big red dead-eyed men just like their fathers, weekly haircuts, changing their own oil, IGA liquor on the warped table next to vinyl chairs worn concave in the ass and back, awaiting the formality of their first cardiac" ("975042012" 30). And yet, the fact that this comment appears inside square brackets in the typescript could suggest that the author may not have been entirely comfortable with this rhetorical throwback to that judgmental tone he had adopted in most of "Getting Away," a tone that is the complete opposite of the sympathetic one of solidarity that we saw in "The View."

Nevertheless, Wallace's notebooks, manuscripts, and typescripts are full of phrases and midwesternisms that take on the same tone and draw attention to the region's poor working class. One such midwesternism, included in a one-page note on the Chris Fogle chapter, says "Fact: an IRS town is rather like a mining town or a town built around fishery—the industry is extractive, blue-collar, heavily stratified, unpleasant" ("Note: Van Note's"). Another one, which Wallace later crossed out, reads: "Peoria at root a small town, w/ a lot of solemn caucasian poverty" ("Records" 153). And there is one that describes Peoria simply as "the plumber's butt of America" ("Evidence" 140) Though Wallace did not write these phrases into the polished drafts that the published book is based on, those polished drafts of his faux-memoirs are still full of comparable descriptions of Peoria and the surrounding midwestern region, which are far more reminiscent of *Broom*'s ambivalent portrait of Cleveland and East Corinth than the Bloomington of that post-9/11 essay "The View." For example, describing his

car ride from Peoria's regional airport to the REC at the start of his first day as an IRS employee, the past Wallace draws attention to Peoria's apparent lack of local color:

> There is no point in describing the gauntlet of franchise retail and shopping centers and auto and tire and motorcycle/Jet Ski outlets and self-serve gas plazas with built-in convenience stores and national fast food brands we crawled through, since it's now the same basic gauntlet around every US city—I believe the economic term is "monoculture." (271)

Summed up with that word "monoculture," a term that Wallace made special note of in his "Records Notebook," the past Wallace's impressions criticize, at once, the town of Peoria and the increasingly homogeneous landscape of the entire United States (13).

It is quite possible that these negative views expressed by the past Wallace were supposed to be offset against the present Wallace's more positive comments about the region—a scenario not unlike that of "Getting Away," where Wallace's east-coast caricature's dismissal of the Kmart People is contrasted, to great effect, with an appreciative account of a clog dance. Wallace may have wanted to achieve a similar effect in *The Pale King*, one that would highlight a turn toward the Midwest that the novel was presumably meant to complete. Given the novel's obsession with conversion narratives, the most central of which I discuss below, this is not implausible. For one thing, it would be similar to the literary memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by Dave Eggers, whose "sudden celebrity and windfall" in 2000 are mentioned in *The Pale King* (81n22). After all, in an addendum to the 2001 paperback edition titled "Mistakes We Knew We Were Making," Eggers stresses his own authorial persona's transformation from his younger self, the ironist working for *Might* magazine, whose "ironic contents, were included in the book simply so that they could be knocked down and picked apart" (Eggers 35). The idea of a conversion story seems even less far-fetched when we consider some very personal entries Wallace made in his "Records Notebook." The first of these shows the author in dialogue with himself over a long period of time. It reads as follows: "10/2/99 I want to be <u>so different</u> – 10/24 Tell me about it – 11/12 Oh yeah – 1-23-07 Still want to be different – 4-10-07 I can accept

being this way" (80). And in the same notebook, Wallace writes "I die + am reborn every few years" (203). So the desire for a personal transformation and the idea of rebirth definitely preoccupied Wallace.

But this transformation never occurs and a more appreciative Wallace is nowhere to be found in the drafts of *The Pale King*'s faux-memoirs. Instead, the present Wallace is less and less able to deflect the past Wallace's lack of appreciation for the Midwest and its residents. In several footnotes, which are typically reserved for editorial comments from the present Wallace, the narrative voice of this 2005 Wallace becomes virtually indistinguishable from that of his mid-'80s counterpart, which only ends up reinforcing the past Wallace's dismissive views on Peoria. The first of these footnotes contains the following comments:

> understood not as an agglomeration of human beings but as a going economic concern, Peoria had come in the 1980s to assume the same basic doughnut shape as so many other formerly industrial cities[. … T]he same basic thing played out in cities all over the Midwest. (272fn17)

Here the present Wallace passes judgment on the city of Peoria by mockingly comparing it to a doughnut, which snack is itself sold in many of Peoria's fast-food establishments that have surrounded the city as part of a large exurban ring. Not only does this description bring to mind the confusion between the map and the territory that we saw in "Derivative Sport," its use of a pop-cultural symbol to depict an entire city also evokes the image of *Broom*'s East Corinth, which was built as a large-scale reproduction of Jayne Mansfield's head. But this is not the only example. In another footnote, which provides a description of the area of Lake James near Peoria, we are told that the township is situated close to "a body of water called Lake James, but as a practical matter it's more of a large fetid pond, choked with algae from ag-runoff" (257fn2). This mention of a large fetid pond recalls Rick Vigorous's description of Lake Erie as that "biologically dead and completely offensive-smelling lake" close to Cleveland, with all of the usual connotations of the Midwest's staleness (*Broom* 57).

These various examples show that the initial distinction between a past and present Wallace eventually breaks down: the present Wallace is unable to mute the more dismissive, experimental, and ironic voice of the past Wallace. This breakdown, in turn, offers useful insights into the author's creative conflicts—conflicts that emerge most directly from one of the comments included in the abovementioned disclaimer about the jazzed-up notebooks. These notebooks, we are told, were written by a young Wallace who apparently dreamed of becoming "an immortally great fiction writer à la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec" (*TPK* 73).[52] But what is so odd about this list of authors is that only two of them can reasonably be mentioned for their experimental fiction and fractured narratives, namely William Gaddis and, above all, the verbal gymnast and Oulipo-member Georges Perec. There is no mention at all of the experimental writers whom Wallace was, in reality, imitating in the '80s, namely DeLillo, Barth, and of course Pynchon, whose unacknowledged presence in *The Pale King*, as Brian McHale has convincingly shown, accounts for the way in which the IRS's REC in Peoria "both evokes and resists the model of […] the White Visitation" in *Gravity's Rainbow* ("The Pale" 198). As for the other two writers, Sherwood Anderson and Honoré de Balzac, it seems that they have much more to do with the present Wallace's literary project than the experimentalism of his younger counterpart.

I will begin with Balzac and save Anderson for my analysis of the "Good People" section in the closing pages of this chapter. The French realist's work comes up only once in Wallace's teaching materials, but the reference goes a long way toward explaining why he is mentioned in the unfinished novel. Wallace's typed-up notes for a class on "Setting," which he copied from X. J. Kennedy's *Literature: An Introduction to*

[52] The genesis of this list is an interesting one because several early drafts of the "Foreword" mention entirely different authors, namely "Kafka or John Irving" ("The Following" 6). The reference to the former can be explained as an acknowledgement of the overall Kafkaesque qualities of the IRS bureaucracy, and more specifically as a nod to Kafka's *Amerika*, which is cited almost verbatim in the mid-'80s Wallace's job reference: "He will be given only a small job to begin with, and it will be his business to work his way up by diligence and attentiveness" (*TPK* 260n6; cf. Kafka 130). Irving's *The World According to Garp* is among Wallace's books at the HRC, and the reference to him is perhaps an allusion to the novel's genre, the *Künstlerroman*. Irving's name was the first to be substituted once Wallace manually corrected "great fiction writer" to "immortally great fiction writer" ("Author Here" 7). His replacement was Djuna Barnes, whose experimental 1936 novel *Nightwood* was on his syllabus for the Spring 2003 course on "Selected Obscure/Eclectic Fictions" ("English 170R" 609).

Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, contain the following remarks: “Physical places mattered so greatly to French novelist Honoré de Balzac that sometimes, before writing a story set in a town, he would visit that town, select a few houses, and describe them in detail, down to their very smell” (“English 102”). This is exactly what Wallace appears to have done in preparing to write about Peoria. Among his files at the HRC there is a folder labeled “CO/PA Trips,” which likely stands for County Peoria Trips (“CO/PA”). This folder contained a typescript draft, with handwritten corrections, of *The Pale King*’s prose-poetic opening, bearing the telling name “Reply to <All> Theory”—a title that may have been Wallace’s way of responding to that mid-’80s avant-gardist who, as he told Lipsky, “had four hundred thousand pages of continental philosophy and lit theory in [his] head [and] by God, [he] was going to use it” (“Reply”; *Although* 35). This short piece, published as “Peoria (4)” in the June 2002 issue of *TriQuarterly*, does manage to be strikingly different from the vast majority of Wallace’s writing up to that point.[53]

For that reason, it seems, Michael Pietsch chose it as the prologue for *The Pale King*, even though it is never entirely clear from Wallace’s own notes and rosters of parts that it was written for that purpose. As Pietsch put it to Geoff Ward, it shows how the novel “comes home,” how it is “full of this really detailed love of the Midwest, this landscape of Illinois that was inside of [Wallace, … who] goes to great extent to show the beauty of what’s thought of as the most ordinary part of America” (“Endnotes” 40:32-40:45). The piece exchanges the distant, aerial view of “Derivative Sport” for a down-to-earth account of the midwestern landscape, and in doing so, may well have drawn inspiration from what, in his 2001 review of *The Best of the Prose Poem*, Wallace called “McCarthy’s dreamy, anapestic prologue to *Suttree*,” of which Wallace had his own, heavily annotated copy (247).[54] As McCarthy has so successfully

[53] An explanation for this title, “Peoria (4),” can be found in one of Wallace’s typescript drafts, in which he writes that “[s]ince the Midwest is the fourth of the Service’s national regions, Peoria’s District office is technically designated, within the binary based classification of the IRS, Service Post 19010-4” (“WPF July” 3). “Nationwide,” Wallace clarifies on the next page, “the Peoria Compliance Complex is known informally by Service personnel as Peoria 4” (Ibid. 4). The title of the piece is also alluded to in one of Wallace’s working titles for the entire novel, “*What Is Peoria For?*,” which he often referred to by the acronym *WPF* or *WIPF* and occasionally mentioned as “*What Is Peoria 4*” (“Electric Girl” 1; “Monlogue” 60).

[54] There are also several references to *Suttree* in Wallace’s “Evidence Notebook” alongside references to Gass’s *Omensetter’s Luck*, which strongly suggests that he may have turned to McCarthy’s novel for

captured the South and Southwest, so did Wallace perhaps mean to capture the spirit of the Midwest. Unlike "Derivative Sport," in which he described "Tornado Alley" as a region "informed and deformed by wind" and told a tall tale about having played tennis in an actual tornado, there is no such overcompensation and spectacle here (15, 5). Instead of tornadoes, the prose poem describes a much gentler "morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek," which seems to carry the reader away from a hectic millennial life to what appears to be a premodern Midwest, a "[v]ery old land" that resembles a tribal Native-American province where "[w]e are all of us brothers" (*TPK* 3). Instead of the mathematical grids of post-frontier times, it presents a field buzzing with insects, a field on which horses are grazing and flowers are nodding in the wind, and we are asked: "Read these" (Ibid. 4).

But these "flannel plains" were, at one point, supposed to be juxtaposed with a more comic account of the men in gray flannel suits coming to work at Peoria's REC, judging by a clean typescript draft of the published version with the heading "Open – Juxtaposed w/ Accountants Coming to Work?" (Ibid. 3; "Walking" 1; removed all-capitals). The unpublished draft to which this heading most likely refers is the "Provisional Opening" to *Glitterer*, which was another of Wallace's working titles for the manuscript. It contains comments such as the following:

> We think of accountants as pale and pinch-faced little men, metal-minded, with obscure hobbies and fastidious tastes. The sort of person whose aura if you could see it would be gray. […] The sort whose drawers and shelves at home are sterile and organized to the point of alphabetization. ("Glitterer" 1)

Here we can clearly see how Wallace's mocking and judgmental tone creeps into his descriptions of these bureaucrats working for what, in his "Records Notebook," he calls "'The Gray Paradise' of the IRS," whose Exams Division is, according to another entry in the same notebook, nicknamed "'The Gray Havens'" ("Records" 69, 126).[55] In a later

inspiration. On page two, for example, he writes "Gene Harrogate in Suttree" and below that "Omensetter's Luck" ("Evidence" 2). And on page 31 of that same notebook he writes "McCarthy" and below that "What Is Peoria For" (Ibid. 31).

[55] All this emphasis on gray is, of course, Wallace's nod to Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, of which his own copy includes some underlined and marked passages. One of the more

entry marked “OPEN,” Wallace does write more appreciatively about “the gray paradise that is the IRS, that nation within a nation. The Vatican of America—both other and its beating heart” (Ibid. 304). But these mentions of a “gray paradise” and a “gray aura” never quite lose that comic touch; they show that Wallace had by no means muted that inner ironist of his early career.

These creative conflicts and Wallace’s overall sense of confusion are best explained alongside the regional metaphor of the tornado. In his “Editor’s Note” to the published novel, Pietsch observes that “[i]n several notes to himself, David referred to the novel as ‘tornadic’ or having a ‘tornado feeling’—suggesting pieces of story coming at the reader in a high-speed swirl” (Pietsch viii). What Pietsch does not mention, however, is that all of these notes actually describe Wallace’s own creative struggle, not his plan for the novel. Of course, for an editor’s preface it makes sense to smooth over these difficulties and present the manuscript in the best possible light. But Pietsch’s editorial remarks have led Paul Quinn to suggest, rather simplistically, that the book is an example of Wallace’s signature “encyclopedic form—the ‘tornadic’” (87). Looking at Wallace’s comments, there can be no doubt that the “tornadic” feeling was in fact his own. “It feels like I’ve got a tornado in my head,” he writes on a sheet pasted into his “Records Notebook” (131). In the left margin of his “Notes on Characters,” moreover, he scribbled “The Tornado-feeling” next to “How do pieces/characters cohere?” (“Notes on Character”). And in one of his pieces of free-writing, which includes the comments “Tornado in my head” and “Tornado or stasis,” he writes that he has “1,000,000 ideas” and “no idea seems better or less dead than any of the others” (“Floating” 3, 6, 8). According to Max, Wallace also complained in a letter to Franzen that he felt “like the whole thing is a tornado that won’t hold still long enough for [him] to see what’s useful and what isn’t” (qtd. in Max 289). Even some of his characters inherited these difficulties, going by the scene that depicts Claude Sylvanshine’s arrival

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relevant ones, in the context of the above arrival scene of Peoria’s accountants, is an underlined passage in which Tom Rath says the following: “all I could see was a lot of bright young men in gray flannel suits rushing around New York in a frantic parade to nowhere. They seemed to me to be pursuing neither ideals nor happiness—they were pursuing a routine” (Wilson 272).

in Peoria: “The whole thing presenting such a tornado of logistical problems and complexities that Sylvanshine was forced to do some Thought-Stopping right there on the tarmac” (“Zero Draft” 11).[56] Unlike Sylvanshine, however, Wallace “could not himself tune out the noise of modern life”—noise that he referred to in his introduction to *The Best American Essays 2007* as “the tsunami of available fact, context, and perspective that constitutes Total Noise” (Max 292; Wallace, “Deciderization” 312).

Instead of the “tornadic” shape, there is a Midwest-inspired form that Wallace does mention explicitly as a narrative structure—one that neatly explains what Peoria is for. In a typescript labeled *WPF* and dated 8 July 2005, Wallace toys with the idea that, “[t]oward end, as computers are implemented, someone is making a record of various agents’ lives, jobs, selves—as a kind of living archive” (“WPF July” 1). “Hence,” he continues, “the fragmented bits of narrative from different characters, which isn’t explained for some time in the whole narrative” (Ibid.). This idea of a living archive, of documenting the lives and times of the residents of a midwestern town seems to have been taken straight from Robert Staughton Lynd’s and Helen Merrel Lynd’s 1929 sociological study of the town of Muncie, Indiana.[57] Titled *Middletown*: *A Study in American Culture*, this work treats Muncie as a Middletown, that is, as an all-American locale whose residents’ behavior is representative of larger statistical averages and national trends. In fact, Wallace considers precisely such a setup in one of the typescript notes that he put up on his wall. Dated 22 October 2005, this sheet outlines the following scenario:

> Sylvanshine is on the way to Peoria REC because one particular dept. or pod of the Peoria REC has an output that’s the exact statistical mean of all RECs’ outputs. Meaning it’s the ideal test base for human examiners vs. the computerized DIF as determining which one results in the greatest revenue, the greatest efficiency. (“Wall Hangings”)

[56] Interestingly, the word “tornado” has been replaced with “cyclone” in the draft that was published as chapter 2 of *The Pale King* (*TPK* 24). Another example of the “tornado-feeling” can be found in chapter 19’s dialogue on civics, in which one of the unnamed speakers admits at some point in the conversation that “the whole thing is usually more a tornado in my head” (Ibid. 138).

[57] Wallace actually mentions Muncie in one of his typescript pieces as the post where a “super other Examiner” is stationed, presumably David Francis Wallace (“Notes on Glendenning” 42).

As four-time winner of the apparently much-coveted "All-America City" award, the real-life city of Peoria is treated as just such an ideal test market for political change, radio and television pilots, and brand-new consumer products, making it the perfect backdrop for Wallace's story (*Welcome*).[58] Given that Wallace wrote in his "Records Notebook" that "Peoria = Large-Font edition of America," he was keenly aware of its all-American status, which is so widespread that it has even been immortalized in a well-known midwestern saying, one that Wallace also made a note of in his "Evidence Notebook" as "Cliché: 'Will it play in Peoria'" ("Records" 28; "Evidence" 92).[59]

One indication that Wallace seriously pursued this idea of presenting a living archive is the fact that a lot of very polished typescript drafts, which detail the lives and backstories of the novel's cast of characters, are all identified by Social Security numbers.[60] This leaves the reader with the impression that they are part of a collection of data, an archive. Four of these accounts stand out from the rest of *The Pale King* as the author's most distinct character studies of four midwestern types, namely Kmart People, do-good people, the anti-rebel, and Christian good people. Significantly, Wallace deemed (excerpts from) three of them polished enough for publication as stand-alone pieces, and some did actually appear as short stories in literary magazines during his lifetime. The opening pages of the first of these studies, for instance, appeared as "Peoria (9) 'Whispering Pines'" in *TriQuarterly* alongside "Peoria (4)." This section, which covers the socio-economic background of IRS employee Toni Ware, opens with a detailed description of a trailer park for which Wallace also seems to have done some Balzacian fieldwork, judging by the following handwritten note:

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[58] The city of Peoria's website proudly states that Peoria won the AAC award in 1953, 1966, 1989, and, most recently, in 2013. See for more information about the award as well as a comprehensive list of past winners www.allamericacityaward.com.

[59] This phrase is said to have originated in Horatio Alger Jr.'s rags-to-riches novel, *Five Hundred Dollars; or, Jacob Marlowe's Secret* (1890), in which a group of actors are preparing to perform a show in Peoria and repeatedly use phrases such as, "we shall be playing in Peoria," "if you are sure we shall play at Peoria," and, "[t]hey will play an engagement in Peoria" (120-121). Wallace definitely knew of these novels, seeing that his "Evidence Notebook" includes the comment "'Ragged Dick'—hero of Horatio Alger's 'rags-to-riches' novels" (200).

[60] There is still a trace of these headings left in chapter 14 of the published book, which presents transcripts of various videotaped interviews with IRS employees who are all identified by their social-security numbers.

> We were trailer park children with cowlicks and smeared face and those dead eyes you see in trailer-park children when you're passing the trailer park on the Interstate because so often they build the really big parks out by the Interstate and the kids you'll see playing or just standing in the weeds on the incline of the bank by the Interstate looking at all the nice cars going someplace with dead eyes, runny noses, kids you imagine getting hit by overweight moms in the checkout line at Kmart. Trailers with black velvet art and two years of TV Guides stacked in the corner. Burnt-orange bugs. 16-wides and doublewides and single trailers on cinderblocks set 7.5 feet apart along anfractuous lanes and culs de sac named like Persimmon Lane, Grandview Lane. ("Electric" 1)

"Begat in one car and born in another," Ware spent her childhood in precisely such trailer parks with a mother who quit one abusive relationship only to start another (*TPK* 59).

Named after her birthplace, which in early drafts was Peoria and was later changed to the fictional suburb of Anthony, Toni Ware had no proper schooling at all and has had to take care of herself from an early age on, making her the novel's most obvious example of Kmart People. Her Midwest in no way resembles one of the REC group leaders' "visions of fishing barefoot on the banks of motionless rivers and a moon you could read the paper by and everyone else saying Hi to everyone else every time they saw them and moving in a kind of cheery slo-mo" (Ibid. 20). Yet the narrator never sneers at Ware the way east-coast Wallace sneered at the midwestern provincials in "Getting Away." On the contrary, her backstory centers on how, as a young girl, she maintained an inner life that was "rich and multivalent," and on how she showed exceptional spiritual resilience and came up with inventive survival strategies in the face of mental and physical hardship (Ibid. 55). In his typescripts for the narrative, Wallace makes particular mention of her reading habits, noting that she "had library cards from <five> different cities," that her "[f]avorite poet [was] Marianne Moore" and her "favorite story [was] Hemingway's 'Big, Two-Hearted River,' the first two paragraphs of which the girl had copied down by hand, and knew" ("Electric"; "Electric" 10). In a manuscript draft labeled *What Is Peoria For*, the young Ware even appears to write her own material, given Wallace's description of the "[t]itle on inside page of

journal girl keeps in the outsized ratty purse that allegedly once belonged to the mother's own mother: Brief Interviews with Hideous Men" (Ibid. 4).[61]

All of this is written in a lyrical prose that is so strongly reminiscent of McCarthy's that Wallace feared it may "just seem like all language, some McCarthy exercise" (Ibid. 11).[62] This self-doubt comes through in Wallace's comments to himself in the margins of his drafts, comments such as "I have no idea how to do this; it's like I've forgotten," to which he replied "I know. But try" (Ibid. 3). It is at these moments, it seems, that the more exhibitionistic Wallace rears his head to invent over-the-top scenarios like that of the so-called "Scrunchy Girls" of whom Toni Ware was at one point supposed to be a member (Ibid. 4). They are called the Scrunchy Girls because "if they saw a girl wearing a Scrunchy they fell on that girl and stomped her and took her Scrunchy, to add to their collection," which Wallace describes on the same page as "[t]hreescore Scrunchies hung in rows from a splintered pegboard inside the wooden fence that demarcated the Hubcap House from the ~~mustard~~ crackhouse next door (Ibid.).[63] Although Wallace appears not to have followed up on these ideas for introducing more drama and conflict into the narrative, and although they were not included in the published version of *The Pale King*, they nonetheless illustrate how much Wallace struggled to move away from his old literary habits and to make the turn to the Midwest that the novel was presumably supposed to complete.

More evidence of this struggle did make it into the published book in the form of the most spectacular and traumatic episode in Ware's backstory. In this episode, she and her mother are driving around in their car until they are chased by one of the mother's abusive ex-boyfriends, causing the mom to panic and crash her car. After the

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[61] Wallace's account of Ware may well have drawn inspiration from the life of one of his undergraduate students at ISU, whom he mentions to Gus van Sant in a telephone interview for *Dazed and Confused*. "The best under grad writing student I've had was this girl," says Wallace ("A Fun"). "I met her when she was 18[;] she had a three year old kid. She is from a little town, trailer park, got knocked up at fifteen and was reading *Middlemarch* on the bus trying to go to the welfare office to get her bottle of milk subsidy from the Government agency" (Ibid.).

[62] Wallace also considered adding "ital[icized] chapter headings à la Blood Mer[idian]," one of which can be found among the typescript drafts of Toni Ware's backstory: "ROUGH STORY OF HOW TONI WARE (who's from the Peoria exurb of Anthony, hence Toni) came to be such a good immersive, albeit with glasses so thick they can't even be replaced with contacts" ("Records" 147; ""Electric Girl II" 1).

[63] Wallace's "Records Notebook" contains a helpful midwesternism on this subject: "MW girl: feathered bangs / brocade sweater / multiple scrunchies" ("Records" 151).

crash, which has left both the young Ware and her mother badly injured, the man suffocates Ware's mother, and the only thing that keeps him from killing Ware is her exceptional survival instinct to play dead and look the man straight in the eye for five long minutes without blinking, "even though the dryness and discomfort must have been terrific" (*TPK* 442). Though this scene is not as gruesome as in earlier, unpublished drafts in which the young Ware "plays dead, wipes mom's blood over her head and face and lies there with eyes open, eyes open so long that she goes blind," they still show how Wallace seems not to have been able to refrain from spectacular, cinematic scenes of violence ("Green Spiral Reward"). Such scenes do not fit the "anti-rebellious" aesthetics proposed in "E Unibus"; they reveal a Wallace who is no different from the one who reportedly told fellow writer Mary Karr that he had "put certain scenes into *Infinite Jest* because they were 'cool'" (Max 315n11).

Wallace appears to have taken a less spectacular approach in the narrative that focuses on the spiritual make-up of a second midwestern type, namely the IRS employee Leonard Stecyk. In his account of Stecyk, the author seems to have been more interested in exploring the character's sincerity and neighborliness. Although in chapter 5 we learn that Stecyk's midwestern childhood was also troubled by familial trauma, his loss of his mother due to a "terrible accident while cleaning the oven" is a lot more banal than Ware's mother's death (*TPK* 31). This difference is, of course, representative of the social divide between Ware, who belongs to Peoria's Kmart People, and Stecyk, who is part of the provincial subphylum of do-good people. The community values, which add to his status as a do-gooder, are already apparent from the very first sentence, which depicts him as a volunteer member of his school's crossing patrol, "shepherd[ing] the lower grades' kids through the crosswalk outside school" (Ibid. 29). And on the next page we see the young Stecyk as a hall monitor, proudly proclaiming that "he's here to serve, he feels, not run people down," which is an obvious allusion to the adult Stecyk's job at the IRS, or "the Service" (Ibid. 30).

While the published version of Stecyk's story never really provides any reasons for his exemplary behavior, Wallace's character outline in his "Green Spiral Notebook"

does. Not unexpectedly, it involves a lot more drama. Stecyk's worst childhood memory, Wallace writes, is of running home from kindergarten everyday "with the dread that his mom/parents would have left" ("Green Spiral Notebook"). One day, his nightmare becomes reality as he returns to an empty house: "No note, no neat little plate of cookies and apple and glass of milk laid out at his place at the kitchen table" (Ibid.) It turns out, Wallace continues, that his mother had attempted suicide, had "taken pills then panicked + called Dad" (Ibid.). In the rush to get her to the hospital, Stecyk's father had forgotten to ask the neighbors to pick up their son. Under the impression that he has been abandoned by his parents, the young Stecyk "falls to his knees and prays. He promises that, if his parents will forgive him and come home, he will be good from now on" (Ibid.). Incidentally, the moment he finishes his prayer, the phone rings and it is his father calling. Relieved that he has not been abandoned after all, Stecyk keeps his promise and becomes, as Wallace puts it in another longhand draft, a "Hideously Nice Kid" ("Hideously" 2). His behavior, in other words, is the outcome of one of those conversion stories with which Wallace seems to have been preoccupied while working on the drafts for *The Pale King*.

But what may have begun as Wallace's dramatic yet unironic exploration of Stecyk's embrace of sincerity and neighborliness quickly turned into a rather sadistic parody of these positive character traits. Because of his obsession with volunteer work, donations, and extracurricular activities, no one really likes Stecyk and he gets bullied by his school's sixth-graders, who accost him just before Halloween and leave him "hanging from a stall's hook by his underpants' elastic" (*TPK* 35). After this incident, however, the ultimate do-gooder makes sure to let the bullies know that he harbors no hard feelings against them and apologizes for anything that might have provoked their aggression toward him. Another psychologically painful moment in his youth is his "eleventh-birthday BLOWOUT BASH," to which only nine of the 322 invited children show up (Ibid. 32). Even here, though, the young Stecyk shows a lot of psychological strength and makes sure to donate the staggering amount of leftovers to the Kent County Children's Home "via procedures and transport that the birthday boy has

initiated even while the big Twister free-for-all is under way" (Ibid. 33). When he makes his adult appearance in chapter 12, going around his new Peoria neighborhood to hand out free copies of the "US Post Office's 1979 National Zip Code Directory," he is still that same do-gooder (Ibid. 89). And according to an unpublished piece of dialogue, included in Wallace's "Records Notebook," his behavior is still as unbearable to others—even to his own dog:

> "X had a dog that committed suicide."
> "The dog killed itself? I've never heard of that. I didn't even know it was possible. Animals don't suicide."
> "What about lemmings?"
> "All right, call lemmings the exception that proves the rule."
> "To be honest, I'd never heard of it before either. But it happened. The evidence was incontrovertible."
> "It was dangling from a little noose or something?"
> "You'd have to know Stecyk [It was Stecyk's dog!]." (221; Wallace's brackets)

Apparently the gifted satirist in Wallace could not help but poke fun at the very qualities he had himself proposed as desirable in the conclusion of "E Unibus."

The third of Wallace's character studies, which focuses on the anti-rebel, is also the longest one. It tells the dramatic conversion story of "Irrelevant" Chris Fogle, and according to Max, "Wallace liked the many pages he wrote on Fogle well enough to consider publishing them as a short stand-alone novel" (294).[64] Before we are presented with Fogle's story, we have already been told in one of the videotaped interviews that make up chapter 14, that there are "two kinds of people now, when you get down to it" (*TPK* 105). These two types are as follows:

> On one hand you've got your rebel mentality […] going against the power and the Establishment and what have you. Then, type two, you've got your other type, which is the soldier personality, the type that […] aligns themselves with power and authority […]. The age of the rebel is over. It's the eighties. If You're a Type Two, We Want You. (Ibid.)

[64] Madras Press eventually did publish this section as a stand-alone novel, titled *The Awakening of My Interest in Advanced Tax* (2013). The proceeds of this novel actually go to Granada House, the Brighton halfway house that was the inspiration for *Infinite Jest*'s Ennet House.

"IRS workers," as Wallace puts it in one of his notebook entries, "are not edgy or rebellious. They don't go against the grain—they go with the grain, wish to be the grain" ("Records" 136). Fogle's story, in short, describes how he became an anti-rebellious Type Two, that is, how he came to go with the grain, not against it. There are several dramatic moments in Fogle's life that lead to his spiritual conversion, but I want to focus on two of them here.

The first of these is the death of Fogle's father, a man who "grew up during the Depression" and whose own conscientiousness and old-fashioned principles stand in stark contrast to the fecklessness and casual lifestyle of his drop-out son (Ibid. 167). The scene of his death, we learn, was a Chicago subway station crowded with Christmas shoppers. In a rush to make it inside one of the subway carts, Fogle's father gets his hand stuck between the automatic doors and is dragged into the tunnel, where he dies upon impact with a maintenance ladder. In one of Wallace's more dramatic earlier drafts, Fogle was even supposed to have "r[u]n along w/ Dad, trying to pull him off the train—but […] at end of platform he let go, watched father go pinwheeling into the darkness of the tunnel" ("Aimless" 11). This in itself already matches, or perhaps even tops, *Infinite Jest*'s gruesome account of how Hal Incandenza finds the remains of his father, who killed himself by sticking his head into a rigged microwave oven. But there is more to it. Apparently, what made Fogle's father rush toward the closing doors was "some kind of strange, involuntary feeling of anxiety or urgency—I don't think there is even a word for it" (*TPK* 198). Yet there is, in fact, a word for it, and Wallace noted it down in his "Evidence Notebook," which contains the entry "JR 393 Torschluss-Panik [sic]"—a note that is a reference to page 393 of William Gaddis's 1975 novel *J R*, which mentions the so-called "Türschluss syndrome" ("Evidence" 190; Gaddis 393). This syndrome describes a fear of missed opportunities, of literal and metaphorical doors closing right in front of you, and according to Fogle, it "was especially bad for my father, who was a man of extreme organization and personal discipline" (TPK 199). Wallace clearly had some sadistic fun, so to speak, at the expense of the man in the gray flannel suit.

The second key event in Fogle's conversion story could not seem more different from the first and appears to be much more in line with Wallace's thoughts on an anti-rebellious literary project. What allegedly made Fogle pursue a career as one of the "small-*h* heroes" of the IRS is a Jesuit teacher's speech delivered at the end of a course in "Advanced Tax" at Chicago's DePaul University (Ibid. 127). In his speech, the Jesuit teacher, whom Wallace describes in one of his typescripts as resembling "a Dust Bowl farmer in Walker Evans' Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," makes the following remarks ("Monologue" 45):

> "Gentlemen, read your history. Yesterday's hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made, brought things into being. Yesterday's society's heroes generated facts. […] But it is now today's era, the modern era […]. In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated." (*TPK* 232)

Today's "heroic frontier," the Jesuit continues, "lies in the ordering and deployment" of data (Ibid.). This is why all true accountants wear hats. "'They are today's cowboys," he explains. "As you will be. Riding the American range'" (Ibid. 233). Fogle is so impressed by this idea that he experiences the Jesuit's rather odd end-of-term speech as a rebirth, which is signaled to the reader by "a visual flash of something lying in its crib and waving its limbs uselessly in the air, its mouth open and wet" (Ibid.). In an interesting reversal of what Matts Västå calls the traditional midwestern "escape theme," featured in novels such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), which recounts how Caroline Meeber escapes her rural Wisconsin home to move to Chicago, Fogle actually leaves the metropolis of Chicago to head back to the appropriately named small town of Libertyville, where he signs up for a future career with the IRS (36). His rebirth is completed at the Peoria REC, whose intake procedure requires all new employees to be issued with a new Social Security number that identifies them as bureaucrats for the rest of their lives—a process that the present Wallace describes in the abovementioned "Foreword" as: "It's like you're born again, ID-wise" (*TPK* 66fn1).

And yet, the draft materials for the Chris Fogle chapter provide a fascinating glimpse of how the Jesuit's speech may, alternatively, have resulted in trauma rather than spiritual rebirth. One of Wallace's typescripts for the chapter includes a short snippet of the Jesuit's speech, which reads as follows:

> The contest now is in the slicing. Gentlemen, you aspire to hold the knife. To admeasure. To shape the slice, the knife's angle and depth of cut. [a knife not unlike this one] ➦ (later, in dreams/memories, he'd say "a knife not unlike this one"). ("Aimless" 20; Wallace's brackets)

This description, which suggests that the Jesuit pulls an actual knife at some point during his speech, contains more than a hint of violence, and the idea that it should be represented as a recollection or as part of a dream implies that there may have been something traumatic about the event. Following up on this idea brings us to another draft, in which Wallace considered linking Fogle's story to a "description of Nightmare of Rows of men in offices, other section" ("Van Note" 68). This office nightmare would eventually find its way into *Oblivion* as part of "The Soul Is not a Smithy," which is one pupil's traumatic recollection of a civics class in which the teacher "had evidently just written *KILL* on the chalkboard" (84). So, in composing a relatively uneventful scene that is meant to highlight the small-h heroism of an uneventful life, Wallace was evidently still devising other, more spectacular plots that appear to undercut the entire message that the characters in his scene are trying to convey.

Finally, the last of the four character studies I want to examine is chapter 6, which was published in the 5 February 2007 issue of *The New Yorker* under the title "Good People" and was singled out by D. T. Max at the 2012 *New Yorker Festival* as a piece that "sounds unlike anything else David ever wrote" ("Rereading" 1:08:37-1:08:39). The magazine's fiction editor, Deborah Treisman, confirmed to Max that Wallace was "very, very particular about the tone of that story when we worked on editing it," and she explained that it "is basically a take-off on Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'" (Ibid. 1:08:45-1:08:53). Just as Hemingway depicts a couple, "the American" and "the girl," talking very indirectly about abortion while they wait at a

Spanish train station, so does Wallace portray two young Peorians, Lane Dean and his girlfriend Sheri Fisher, talking very awkwardly about the same dilemma while they sit in a park. He even appears to have made a subtle nod to Hemingway's piece by describing how Lane "pictured in his mind an image of himself on a train, waving mechanically to something that got smaller and smaller as the train pulled away" (*TPK* 38). The decision on whether or not to abort Sheri's pregnancy is made more difficult by the fact that both of them, unlike Hemingway's couple, are very serious in their religion. But instead of drawing attention to the "Kmart People-ish" element of a young pregnant girl who is still in college, and instead of judging or satirizing the couple's faith in the way *Broom*'s foulmouthed cockatiel, Vlad the Impaler, made a mockery of the Midwest's religiosity, Wallace chooses to underline the profundity of Sheri's and Lane's spiritual lives, which marks an important change.

The author captures the characters' thoughts and doubts in an uncharacteristically straightforward prose style that is aimed at bespeaking their sincerity—a style that, I suggest, takes its inspiration not directly from Hemingway but from one of his immediate precursors, Sherwood Anderson. One possible reference to Anderson may have been included in the majority of Wallace's chapter drafts in the form of Lane's original surname, "Sweetwood," which appears to have its origins in the names "Sherwin; Sherwood" that appear in one of Wallace's brief character notes ("Innersapco" 1; "Sylvanshine/Stackpole" 1). And Wallace's heavily annotated copy of Anderson's 1919 story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* proves that Wallace was intimately familiar with Anderson's tales of midwestern small-town life, which appear to have resonated with him on a very personal level, judging by the fact that he wrote his initials "DW" in the margin next to the following excerpt from "Godliness":

> As time passed and he grew to know people better, he began to think of himself as an extraordinary man, one set apart from his fellows. He wanted terribly to make his life a thing of great importance, and as he looked about at his fellow men and saw how like clods they lived it seemed to him that he could not bear to become also such a clod. (Anderson, "Godliness" 69)

It is not hard to see in Wallace's annotation some form of self-criticism, some recognition of his own judgment of his fellow Illinoisans, his persistent "Asshole problem."

In light of this apparent self-criticism, it is all the more remarkable to see that Wallace underlined several of Malcolm Cowley's observations in the book's foreword that explain the level of compassion and understanding that characterizes Anderson's writing. One of these underlined passages reads as follows:

> That single moment of aliveness—that epiphany, as Joyce would have called it, that sudden reaching out of two characters through walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding—is the effect Anderson is trying to create for his readers or listeners. (Cowley 7)

Significantly, Cowley makes this comment about Anderson's story "The Untold Lie," a story about how, out in the cornfields, a young farmhand named Hal Winters confesses to his older co-worker Ray Pearson that he "got Nell Gunther in trouble" and wonders whether he should do "the right thing" and marry her (Anderson, "The Untold" 205). In this story, of which Wallace underlined entire paragraphs, not much is spoken but a lot is said. "It is as if a gulf had opened in the level Ohio cornfield," writes Cowley in another prefatory comment that Wallace underlined, "as if, for one moment, a light had shone from the depths, illuminating everything that happened or would ever happen to both of them" (Cowley 7). A comparable effect is created in Wallace's "Good People" chapter, whose third-person narrative is largely focalized through Lane and brings to the surface a profound and complex interior life that would have otherwise remained hidden behind similar "walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding." We are offered a glimpse of such miscommunication when Lane realizes that what he had intended as words of comfort had not reassured Sheri at all, and now he feels "like a ninny," which is itself an obscure midwesternism that Wallace seems to have chosen very carefully

for this reason, judging by an earlier typescript that reads: “he felt like a douchebag <~~turd~~> <ninny>” (*TPK* 37; “Innersapco” 2).[65]

The complexity of Lane’s interior life is illustrated exceptionally well by a long passage near the end of the chapter, in which he is trying to imagine not just what Sheri will say to him about her pregnancy, but also what she will actually mean when she says it. After his continuous silent prayer, Lane experiences a sudden “moment of aliveness” that is strikingly similar to the one described in Cowley’s above comment about Anderson, a moment that he “would later call within his own mind a vision or *moment of grace*,” which supposedly enables him to foresee exactly what Sheri will say and mean (*TPK* 42):

> she would say that she cannot do it. That she is sorry she did not know this sooner, she hadn’t meant to lie, she’d agreed because she wanted to believe she could, but she cannot. […] That listen—this is her own decision and obliges him to nothing. That she knows he does not love her, not that way, has known it all this time, and that it’s all right. That it is as it is and it’s all right. She will carry this, and have it, and love it and make no claim on Lane except his good wishes and respecting what she has to do. […] Her voice will be clear and steady, and she will be lying, for Lane has been given to read her heart. […] It will be a terrible, make-or-break gamble born out of the desperation in Sheri Fisher’s soul, the knowledge that she can neither do this thing today nor carry a child alone and shame her family. […] She is gambling that he is good. (Ibid. 42)

Lane’s second- or triple-guessing of Sheri’s decision about whether or not to keep the baby actually seems to match the complexity of the mind games played by the sophisticated ladies’ men in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Yet Lane’s intentions are far more sincere. While carefully weighing his options, he remembers that his mother called Sheri “*down to earth* and liked her, thought she was good people, you could tell—she made this evident in little ways” (Ibid. 37). From his sudden revelation, which allowed him to see “into Sheri’s heart,” Lane knows that “Sheri is gambling that he is good,” too (Ibid. 42). But throughout the narrative, Lane is plagued by doubts about whether or not he is, in fact, good. Finally, from a later chapter, which was

[65] Wallace’s “Midwesternisms Notebook” explains that “Breasts = ‘Ninnies.’ (Rural slang)” (“Midwesternisms” 2).

published in the 9 March 2009 issue of *The New Yorker* as “Wiggle Room” and features a slightly older Lane as an IRS employee, we know that he did marry Sheri in the end, even though he was not sure he loved her.

All of this would seem to confirm Max’s comment that the “Good People” chapter is unlike any of Wallace’s other work. But Lane and Sheri were not always “good people,” and different variations on the pregnancy scenario recur throughout Wallace’s manuscripts and notebooks. One such variation describes how “[g]uy got girlfriend pregnant, decided to ditch her, was just about to when it was discovered she wasn’t really pregnant. Suffers incredible guilt. ➦ She was only pretending to be to get the guy to ditch her?” (“Records” 157). And that is just the most harmless of these alternatives. Another scenario, for instance, details how “he got girlfriend pregnant, refused to commit to her; she died while having an abortion. (Plus, he’s Catholic?) So out of guilt, he takes the dreariest, most unpopular job he can find?” (“Note: Van Note’s”). At one point, Wallace even considered a tie-in to the IRS rebirth idea that we discussed earlier, seeing that he wrote “X gets girlfriend pregnant and can’t deal with either marriage or abortion and flees. Enters IRS the way men in the past entered French Foreign Legion. It’s a way to change your SS#, for one thing. And girl’s father looking for him” (“Code”). That last plot idea, in particular, would have added a darkly comic twist to both the “Good People” story arc itself as well as the general idea of the IRS as a noble calling, as a place for upstanding anti-rebellious citizens.

Of course, Wallace eventually discarded these ideas for a dramatic plot twist, but his longhand and typescript drafts reveal that he had by no means embraced the more straightforward and sentimental scenario that would make it into the published version. The most obvious signs of his continued struggle are the notes that he scribbled in the margins of these drafts. In the top-right corner of the third page of what he called his “zero draft,” for instance, Wallace wrote “My Inner Sap Lives,” and on the top of page four of his first draft he wrote “Sapsky” as well as “Sheri Slutsky hates her name” (“Lane” 3, 4). Both this first draft and his typescript draft were, moreover, titled “Innersapco, Inc.,” all of which suggests that Wallace was not exactly comfortable with

the story's more sentimental or sappy tone and had to poke fun at it, at least privately (Ibid. 1; "Innersapco" 1). A slightly subtler hint about Wallace's fear of sappiness and sentimentality can be found in a description of the story's setting, included in both his "zero" and first drafts: "It was May and the area's grass was very green and soft and the air suffused with honeysuckle and violets like being held down and sugar poured into your nose" ("Lane" 1).[66] This comic reference to "sugarboarding," so to speak, would later be replaced with the more neutral phrase, "which was almost too much" ("Innersapco" 1).

The subtlest of all these clues as to Wallace's continued struggle is also the most important one. It concerns a trio of excerpts—each taken from a different draft—in which Lane reflects on his feelings for Sheri. The first is taken from the "zero" draft and reads: "why is he so sure he does not love her? Why is love a switch that's either on or not?" (Ibid. 3). The second comes from his first draft: "why is he so sure he does not 'love' her? How come 'love' is a switch that's either on or not?" (Ibid. 5). And the third one from his typescript draft reads: "why is he so sure he doesn't love her? Why is that kind of love a switch that's either on or not?" ("Innersapco" 6). So here we see Wallace shifting back and forth on whether or not to use quotation marks in Lane's reflections on his love for Sheri. This may, at first, seem like a very minor difference in punctuation, but it has very big implications when we consider it alongside the following entry in Wallace's "Evidence Notebook":

> Postmodern conundrum (Eco, ➦ (Reflections on The Name of the Rose), quoted by Adair in Flickers, p. 196: A man loves a really sophisticated woman and can't say to her, "I love you madly" or "kiss me, you fool" because he knows that she knows that these words have been used before in cheesy entertainments. Plus she knows he knows she knows this, etc. It's almost impossible to speak innocently – we know too much basic rhetoric and context. Solution: He can say, "As Barbara Cartland put it, 'I love you madly so kiss me you fool.'" This way he visibly abjures false innocence, paying tribute to her

[66] This is another one of Wallace's midwesternism, noted down in his "Evidence Notebook" as "Spring: Violets in bloom; honeysuckle ➦ cloying, like having sugar poured in your nose. Bees everywhere. The watery, mint smell of growing clover. Distant manure" ("Evidence" 111).

> sophistication and simultaneously getting across what he wants to say. ("Evidence Notebook" 225)[67]

This reference to Umberto Eco helps us lay bare the great tension within Wallace's above wavering over the use of quotation marks in writing about Lane's feelings for Sheri. Should he mention love within quotation marks and undercut the entire emotional thrust of the story? Or would he be brave enough, as he put it in "E Unibus," to "risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*'"? (81).

In closing, then, we return to fear and love, the place where we began. The effort it took Wallace to work through his anxieties and get the "Good People" excerpt into the shape that it would eventually be published in adds a new layer of depth to Lane's self-doubts and desperation to be "good people." It is this desperation, I suggest, that sums up not just the novel's troubled attempts to turn toward the Midwest as a source of value and inspiration, but also Wallace's writing career in general. In one of the writer's last big interviews, conducted by *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Wallace himself voiced this desperation quite explicitly when he was asked the question, "As a writer, what parts of another writer's work would you dream of being able to borrow—the rhythms of Don DeLillo, for example? Russell Banks's characters? Pynchon's titles?" ("Interview" 156). Wallace answered that what he most envied of truly great writers were their "capacities of spirit," not their technical skills: "The abilities of writers like St. Paul, Rousseau, Dostoevsky, and Camus to render so fully, passionately, the spiritual urgencies they felt as, saw as reality continue to fulfill me with an awe that is almost despair: To be able to be such a person!" (Ibid. 157). Wallace's imagining and re-imagining of the Midwest and its inhabitants at different points in his career, I believe, are part of this very desire to develop a literary sensibility that would enable him to appeal to a whole generation of Americans and capture the spiritual urgencies of his times.

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[67] Wallace's note is a slightly altered version of Umberto Eco's original, which appeared in his 1994 book *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*. The remarks to which Wallace refers can be found on pp. 67-68 of Eco's book.

Chapter 2

"Constructing Uncool Midwestern Dreams": Jonathan Franzen's Peripheral Vision

> Get ready for the first shock of the Nineties: The new trendsetter is the heartland.
>
> — *Forbes*, 3 September 1990[68]

For its Spring Issue of 1996, the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (*RCF*) ran a special edition on "The Future of Fiction" and invited David Foster Wallace to be its guest editor.[69] Among the more notable pieces that Wallace selected was a brief essay, "I'll Be Doing More of Same," written by his fellow midwesterner and friendly rival Jonathan Franzen, who, after the publication of two moderately successful novels, was struggling to write his third. Though darker and angrier than any of Wallace's own non-fiction, Franzen's essay reaches a conclusion similar to that of Wallace's oft-cited manifesto, "E Unibus Pluram." In its penultimate sentence, Franzen prophesies that "[t]he day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative" (38). This similarity, as Wallace suggests in one of the characteristic footnotes that round off his introduction, is most likely the result of his regular arguments with Franzen about the state of American literature. "[I]t seems to me," writes Wallace, "that I've won and convinced him I'm right, so in general I'm just real pleased with Jon's essay" (8fn3). In light of the previous chapter, it is not hard to see why Wallace must have been so pleased: for all his ambivalence toward the anti-rebellious literary sensibility that he himself had proposed, it appears he had at least convinced Franzen.

In fact, few would disagree that most of Franzen's own writing, with its direct prose style, third person narrators, and strong focus on middle-class domestic life, is in

[68] This citation is taken from page 86 of *Forbes* magazine, which contains a short feature on the Midwest, titled "You Can Go Home Again," by Michael Novak. As Victoria Johnson rightly points out in her 2008 book, *Heartland TV*, the article seeks to convince readers that "square is the new hip"(152).

[69] Prior to Wallace's appointment as guest editor, two of his own essays on the state of American literature had been published in the *RCF*. His celebrated essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," and its precursor text, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," appeared in the *RCF*'s Summer 1993 and Fall 1988 issues respectively.

some measure conservative. With the benefit of hindsight, many scholars and critics now read Franzen's predictions as an indication of his shift to the more conventional narrative approach of his breakthrough novel, *The Corrections* (2001). Franzen himself opened the way for such interpretations of authorial intent when, in the same month as his essay for the *RCF* appeared, he published a longer piece in *Harper's*, titled "Perchance to Dream," in which he conflates the supposedly bleak future of the novel with his personal struggle to write his third book. The main question that he raises in this *Harper's* essay, in the apt words of James Wood, is "how to write a novel both of its time and properly resistant to it" ("Jonathan" 185). We might, of course, rephrase this as a question of how to write fiction that is equally conservative and subversive. Franzen's solution, many scholars and journalists believe, was to exchange the elaborate plots and formal experiments of the Pynchonesque postmodern novel for a 1950s-inspired "Trillingite definition of the novel as a 'tragic realism' that explores moral questions in a dialectical way" (P. Hayes 11).[70]

Such a harkening back to the realist tradition may certainly explain some of the "classical" aspects of Franzen's millennial fiction, yet it cannot account for what makes his work unmistakably of its time, so much so that it landed him on the cover of *TIME* magazine. To be able to elucidate both sides of Franzen's writing, that is, to be mindful of what Stephen Burn, in a more general context, has called the author's "double vision," we will have to view his work from an altogether different angle (*Jonathan* 31). This chapter does just that. By focusing on Franzen's largely unacknowledged regionalist tendencies, I explain how his sense of place laid the foundation for a model of authorship that presents conservatism as if it were subversion in a complicated effort

[70] See, for instance, John Baskin's comparative essay on Wallace and Franzen, "Coming to Terms." Baskin writes that, "[d]espite an early flirtation with postmodern plotting, Franzen is considered to be a conventional realist, […] blending dialogue, psychological insight and third-person narration in 'proportions that now seem classical'" (Baskin). Similar views are at the core of Sibylle Freitag's *The Return of the Real in the Works of Jonathan Franzen* (2009), one of the first lengthy studies of Franzen's work. Its rather bold title, with its apparent reference to art critic Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* (1996), does raise the question of whether "the real" has ever really been away from the realm of the novel in the same way figurative art well-nigh disappeared in the face of abstract expressionism. This question receives no satisfactory answer, though. And the apparent allusion to Foster's work is never actually touched upon.

to revalue the outmoded novel of local manners.[71] From his first book on, Franzen has increasingly placed a supposedly square but sincere Midwest in dialectical opposition to the hip and ironic East Coast. In doing so, he has found a vantage point from which to imagine the midwestern periphery as a site of resistance against what he has called a "technocorporate, postironic, cool, late-late-late East-coast world," while at the same time still mocking the Midwest for its staleness ("Jonathan Franzen" 76). What finally emerges from Franzen's fiction, then, is a complex use of allusion to the Midwest's popular image and its association with an authentic but uncool "heartland sensibility." Yet Franzen never quite manages to use this midwestern symbolism consistently, which reveals an ambivalent attitude toward the Midwest that, as we shall see, differs from Wallace's in important ways.

In a long and revealing interview with Donald Antrim, Franzen has stated that the "most important experience of my life, really, to date, is the experience of growing up in the Midwest with the particular parents I had" (Ibid.). It is therefore only fitting that we begin by taking a closer look at the midwestern environment in which Franzen grew up, or rather, at the author's own account of this environment in his 2006 memoir *The Discomfort Zone*. Judging the American edition by its cover, which is adorned with a stylized map of a heart-shaped territory, we might expect the book's title to be primarily a reference to its main setting, the nation's heartland, whose residents were, after all, robbed of most of their comforts by the Great Depression. The book's first chapter, however, makes it clear that this broken heartland lies mostly in the past—a past that belongs to the author's parents, Irene Super and Earl T. Franzen, who both lived through the aftermath of the Great Depression in Minnesota before they married and eventually settled down in Webster Groves, Missouri, an affluent suburb of St. Louis in

[71] Franzen's regionalist tendencies have hitherto only come to the scholarly attention of Ralph Poole and Keith Wilhite. Poole's essay on *The Corrections* rightly concludes that the novel "promotes a regionalist-based tragic realism as entertaining model for successful poetics," but it does not specify what such a regionalist-based poetics might look like (281). Wilhite, on the other hand, provides highly valuable insights into how the suburban narrative of *The Corrections* "updates and revises long-standing regionalist approaches to local and global scales" (619). My own analysis of *The Corrections* and the context of Franzen's disagreement with Oprah Winfrey will make several references to Wilhite's critical observations.

which discomfort apparently had no place (Burn 32).[72] At least not in the 1960s and '70s, when Franzen grew up there, "in the middle of the country in the middle of the golden age of the American middle class" (*DZ* 13).

Descriptions like this suggest that Franzen's youth in Webster Groves must have felt to him like living in a midwestern reserve of sorts. The author clearly means to portray it as such because, two pages later, he reiterates that he "was cocooned in cocoons that were themselves cocooned" (15). Ironically, his cosseted life puts the memoirist at a disadvantage, though, since it is not at all in accordance with the literary conventions of what is far and away the most popular autobiographical subgenre: the "misery memoir." Having chosen *The Discomfort Zone* as the book's title, Franzen seems to make a knowing gesture toward exactly this subgenre; the title appears to warn readers who expect misery that they will merely find discomfort here. Where renowned life writers Elizabeth Wurtzel and Mary Karr wrestle with their substance abuse and troubled childhoods in *Prozac Nation* (1994) and *The Liars' Club* (1995) respectively, Franzen writes about the pains of hiding from his classmates that he secretly enjoyed "calculating absolute stellar magnitudes on his new six-function Texas Instruments calculator" (57). The closest he actually comes to drug abuse is when six members of his church fellowship are caught smoking marijuana on their ninth-grade retreat at Shannondale, West Virginia. When not just the six culprits but the entire group of teenagers are told to inform their parents of these goings-on, what ensues is the anti-climactic story of a young Franzen taking weeks to muster the courage to mention something that, in the end, leaves even his anti-drug mother so unimpressed she responds with a mere "'Oh, uh-huh'" (76).

All of this is of course painfully uncool, and Franzen is keenly aware of it. More than aware even, for he actually tries to turn this apparent disadvantage into his biggest asset by giving us a portrait of the artist as a clueless midwesterner, so to speak. As Michiko Kakutani puts it in her book review, "there is something oddly

[72] Most of the biographical data that is mentioned in this chapter is taken from either Franzen's own memoir, *The Discomfort Zone*, or the first monograph on Franzen's work, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2008) by Stephen Burn.

preening about his self-inventory of sins" against the unwritten laws of the high school in-crowd ("A Man" E1). Franzen claims, for example, that his younger self was so utterly naïve he "didn't even know what to call the stuff that kids were smoking" (69). The word "pot," he explains, had "the quotation-marked ring of moms and teachers trying to sound hipper than they really were, which was unpleasantly close to a description of myself" (Ibid.). Another painful example, to which Franzen nevertheless appears to eagerly draw our attention, is his younger self's failure to understand the social penalties of bringing his stuffed Kanga and Roo toys to his junior high school as props for a show-and-tell on Australian wildlife (69). This and many other incidents ensured that, according to Franzen, his "social death was grossly overdetermined" all the way through high school (96). In other words, his "self-inventory of sins" is brought up as anecdotal evidence of how Franzen's all-too-comfortable midwestern upbringing is precisely what caused him so much discomfort.

But who is Franzen trying to convince here? This must have been on Kakutani's mind as well when she concluded her book review by asking who would actually be interested in reading the "self-important and self-promoting contents of Mr. Franzen's mind" ("A Man" E1). Although the question is clearly a rhetorical one and Kakutani's scathing review makes it plain that Franzen's midwestern self-portrait should interest exactly nobody, it is useful to try and answer it as if it were a genuine question about Franzen's implied readership. Such efforts lead us directly to *The New Yorker*, since it published several large portions of Franzen's memoir, including the abovementioned accounts of his midwestern boyhood, which appeared separately as "The Retreat" and "The Comfort Zone." From this we are able to infer that Franzen most likely wrote his autobiographical sketches of the Midwest with a cosmopolitan audience in mind, much like Wallace wrote his essays on the Illinois State Fair and his Bloomington neighborhood while highly conscious of the cultured readership of those east-coast magazines in which they first appeared. The crucial difference between the two, however, is that Wallace's layered accounts of the midwestern fairgoers and his Bloomington neighbors constantly interrogate and challenge both himself and his

implied readers, while Franzen's self-parodic memoirs come across as more self-serving; that is, they seem calculated to make a highbrow readership sympathize with him in his struggle with being the self-styled squarest midwesterner among his sheltered, middle-class peers.

Such struggles with the (dis)comforts of a midwestern childhood are not at all confined to Franzen's autobiographical writing. With the exception of his latest bestseller, *Purity* (2015), the author's novels have so far always included midwesterners among their main characters, and more often than not these characters express similar concerns with their regional heritage. Each of these novels will be considered in greater detail later on, but for now I would like to briefly call attention to the author's second novel, *Strong Motion* (1992). Set in metropolitan Boston, this early work does not feature the Midwest as a prime location, even though its two main characters, Louis Holland and Renée Seitchek, are both originally from Illinois and Louis's name obviously hints at Franzen's own roots in the St. Louis area. Still, that does not mean that the novel has nothing to say about the Midwest, as the following exchange between Louis and Renée clearly demonstrates:

> For a long time Louis studied a full-page ad that showed a businessman using IBM equipment in his office at home. "The books on the shelves in the background of these things. Like this one here. Is that Mein Kampf?" He turned his head. "It's Mein Kampf! The guy's got Mein Kampf on his shelf! With his ten-thousand-dollar computer. And these, I bet these are Hustler magazines."
>
> "Let me see that." Renée scrutinized the photograph. "It's Main Street."
>
> "It's Mein Kampf!"
>
> "This is an S. It's Sinclair Lewis. It's Main Street."
>
> "I bet he keeps his Hitler stuff in the file cabinet." (178)[73]

With this confusion over whether a book is either Sinclair Lewis's iconic novel about the social horrors of midwestern small-town life or Adolf Hitler's autobiographical manifesto for National Socialism, Franzen appears to hint at an intentionally inappropriate and hyperbolic comparison between the "white people problems" of a life

[73] The joke works on a much more cynical level, too, for IBM's German subsidiary, "Deutsche Hollerith Maschinen GmbH (Dehomag)," actually supplied Hollerith equipment, which the Nazis used to set up their well-oiled administrative system ("IBM Statement").

on Main Street and the crimes against humanity associated with the Third Reich and Hitler's *My Struggle*. He cleverly manages to acknowledge Louis's "struggle" with his midwestern boyhood while at the same time ridiculing and invalidating it.[74] But even before this hint of a purposefully overblown comparison, the author already makes a more light-hearted reference to Louis's "struggle" with Main Street in a preceding passage that describes how Louis plays Renée a tape of a record by The Rolling Stones. The tape turns out to be the band's 1972 classic *Exile on Main St.*, which, as Louis tells Renée, is "almost as old as me" (173). In a novel that only occasionally refers to the Midwest, comments and allusions such as these become all the more meaningful, not least because the phrase *Exile on Main St.* now seems an uncannily accurate description of Franzen's own case of the midwestern blues in *The Discomfort Zone*.

Renée's own meditations on place, on the other hand, offer more general insights into the regionalist aspects of Franzen's writing. On their first date, Renée tells Louis that she was at first eager to move away from her midwestern hometown of Lake Forest, Illinois. She says that Boston is "'where I always wanted to live. The east coast in general, Boston in particular'" (119). But she explains to Louis that once she had actually moved to Boston to begin her Ph.D. in seismology at Harvard University, she quickly came to dislike the city, or not so much the actual city of Boston as "the idea of the place" (120). She complains that "the whole country buys this image of Boston as a fun town, and what's sickening is that Boston itself buys it more than anybody" (Ibid.). So while she was at first anxious to move away from her native Midwest, Renée became increasingly nostalgic for the place once she had settled into her supposedly fun life on the East Coast. We learn that, in her self-imposed exile from Main Street, "[s]ome trusting, autonomous part of herself kept constructing uncool midwestern dreams" (263).

[74] Most recently, a similar reference to Hitler's infamous work has figured as the title for a six-volume autobiographical series by Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård, namely *Min Kamp*, whose first five volumes have appeared in English translation as *My Struggle*. Interestingly, Knausgård's work is celebrated by the New York literati for "its directness and sincerity" (Hughes). On his last book tour to New York, he appeared in conversation with Nicole Krauss in Park Slope, with Zadie Smith at McNally Jackson bookstore in SoHo, and with Jeffrey Eugenides at the New York Public Library (Williams).

A similar approach to the Midwest, I argue, is integral to the creative process behind Franzen's own fiction and non-fiction, the majority of which was actually written on the East Coast, in New York City, where he has spent most of his writing life since he left the Midwest to study at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia. In recent years, Franzen has articulated his ideas about novel writing in ways that bear more than a passing resemblance to Renée's dreamscaping in the abovementioned passage. "More and more," Franzen says in a 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, "I think of novel writing as a kind of deliberate dreaming" ("The Art" 55). And in a Q&A session that followed Franzen's 2010 appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show, he describes his writing process as "try[ing] to construct something that feels like a dream" ("After the Show" 00:37-00:40).[75] The following analysis of the author's fiction, non-fiction, and interviews will reveal how Franzen gradually developed this approach, what role the Midwest plays in it, and most importantly, how it bears on Franzen's concern with authorial self-presentation. And yet, we have already caught a glimpse of this strategy in full use. After all, what is *The Discomfort Zone* if not a carefully constructed uncool midwestern dream?

No County for Young Men

Franzen's memoir is not his first literary portrait of his native Midwest. Webster Groves and the nearby city of St. Louis already served as the main setting for his much darker 1988 debut novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, which he only came to refer to in retrospect as a work "about the innocence of a Midwestern city—about the poignancy of St. Louis's municipal ambitions in an age of apathy and distraction" ("Why" 60). Upon its publication, the book received a fair amount of critical attention; and although some reviewers found fault with its confusing plot, they generally praised its subversive

[75] See below for a detailed discussion of Franzen's 2001 dispute with Winfrey and his eventual reconciliation with her in 2010, when he appeared on her TV show.

humor and overall ambition. In doing so, many of them judged Franzen's achievements against what is surely one of the major artistic benchmarks of the postwar period: Thomas Pynchon's subversive blend of pop culture and experimental writing. According to *Kirkus Reviews*, for instance, Franzen's "world takes on a Pynchon-like strangeness," and the *Chicago Tribune* observed that the novel is "heavily influenced (as Franzen seems to acknowledge) by Thomas Pynchon" (*Kirkus*; Blades 5).[76] Indeed, the book practically wears its Pynchonesque qualities on its sleeve (or rather, dust jacket), and the young Franzen appears to have actively encouraged comparisons to Pynchon, seeing that, early on in his story, one of the main characters asks another, "'Do you know Thomas Pynchon?'" (55).

One way of understanding these references to Pynchon that were picked up in book review after book review is through Pierre Bourdieu's account of "symbolic capital," which, generally speaking, is the value that any individual holds within a particular social field based on honor or prestige (*Distinction* 282).[77] In the specific field of literature, this capital traditionally derives from the amount of "high-art" accolades a work is able to draw primarily from critics and academics, whom Bourdieu fittingly describes as "the guardians of the literary state" (*Homo* 117). In the late '80s, emulating the stylistic aspects of Pynchon's highly praised and by then canonical work presented the young Franzen with arguably the most direct route to such high-art status, even though Pynchon's was by no means the only model of authorship to carry cachet in postwar American letters. Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009), for instance, identifies three broad "aesthetic formations" that enjoyed high-art prestige in the later twentieth century, namely "technomodernism," "high cultural pluralism," and "lower-middle-class modernism" (32). "Technomodernism" is that avant-gardist,

[76] Interestingly, Wallace provided a blurb in which he refrained from making any kind of allusion to Pynchon. Instead, he describes Franzen's work as "[a]n unambiguous display of talent, as important and promising a novel as any since *The Floating Opera* and the *Poorhouse Fair*" (*SM*). Perhaps it is because of these references to John Barth's and John Updike's debut works of *realist* fiction that, much to Wallace's disappointment, his blurb was not used (Max 115). It is, in fact, Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion*, whose back cover first includes Wallace's praise for *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

[77] Bourdieu is well known for expanding our conventional understanding of capital to include not only economic capital (material wealth), but also cultural capital (skills, education), social capital (networks, class), and symbolic capital (honor, prestige). For an in-depth study of these different forms of capital, see Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979).

Pynchonesque model characterized by formal experimentation and a preoccupation with America's media-saturated landscape (43). The second, "high cultural pluralism," combines modernist literary values with a focus on the "authentic" voice of cultural minorities and counts Toni Morrison among its more notable practitioners (57). Finally, "lower-middle-class modernism" concerns itself with socio-economic insecurities and often takes the form of the "Kmart realist" short story that was the hallmark of Raymond Carver (32).

From *The Discomfort Zone*, it should be evident that any of Franzen's attempts to follow Carver's example would at the very least be complicated by both his "cocooned" midwestern boyhood and his adolescent years within the ivied walls of an elite college. And, of course, any white middle-class male writer like Franzen would be hard-pressed to claim for himself the kind of "authentic" minority voice on which a work of "high cultural pluralism" hinges. So Franzen's mainstream status ends up more or less excluding him from two of these three high-cultural formations—an irony that was not lost on the author, for he would later draw attention to it in his 1996 *Harper's* essay, where he excerpts one of his aforementioned arguments with Wallace to make this point:

> Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture's alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. (Wallace qtd. in "Perchance" 51)

The example of Pynchon presented the young Franzen with the most viable model of authorship for establishing high-art credentials. And yet, even in his debut work Franzen already has one eye on an altogether different construct of literary value, namely the midwestern novel of local manners that enjoyed little or no prestige in the field of postwar American literature. As Kakutani rightly observes in her piece for *The New York Times*, the book's St. Louis setting is "a mythical place, a supercharged symbol of all-American dreams, values and problems—a 1980's [sic], urbanized version of such fictional towns as Zenith or Gopher Prairie" ("Politics" C21). With these

references to the Zenith of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and the Gopher Prairie of his aforementioned novel *Main Street*, she partially traces the work's lineage back to the outmoded regionalist tradition of imagining the midwestern small town or suburb. The following study of *The Twenty-Seventh City* pursues this observation further. I argue that close attention to the way the novel explores and portrays its midwestern suburban setting reveals a deeply ambivalent work and a writer who, at the very start of his career, appears troubled by the implications of the subversive, Pynchonesque model of authorship to which he nevertheless subscribes.

The best way to begin such an investigation is to start with a scene that comes rather late in Franzen's novel, long after its plot has been set in motion by St. Louis's appointment of a charismatic young woman from Bombay as the city's new police chief. This woman, named S. Jammu, plans to "reunify" St. Louis by abolishing a century-old law that divides the now mostly run-down city from the much wealthier county of which Webster Groves is a part. To put an end to this legal segregation, which one of the novel's mock-newspaper articles describes as "a *regional* problem," Jammu requires the help of St. Louis's prominent businessmen and public figures, who are all members of a group called Municipal Growth (11). At the head of this group is Martin Probst, a construction magnate from Webster Groves whose company's many successes include St. Louis's iconic Gateway Arch. Unfortunately for Jammu, Martin is so opposed to her plans for reunification that, in the run-up to a public vote on the issue, he lends his support to a Vote No campaign.

The key scene occurs shortly before the day of the referendum, when Martin has finally been persuaded by Jammu to stop his involvement with Vote No and switch to her camp. It describes how Martin receives a reporter from *TIME*, a magazine that, rather tellingly, was considered "the ultimate cultural authority" in the Franzen household ("Why" 62). *TIME* has expressed an interest in profiling Martin not in the context of the recent special elections but because of his entrepreneurial achievements. This is at first unclear to Martin, which is why he asks the journalist what kind of story he plans on writing. The reporter mistakes Martin's question for an

expression of concern over the magazine's overall power to shape public opinion and taste, which Bourdieu would categorize as "symbolic power" (*Distinction* 208). He gives the following answer:

> "You'd be surprised how many people have mentioned that CBS documentary 'Sixteen in Webster Groves.' I think CBS really traumatized this area. Everyone's afraid we're going to smear you. Don't worry. None of the media are, not this time around. I myself have been uniformly impressed here." (411)

So we learn from this reporter for the New York-based *TIME* that the citizens of Webster Groves have every reason to be suspicious of media interest, since their public image has apparently been tarnished by an unflattering documentary that was broadcast on national television. Given its associations with trauma, paranoia, and defamation, this documentary blends in perfectly with the fictitious elements of the novel's "swashbuckling, Pynchon-sized megaplot" that sees Jammu and her loyal supporters resort to blackmail, abduction, and terrorism to try and push through the proposed legislative reforms (Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen" 76). This could very well explain why the reference to what turns out to be a real-life CBS broadcast has not so far been spotted, let alone subjected to close scrutiny.

But Franzen clearly thought the documentary is nothing to be overlooked, seeing that he returned to it years later in *The Discomfort Zone*. There he complains that, "[a]s an adult, when I say the words 'Webster Groves' to people I've just met, I'm often informed that I grew up in a suffocatingly wealthy, insular, conformist town with a punitive social hierarchy" (60). Leaving aside the question of how his own memoir of a sheltered midwestern childhood might simply perpetuate a non-midwestern audience's negative views, Franzen blames his hometown's bad reputation on a "1966 CBS documentary called *16 in Webster Groves*," the same documentary that the *TIME* reporter mentions in *The Twenty-Seventh City* (Ibid.). The author explains that, despite its one-time airing in 1966, the documentary has lasting symbolic power over college-educated Americans from across the country because it was a staple of many sociology curricula in the 1970s and '80s. This also accounts for why the inhabitants of

Webster Groves in *The Twenty-Seventh City* can still be so affected by the CBS special, even though we know from Franzen's prefatory comments that the novel is set in "a year somewhat like 1984."

In light of Franzen's concerns, it is important that we carefully consider the supposedly alarming content of this documentary, which aired on 25 February 1966 under the official title *CBS Reports: Sixteen in Webster Groves*. The opening sequence in particular stands out because it captures the essence and poses the main question of the entire broadcast. A few minutes into the film, we are shown an image of some natural surroundings, over which the deep and slightly ominous voice of Charles Kuralt gives the following account of Webster Groves' teenagers: "Theirs, it turns out, is not the world of rebellion, dissatisfaction, and adventure" (04:06-04:10). While Kuralt speaks these words the camera gradually shifts its focus to one of Webster Groves' "8022 pleasant houses," and Kuralt continues, "Theirs is the world in which 'silverware makes you feel good'" (00:48, 04:10-04:13). Finally, Kuralt poses the question, "But how did they arrive at that conclusion so young—they're only sixteen?" (04:13-04:20). These images, accompanied by Kuralt's voice-over, invite viewers to cast a skeptical eye over an hour's worth of what can only be described now as *American Beauty*-like footage of pristine lawns and houses with white picket fences, local cheerleaders going through their routines, and high-school jocks going for their daily run. We are led to wonder, as Kuralt does in the documentary's opening shot, whether there is "something missing from their lives—some things nothing to do with good schools, nice houses, and cars in the garage" (00:26-00:34).

So in its opening sequence, CBS's "local color" report already dismisses the locals as anything but colorful. What the documentary suggests is that the square midwestern teenagers of Webster Groves lead cosseted lives and are out of touch with both the ideas behind the 1920s "revolt from the village" as well as the rebellious spirit of their own times—times that, according to Minnesotan folk singer Bob Dylan, were

definitely “a-changin’,” just not in Webster Groves (Dylan).[78] From this it should first of all be clear why Franzen writes in his memoir that the “problem with *16* was tonal” (61). But, more importantly, the material is also highly relevant to my discussion of Franzen’s own oeuvre and his concern with self-presentation. The film’s apparent disapproval of the teenagers’ non-participation in the subversive and adventurous zeitgeist of the sixties is a key example of the reigning cultural paradigm against which we can examine Franzen’s fiction, his wavering between Pynchonesque subversion and the conservative novel of local manners, and his anxieties about what either would mean for his own prestige.

Of course, what has become synonymous with the 1960s is its romanticized counterculture, epitomized by the wave of civil rights marches and protests against the Vietnam War that swept across the country around the time when *Sixteen* was recorded—demonstrations that also loom large in some of the documentary’s more memorable scenes. In one of those scenes, Kuralt sits down with some of the parents of Webster Groves to discuss the possibility that some of their teenagers might participate in a civil rights march. One father, whose opinions set the tone for the entire conversation, has the following to say about it:

> “And all any normal child has to do is look at the demonstrators at Jefferson Bank—this was what? A year ago, I suppose. And a bunch of beatnik white, black, green, yellow, everything. […] It looked like they pulled them out of some wine jug or something and put them out there to demonstrate.” (28:30-28:53)

Here the father blatantly dismisses the Jefferson Bank Protest that was held in St. Louis on 30 August 1963 to urge the bank to hire black Americans for white-collar jobs. The other parents agree with him that, surely, no “normal” teenager would participate in such a demonstration.

It is exactly this scene that Franzen picks to illustrate his own critical commentary in *The Discomfort Zone*. Remarkably, however, he does not criticize the

[78] Born in Duluth and raised in Hibbing, Minnesota, Bob Dylan is the subversive counterexample to the Midwest’s conservatism. Not coincidentally, Franzen makes repeated allusions to Dylan in his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, which I look at in the conclusion of this chapter.

parents but the filmmakers. He blames them for being "unable to imagine that you could be a nice person and still not want your sixteen-year-old in a civil rights march" and for failing to recognize in Webster Groves "a kind of apolitical niceness" (61, 62). But despite all these complaints, Franzen has already concluded beforehand that any efforts to disabuse his acquaintances of the idea that his hometown is "a nightmare of mind control and soulless materialism" are wasted because "it's useless to contradict TV" (61, 60). Yet it was the suburb's collective efforts to contradict TV that actually led to CBS's decision to produce a televised "correction," titled *Webster Groves Revisited*, which aired seven weeks after *Sixteen* and was the network's attempt "to hear what you say back to the picture tube" (01:27-01:30).[79] And even Franzen himself, however firmly he may deny it, is obviously having it out with the TV in his literary memoir.[80]

He does so, too, in his debut novel, which is why I describe the documentary at such length. I would like to suggest that *The Twenty-Seventh City* was the young Franzen's own means of revisiting Webster Groves. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say "revising," since this first novel, unlike his later memoir, seems intent on de-emphasizing the suburb's apolitical niceness and convincing us that the region can indeed be a place of rebellion, dissatisfaction, and adventure. In that respect, it is, as Stephen Burn has noted of Franzen's entire oeuvre, in constant dialogue with the work of Franzen's postmodern precursors. It is this dialogue, I argue, that is made to complement the author's conversation with a regionalist set of precursor texts, which includes the image-tarnishing and rather cynical documentary *Sixteen in Webster Groves*. The fiction of Jammu's Pynchonesque "conspiracy to subvert the government of St. Louis" allows Franzen to examine a city and suburb that are "still struggling to overcome [their] image as a 'loser'" both in the storyworld and in real life (*TSC* 37, 11). The novel's subversive plot seems a convenient way for the author to write about his

[79] For a detailed study of *Webster Groves Revisted* within the larger context of the televisual identity of the Midwest, see chapter 3 of Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV*.
[80] And not just in *The Discomfort Zone* either. His famous *Harper's* essay, for instance, is subtitled "In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," which makes it quite plain that Franzen was already more deeply invested in the idea of literature's potential to contradict television around the mid-1990s.

midwestern hometown, to challenge its nationally broadcast “square” image, and in doing so, acquire the high-art prestige that comes with writing experimental fiction.

The young Franzen’s preoccupation with the region’s loser image and lack of symbolic capital is already apparent from the novel’s title, which is explained in the book’s second chapter. This chapter recounts how, over the course of the nineteenth century, the frontier town of St. Louis developed into a booming center of national transport and commerce with the great ambition of eventually becoming the country’s capital (24). In those years, St. Louis was apparently America’s “Fourth City,” bested only by New York, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn. But several newspapers in Chicago, “a close Fifth,” begged to differ, pointing out that St. Louis’s 1870 census was based on a miscalculation that added an extra 90,000 inhabitants to the final count (Ibid.). Interestingly, the narrator shrugs off these apparently legitimate complaints by suggesting that facts and figures are not that important, since “all cities are ideas, ultimately. They create themselves, and the rest of the world apprehends them or ignores them as it chooses” (Ibid.). This rather telling remark underlines both the constructedness and vulnerability of a place’s public image. St. Louis was to experience this vulnerability first-hand when, in the wake of the Great Depression, it rapidly declined and ended up as the nation’s “Twenty-Seventh City,” in comparison to which “even Detroit looked like a teeming metropolis, even Cleveland like a safe place to raise a family” (26).

Yet the city-as-idea does not just create itself; more importantly, it is to a large extent a product of the symbolic power wielded by others, be they CBS filmmakers, an ambitious police chief from India, or a young and aspiring novelist from Webster Groves. This is where Jammu and, by implication, Franzen come in. Jammu’s ambitions to rejuvenate the region of St. Louis by merging city and county work in tandem with the young Franzen’s own efforts to play around with the conventional “idea” and status of the Midwest. The police chief’s intended changes to St. Louis’s self-image are meant to be brought about by her subversive plot to put the locals into what she and her Indian supporters call a “State,” one that she describes in rather

abstract terms as a mindset in which "the subject's everyday consciousness becomes severely limited" (30). It is more fruitful, however, to think of the "State" not on the individual but on the collective level, since it makes strategic use of "the whole Spirit of St. Louis mythos" and entails a kind of region-wide throwback to the city's more adventurous past of westward expansion, a past to which the Gateway Arch stands as a proud monument (22). But the region's frontier history is also tainted with violent conflicts between pioneers and Native Americans, who were, of course, originally referred to as Indians. It is these conflicts that Jammu the "Indian chief" attempts to replicate in order to get the area of St. Louis into a "State," and this replication is made possible by the fact that Jammu's nationality is a homograph of the historical term for Native Americans. The likeness, to be sure, is underscored by Martin Probst when he remarks at one point in the story, "All I see is coincidences. Indians and Indians" (172).

Perhaps the clearest example of Jammu's attempts to capitalize on this resemblance and to simulate the historical clashes between the pioneers and Native Americans is a series of false-flag attacks by some of Jammu's Indian supporters. These supporters operate under the name "Osage Warriors" to make it seem like their attacks are linked to the Osage Nation, a Native American people that once controlled the Missouri area. In true Pynchonesque fashion, these "Indian" attacks ironically include car bombs and a helicopter-fly-by shooting, yet they are not without their historical resonances. One of the attacks, for example, is launched in a college football stadium "where the Cardinals and Redskins [a]re locked in combat" (145). Halfway into the match, the Osage Warriors set off a bomb that has been carefully designed to wreak enough havoc to cause a panic without inflicting any fatal injuries. In the meantime, a message of theirs is displayed on the scoreboard, part of which reads, "ATTENTION GENOCIDAL PIGS / […] WE OW! ARE REDSKINS / WE FREE THE LAND FROM / IMPERIALIST NAZI U.S." (150). A similar message appears on several leaflets that the Osage Warriors spread across a local radio host's front yard after the abovementioned fly-by shooting. What these two incidents show is that the spectacular attacks are carefully made to fit a political message of a Native American revolt against

the genocidal U.S. pioneers; they are intended to put the locals into the "Wild West" mindset of the region's adventurous past in order to prime them for Jammu's reforms, which are ultimately meant to revitalize the area.

One other important example of Jammu's attempts to stage a clash of civilizations reminiscent of frontier times is the abduction of Martin Probst's wife, Barbara. To get Martin into a "State" that makes him stop his involvement with the Vote No campaign and publicly show his approval of the police chief's plans for the "reunification" of St. Louis, Jammu orders her right-hand man, Balwan Singh, to seduce Barbara. Posing as a writer for *House* magazine, Singh arranges to meet Barbara at her home in Webster Groves to do a feature on her house's interior design. Soon after his initial visit, Singh successfully seduces Barbara and he expects to continue the affair long enough to put Martin into the "State." Barbara, however, insists on ending the affair immediately, which is why Singh resorts to his back-up plan. He forces Barbara to write a letter to Martin, saying that she is voluntarily leaving him for Singh, and he brings her to his flat in East St. Louis while pretending to Barbara that they are headed for New York. This abduction is Franzen's Pynchonesque pastiche of the American Indian "captivity narrative," a genre that gained widespread popularity with the 1682 publication of Mary Rowlandson's memoir, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, and remained popular until the close of the American frontier at the end of the nineteenth century.[81] So again we find an instance in which Franzen's novel revisits the region's frontier past in a contemporary setting.

These examples suggest that, although several reviewers likened the book to a thriller, it can certainly be described as a mock-Western, too. We have seen that the novel's "State"-inducing, Western plot elements are carefully orchestrated by Jammu to give the region of St. Louis the "fundamental shake-up" that one of the book's newspaper articles says it so desperately needs (11). This may, in an ironic twist

[81] Just how Pynchonesque Franzen's 1988 spin on the captivity narrative was would become clear almost a decade later, when Pynchon himself tried his hand at the genre in chapters 53 and 54 of his novel, *Mason & Dixon* (1997), which narrate the abduction of Eliza Fields by a band of "unimagin'd dark Men" (512).

befitting a subversive mock-Western, also lead us to identify the "Indian chief" as the novel's unlikely hero. Jammu is undoubtedly a figure of great importance, since her plans to enliven the area of St. Louis do not just affect the fictional world that she, Martin, and the other characters inhabit, but they are also an essential part of Franzen's own attempts to challenge conventional ideas about the Midwest. Her elaborate "Indian" conspiracy and the book's Western plot elements are, in Franzen's own words, what enabled him to "put on the mask of a middle-aged postmodern writer"; that is to say, they allowed him to experiment with the artistic conventions of midwestern literature and to write in an engagingly subversive way about a region that is usually conceived of in rather narrow, conservative terms (Franzen, "The Art" 50).

But following Jammu's plans to their logical conclusion would result in a portrait of the author's hometown that is not unlike the very "nightmare of mind control and soulless materialism" that, as Franzen would later complain in his memoir, it was made out to be in *Sixteen* (*DZ* 61). It is here, in fact, that the novel's Pynchonesque plot begins to unravel. Just as Franzen would later emphasize in *The Discomfort Zone* that his suburban hometown should be portrayed as a bastion of "apolitical niceness," so too is he already driven by the impulse in *The Twenty-Seventh City* to defend Webster Groves' "niceness" and to stress how it stands out from Jammu's nightmarish plot (*DZ* 62; *TSC* 328). The Probst family as well as the other inhabitants of the sheltered suburban community are, according to a member of Municipal Growth by the name of General Norris, "[g]ood-hearted people" who, more than anything else, "wanted to believe in niceness" (*TSC* 328). Exactly how much the novel associates these suburbanites with niceness will be evident from the following description of Webster Groves, which is worth citing at length because it reads like Franzen's trip down the tree-lined memory lanes of the midwestern suburbs of his boyhood:

> Although the streets of Webster Groves connect with those of its neighbors, and aside from Deer Creek in the north the town has no natural boundaries, its residents experience it as an enclosure, an area where Christmas can occur in safety. It's a state of mind. A few people leave Webster Groves for the holidays, but many more come to it, by plane or train or car. And landscape recapitulates personality. There are no open fields, no high-rises or trailer parks or even

> shopping malls, no zones of negative potential into which spirit can drain. All houses are bright, and no one stands alone. All streets interlock. […] The air is full of woodsmoke, but the sky is clear. Born lucky, residents guess. This is a home that feels like home. (264)

From this passage we can gather that the suburb of Webster Groves, like the city of St. Louis, is ultimately an "idea." Following Glenway Wescott's well-known description of the Midwest, Franzen writes that Webster Groves is "a state of mind" (Ibid.; Wescott 39). Far from an easy victim of Jammu's plot, the suburb is imagined as a middle-class comfort zone whose communal, holiday spirit makes it a site of resistance against the "State"-inducing, nightmarish conspiracies of St. Louis's police chief. This opposition between St. Louis and Webster Groves, city and county, "State" and "state of mind" complicates Franzen's Pynchonesque challenge to Webster Groves' square image; in it we can already discern the first outlines of Franzen's "double vision" and method of geographical juxtaposition, which he would further develop in his subsequent novels.

The complicated relation between Webster Groves and St. Louis is even underlined by Jammu herself when she tells Martin that a "bankrupt, crime-ridden inner city is fundamental to your outlook as an old St. Louisan, and you don't *want* it to change" (382). Of course, what Jammu is suggesting here is that her proposed merger "could have serious demographic implications" for Martin's hometown, seeing that the entire *raison d'être* of any suburban enclave is, arguably, to provide good schools and nice houses to the white middle classes who have fled the city in "fear of black areas" (290). If city and county were to reunite, "there won't be anyplace to run" (Ibid.). Surely, this kind of white flight and suburban segregation must also have been central to the Webster Groves in which Franzen grew up, judging by the overwhelming whiteness of *Sixteen*'s teenagers and their own acknowledgement that they "really don't mingle very much" with the suburb's five-percent black minority (26:31-26:34).[82] Franzen's debut novel could have been an excellent opportunity to shake things up demographically in the town's fictional counterpart, much like *Sixteen*'s Charles Kuralt supposed a civil

[82] Moreover, the recent explosion of racial tensions in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson over the police shooting of the unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown has made it abundantly clear that racial issues are still very much a part of the local politics of the St. Louis area.

rights march would "sort of inject some life into things around" the real-life Webster Groves (29:01-29:02). Clearly, the story's build-up to the day of the special elections does set the stage for a confrontation between the two opposites of city and county, which are each associated with a different "idea" and demographic.

Yet when the day of the referendum finally arrives, Franzen does not follow through with the confrontational strategy he has more than hinted at in the course of the novel. While the outcome of the elections turns out to be a "No," it is anything but a landslide victory for those opposed to Jammu's plans. "When," as the narrator so accurately puts it, "little better than one eligible adult in seven had bothered to go to the polls, the only thing anybody could say had carried by a landslide was apathy" (502).[83] This widespread apathy, the narrator continues, is primarily caused by the electorate's realization that, regardless of the referendum's outcome, the region's white middle classes would always remain privileged and the area's black population would always be marginalized. Even before voting day, it becomes blatantly obvious that nothing will change: speculators' belief that Jammu's victory would be virtually guaranteed causes a steep increase in the price of inner-city real estate, which forces St. Louis's underprivileged and predominantly black population to relocate. Their only option is the nearby East St. Louis, an area that is rapidly turned into one large ghetto resembling "a Hiroshima neighborhood in the spring of '46" and is subsequently rechristened "Jammuville" (490). Fortunately for Jammu and the St. Louis municipality, Jammuville and the East St. Louis area in general are not part of Missouri but of the neighboring state of Illinois. St. Louis's problems are simply passed on to another local government. In the end, then, the feeble outcome of the special elections allows the novel to conveniently back away from a firm resolution that entails either a proper stand-off between city and county or a successful "reunification" of the St. Louis area. The

[83] In a nod to the popular idea that the Midwest is the home of the "common man" who is entirely representative of larger trends, moods, and political opinions, *The Twenty-Seventh City*'s cast of characters includes a man by the name of Jack DuChamp, who "possessed a God-given aptitude for calling elections" (327). In other words, Jack has a perfect record for voting for parties that would go on to win the elections. Even the frequency in which he votes is supposedly representative of the average voter turnout. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that on the day of St. Louis's special elections, Jack does not turn up to cast his vote (476).

results permit Franzen to ultimately ignore the implications of the subversive mode of writing he has adopted for most of the book. At the novel's close, it is as if Jammu and her loyal supporters had never presented their plans to St. Louis in the first place.

Still, readers will have noticed that, while St. Louis and Webster Groves never officially reunite, they do frequently blend into each other in the course of Franzen's story. There are many examples to illustrate this, but perhaps the most striking one is Barbara Probst's description of St. Louis near the end of the novel. When Singh has finally decided that Barbara can go home, he gives her an anesthetic and asks her to repeat the memorable line from the 1939 film adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), "there's no place like home," after which "the room [starts] turning" and Barbara passes out (474).[84] When she wakes up alone, she leaves Singh's apartment and wanders around East St. Louis's wasteland not knowing where she is until she realizes that the city that looms on the horizon "[i]s St. Louis" (493). From the following description of the city, which clearly anticipates Renée Seitchek's aforementioned uncool midwestern dreams in *Strong Motion*, it is evident that Barbara's memories of Webster Groves—that suburban "home that feels like home"—are actually projected onto St. Louis (264):

> It was the city in which her dreams had taken place all her life, all through the last two and a half months, the city which whenever John [i.e. Singh] left the room she peopled with her family and her friends, the city she'd never stopped trying to remember and imagine: this was the city itself, and it was completely different from the city in her head though identical in detail, completely itself, the quality of reality overpowering all the more specific landmarks. (493)

It is this lack of a clear distinction between the two opposing geographies that lays bare the main difficulty with Franzen's approach in *The Twenty-Seventh City*. While thematically as well as structurally his "essentially dark, contrarian entertainment" appears to hinge on confrontation and opposition, the two geographies and, moreover,

[84] This is a reference to the famous scene where Glinda the Good Witch of the North tells Dorothy that she can go back home by clicking the heels of her ruby slippers three times while repeating the phrase, "there's no place like home." While Dorothy does so, the room starts spinning, and she eventually wakes up in her family home in Kansas.

the two ideas they are meant to represent are not consistently kept separate (Franzen, "Why" 60). This highlights the ambivalence that is at the heart of this first novel, which, on the one hand, pursues the high-art status associated with Pynchon's subversive writing by submerging Webster Groves in Jammu's political conspiracies, while, on the other hand, derailing such pursuits by defending the suburb's local manners and depicting the area as a conventional, conservative bulwark of "apolitical niceness." In other words, it seems the young Franzen had yet to decide on his model of authorship and on what role his native heartland should play in his writing. Should he opt for status and follow the cynical approach of CBS's influential documentary? Or should he fashion for himself a midwestern image and rush to the region's defense? Going by his memoir's portrait of the artist as a clueless midwesterner, Franzen eventually chose something of a middle way, one that was not without its major hurdles, though, as the following discussion of his first essay collection, *How to Be Alone* (2002), and his well-publicized argument with Oprah Winfrey will now explain.

Against the Grain

In a postcard dated 20 August 2001, Wallace joked to Don DeLillo that Franzen was "gearing up for his turn at having Sauron's great red eye upon him," and sure enough that same month Franzen was invited by Oprah Winfrey to have his upcoming novel, *The Corrections*, be part of her popular Book Club and to make a personal appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (Wallace). This media coverage must have seemed like the perfect opportunity, since it would more or less guarantee Franzen the large, "general audience" for which he had expressed a strong desire in "Perchance to Dream," his April 1996 essay for *Harper's*.[85] In fact, Franzen should have hardly had

[85] In her comprehensive study of the Book Club phenomenon, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads*, Cecilia Konchar Farr writes that, after Franzen's invitation, Farrar, Straus and Giroux increased their initial printing of *The Corrections* from 90,000 to around 600,000 copies (Farr 76).

any reservations at all, judging by one of Wallace's earlier letters to DeLillo, dated 16 March 1996, in which he writes that

> Jon has a real 90's [sic] attitude about books and PR. When I'd invoke you or Gaddis or somebody who keeps their head real low, Jon says that you guys made your bones in a different time, when the author's own personal person wasn't as necessary a part of a PR machine that itself wasn't as necessary to sell books. I couldn't tell whether I agreed with him or not. (Wallace)

But now that TV fame and bestseller rankings were more than just a remote possibility for Franzen, he too seemed to have his doubts about his '90s attitude to PR. After all, what consequences would Winfrey's endorsement have for his prestige and his pursuit of symbolic capital? At several points during his national book tour, he publicly asked himself this question, expressing his concern over the Book Club's middle-brow status and its potential impact on the reception of his work, which, in an interview with *The Oregonian*, he placed "solidly in the high-art literary tradition" ("Oprah's" 5).

As soon as Winfrey heard of Franzen's reservations, she took the unprecedented step of withdrawing her invitation and issued the following statement:

> Jonathan Franzen will not be on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* because he is seemingly conflicted about being chosen as a book club selection. It is never my intention to make anyone feel uncomfortable or cause anyone conflict. We have decided to skip the dinner and move on to the next book. (qtd. in Rooney 33)

Shortly after this announcement, several east-coast literati weighed in, and because of their involvement the dispute between Franzen and Winfrey mushroomed into a broad public debate on canonicity, "high" and "low" culture, belletrism and bestsellerdom. Remarkably, the majority of these cultural commentators jumped to Winfrey's defense, not Franzen's. Harold Bloom, for instance, said he would have been "honored" with Winfrey's invitation and observed that it "does seem a little invidious of [Franzen] to want to have it both ways, to want the benefits of it and not jeopardize his high aesthetic standing" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick E5). On top of that, and in spite of all that trouble

of locating himself solidly in the high-art literary tradition, Franzen was put firmly in his place by *Harper's* editor-in-chief Lewis Lapham, who pictured the author as "a guy from the country who shows up at court wearing the wrong shoes" (qtd. in Ibid.). Lapham explained that the notion of the artist as Olympian figure "was part of the avant-garde literary tradition that came out of the '20s [… and] still had some force through the 1960s, but now the garret is a thing of the past" (qtd. in Ibid.). Literary gatekeeper by vocation, he more or less denounced Franzen as a clueless midwesterner precisely because of the author's unseemly concern for high-art status.

Lapham's pithy characterization of Franzen highlights the unmistakable yet often neglected "regional subtext" of not only the Oprah debate but also, more generally speaking, Franzen's constant anxieties about symbolic capital (Wilhite 624). The following analysis of several of the author's public appearances as well as a selection of his non-fiction brings this subtext to the fore in order to shed light on various key changes in Franzen's self-presentation in the aftermath of the Oprah debate. In doing so, it will be in close conversation with a thoughtful and perceptive essay by Keith Wilhite, titled "Contested Terrain: The Suburbs as Region." Above all, Wilhite's piece draws attention to Franzen's obsession with marginality and prestige, and rightly so, given a tendency among Franzen scholars to go easy on the author. Christoph Ribbat, for example, has argued that the writer's public doubts about Oprah's Book Club could be thought of retrospectively as the work of a PR mastermind, as "an almost conceptual move to trigger discussions of literature's position in a post-postmodern world" (559). And Jeremy Green's chapter on Franzen in *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (2005) practically calls the Oprah incident one big, silly misunderstanding in which "a brilliant success gives way to disaster because of a few ill-chosen words" that were blown out of proportion by the media simply because they would cause a public spectacle that "made good copy" (79, 80).[86]

[86] It is worth noting how closely Green's account of the Oprah debate follows the writer's own version of it. On the evening of the National Book Awards ceremony, Franzen said to a reporter for *The Washington*

In much the same way, Stephen Burn trivializes the debate when he writes in his book's preface that it led to a "host of increasingly fine-grained dissections of what is, after all, an argument over whether or not someone wanted to appear on a late afternoon TV show" (x). Burn could, of course, have taken a real stance here, if only he had not himself proceeded to offer what is possibly the finest-grained dissection of Franzen's ambivalence to date by arguing that it should be understood not at all as a case of regional image and symbolic capital but as an artistic struggle about writing "academically-privileged formalist postmodernism versus story-based literature that aims to entertain the reader" (48). This dichotomy is not only regressively "literary" but a false one, too. Whoever said an academically-privileged formalist postmodern work cannot be story-based and wildly entertaining? Surely DeLillo, Pynchon, and Vladimir Nabokov never treated these two as mutually exclusive. The terminology I would therefore like to suggest instead is that by now familiar one of subversion and conservatism, avant-gardism and midwesternness, coolness and uncoolness.

These terms loom large in Franzen's own published account of the Oprah debate, "Meet Me in St. Louis," which presents the novelist's conflicted feelings as a struggle between those "uncool midwestern dreams" of his suburban boyhood and his writer's life in New York City, that literary capital of cool. We should be mindful, as Wilhite rightly notes, that the piece originally appeared in the 24 December 2001 issue of *The New Yorker* and shows Franzen's "efforts to resist his construction as a suburban writer for Oprah's audience while preserving his cosmopolitan literary sensibilities for his *New Yorker* audience" (624). At the start of the essay, which recounts Franzen's visit to Webster Groves to shoot "B-roll" footage for his scheduled appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, Franzen writes that he is

> a Midwesterner who's been living in the East for twenty-four years. I'm a grumpy Manhattanite who, with what feels like a Midwestern eagerness to cooperate, has agreed to pretend to arrive in the Midwestern city of his childhood and re-examine his roots. (287)

Post that, soon after September 11, the media were looking for "blood-sport entertainment. I was very happy to have provided that service" (qtd. in Weeks C1).

The author's above description of himself casts some initial doubt on Wilhite's argument because Franzen actually strikes somewhat of a balance between his midwesternness and his current life as an east coaster, and we might, at first, assume that this balance will be maintained throughout the essay.

But as the piece progresses, Franzen becomes increasingly concerned with fashioning for himself a "city image" that matches his literary ambitions and mid-career status as an adopted Manhattanite. When, for example, one of Winfrey's producers calls Franzen to discuss their St. Louis plans, the writer asks her, "'And what about filming me here in New York?,'" while making sure to let her know that "'St. Louis doesn't really have anything to do with my life now'" (289). He both disavows his midwestern past and feels the need to emphasize his present life on the East Coast. So much so, that by the end of the essay he even resorts to logical fallacies to make his point. "New York," Franzen writes,

> is the city, of all the cities in the world, that feels to me like the home I grew up in. My parents had me late in life, and my most typical experience as a child was to be left to my own devices while adults went to work and had parties. That's what my New York is. (299)

Apparently, he expects us to regard him as a born-and-bred New Yorker simply because he is the youngest child and his parents went to work and had parties. The sheer contrivance of this attempt to refashion his pretend home of New York into his real home is, moreover, matched by that of his efforts to dismiss his real home—"this other home, this St. Louis"—as simply a pretend home (299). At one point in the essay, the self-proclaimed Manhattanite makes what seems like a gesture of surrender to Winfrey's film crew by saying that, "[i]f the producers wanted me to be Midwestern, I would try to be Midwestern"—a rather absurd gesture, of course, which amounts to saying: ok, alright, fine, I will *try* to pretend to be from the place I am actually from (290).

To be sure, the cultural distinctions between Franzen's two "homes," the Midwest and the East Coast, are communicated to the reader by means of an

objectification of “bad” and “good” taste that involves a pair of geographical stereotypes. On the essay’s very first page, Franzen introduces us to Winfrey’s hired cameraman, “a barrel-chested, red-faced local with a local accent” (286). On the same page, he contrasts this local with one of Winfrey’s east-coast producers, “a tall, good-looking cosmopolitan with fashion-model locks” (Ibid.). What sets these two caricatures apart—even more so than their looks—is their cultural taste: Franzen pictures the midwestern cameraman as someone who “listened to the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd in his youth,” whereas the cosmopolitan producer is depicted as “a person to whom the Smiths and New Order were important” (291). In other words, while the regional simpleton merrily sang along to country-rock classics like “Sweet Home Alabama,” the east-coast sophisticate apparently ignored local Americana altogether in favor of artsy British records like *Meat Is Murder* and *Power, Corruption & Lies*. Given Franzen’s concern for artistic status, it is not hard to predict who has the author’s sympathy here. Indeed, as Franzen and the producer drive out of the city together, the writer expects the producer to join him in his condescension, “to ask him questions about St. Louis,” and to “joke with [him] about the tedium and artificiality of what [they are] doing” (Ibid.).

This note of condescension reverberates through the entire essay and lends the piece a cynical quality that is not unlike that of *Sixteen in Webster Groves*. We may reasonably assume therefore that, in the case of “Meet Me in St. Louis,” Franzen did, as Wilhite suggests, intend to “tell us, once and for all, that his midwestern, suburban past no longer figures in his life as a writer” (624-5). Wilhite even goes so far as to make the much broader claim that Franzen’s writing “proudly carries the baggage of exile,” arguing that Franzen “cultivate[s] an antagonistic relationship between his literary aspirations and his midwestern suburban past” (622). At first glance, this may seem like a reasonable conclusion. Franzen had, after all, adopted a similarly elitist view on midwestern suburbia in his earlier piece for *Harper’s*, “Perchance to Dream,” in which he describes how

> [t]he literary America in which I found myself after I published *The Twenty-Seventh City* bore a strange resemblance to the St. Louis I'd grown up in: a once-great city that had been gutted and drained by white flight and superhighways. Ringing the depressed urban core of serious fiction were prosperous new suburbs of mass entertainments. ("Why" 62)

Just like "Meet Me in St. Louis," this *Harper's* essay presents a very negative portrait of the midwestern suburbs, from which Franzen subsequently distances himself by writing that he apparently misses "the days when more novelists lived and worked in the city" and that he likes "a novel that's alive and multivalent like a city" (80).

But why, then, does the novelist move his suburban childhood to the foreground of his later memoir? Why does he still set both *The Corrections* and his next novel, *Freedom*, in the Midwest? And why does he continue to bring up the region in interviews and non-fiction pieces? The short answer is that Franzen's general attitude toward the Midwest is not at all as straightforwardly hostile as Wilhite contends. What we have instead, I argue, is a much more complex case of an author wanting to avail himself of the fringe benefits of his regional past so as to be able to distance himself from America's techno-corporate center while also aligning himself with that very center in an attempt to accrue symbolic capital. This means that, when emphasizing his regional upbringing presents itself as a more attractive option than renouncing his roots, Franzen will not hesitate to do so. He most certainly showed no signs of hesitation in his essay for the 30 September 2002 issue of *The New Yorker*, titled "Mr. Difficult," an essay that is ostensibly about the difficulty of William Gaddis's fiction but turns out to be, more than anything else, about Franzen himself.

The piece takes as its point of departure an angry letter that the author received from one of his readers, Mrs. M——, who provides the following description of Franzen and his implied readership:

> The elite of New York, the elite who are beautiful, thin, anorexic, neurotic, sophisticated, don't smoke, have abortions tri-yearly, are antiseptic, live in lofts or penthouses, this superior species of humanity who read *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*. (239)

Here, Mrs. M—— moves Franzen into exactly the position of symbolic power that, judging by "Meet Me in St. Louis," he wished to occupy all along: that of the cultural elite of New York City. But rather than admitting to this aspiration, Franzen now dismisses this "superior species" for the very same reason Lapham criticized him, namely for still adhering to the "Status model," a model that "invites a discourse of genius" and flatters the author's sense of self-importance (240). Franzen goes on to say that on the opposite end of the literary spectrum there is the "Contract model," one in which literature is treated as a communal enterprise that requires the author to remain close to, and connected with, his or her "community of readers" (Ibid.). For the purpose of this study, there is really no need to examine these models in greater detail, but it is, of course, imperative to ask the question: to which of the two models does Franzen subscribe? "In my bones," he writes, "I am a Contract kind of person. I grew up in a friendly, egalitarian suburb" (241). In light of the Oprah debate, this answer is surprising, to say the least. Most baffling of all is that last phrase, in which Franzen constructs a positive image of an egalitarian midwestern suburb with which he then identifies uncomplainingly, since it signals nothing less than the author's U-turn on his identification with New York and his antagonism toward suburbia in "Meet Me in St. Louis" and "Perchance to Dream."

To understand why, in this case, Franzen chooses to identify with the periphery rather than the cultural center, it is important that we remain skeptical of his claim that he is indeed a Contract writer. Taking my cue from Ben Marcus, whose sharp reply to "Mr. Difficult" appeared in the October 2005 issue of *Harper's*, I suggest that Franzen's version of the Contract model actually comes "from the highest point of status culture" (52).[87] What Franzen attempts here, I argue, is to present the Contract model as every truly great and compassionate author's model of choice. In doing so, he effectively tries to devalue the Status model, to which the essay's opening gives the negative

[87] Interestingly, Wallace appears to have strongly disapproved of Marcus's piece about Franzen. In an email to his agent Bonnie Nadell, dated 4 December 2007, he writes this about *Harper's*: "Between you and me, when they ran Marcus's scurrilous piece on Franzen, I ceased subscribing and sort of lost interest" (Wallace).

connotation of New York elitism, so as to then transfer the symbolic capital generally associated with this model to that of the Contract. This way, his own identification with the Contract model, which he strategically mentions in the same breath as his egalitarian suburban home, would conveniently allow the best-selling, born-and-bred midwesterner to have his proverbial cake and eat it too, "to have the reputation of writing experimental fiction without actually writing any" (Parrish 652). Its two main implications would be that middle-brow is the new high-brow and, as the *Forbes* quotation that serves as this chapter's epigraph puts it, "the new trendsetter is the heartland." Above all, then, "Mr. Difficult" gestures toward Franzen's own mid-career efforts to renegotiate the very terms on which symbolic capital can be accrued, the terms on which we judge subversion and conservatism, center and periphery, avant-gardism and midwesternness.

While Franzen only really began to redouble his efforts at such a renegotiation in the aftermath of the Oprah debate, the ideas behind them recur in his entire oeuvre and can be traced all the way back to his student writing. As a regular contributor to Swarthmore College's newspaper, *Phoenix*, Franzen wrote a number of light-hearted fashion pieces, some of which are briefly discussed by Burn in his book's chapter on Franzen's early writing. But while Burn brings them up mostly as whimsical juvenilia that document an aspiring author's attempt to find his voice by trying his hand at a number of very different and unexpected topics, they also contain valuable information that adds to our understanding of the young author's preoccupation with status and appearance. For example, one early exercise in self-parody, "Campus in Style," includes an unacknowledged photograph of Franzen himself, whose style is mocked in the actual text for being that of a "preppie impostor" (qtd. in Burn 36). But there is one other piece on campus fashion, titled "What's in Vogue this Fall for Stylish Students" and published on 19 October 1977, that is especially relevant to my discussion because it reveals how, at a very early stage, there is already a regional dimension to Franzen's concern for image and status. "[H]ightops," the young author writes in this article, "are not in vogue, and anyone who ignores this must be willing to accept being

termed an avantgardist or Midwestern" (qtd. in Ibid.). This comment, with its obvious sense of tongue-in-cheek humor, shows how Franzen actually conflates avant-gardism with midwesternness in a counterintuitive way that clearly anticipates what could be called the "hip-to-be-square" message of his mid-career changes in self-presentation.

That message is further developed in Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion*. Though its story is set in the city of Boston and the Midwest is only occasionally mentioned, the author manages to find indirect ways to bring the square Midwest into dialogue with the book's supposedly hip east-coast setting. One such exchange takes place when the novel's two main characters, Renée and Louis, broach the subject of coolness. When Louis, who used to work for a Boston radio station, asks Renée why she does not have any records or mix tapes in her flat, she explains that she intentionally got rid of practically all of her music because

> [e]verything became a competition. […] I ran into people who went to clubs every weekend. […] People who were friends with Tina Weymouth's siblings. People who hung around at CBGB and could invest so much more time in being cool. Maybe it was just self-protection, but I started despising these people, and the way they all had to be scrambling to discover something new. I decided this was just pathetic. But I was still afraid of these people. I was afraid they'd find out how much I loved the music I'd grown up with. It seemed like the only way to compete with all their originality, the only way to keep my love safe, was to hate music. (170)

In light of the cultural references that Renée makes here, this passage is a very revealing one. CBGB, first of all, was a famed music club in Manhattan's Lower East Side that was closely associated with the city's musical avant-garde and showcased post-punk bands such as Talking Heads and Television. Renée even mentions the former's bass player, Tina Weymouth, by name, and the latter's song, "See No Evil," is actually playing in the background when Renée and Louis have the above conversation (Ibid.). These very specific references act as geographical markers for the New York scene. In view of this, the "competition" that Renée complains about turns out to be one between herself and the East Coast's cultural avant-garde, which means it is not unlike the comparison between the two geographical stereotypes in "Meet Me in St. Louis."

The major difference, however, is the language used by Renée to describe the east-coast hipsters, with their "pathetic" need to always "be scrambling to discover something new," for it implies that Renée, the girl from Lake Forest, Illinois, who "kept constructing uncool midwestern dreams," has actually "won" by breaking free from the conformity of that supposedly non-conformist, avant-garde subculture.

Fast-forward to Franzen's 2010 book tour for *Freedom* and we see that he now uses the same "hip-to-be-square" language to describe his own cultural position as an author. Near the end of an hour-long interview at the John Adams Institute in Amsterdam, Franzen's interlocutor, Jan Donkers, turns the conversation toward his non-fiction and remarks that in many of his essays the writer comes across as largely unafraid "of being considered conservative, nerdy" ("Jonathan Franzen" 55:15-55:18). Franzen not only agrees with this observation but he actually exaggerates the interviewer's description of himself by adding that "uncool, I think, is the word you're looking for" (55:22-55:24). He then goes on to say,

> I think there's a close connection between being free and being uncool, basically. [… C]ool is the enemy as far as I'm concerned. And I think the sort of, the pursuit of the phoney freedom that's associated with coolness is […] why people have despaired—because they're all too busy being cool, […] chasing the cool products and chasing the cool attitude. I find it all basically rancid. (55:58-57:29)

So, on this occasion, Franzen appears rather eager to present himself as uncool in much the same way as he seemed eager to draw attention to his teenage self's cluelessness in *The Discomfort Zone*. Not only that, he actually proceeds in the vein of *Strong Motion* and equates his uncoolness with the kind of freedom that is commonly associated with subversion, protest, non-conformity, and certainly not with the square conventionality that he has now quite openly turned to.

Even in his more recent book, *The Kraus Project* (2013), which brings together his translations of several essays by the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, Franzen somehow finds the opportunity to try and further his own revaluation of symbolic capital in the space of a set of editorial footnotes. The annotations that accompany the book's first

essay, “Heine and the Consequences,” are particularly interesting because they discuss how Kraus’s essay revolves around “German” culture’s favorable comparison with “Romance” culture, a comparison that is remarkably similar to Franzen’s “double vision” of a square Midwest and a hip East Coast. For the Germans, Kraus argues, “art is an instrument,” whereas in Romance cultures, “life is an ornament” (7). Franzen chooses to explain this dichotomy alongside the rather telling example of coolness versus uncoolness. He suggests that “Germany insists on content over form. If the concept of coolness had existed in Kraus’s time, he might have said that Germany is uncool” (9fn3). But he does not stop there. He goes on to argue in his next footnote that this uncoolness should actually be seen as “real, authentic coolness” and be distinguished from the coolness that “has been so fully coopted by the tech industries” (10fn3). Meanwhile, of course, Franzen has conveniently implicated himself in this very definition by virtue of his Germanophilia. So what *The Kraus Project* ends up illustrating more than anything is the author’s own constant concern for self-presentation, his own desire to refashion conservatism into subversion.

But it is his 2002 foreword to *How to Be Alone* that really catches Franzen in the act of reimagining himself as an uncool, midwestern Contract author. It shows him taking off the aforementioned “mask of a middle-aged postmodern writer”—one that he had donned for his first two novels—and exchanging it for the wig of a realist *éminence grise* that he has worn ever since his books became bestsellers. The sole purpose of this foreword, it seems, is to convince us of how much the author has changed since writing the thirteen essays collected in the book, essays that appeared in east-coast magazines such as *Harper’s*, *Details*, and *The New Yorker* from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. While arguing his case, Franzen singles out his *Harper’s* essay, “Perchance to Dream,” which is included in *How to Be Alone* in pared down and revised form, bearing the less pretentious title, “Why Bother?”[88] He describes the essay as a piece “evidently written by me,” whose complaints and tenuous logic “*I* couldn’t

[88] The original hardcover edition of *How to Be Alone* contained thirteen essays. It was only in later paperback editions that “Mr. Difficult” was included as an additional, fourteenth essay. All citations that appear in this chapter are taken from this later paperback edition.

even follow" ("A Word" 4). As if that does not indicate enough distance between the past and present Franzen already, the preface goes on to dissociate Franzen from the "angry and theory-minded" writer he "used to be," from the various high-cultural matters he "used to consider" important, and from the self-important ways he "used to think" (4, 5). By exaggerating his younger self's experimental traits and by endowing this apprentice writer with qualities that he disapproved of and associated with the Status writer in "Mr. Difficult," which, not coincidentally, also appeared in 2002, Franzen asks the reader not to judge him on his *Harper's* piece but to see it as part of his "movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance—even a celebration—of being a reader and a writer" (Ibid. 5-6).

If this sounds oddly similar to the main premise of a self-help book, it is because the essay collection as a whole makes several nods to exactly this genre and Franzen frequently dresses up his writing in the rhetoric of self-improvement, as evidenced by his very choice of the title *How to Be Alone*, which playfully sets up the collection as a "how-to" book. Going by this rhetoric, Franzen's apparent struggle with himself might, at first, appear to have some similarity to Wallace's internal conflicts. There is, however, a crucial difference between the two. Wallace, as we have seen in the previous chapter, seems to have been genuinely locked in a career-long struggle with his younger, more ironic and philosophically educated self and he reflected on this struggle in several complexly layered narratives. Franzen, on the other hand, so readily claims to have abandoned his former, "theory-minded" and subversive ways that his prefatory comments about that mid-career abandonment end up sounding rather disingenuous and self-congratulatory. They seem calculated to add high-cultural value to his decision to embrace the Contract model and its mediagenic, reader-friendly, middle-brow writing for which Tariq Ali, in a 1993 essay for the *New Left Review*, coined the apt phrase "market realism" (144).[89] Hence the preface is less a nuanced

[89] Franzen's attempt to make his shift to mainstream fiction seem like an unprecedented and heroic one is also what Jason Arthur appears to have in mind when he begins the epilogue to his book, *Violet America: Regional Cosmopolitanism in U.S. Fiction* (2003), by writing that "[p]art of what makes Jonathan Franzen infuriating to so many of his contemporaries is that he acts as though he invented the desire to have a big audience for literary fiction, as if his decision to write readable social novels is part of some private, Promethean urge to consolidate the otherwise niche reader communities of contemporary America" (119).

piece of self-reflection than a bold message of self-promotion: *non sum qualis eram*.[90] I am not what I used to be.

Of course, our final question should then be whether Franzen's message came through: were his attempts to achieve status in the guise of a Contract writer successful? Did he manage to change public opinion on what can count as a prestigious novel in postwar America? Judging by the fanfare with which his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, was published, it seems the answer is yes. Franzen managed to both be the first living American novelist in a decade to have his picture on *TIME* magazine's cover—captioned "Great American Novelist"—as well as receive a re-invitation to participate in Oprah's Book Club and to be featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on 6 December 2010.[91] The latter brings us back to Franzen's initial reluctance to receive Winfrey's endorsement, which, as we have seen, was strongly tied to his refusal to be presented as a midwestern suburbanite. We might reasonably expect that, this time, Franzen and Winfrey would agree beforehand to follow *TIME*'s example and feature Franzen as a Great American Novelist, not a midwestern writer. It is surprising, therefore, that Franzen's midwestern roots receive special mention on Winfrey's show, and it is even more surprising that it is Franzen himself who brings them up. When Winfrey looks back with him on their initial falling-out, she tells him that "the impression at the time was that you were being a snob. That's the impression most people got. And was that true or not?" (qtd. in "The Franzen Phenomenon"). Franzen answers this question in much the same way as he responded to Mrs. M——'s accusations of elitism in "Mr. Difficult," which is to say, he denies them by pointing to his regional past: "I am a midwestern egalitarian" (qtd. in Ibid.). With those words, Franzen has apparently come full circle.

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[90] Or as Franzen's namesake, Johnny Truant, puts it in Mark Z. Danielewski's 2000 novel *House of Leaves*, "Known. Some. Call. Is. Air. Am" (71fn77).

[91] By the time he made his appearance on Winfrey's show, Franzen had received what is commonly regarded as the sincerest form of flattery, namely imitation. For their 23-29 September 2010 issue, *The Stranger* had given poet and novelist Tao Lin the "Franzen treatment" by featuring him on their cover in an obvious parody of *TIME* magazine's portrait of the "Great American Novelist." Two years later, Franzen received yet more compliments—this time, not by any "rival sibling" but by one of the great father figures of American letters, Philip Roth, who said upon his retirement in 2012 that "[t]here are about twenty great American novelists that follow me. The greatest is Jonathan Franzen." Franzen's 2012 essay collection, *Farther Away*, wears this quote on its front cover like a badge of honor.

This and other examples from the late 2000s might lead us to assume that, in the wake of the Oprah debate, Franzen ceased his hostility toward the Midwest altogether and did so of his own accord. After all, in his 2007 "Interview with New York State," he appreciates that "New York's like the beady eye of yang at the center of the Midwest's unentitled, self-effacing plains of yin. And the Midwest is like the dewy, romantic, hopeful eye of yin at the center of New York's brutal, grasping yang" (254-255). But it is not that straightforward either. In a 2009 interview with *boundary 2*, for instance, Franzen still complains that "[t]hings are neither urban nor rural, it's all exurban mush. Things are neither high art nor pop, it's all middle-brow pomo mush" ("The Liberal" 44-45). So in the unmistakably high-brow context of an academic journal, he takes the same elitist stance on literature and suburbia as he did in his *Harper's* essay and in "Meet Me in St. Louis." We might say, then, that his dispute with Winfrey has mostly taught Franzen to be more careful about adjusting his "own personal person" to a specific context and audience, to sometimes act like a cool writer based in New York City and at other times highlight his uncool suburban past and call himself an egalitarian midwesterner. Yet, the author's apparent inability to fully square his avant-gardist side with his uncool midwestern dreams leaves us with the question of how the revaluation of his midwestern novels of local manners was still so successful. The following section discusses this question in relation to Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections*, its critical reception, and its cultural context.

Webster Groves Revisited, Again

"I'm still wondering," Franzen writes to DeLillo in a letter dated 12 June 1995, "whether a thing as slow as a novel is even capable of registering our eternal Now" (Franzen).

Six years later, his doubts were apparently confirmed when *The Corrections*, the novel on which he had worked for almost ten years, was quickly overtaken by the culture's eternal Now a mere ten days after its publication. The events that overtook it were the September 11 attacks, of which Franzen himself wrote in the special post-9/11 issue of *The New Yorker* that, "[i]n the space of two hours, we left behind a happy era of Game Boy economics and trophy houses and entered a world of fear and vengeance" (29).[92] Going by this description, it appears it was the very America depicted in *The Corrections* that had just fallen irretrievably into the past. For this reason, as his partner Kathryn Chetkovich recounts, she and Franzen feared that the book itself might suffer the same fate and "disappear before [their] eyes" (19). In light of this national tragedy, just how relevant was Franzen's comparatively humble story of an old midwestern couple named Enid and Alfred Lambert and their efforts to persuade their three children, Gary, Chip, and Denise, to take a break from their east-coast lives and celebrate one last Christmas in their hometown of St. Jude? Only two days after the attacks, an article in *The Wall Street Journal* answered this question in the negative. The piece, titled "A New Canvas," argues that Franzen's novel may have been yesterday's talk of the town, but "[t]oday, the travails of a dysfunctional family—the book's subject—don't seem so urgent" (A18). Similarly, James Wood's review for the 15 October issue of *The New Republic* begins with the statement that, "[i]f anyone still had a longing for the great American 'social novel,' the events of September 11 may have corrected it" by issuing a harsh reminder that, however big and ambitious a novel may be, "the 'culture' can always get up to something bigger" ("Abhorring" 32).

Yet the reception of Franzen's novel, which did, after all, make a highly successful transition from pre- to post-9/11, suggests that it is Wood who should stand corrected.[93] It reveals that readers' longing for the Great American Novel did not at all

[92] By now, it should be clear that Franzen would not be Franzen if he did not at some point complicate or contradict his public views. It should be no surprise, then, that in his 2008 essay, "I Just Called to Say I Love You," he suddenly sneers at the "mysterious, disastrous sentimentalization of American public discourse" in the wake of 9/11, as if he himself had never made a significant contribution to this sentimentalization in his piece for *The New Yorker* (153).

[93] Wood appears to acknowledge this in a conversation with Franzen at Harvard University on 28 April 2008, judging by the following soundbites included in *The Harvard Crimson*'s report on the event: "'A lot of us will remember the moment of its publication because it was 2001 just around the time of 9/11,' Wood

subside in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks—if anything, it seems to have intensified. While practically none of the many rave reviews published before September 11 touted Franzen's book as the latest contender for the title of Great American Novel, the label has since been applied "to no single novel more often than to Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*" (K. Hayes 156).[94] This begs the question of how a work that had almost immediately been outpaced by the culture could still be deemed so relevant by that culture as to be elevated to the status of a nation-defining fiction. In the following study of *The Corrections*, I argue that it was praised as such an emblem of national identity precisely because the America reflected in its pages was generally thought to have tragically vanished. Expanding on Kevin Hayes's observation that Franzen's being "called the great American novelist more readily than his contemporaries may indicate the reactionary quality of that label," I suggest that it is with the post-9/11 canonization of *The Corrections* that Franzen successfully managed to have his conservatism revalued as a kind of patriotic statement (157). The book's core chapters, which are a self-conscious throwback to the midwestern novel of local manners, actually provided readers with very timely material on which to project their sentimental longing for what has been described in an article for *TIME* magazine as an instantly stereotyped "Great Before" (Poniewozik, McDowell, and Sachs 126).

The article I refer to appeared in the 19 November 2001 issue of *TIME* under the title "The Culture Comes Home," and it makes one important point: if the terrorist attacks did, as the cliché goes, "change everything" about the culture, and novels such as *The Corrections* are part of that culture, then "in a way Sept. 11 changed them too" (Ibid.). Wood, a firm believer in what he has elsewhere called "the autonomous novel," never considers this possibility in his review of Franzen's book ("A Reply"). Instead,

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said. 'It didn't seem as if any novel could really survive that rivalry, something so massive. But of course, this novel not only survived, but enormously prospered'" (qtd. in Cohn).

[94] Ironically, it appears that Oprah Winfrey was actually one of the first to advertise *The Corrections* as the Great American Novel. In her televised Book Club announcement on 24 September, she said that "[w]hen critics refer to the great American novel, I think this is it, people!" (qtd. in Kacha 300). Then again, as Lawrence Buell has shown in his comprehensive new study, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014), the notion of the Great American Novel has always been at least as much a marketing tool as a benchmark for artistic accomplishment. Before the phrase was even introduced as a critical concept in an essay by John W. De Forest in 1868, it had already been criticized as advertisement lingo by P. T. Barnum two years earlier (Buell 23-24).

what he suggests is that the contemporary novel, given that it is so easily outrun by it own source material, "should stop trying to act like the culture, and become properly aesthetic" ("Abhorring" 34). But if there is any book that demonstrates that there is no such aesthetic autonomy it is *The Corrections*, whose transition from pre- to post-9/11 came with several key changes to how readers are apt to appreciate both its form and content. The article for *TIME* cleverly picked up on this and gave the following examples, which, by virtue of the magazine's considerable symbolic power, did not simply illustrate but also further shaped the on-going revaluation:[95]

> On its release, the jacket art of *The Corrections*—a clean-cut family sitting at a holiday table laden with turkey, cranberry-jelly slices and radish rosetttes—seemed like a Lynchian dig at Norman Rockwell Americana. Today the image just seems, well, nice. And before Sept. 11 a literate reader would most likely have identified with the novel's neurotic, sophisticated grown children. Today it's hard for even the most jaded not to feel more like Enid, hoping against hope and reality for one more normal holiday. (Poniewozik, McDowell, and Sachs 126)

From this excerpt we can infer that it is the novel's square midwesternness that played a central role in the popular revaluation of its aesthetics, which was anticipated almost eerily by a handful of early reviews even though it appears to have only gained real momentum in the wake of 9/11, when, according to Franzen, "everybody agreed that irony was dead [… and] we'd stepped forward into a new age of sincerity" ("I Just" 153).[96] The terrorist attacks, as the article suggests, may have inclined readers to adopt a more positive view of that white, middle-class, nuclear family pictured on the book's cover and figured in its pages, to judge it not as Franzen's ironic, *Sixteen*-like commentary on midwestern suburbia but as the embodiment of that sense of "apolitical

[95] Doubtless the magazine was aware of its ability to shape public opinion and taste, seeing that its 10 September review of *The Corrections* starts off by drawing attention to its own symbolic power: "Here's how you know you've written one of the year's most anticipated novels […] You also get a good-size spread—this one—in *TIME*, the magazine your late father always wanted to see you in" (Lacayo 78).

[96] On 2 September, for instance, *The Washington Post* ran a review, titled "Lost in America," which describes Franzen's book with uncanny prescience as "a moving record of messy, unbidden outbreaks of frailty and love that can make the long-maligned middle-American family something of a miracle, even in an age as disenchanted as our own" (Lehmann T3). Another review that was especially appreciative of the novel's midwestern family portrait was Gail Caldwell's piece for the 9 September issue of *The Boston Globe,* in which she writes that "Franzen may not care much for the autumnal prairie of millennial America, but his rendering of it here is frighteningly, luminously authentic" (E3).

niceness" and midwestern homeliness to which he would later draw attention in his memoir. For such a post-9/11 readership, the sting is apparently taken out of, for instance, Chip's description of Enid and Alfred as "the squarest people in America," making it seem more like an echo of Lewis's *Main Street*, in which Dr. Kennicott compliments his Gopher Prairie neighbors by saying to his newly wedded wife Carol, "I told you you'd like 'em. Squarest people on earth" (Franzen 26; Lewis 36).

But the *TIME* piece's most thought-provoking comment on the aftermath of September 11 is actually its heading, "The Culture Comes Home." This title makes a very telling allusion to the Midwest and one of the main shapes it has assumed in the popular imagination, namely that of the nation's collective home to which its citizens long to travel back in turbulent times, much like Dorothy Gale wishes to return to her idyllic Kansas home in that Great American Fairytale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.[97] The idea of such a cultural homecoming puts a completely different perspective on Winfrey's aforementioned request to shoot footage of Franzen's return to his midwestern hometown. Given that the filming took place on Monday 24 September and plans for it had only been made the week before that, Winfrey's framing of Franzen as a midwesterner may very well have been motivated by a desire to offer viewers the opportunity to escape the New York City of 9/11—or at least the non-stop coverage of it—and come "home" with the author. Many of the immediate post-9/11 features on Franzen and his book do, in fact, play on the notion of homesickness. One notable example is a piece for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of 23 September, since it draws on a telephone interview that Franzen gave the very day after the attacks, an interview in which the reporters discussed with him their "sudden feelings of nostalgia for the world he portrays in his newest book, *The Corrections*" (Henderson and Toroian G1).

This article deserves further mention because it is among the first to combine a nostalgic appreciation of the midwestern locale of Franzen's work with a belief that "if

[97] The 1990s *Forbes* article to which I alluded in my epigraph has a similar title, "You Can Go Home Again." And the Midwest continues to play this role of the nation's home in the twenty-first century. M. J. Andersen, for example, prefaces her 2005 book, *Portable Prairie: Confessions of an Unsettled Midwesterner*, with a comment on how the region "has long been the imaginary home of all Americans. You are picturing it now—a little town with a Main Street; on the edge of that town, a peaceful farmhouse surrounded by corn; pure unadulterated heartland" (ix).

his book is not the Great American Novel, then it just might be one of them" (Ibid.). Such praise for the novel's regional qualities on the one hand and its nation-defining potential on the other may seem contradictory, but it is actually fully consistent with the concept of "midwestern nationalism" that I discussed in the introduction and chapter 1 of this dissertation (Barillas 19). It illustrates how the Midwest continues to be figured within the public discourse as a "common sense framework for 'all-American' identification" (Johnson 5). The idea of the region as a synecdoche of the nation is what makes a midwestern setting so well suited to the Great American Novel, which is presumably why Edith Wharton wrote in 1927 that "the great American novel must always be about Main Street, geographically, socially, and intellectually" (152). Though the Main Street she had in mind was that of Lewis's fictional small town, Gopher Prairie, her observation also gets to the heart of a much wider range of imagined heartlands and their lasting appeal—heartlands such as William Gass's Gilean, Ohio, Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, and Jane Smiley's Zebulon County, Iowa, to name but a few. In the wake of September 11, *The Corrections*' "St. Louis-like" setting of St. Jude was received as just such an incarnation of Main Street onto which readers could project a broader, national fiction of square American values and good old-fashioned virtues (Franzen qtd. in Henderson G1).

All this is not to say, though, that Franzen's sole accomplishment was to write a novel that, by a mere coincidence, turned out to be the right book about the right place at the right time. On the contrary, *The Corrections* also represents a real artistic breakthrough for Franzen, and its biggest achievement is arguably its self-consciously nostalgic treatment of the Midwest, which became that much more poignant after the terrorist attacks. Not coincidentally, the notion of place and its possible role in readers' emotional investment in a work of fiction seem to have been a main preoccupation of Franzen's in the years it took him to write the novel, judging by his *Harper's* essay and several of his letters to DeLillo. In one of those letters, dated 29 July 1995, Franzen goes over some of his ideas for the *Harper's* piece and offers the following summary of a conversation he had about them with Donald Antrim:

> Donald Antrim, who [sic] I just had dinner with and found very sympathetic, offered the idea that to write a novel is to create an (imagined) community that makes sense and feels home-like to the socially-isolate writer. This idea has the beauty of explaining the appeal of such a world to the socially-isolate reader. (Franzen)

Here Franzen discusses the very home-like qualities of a novel's imagined world that would come to be associated so closely with his own book's depiction of the Midwest in the aftermath of September 11.[98] Not only that, he actually goes on to mention that he "would add that sometimes, by accident, that imagined world seems 'relevant' to the much larger audience of unserious readers," thereby showing a keen awareness of how such a novelistic home-like community might end up appealing to the culture at large, just like his own novel's midwestern community did in the wake of 9/11 (Ibid.).

But these remarks should not lead us to simply attribute to Franzen the same kind of prophetic foresight that critics so often ascribe to his correspondent, Don DeLillo. Rather, what seems like Franzen's extraordinary prescience is actually the result of his nuanced understanding of how regional America—in particular the Midwest—has been figured in the collective American imagination for the past century and a half. In order to fully understand how Franzen draws on these regional connotations, it is useful to take another brief look at his *Harper's* essay first. The piece's closing pages are especially interesting because they contain an excerpt from one of DeLillo's replies to Franzen, the most relevant part of which reads as follows: "if the social novel lives, but only barely, surviving in the cracks and ruts of the culture, maybe it will be taken more seriously, as an endangered spectacle" (qtd. in "Why" 95). This idea of literary fiction as an "endangered spectacle," as something precious that has been pushed to the very margins of American culture, is of such relevance here not just because it clearly resonated with Franzen but also because it has a close affinity with "the death of the prairie town" that I outlined in the preface to this

[98] In the previous chapter, we saw how Wallace makes strategic use of this home-like regional image when he purposefully idealizes the "good people" of his Bloomington neighborhood in his post-9/11 essay, "The View from Mrs. Thompson's."

dissertation. Just as this metanarrative has always served as regionalism's enabling fiction, so too does the idea of the endangered novel in our "brave new McWorld" lend a sense of urgency to *The Corrections*, Franzen's own novel of local manners ("Why" 72).

Surely, Franzen was aware of how much this central idea of fiction as an "endangered spectacle" has in common with regionalism's metanarrative, since he builds his *Harper's* essay's core argument on a distinctly regionalist view of American literature. He presents his case by first offering a short paraphrase of Flannery O'Connor's insistence that "the best American fiction has always been regional," by which she means, according to Franzen, that "fiction feeds on specificity" and that "the manners of a particular region have always provided especially fertile ground" (68).[99] From there, he identifies the major threat faced by contemporary novelists, namely that "the world of the present is a world in which rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality" (69). Such a regionalist view on the supposedly imminent death of the novel would seem to call for a response that is no less inspired by the conventions of place-writing, and Franzen goes on to offer exactly such a response. He argues that contemporary novelists should adopt what he calls a "tragic realism," by which he means a self-consciously outdated, dialectical mode of writing that seeks to preserve the last vestiges of an "authentic" America that he finds to be endangered by a destructive yet ever so seductive modern techno-corporatism.[100] "What emerges as the belief that unifies us," Franzen argues, "is not that a novel can change anything but that it can *preserve* something" (90). And most notable among the things that the novel can preserve are "the complexities of character and locale" that he describes to DeLillo, in a revealing letter of 12 June 1995, as "my specialities" ("Why" 65; Franzen). It is

[99] Here Franzen paraphrases a talk given by O'Connor in the fall of 1962, when she accepted an award by the Georgia Writers' Association for *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). This talk was later published under the title "The Regional Writer" in the Winter 1963 issue of *Esprit*.

[100] Another strong influence on this tragic realist mode, according to Adam Kirsch, is the tragic poetics that Lionel Trilling termed "moral realism." Kirsch argues in *Why Trilling Matters* (2011) that in the past two decades, when writers like Franzen and Cynthia Ozick "have lamented the decay of literature's confidence and authority, they have often turned, as if by instinct, to Trilling as the emblem of those lost virtues" (4).

Franzen's reactionary efforts to preserve these complexities in "sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them" that play a central role in *The Corrections*' evocation of nostalgia, a nostalgia that would reportedly be felt all the more strongly after 9/11 ("Why" 84).

Nowhere in *The Corrections* is this tragic realist sentiment more immediately apparent than in its core chapters on Enid and Alfred's daily lives in the midwestern suburbs of St. Jude. Even though Enid says midway through the novel that she thinks that her "'children are all easterners now [… and n]obody seems to like the Midwest anymore,'" both she and Alfred go against the prevailing opinion and continue to identify with the place, almost as an act of resistance (378). Enid's reasons for never losing her affection for the Midwest are made clear in the following passage, which builds on the midwestern "state of mind" that Franzen first touched on in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and offers a view of the region that comes remarkably close to the post-9/11 one we saw in the article for *TIME* magazine:

> In the pageantry of weddings Enid reliably experienced the paroxysmal love of *place*—of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular—that for her was the only true patriotism and the only viable spirituality. Living under presidents as crooked as Nixon and stupid as Reagan and disgusting as Clinton, she'd lost interest in American flag-waving, and not one of the miracles she'd ever prayed to God for had come to pass; but at a Saturday wedding in the lilac season, from a pew of the Paradise Valley Presbyterian Church, she could look around and see two hundred nice people and not a single bad one. All her friends were nice and had nice friends, and since nice people tended to raise nice children, Enid's world was like a lawn in which the bluegrass grew so thick that evil was simply choked out: a miracle of niceness. (135)

The first thing to notice here is how Enid seeks refuge from the metanarratives of national politics and religion in one of those by now familiar "uncool midwestern dreams" that she constructs for herself. But even more important is how Franzen's word choice implies that Enid's Midwest is no less a construct than those grand narratives from which it provides shelter: Enid's love of suburban St. Jude is presented as a kind of patriotism or mock-spiritual belief in the place as a "miracle of niceness." Whether or not Enid's hometown is actually as nice as that picture-perfect Midwest is

mostly irrelevant; what matters is her very need to construct for herself a symbolic geography where, to borrow a remarkably apt phrase from *The Twenty-Seventh City*, "Christmas can occur in safety" (264).

So it is not enough to merely point out, as Wilhite does in his aforementioned essay, that *The Corrections* portrays a "suburbia [that] will always imply a counterfeit, fictitious way of life" (620). After all, has Franzen himself not maintained from the very start of his career that all places are essentially fictitious, that "cities are ideas," and that suburbia is a "state of mind"? Enid and most of the other characters in *The Corrections* are, to varying degrees, conscious of this artificiality and the common discrepancy between the idea of a place and its day-to-day reality. Franzen makes this awareness most explicit in his depiction of one of the novel's few real outsiders, Klaus Müller-Karltreu, the Austrian husband of one of the Lamberts' former neighbors, Cindy Meisner. When Denise visits Cindy and Klaus in their home in Vienna, the three of them end up talking about St. Jude. At some point, Klaus says, "'Do you know what I rilly [sic] *hate* about St. Jude?,'" and he continues:

> "The people in St. Jude pretend they're all alike. It's all very *nice*. Nice, nice, nice. But the people are not alike. Not at all. There are class differences, there are race differences, there are enormous and decisive economic differences, and yet nobody's honest in this case. Everybody pretends!" (454)

The main object of criticism here is what Victoria Johnson refers to in her monograph as the "Heartland myth" that emerged from Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and has since been perpetuated by a wide range of popular media (7). This myth "excise[s] urban life and culture, 'non-white' populations, and marked class differences" from the Midwest's symbolic geography for the purpose of "retaining a pastoral storehouse for national ideals and 'traditional values'" (115).[101] In other words, its selective representation of the region allows for the preservation of that aforementioned

[101] It is quite telling that in his interview with *boundary 2* Franzen uses a similar phrase, "personal myth," to refer to his own views on the Midwest ("The Liberal" 41). For him, as for the culture at large, the heartland myth revolves around the idea of a "time lag," which "has to do with a prolongation of innocence there, a prolongation of childhood, that has to do with the Midwest being just a little bit farther from the rest of the world" (Ibid.).

image of the Midwest as the nation's collective home whose square, white, middle-class, nuclear families serve as an "all-American" audience's idealized object of nostalgia.

It is here, then, that we get to the central irony of *The Corrections*. The novel reminds us to be aware or even skeptical of the fictitious, mythological dimension of midwestern suburbia, but at the same time its tragic realist poetics is steeped in that very heartland myth and owes a great deal of its success to it. Unlike the real-life St. Louis area and its fictional counterpart in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the "St. Louis-like" setting of Franzen's breakthrough novel is practically devoid of racial and socio-economic tensions, and any kind of midwestern cityscape is conspicuously absent from its symbolic geography. Remarkably, however, their omission seems to have actually benefited the book's post-9/11 reception as a Great American Novel. This is evidenced most strikingly by *TIME* magazine's profile of Franzen in its 23 August 2010 issue, which featured the "Great American Novelist" on its cover. Titled "The Wide Shot," the magazine's cover story argues that while many novels of the early 2000s "zoomed deep in, exploring subcultures, individual voices, specific ethnic communities," Franzen remains "a devotee of the wide shot, the all-embracing, way-we-live-now novel" (Grossman 40).[102] Yet the article never bothers to ask whom this "we" might actually refer to. Nor does it specify what is included in Franzen's supposedly "all-embracing" work. With its claim that Franzen's fiction "isn't about a subculture [… but] about the culture," *TIME* simply buys into the heartland myth and, in doing so, betrays the reactionary views that lie at the heart of Franzen's reputation as a Great American Novelist (Ibid.).

Now, what gives *The Corrections* a level of depth that Wilhite never fully appreciates is that Franzen combines a skepticism of this heartland myth with a subtle awareness of both his own reliance on it as well as a larger cultural need to continue to

[102] Zadie Smith draws attention to the racial bias inherent in such claims about literature in her foreword to a 2008 reprint of Zora Neale Hurston's classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). There she writes: "I once overheard a young white man at a book festival say to his friend, 'Have you read the new Kureishi? Same old thing – loads of Indian people.' To which you want to reply, 'Have you read the new Franzen? Same old thing – loads of white people'" (xxiifn13).

believe in it. If Enid had been the novel's only character to revere the region's "miracle of niceness," it would have been easy to dismiss her love of St. Jude as the boosterism of an old midwestern lady who, in her autumn years, clings to an idealized image of the green lanes of her suburban hometown. But Enid is not the only believer. Her three children, Gary, Chip, and Denise, hold on to the same idealized image of their native Midwest even though all three of them have made a break for the East Coast. They are, much like Franzen himself, caught between the desire to "correct" the romanticized idea of their parents' Midwest and their unwillingness or inability to really let go of it. The complex, unresolved tension that results from this dilemma propels the narrative of *The Corrections* and is central to its design, which alternates between the Midwest and the East Coast. To be sure, Franzen comments on its centrality in the following excerpt from his 2001 interview with Donald Antrim:

> I come from a kind of old-fashioned Midwest, and I live in a technocorporate, postironic, cool, late-late-late East-coast world. The two worlds hardly ever talk to each other, but they're completely, constantly talking to one another inside me. And certainly my enterprise in the book […] is to take different strains in [my] own character, different modules in [my] own personality, and create whole characters on the page. ("Jonathan Franzen" 76)

Beginning with the character of Denise, let us take a closer look at how this constant dilemma plays out in the lives of each of the three Lambert children, or rather, how it figures in the personal crises around which their individual narratives revolve. Denise, we learn, is the only sibling to have dropped out of college, choosing to pursue a career as a chef instead. Having worked for a number of east-coast restaurants, she eventually gets her break when she is hired as the executive chef of the Generator, a trendy Philadelphian restaurant housed in the suitably trendy workrooms of a former power plant. While working for the Generator, putting a hip spin on childhood memories of square family meals, Denise enters into a love triangle with the restaurant's cool, tech-savvy owner, Brian Callahan, and his profoundly uncool wife, Robin Passafaro, of whom she has the following opinion:

> Maybe it was because […] some sentimental part of her was taken in by the egalitarian ideal that Klaus Müller-Karltreu found so phony in St. Jude, but the word she wanted to apply to Robin Passafaro, who had lived in urban Philly all her life, was "midwestern." By which she meant *hopeful* or *enthusiastic* or *community-spirited*. (465)

The above description shows Denise's awareness of how she is, much like her mother, prone to construct a romanticized image of her midwestern home. In fact, she is still greatly attracted to it, seeing that it is Robin's "midwestern" spirit, or what Johnson would call her "heartland sensibility," that actually arouses Denise's romantic interest in her (Johnson 201). Moreover, the above citation is actually embedded in a scene where Robin gives Denise a tour of her "Garden Project," an urban farming utopia for children from deprived backgrounds that ends up doubling as a secret rendezvous for Denise and Robin. Franzen could have hardly made the link between Denise's attraction to Robin and her longing for her idealized midwestern home any more obvious.

On the other hand, Franzen depicts Brian as an ambitious "born insider," as the very embodiment of the techno-corporate world of the East Coast (459). Having sold his Eigenmelody technology to the W—— Corporation for a cool 19.5 million dollars, Brian is free to indulge his inner gourmet, free to flaunt his effortless sense of style and impeccable taste that Denise finds so attractive about him even though they make him the complete opposite of Robin, whose adopted brother gave her the charming nickname "Cow Clueless." This juxtaposition, however labored it may ultimately be, suggests that Franzen meant to add a geographical dimension to the characters' love triangle. Denise's affairs with both Robin and Brian—the clueless "midwesterner" and the cool east coaster—illustrate how she is torn between the "uncool midwestern dreams" of her childhood and the slick, techno-corporate East Coast of her adult life.[103] The career-ruining outcome of this *ménage à trois* can, then, be interpreted as a sign of Denise's difficulties in reconciling these two parts of herself. Even when, after their initial falling-out, Denise does get back together with Robin and not with Brian, this is

[103] A similar love triangle would come to serve as the central conceit for Franzen's next novel, *Freedom*. See below for a detailed analysis of this love triangle and the role it plays in the design for that book.

anything but an indication that she has finally decided to embrace her midwestern roots and accept that maybe she "was more like Enid than she had ever dreamed" (491). Denise's relationship with Robin quickly devolves into an abusive love/hate affair that comes to a bitter end when she lashes out at her partner and says, "I hate this city. I hate my life here. I hate family. I hate home. I'm ready to *leave*. *I'm not a good person*. And it only makes it worse to pretend I am" (585). This outburst confirms Denise's frustration with her current life in Philadelphia as well as her difficulties in living up to the "good-people" image that she continues to project onto the residents of St. Jude and that Enid, moreover, projects onto Denise when she holds Denise up to her two siblings as "a paragon of midwestern values" (252).

Denise's brother Chip is similarly conflicted, and one of Denise's childhood memories of him offers a valuable clue as to why this is so. Near the end of the novel, Denise fondly remembers how she used to join Chip for occasional trips to St. Jude's local mall and she recounts that there "was no greater bliss for her at ten and twelve than to […] take instruction from Chip in the evils of late capitalism" (595). These memories recall Chip's early career of instructing others in critical theory. Chip pursued this career at D—— College, where he worked as a tenure-track lecturer in "Textual Artifacts" and taught Marxist criticism as part of a course titled "Consuming Narratives"—that is, until he was fired for sleeping with one of his students. Denise's memories also provide a possible explanation for this career choice: Chip likely saw east-coast academia as a refuge from the consumerist "middlescape" of the Midwest, a region that counts the real-life Mall of America® among its biggest attractions.[104] So while Enid finds shelter in the Midwest, Chip appears to seek refuge from it. One of the novel's ironic twists, however, is that the very capitalism from which he flees has also penetrated the ivied walls of D—— College. This is evidenced most clearly by the fact that the Hillard Wroth Hall in which Chip used to teach his anti-capitalist theory is

[104] The Mall's official website describes it as a veritable "Hollywood of the Midwest" complete with a Nickelodeon Universe in-door theme park, a Sea Life aquarium, and a Lego "Imagination Center," making it "one of the biggest tourist attractions in the world"—big enough too, one would imagine, for any Marxist semiotician to have a field day there ("Mall of America"). Note, also, that the name "Mall of America®" alludes to exactly the kind of metonymic relation between the region and the nation that I mentioned earlier.

actually named after one of the capitalists behind the fictional Orfic Group, the company that arranged a hostile take-over of the Midland Pacific Railroad that included Alfred Lambert among its long-time employees.

Chip's dishonorable discharge from academia leaves him little time to ponder this irony, though. He briefly tries his hand at a screenplay in New York before accepting a job in Lithuania that is offered to him by his ex-girlfriend's Lithuanian husband. This job, which involves the running of an online mock-privatization plan to defraud Western investors, moves him even farther away from a Midwest of "malls with pools of meltwater on their papered roofs […] and transmission towers feeding soaps and game shows to the ether" (201). But while this may sound like the ideal opportunity for Chip to put his Marxist theories into practice—indeed, his brother Gary's first response is, "[y]ou want to be a Bolshevik?"—Chip soon finds himself disillusioned with the country as it races down the road of anarchy and the threat of violence increases dramatically (624). When the situation finally becomes too dangerous, he makes his escape to suburban St. Jude, just in time for Christmas. The following key passage describes his homecoming and shows how even a critical thinker like Chip, whose collection of "structuralists [and] poststructuralists" would have surely included a copy of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), can still be caught mythologizing his midwestern home (106):

> The midwestern street struck the traveler [i.e. Chip] as a wonderland of wealth and oak trees and conspicuously useless space. The traveler didn't see how such a place could exist in a world of Lithuanias and Polands. […] The old street with its oak smoke and snowy flat-topped hedges and icicled eaves seemed precarious. It seemed mirage-like. It seemed like an exceptionally vivid memory of something beloved and dead. (620)

If we substitute "a world of fear and vengeance" for "a world of Lithuanias and Polands," this account of Chip's homecoming may well have been the script for Winfrey's requested B-roll footage of Franzen's return to his parental home after September 11. But, again, this is not to say that Franzen had remarkable foresight; rather, it is an illustration of how the author was highly aware of the Midwest's cultural

connotations and its popular appeal. His allusions to the region's home-like image and nostalgia factor continue on the next page, where Chip's entrance into his parents' house is depicted as if it were an entry into a kind of midwestern safe haven. Through Chip's eyes, we see how "[t]he light in the wood-framed windows, though gray, had a prairie optimism; there wasn't a sea within six hundred miles to trouble the atmosphere" (621). Yet Chip's story, like Denise's, does not simply conclude with him warmly embracing his midwestern roots. When Chip gets too near the "mirage-like" wonderland, the spell is broken and he is left feeling "like a child out of Grimm, lured into the enchanted house by the warmth and the food; and now the witch was going to lock him in a cage, fatten him up, and eat him" (631). As we will see, this too is exemplary of the general attitude toward the Midwest, a region that the public continues to idealize primarily—and this is crucial—from a distance.

No one of the three Lambert children appears to understand this better than the eldest son Gary, the family's certified "Game Boy economist." Caught between his mother Enid and his wife Caroline, Gary finds himself in constant search of a compromise between his midwestern past and his present life in Philadelphia. One area where this is particularly noticeable, and where he eventually reaches his crisis point, is that of child-rearing. While Caroline dotes on her three sons and indulges their high-tech "hobbies" such as fitting the kitchen with expensive CCTV equipment, Gary takes on the role of the more old-fashioned parent who insists on sit-down dinners and encourages his children to switch off the TV and pick up a book once in a while—an attitude for which Caroline mocks him by saying, "'It's like you're suddenly trying to make us act like it's 1964 and we're all living in Peoria. "Clean your plate!" "Wear a necktie!" "No TV tonight!"'" (213). Gary plays the role of the Peorian parent strategically, it appears, in the vain hope of preventing his sons from falling victim to what he calls "the tyranny of Cool," even though it is quite clear that he has long ago fallen victim to it himself (561). The following passage, which is worth citing at length, shows Gary giving the issue some serious thought and exploring it on a much larger, geographical scale:

> Who would perform the thankless work of being comparatively *un*cool?
>
> Well, there was still the citizenry of America's heartland: St. Judean minivan drivers thirty and forty pounds overweight and sporting pastel sweats, pro-life bumper stickers, Prussian hair. But Gary in recent years had observed, with plate-tectonically cumulative anxiety, that population was continuing to flow out of the Midwest and toward the cooler coasts. (He was part of this exodus himself, of course, but he'd made his escape early, and, frankly, priority had its privileges.) At the same time, all the restaurants in St. Jude were suddenly coming up to European speed (suddenly cleaning ladies knew from sun-dried tomatoes, suddenly hog farmers knew from crème brûlée), and shoppers at the mall near his parents' house had an air of entitlement offputtingly similar to his own, and the electronic consumer goods for sale in St. Jude were every bit as powerful and cool as those in Chestnut Hill. Gary wished that all further migration to the coasts could be banned and all midwesterners encouraged to revert to eating pasty foods and wearing dowdy clothes and playing board games, in order that a strategic national reserve of cluelessness might be maintained, a wilderness of taste which would enable people of privilege, like himself, to feel extremely civilized in perpetuity. (226-7)

A "strategic national reserve of cluelessness" is exactly the role that the Midwest has come to play for a general public that—like Gary, Chip, Denise, and not to mention Franzen himself—mythologizes the region from afar and wishes for it to remain frozen in time as if it were an outdoor living-history museum *à la* CivilWarLand in George Saunders's *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996). Indeed, as Robert Wuthnow observes in his preface to *Remaking the Heartland* (2011), the Midwest is commonly regarded as "a vast museum of dwindling farms and small towns to be visited by folks who live elsewhere and would not want to stay for very long" (ix-x). Gary, it seems, treats his midwestern home as just such a museum-like place, and Franzen further hints at this by giving Gary the hopelessly uncool hobby of collecting railroad memorabilia, which he purchases at the Collector's Room of St. Jude's Museum of Transport during his stay at his parental home. This hobby of Gary's is part of another one of Franzen's neat juxtapositions, seeing that it is the complete opposite of his son Caleb's aforementioned interest in high-tech surveillance equipment. Here, then, we find another example of Franzen's "double vision": while Caleb the east coaster is associated with high technology, his father, the born-and-raised midwesterner, takes an interest in something as old-fashioned as steam locomotives.

But just as Gary expresses his doubts about his son's hobby, so too does Alfred end up criticizing Gary's when he complains that "[p]eople nowadays seemed to resent the railroads for abandoning romantic steam power in favor of diesel. […] People thought the railroad owed them romantic favors" (297). These words, I believe, also make for a fitting conclusion to my analysis of *The Corrections* because they offer much more than just a commentary on people's nostalgic longing for the steam locomotives that have remained emblematic of Alfred's beloved Midland Pacific Railroad long after their technological obsolescence. Alfred's comments can first of all be said to apply to the Lamberts themselves, since their narratives revolve around exactly this belief that the Midwest and its old-fashioned, down-to-earth "good people" owe them "romantic favors." But more importantly, Alfred's commentary also doubles as a general statement on the broad appeal of Franzen's museum-like novel, whose tragic realist portrait of the Midwest lent itself exceptionally well to a post-9/11 readership's reported longing to construct a romantic image of a "Great Before." *The Corrections'* timely response to this apparent need seems to have contributed substantially to both its "high-art" reception as a Great American Novel in prestigious venues like *boundary 2* as well as its ability to reach the large, "general audience" that Franzen wrote about in his *Harper's* piece. This twofold success was, in fact, so overwhelming that for several years Franzen would remain unsure on how to follow up with a fourth novel. After a nine-year interlude, he did eventually publish *Freedom*, his Heartland Prize-winning novel to which I will turn in the closing pages of this chapter.

The Subversive Conservationist

In his 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, Franzen admits straightaway that *"The Corrections* cast a shadow" ("The Art" 43). He suggests that the main obstacle to writing his fourth novel was his assumption that he could stick to a winning formula and

deliver another "*Corrections*-like book," doing little more than "simply changing the structure or writing in the first person" (Ibid.). The latter of these two options seems to have been especially tempting, seeing that Franzen had already had recourse to it in the late 1990s, when work on his third novel was not going too well either. In fact, Franzen's struggle to find the right voice for *Freedom* led him straight back to the figure of a "young midwestern man like [him]self" who, according to his 2009 lecture "On Autobiographical Fiction," was initially meant to be one of *The Corrections*' main protagonists (132). Under the name of Andy Aberant, this Franzen-like character features in two first-person excerpts from *The Corrections* that were published in *Blind Spot*, namely "Somewhere North of Wilmington" (1996) and "At the Party for the Artist with No Last Name" (1999).[105] Though Andy failed to make the novel's final cut, Franzen intended to revive him as an "operator of a bogus land trust" in *Freedom* and, in so doing, break one of his own ten rules for writing fiction, which is to always "[w]rite in the third person unless a really distinctive first-person voice offers itself irresistibly" ("The Art" 66; "Put One" 2). Of course, no matter how irresistibly Andy's voice may have presented itself, Franzen soon realized that it would never work because "he was too much like me, at least the depressive side of me" ("The Art" 67). So Andy was cut, again, and Franzen had to find a different solution.

Then, in 2008, Wallace took his own life. And in much the same way as the death of Franzen's father had marked the start of a period in which Franzen made rapid progress on his third novel, the sudden loss of his friendly rival acted as a catalyst for his fourth. But while his father's death liberated Franzen and made him realize that he did not "have to do any kind of book but the book [he] want[ed] to write," Wallace's suicide seems to have provided him with an altogether different kind of motivation ("Bookworm" 08:32-08:35). "'I was mad,'" he told *The Guardian*'s Ed Pilkington. "'I got motivated by anger at him. "Well, goddamn it, Dave! I've got one advantage over you, and that's that I'm still alive, and I'm going to show what I can

[105] For a brief summary of these two stories as well as a third excerpt that appeared in a 1996 issue of *Granta* under the title "How He Came to Be Nowhere," see chapter 5 of Stephen Burn's monograph. The same chapter also provides an excellent account of the evolution of *The Corrections*.

do"" (qtd. in Pilkington 15). This anger appears to have been caused in no small part by what Franzen would describe in his 2011 essay "Farther Away" as the "career advantage" of Wallace's "going the Kurt Cobain route," which resulted in a veritable Wallace hagiography that made him a "very public legend" and led America's literary establishment to promptly declare him "a lost national treasure" (42, 38). In an interview with Sarfraz Manzoor, Franzen had the following to say about this competitive element and how it became the starting point for his fourth novel:

> I'd known I wanted to write about male friendship, but losing him really forced that into the foreground in the book. And also because, in addition to being friends, we were sort of rivals, and in a perverse way that he could see in advance before he killed himself, he was getting a ton of attention. And, you know, my own little moment in the spotlight was receding further and further into the past. So for a lot of reasons, both straight-up competition but also the desire to honor some of the complexity of our friendship, I plunged hard into work within a month of his death. ("America" 02:09-02:49)

In this interview, Franzen makes no secret of his desire for the spotlight and his anxiety over seeing his own twofold success as a bestselling author and a Great American Novelist being eclipsed by that of Wallace, the "Grunge American Novelist."[106] This prospect must have made Franzen all the more anxious, considering that Wallace was en route to achieve "rock star" popularity and great critical acclaim with an essentially conservative, anti-rebellious literary sensibility not at all unlike his own. Franzen, in short, appeared to have been beaten at his own "hip-to-be-square" game.

Not long after Wallace's suicide, Franzen set to work on weaving the authors' "friendship of compare and contrast" into the plot of his fourth novel, *Freedom* ("Farther" 40). Perhaps unsurprisingly, he did so by means of his tried and tested method of juxtaposing the East Coast with the Midwest, hip with square, cool with nice. This juxtaposition plays out in the form of a love triangle between *Freedom*'s central protagonists, nature-loving idealist Walter Berglund, his stay-at-home wife Patty

[106] It was Frank Bruni who first gave Wallace the "grunge" treatment in his feature for the 24 March 1996 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, titled "The Grunge American Novel."

Berglund, and his college friend turned rock star Richard Katz. Although Kakutani and several other critics were quick to see in this triangular love story a "laughably conceited" reference to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and its Pierre-Natasha-Andrei triangle, the arguably more significant regional subtext to Patty's choice between Richard or Walter, "rock god or husband," has so far received little or no critical attention ("A Family" C4; Lever 13). But it is certainly no coincidence that Walter is depicted as "the nicest guy in Minnesota," that Richard was born and raised in urban and later suburban New York, and that Patty occupies the middle ground by having been born into a family of artsy east coasters from whom she later distances herself by moving to Minnesota "to join a cult where she could be nicer and friendlier" than in her native New York (119, 50).[107] It is this geographical love triangle and the male rivalry between two characters who "[a]re struggling, albeit in very different ways, to be good people," that served as an all-too-familiar literary construct through which Franzen could channel his competitive anxiety (67). It created a fictional opportunity for Franzen to regain some lost ground on his fellow midwesterner.

There is no denying that Wallace was a main source of inspiration for the novel's rock star character, Richard, even though Richard turns out to be more of a Bob Dylan wannabe than a grunge American artist and Wallace was raised in Illinois whereas Richard grew up in Yonkers, New York. We might say, then, that while Richard is by no means a faithful recreation of the author of *Infinite Jest*, Franzen still endowed him with very Wallace-like character traits.[108] Some of these, such as Richard's taste for chewing tobacco and his habit of being "scrupulously polite to people," will be recognizable to anyone who is even slightly familiar with Wallace and

[107] Minnesota has somewhat of a reputation for being "marriage material," as evidenced, for instance, by the 13 August 1973 issue of *TIME* magazine on "The Good Life in Minnesota." In its cover story, "Minnesota: A State that Works," we find the following analogy: "California is the flashy blonde you like to take out once or twice. Minnesota is the girl you want to marry" (34).

[108] A similar Wallace-like character appears in Jeffrey Eugenides's 2011 novel, *The Marriage Plot*, under the name of Leonard Bankhead. Unlike Franzen, who has been quite open about Wallace's presence in *Freedom*, Eugenides denies that his character, a bandanna-wearing, tobacco-chewing philosophy double major with a history of mental illness and a dislike of ironic detachment, is even remotely inspired by Wallace. For a more detailed look at the similarities and differences between Wallace and Leonard, see Willa Paskin's online article for *Vulture*, "There's a David Foster Wallace Character in Jeffrey Eugenides' New Novel."

his work (134). But Franzen also made sure to include lesser-known Wallace trivia such as the writer's "terrible *Margaret Thatcher* obsession" and his childhood wish to have a house with "a black room" in it (Wallace, *Although* 127; Wallace qtd. in Max 232).[109] Throughout *Freedom*, Richard remains little more than a bundle of such quirky "Wallaceisms" wrapped into one irresistibly cool, cliché-ridden, east-coast package that Patty, like most of the novel's other women, cannot wait to unwrap because Richard is so obviously everything that a man like Walter is not. He has, to put it in Walter's words, "'the game set up so he's always going to win'" (307). Even those Hideous Man-like "Wallaceisms" that D.T. Max has uncovered in his biography and that Franzen has passed on directly to Richard do not keep Patty from having an affair with him. "'Sometimes,'" Richard says to Walter, "'I think my purpose on earth is to put my penis in the vaginas of as many women as I can'" (142).[110] His purpose in the grand scheme of Franzen's novel, it seems, is exactly that.

Walter, on the other hand, serves a somewhat more heroic cause within Franzen's fictional world. Although he appears much less straightforwardly autobiographical than the original character design for Andy Aberant, Walter was doubtless inspired by Franzen, too—in particular by that egalitarian midwestern side of his that he chose to highlight, for instance, on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* of 6 December 2010. But in his portrayal of Walter as a "heartbreakingly responsible Minnesota country boy," Franzen also strategically borrows some of Wallace's more positive features that he chose, quite tellingly, not to pass on to Richard (66). We are told, for example, that "[i]ntellectually, Walter was definitely the big brother" of the two and that "the province of listening to women with sincere attentiveness most definitely was [Walter's] turf" (134, 135).[111] By combining Wallace's uncool qualities with his own and

[109] Both of these biographical factoids come up in Patty's account of the trio's student years in St. Paul, Minnesota. In her memoir, "Mistakes Were Made," she recounts how, after one of their dates, Walter took her back to his dorm only to have his romantic plans thwarted by Richard, his flatmate, who was sitting in the living room writing what Walter guesses is "'a love song'" about "'this chick Margaret Thatcher'" (101, 100). Patty starts flirting with Richard and asks to see his room, whose walls and ceilings "were painted black" (103).

[110] In his biography of Wallace, Max writes, "[o]nce talking to Franzen he [Wallace] wondered aloud whether his only purpose on earth was 'to put my penis in as many vaginas as possible'" (232).

[111] From Max's biography, we know that being "an extraordinary listener" was, in fact, one of Wallace's great strengths (322). And with regard to intellectual firepower, it is worth pointing out that it was Wallace,

by attributing all of them to Walter, Franzen has created the epitome of a sincere but hopelessly uncool midwestern nerd who achieves heroic status near the end of the book by virtue of his very squareness. Frustrated with his Free Space campaign for the Cerulean Mountain Trust—a "bogus land trust" owned by an industrialist who wants to mine a piece of West Virginia forest and then turn it into a bird refuge—Walter delivers a long environmentalist rant during one of his scheduled public appearances. Although this rant about mankind being "A CANCER ON THE PLANET!" is cut short when several locals attack him, the TV footage of it goes viral across "the radical fringes of the blogosphere," granting Walter his fifteen minutes of fame as a fanatical nature-lover or, to put it in more Franzenesque terms, a subversive conservationist (484, 487). Franzen, in other words, makes the authentic anti-rebel from Bob Dylan's hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota, ultimately outshine the wannabe, thereby reaffirming his "hip-to-be-square" message.

Finally, this familiar message in support of "real, authentic coolness" also lies at the heart of a rather revealing scene with which I would like to conclude this chapter. The key scene occurs when Walter and Richard are briefly reunited in the Berglunds' new hometown of Washington, D.C. After having spent the day discussing some initial plans for Walter's Free Space campaign, the two of them go out in the evening to see a concert by Nebraskan indie band Bright Eyes at the 9:30 Club. In an ironic twist, it is here that the decidedly Wallace-like character of Richard expresses the following criticism of a very "Wallacean" performance by the band's lead singer, Conor Oberst:

> His Tortured Soulful Artist shtick, his self-indulgence in pushing his songs past their natural limits of endurance, his artful crimes against pop convention: he was performing sincerity, and when the performance threatened to give sincerity the lie, he performed his sincere anguish over the difficulty of sincerity. (369-370)

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not Franzen, who wrote *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (2003) and had his undergraduate philosophy thesis published by Columbia University Press under the title *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will* (2010).

We might, of course, read these words as a thinly veiled critique of Wallace's problematic efforts to make sincerity one of the main features of his work. From this angle, the above statement fits right into a series of high-profile criticisms that Franzen leveled at his literary rival, a series that culminated in the publication of Franzen's controversial essay "Farther Away" in the 18 April 2011 issue of *The New Yorker*.

But Richard's words, I suggest, are of much wider relevance because they also offer a clear view of the inevitable endpoint of that "hip-to-be-square" mode of self-presentation to which Franzen so openly switched in the aftermath of the Oprah debate. Now that even a popular midwestern band like Bright Eyes has achieved great success with their 2002 album, *Lifted, or, The Story Is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground*, by strategically embracing a similar midwestern squareness, Franzen's self-portrait of a clueless midwesterner may no longer suffice to give him that "hip-to-be-square" edge. Franzen himself seems to have realized this around the time when *Freedom* was published. "'I've written four novels about midwestern families,'" he says in his 2010 interview with Pilkington. "'That's all I've written. Maybe I'm doomed as a novelist never to do anything but stories of midwestern families'" (qtd. in Pilkington 15). This sentiment perhaps explains the genre and subject matter of Franzen's latest novel, *Purity*, which abandons those midwestern local manners in favor of a narrative that stretches across multiple continents and time periods, blending an "ostalgic" East-German murder mystery with a contemporary American family drama that takes on Oedipal and Electral dimensions.

Published in September 2015, the novel centers on a young woman from Oakland, California, named Purity Tyler, or simply Pip, whose mother refuses to reveal the identity of Pip's father. Frustrated with her job and crippled by college debt, Pip sets out to Bolivia, where she hopes to uncover her father's identity while interning for the WikiLeaks-like "Sunlight Project" run by a famous German hacker named Andreas Wolf. When Pip finally discovers that her father is the Denver-based investigative journalist Tom Aberant, Franzen has tied together all the narrative strands in a way that clearly marks a break from the geographical "double vision" that acted as the catalyst

for his previous novels.[112] It seems, then, that *Purity* closes the midwestern chapter of Franzen's career, even if it is not exactly the stylistic departure that Jonathan Galassi made it out to be in the advanced publication announcement in *The New York Times*, where he commented that "'[t]here's a kind of fabulist quality to it,'" which means that "'[i]t's not strict realism'" (qtd. in Alter 3). In a later sneak peek of the book's cover art, the publisher again called it Franzen's "edgiest and most searching book yet," even though it maintained much of what made his previous Great American Novels so conventional ("Sneak Peek"). *Purity*, however, is no Great American Novel, and it has not been received as one. So it may well be that the Great American Novelist is on the verge of reinventing his authorial persona and rewriting the terms of the "Contract model" once more.

[112] So after having failed to make the cut in both *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, a character by the name of Aberant makes his belated appearance in *Purity*.

Chapter 3

"INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK":
Richard Powers's Regional Placeholders

> The Tin Woodman appeared to think deeply for a moment. Then he said:
> "Do you suppose Oz could give me a heart?"
> "Why, I guess so," Dorothy answered. "It would be as easy as to give the Scarecrow brains."
>
> — L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (92)

In his 2009 interview with *boundary 2*, Jonathan Franzen was asked a by then familiar question regarding his 1996 *Harper's* essay, "Perchance to Dream": could he perhaps say something more about his disillusionment with the "social novel" and its role in the creative struggle that led to *The Corrections*? Tellingly, Franzen chose to elaborate on the piece's discussion of the novel's declining relevance as a medium of social instruction by referring to Richard Powers, whom he had previously identified as one of his "classmates in the Neo-Furrowed-Browist school of American fiction" ("FC2" 116). "Powers's books," he suggests, "are good examples of what happens when you try to illustrate a social reality that's already known to you" from television and the Internet ("The Liberal" 43). Yet he adds straightaway that Powers is "extremely kind and erudite and a lovely person" who is "brighter than almost anyone who'll read him, so you can always learn something from him" (Ibid.). With this double-edged compliment, he ended up contributing to the discourse of genius that has defined Powers's career from the very start.[113] Franzen, as we saw in chapter 2, may have managed to enjoy great prestige and success in the guise of a book-club-friendly "Contract" author, but the big, brainy novels of his former "classmate" have always reached for what he has called the "Status model" of authorship to invite comparison to Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis,

[113] Powers achieved this status of literary genius remarkably early in his career. He was awarded a MacArthur "Genius Grant" in the year following the appearance of his second novel, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988), and with every subsequent book, published at "approximately three-year intervals, reviewers [have] dub[bed] Powers a genius" and "call[ed] him a 'novelist of ideas'" (Weinberg 4D). By the time Franzen mentioned him in the above interview, Powers could add that other "genius prize," the Lannan Literary Award, to his name as well as a National Book Award for his 2006 novel *The Echo Maker*, which even made the shortlist for the Pulitzer Prize.

and other encyclopedic novelists who inspire awe and wonder among readers ("Mr. Difficult" 240).[114] Powers, in the words of Margaret Atwood, is a "novelist of ideas" whose work is "the stuff of a thousand Ph.D. theses, or I'll be the Wizard of Oz" (58).

Atwood's cheerful optimism can best be explained in the light of a growing demand for research that bridges the gap between what C. P. Snow famously spoke of as "the two cultures," the humanities and the sciences (2). Powers's "prodigious fiction," which weaves together a range of ideas from, among others, the fields of chemistry, music, genetics, and the visual arts, has proven to be ideally suited to such interdisciplinary inquiry (LeClair 12). In a popular piece for *n+1* magazine, for instance, Marco Roth brings up *The Echo Maker* as evidence for the rise of "the neuronovel," and N. Katherine Hayles explains her views on "the posthuman" with reference to the computer model that is a central protagonist of *Galatea 2.2*, Powers's 1995 update to the Pygmalion myth (Roth; Hayles 241).[115] As part of a growing body of secondary literature on the author's work, these texts seem to suggest that Atwood's confidence in the novelist's canonization may not have been misplaced. And yet, in keeping with her intertextual reference to Oz, the emerging consensus on Powers's novels of ideas is that they are populated not with flesh-and-blood characters but with Tin Woodmen, that is to say, mechanical beings in want of a real heart. In fact, by the time *Orfeo* appeared in 2014, criticism of the disparity between the author's in-depth exploration of his novels' subject matter and the superficiality or predictability of his main characters had become so widespread that Jim Holt began his *New York Times* book review by asking whether we should simply start talking of it as "the Powers Problem" (10).

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[114] It is no coincidence that wonder has occupied such a central place in scholarship on Powers's work. In "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace," for instance, Tom LeClair writes that Powers's 1991 novel *The Goldbug Variations* "excit[es] amazement and wonder" (16). Heather Houser's monograph, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (2014), includes a chapter that examines how *The Echo Maker* inspires wonder to "promote ecological protection" (80). And Rachel Greenwald Smith's 2015 polemic, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, discusses the same novel's sense of wonder but highlights its formal aspects and the "ecological role of aesthetics" (104).

[115] Another good example is Wes Chapman's recent piece, "The Cognitive Literary Theory of Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*," which appeared in the special Summer 2015 issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on "Neuroscience and Modern Fiction," edited by Stephen Burn. The article examines whether the novel's cognitive theory poses a viable alternative to poststructuralist views on "truth, meaning and human nature" (227).

Powers, who mentioned in a conversation with fellow Illinoisan David Foster Wallace that he reads reviews of his own books, "do[es]n't believe the good ones" and "agonize[s] over the bad ones," is keenly aware of this critique (112). In response to these objections to his work, voiced most strongly by James Wood in a scathing review of *Generosity* in 2009, the once media-shy novelist has become increasingly vocal in his opinions on the shape and possibilities of contemporary fiction.[116] During the noticeably longer, five-year gap between the publication of *Generosity* and *Orfeo*, for instance, Powers expressed these ideas in several interviews and occasional pieces of non-fiction, for which his contribution to the 2008 essay collection, *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, appears to have laid the groundwork. The question he returns to in all these texts is whether a maximalist novel of ideas could successfully wrap inside itself a more personal, minimalist novel of character and, in doing so, add a layer of "emotional conflict and psychological depth in characterization" that the novel of ideas, almost by definition, lacks (Cuddon 602). Powers's own efforts to create such a hybrid fiction are the main focus of this chapter, which draws attention away from the much-discussed encyclopedic or maximalist qualities of his narratives so as to examine more closely the private stories embedded within them—stories that, by no coincidence, practically always revolve around the author's native Midwest and its "good people." Careful attention to this strong midwestern presence reveals the limitations of the author's narrative powers and offers an explanation for what Wood, John Updike, William Deresiewicz, and others have seen as a failure to deliver on his promise of a hybrid fiction that manages to strike a balance between head and heart, ideas and character. In his attempts to create characters whom readers will find interesting and with whom they can, in accordance with the conventions of psychological realism, identify, Powers all too often takes narrative shortcuts by relying heavily on the "Heartland myth" and its powerful hold on the collective American

[116] Wood's review, titled "Brain Drain," appeared in the 5 October 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*. Some of its key observations will be discussed below.

imagination (Johnson 7). Whenever he needs heart, it seems, he simply turns toward the heartland.

Given Powers's strong reliance on the heartland myth and the Midwest's prominent place in the majority of his novels, it is striking that he seldom reflects on the region, its popular image, and its connection to his own work. Though we saw in chapter 1 that Wallace could be somewhat evasive on the subject of his life in the midwestern town of Urbana, he still made clever use of his feeling "*neither here nor there*" to create a journalistic persona and write a number of intricately layered accounts of Illinois and its local communities (A. Wallace qtd. in Quinn 95). Franzen's memoir of a midwestern childhood may be a lot more self-serving by comparison, but he too provides valuable insights into the lives of midwestern suburbanites, namely the residents of Webster Groves, Missouri. Powers, on the other hand, offers no such insights or sustained reflections in his non-fiction and interviews. For the first six years of his career he actually gave no interviews at all, and the only piece of non-fiction he published in those years was a book review of *Vineland* (1990) by Thomas Pynchon, a notoriously reclusive author whose media silence may well have inspired Powers's own.[117] Even at the two-day press event that his publisher organized for the 1991 launch of his third novel, *The Goldbug Variations*, Powers still proved "surprisingly deft at gently fending off even the most modest inquiries into autobiography" (Dudar A6). It was only following the 1998 publication of *Gain,* for which Powers agreed to do his first book tour and give several interviews, that a clearer picture of his personal background at last emerged.

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[117] Titled "State and Vine," this piece on *Vineland* appeared in the Summer 1990 issue of *The Yale Review* and is full of praise for Pynchon, whose "astonishments and innovations have," according to Powers, "landed him securely in American readers' imagination" (698). Pynchon "remains above all a story-spinner," Powers continues, "[s]o tell us another one, Pop, before it gets too dark" (Ibid.). Powers expressed similar admiration for the author in a 2005 tribute in *Bookforum*, in which he revealed that a yearly re-reading of scenes from *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) is "the closest thing I have to a private religious ritual" ("Pynchon from A to V").

These words of praise—which might well double as an invitation to liken Powers's own work to Pynchon's—could not be further away from Franzen's ambivalence and Wallace's outright hostility toward Pynchon, whom Wallace identified in his interview with Larry McCaffery as "a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide" ("An Expanded" 48). Unlike Powers, moreover, Wallace readily dismissed *Vineland* in a letter to Don DeLillo dated 5 November 1997, a letter in which he speculates that "the exact condition [Pynchon] did most of *Vineland* in" was "stoned while watching television" (Wallace).

Of the handful of interviews he gave that year, his conversation with *Salon*'s Laura Miller reveals the most about his views on the Midwest. When Miller asks him how he thinks the region has shaped his work, Powers starts off with the following biographical sketch:

> I was born in Chicago, moved away to Bangkok at the age of 11, came back to the United States at 16, finished high school in a rural Illinois town, went to college in a rural Illinois town, moved to Boston, moved back to a rural Illinois town, moved to the Netherlands, lived for many years there, moved back to a rural Illinois town. ("The Salon Interview")

Thanks to Stephen Burn's introduction to *Intersections*, fact-checked by Powers himself, we are able to add some detail to this rough sketch. Powers was born and raised in Evanston, Illinois, an affluent suburb on the North Shore above Chicago that is home to Northwestern University and bears the nickname "Heavenston," which gives us a good clue as to why the writer described his boyhood there as "almost idyllic" (qtd. in Burn xx).[118] In 1968, this idyll came to an end when his father accepted a job as principal of the International School in Bangkok and the Powers family moved to Thailand. A mere five years later, however, the whole family returned to Illinois after Powers's father had taken ill, and the novelist finished high school in DeKalb in 1975, after which he matriculated at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)—the same public university where Wallace's father, James D. Wallace, was Professor of Moral Philosophy. Following his graduation, Powers moved to Boston to start work as a computer programmer. But unlike, say, the young Franzen, whose eagerness to assimilate into east-coast culture is captured neatly in *Goldbug*'s description of Keith Tuckwell's "Coastier Than Thou" attitude, Powers soon returned to the midwestern town of his college years, a town that he later called "the perfect balance for me" because he did not "have to work hard to cut down the amount of outside noise" (*Goldbug* 58; Powers qtd. in Howie AB4-7). Even after his second flight from this

[118] Most of the biographical facts that are mentioned here have been taken from this very useful and reliable account of Powers's life included in Burn's introduction to *Intersections*. Readers interested in a more detailed look at how Powers's life may have inspired his writing should find this introduction a good place to start.

midwestern college town had taken him as far afield as Heerlen, a former mining town in the South of the Netherlands, the writer still found his way back to Urbana, where he held the post of Swanlund Professor of English at UIUC from 1996 until he accepted the Phil and Penny Knight Professorship of Creative Writing at Stanford University in 2013.

Despite the strong regional ties that this short biography brings to the fore, the novelist is reluctant to accept Miller's description of him as a midwestern writer—much more reluctant, interestingly, than Franzen has been to call himself an "egalitarian midwesterner" after the publication of *The Corrections*. "My books," Powers tells Miller, "are not Midwestern in the sense that they plumb the Midwestern psyche in the way that Southern writers get to a real precise regional sense of their culture" ("The Salon Interview"). Such unfavorable comparisons to the South are still frequent and serve as a reminder, in the words of Richard Brodhead, of "how much the regionalist project is animated by the South's postwar [i.e. post-Civil War] status, and by the meaning of the local for which the war made the South the sign" (48). A similar comparison can, for instance, be found in Andrew Cayton's essay on the Midwest as "anti-region," which begins by considering how William Faulkner could create a character like Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), whose very southernness "weighed upon him physically, intellectually, and psychologically," whereas no such character appears to exist in the midwestern canon save, perhaps, for Sherwood Anderson's George Willard, the main character of his 1919 short-story cycle, *Winesburg, Ohio* (140).

But does Powers's first instinct to judge his novels' midwesternness by a southern standard not miss the entire point of local difference that is regionalism's precondition? It would seem much more fruitful to consider what makes the Midwest geographically distinct. Powers does this in the following, rare moment of authorial reflection on the heartland's popular image:

> The Midwest is useful to me for a lot of reasons. One is that it does seem the apotheosis of normative bourgeoisie [sic] behavior to me. And that's very useful. Make yourself invisible, don't break the rules and all will be well. And of course, that's subverted and played off against in a couple of my books. It's useful to

> me as a kind of Everyman setting. There is that sense of omnipotential [sic], unwritten, blank page to it. ("The Salon Interview")

The great irony here is not only that the Midwest's putatively normative behavior and tendency to make itself invisible are identified as its stand-out qualities, but also that this self-effacing modesty is apparently what keeps Powers from coming forward and accepting Miller's description of him as a midwestern novelist.[119] Perhaps one way to sum up the difference between the South and the Midwest, then, is to say that being a southern regionalist means always being burdened with a strong awareness of it, while being a midwestern regionalist means never quite having to realize or accept that you are.

Still, that self-effacing or blank-page quality, which Powers emphasizes in the same interview when he argues that "the Midwest is such a *tabula rasa*," is certainly not a bug but a feature, to use one of the writer's own recurring phrases (Ibid.). As we saw in the first chapter, the heartland's embodiment of all-American values is what appears to have at least partly inspired Wallace to see how the story of *The Pale King* would play in Peoria, an Illinois city that he described in his "Records Notebook" as the "large-font edition of America" (28). And the popular conception of the Midwest as American society writ large was, of course, also a major contributor to the post-9/11 praise for Franzen's *The Corrections* as the latest contender for the title of Great American Novel. Moreover, the heartland's Everyman qualities have gained a stronger and stronger hold on the popular imagination since the 1920s, when Sinclair Lewis made Main Street synonymous with the interests of everyday people and Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd put one small town in East Central Indiana on the global map for being exceptionally average. The official name of that Indiana town is Muncie, but it is better known as Middletown—an alias that, as we saw in chapter 1, the Lynds gave to it in their 1929 classic of American sociology *Middletown: A Study in*

[119] This irony is the central focus of Patricia Oman's essay, "For Those Non-Midwestern, Midwestern Writers: Richard Powers, Toni Morrison, and the Midwest *Topos*." In particular, Oman's piece contains some astute observations on Powers's playful use of the region's popular image in his second novel, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, as we will see in the following section.

American Culture, which is a "total-situation study" of how the town's local manners might be representative of larger, national trends (7). Each inhabitant of Muncie thus became a Middletowner, which is to say, an Everyman.

Yet as a result of being treated as simply "that common-denominator of America," the Midwest and its typical local communities face somewhat of an identity crisis (Ibid. 7-8). This is explained to great comic effect by Indiana-born writer Michael Martone in his introduction to *Not Normal, Illinois: Peculiar Fictions from the Flyover* (2009), an edited collection of stories dedicated to the memory of David Foster Wallace, former resident of Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. Titled "In the Middle of the Middle of Middletown," the piece describes Martone's visit to Muncie while the third Middletown study is in progress. Under the watchful eye of many a sociologist, the town's residents "aspired to act normal, a normal they had learned by reading about themselves" (3). Failure to act normal is not too big a problem, though, since "[e]ven their eccentricities [are] interpreted as typical now because they took place here in a typical city" (Ibid.). By design, then, Middletown Studies drains the city of its local color in an attempt to see the bigger picture—no matter how much the Lynds protest that in their first study of Muncie "no claim is made that it is a 'typical' city" (9). Martone's light-hearted commentary makes this evident and helps us see the literary implications of treating a city or, indeed, a whole region as the norm. How can an author write about these locals *as* locals when the Everyman status of their locale inevitably turns their exceptional qualities into typical features?

It is this question, I suggest, that is at the very heart of the "Powers Problem." In arguing this, I build on an observation made by Bruce Bawer, who complained in his *New York Times* review of *Gain* that Powers "seems to have trouble resisting the urge to reduce people to his ideas about them" (BR11). In light of the above discussion, I would like to specify this observation and say that Powers cannot resist the urge to reduce his usually midwestern characters to the culture's popular ideas about them, ideas that are based on their regional background and that have been firmly planted in the collective American imagination by novels like *Main Street* and studies like

Middletown. Powers presumably does this in the hope of making his characters more relatable, but it has the opposite effect. Unlike Wallace's midwesterners who, in the case of Toni Ware, have grown up in a trailer park but managed to maintain a rich and multivalent inner life or, in the case of Leonard Stecyk, are so absurdly neighborly as to fill others with near-murderous rage, Powers's heartlanders are eminently forgettable because, as Wood rightly puts it, they "never speak or act against type" ("Brain" 80).[120] If they are "good country people," then that is all they ever will be in a Powers novel, whether it be *Prisoner's Dilemma*, with its domestic drama set in suburban DeKalb, Illinois; the abovementioned *Gain*, with its variation on the Main Street versus Wall Street juxtaposition; or the National Book Award-winning novel, *The Echo Maker*, with its post-9/11 perspective on the heartland myth. The following analysis of these three novels, published at three main stages in Powers's career, reveals a trio of narrative strategies that he has used to justify his reliance on "type" as a substitute for traditional character development. None of them, however, offers any definite solution to the "Powers Problem."

The Nuclear Family

The author's fascination with "type" dates all the way back to his 1985 debut, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it dates back to even before that, going by the novelist's own account of a Saturday morning spent at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, where he went to see the first American retrospective of the work of German portrait photographer August Sander. In his interview with the *Paris Review*, Powers claims that he was so deeply moved that day

[120] In other words, Powers systematically violates what is sometimes called "Pushkin's Law" or "Pushkin's Law of characterisation," which is founded on Pushkin's observation that "people in [Shakespeare's] plays never behave 'in character'" (Bayley xxxiv). Pushkin reportedly objected to Byron's plays "on the ground that in them 'a conspirator says "Give me a drink" conspiratorially—and that's ridiculous'" (Ibid.). In a recent blog post for the *London Review of Books*, Benjamin Markovits includes this "law" in his three ground rules of which "[m]ost creative writing teachers, and most workshop classes, will give some version" (Markovits).

by Sander's *Young Farmers, Westerwald, ca. 1914* that he went to work on Monday "and gave two weeks notice and started working on *Three Farmers*" ("The Art" 111). But why would this picture have had so big an impact on him that he chose it as the cover image and main subject of his first book? One reason appears to be that Powers had the instant realization that these three young men were on their way not only to a dance but also, unwittingly, to the First World War—a tragic coincidence that captures how the weight of history presses down on the individual, which would become a recurring theme in Powers's novels. Another reason for his fascination with the photograph is hinted at by Anca Cristofovici, who writes in her essay on *Three Farmers*' many allusions to Sander that the photographer "adopted a quasi-encyclopedic approach for his typologically-oriented photographic collection, *Man of the Twentieth Century*" (44). Sander's ambitious work of social realism, she explains, consists of seven groupings of "Ur-types," namely The Craftsman, The Woman, The Professions, The Artist, The Metropolis, The Last People, and The Farmer, which includes the abovementioned picture (Ibid.). I suggest that Sander's ideas for a study in "Ur-type" must have resonated with the young Powers's own "typologically-oriented" views on writing, and I take this second explanation as my starting point for the following discussion of the author's early work. In some ways, those Westerwalders were for Sander what midwesterners would become for Powers.[121]

This is not that obvious yet in Powers's debut novel, mostly because large parts of the book are set in Boston and the South of the Netherlands, leaving the author's native Midwest a far less prominent place than in most of his later novels. Interestingly, the book's Dutch setting was a purely imagined geography for Powers at this stage of his career, since he only moved to Heerlen two years afterward. So perhaps it is no surprise that he projects the much more familiar locale of the Midwest onto the Dutch South as in the following description of the capital city of the southern province of

[121] A crucial difference between Sander and Powers can be gleaned from Cristofovici's following observation about Sander's *Young Farmers*: "Rather than clearly belonging to a gallery of stereotypes, these men are well-dressed for the occasion" (45). Given that the occasion, a dance, is never mentioned in the original caption, Sander's "ur-typical" farmers must have come across as rather atypical instead, which gives them a greater degree of three-dimensionality. Powers's types, on the other hand, are rarely if ever atypical, and consequently they never quite take on that third dimension.

Limburg: “Maastricht is large without luster or cosmopolitan quality. Detroit might be a good American analogy” (47).[122] And a page later he suggests that “Limburg stands in relation to the rest of the Netherlands as, once again, the Midwest stands to the US” (48). Brief though they may be, these two asides give us an early impression of Powers’s treatment of geography as type, a treatment that diminishes precisely those “complexities of character and locale” whose literary importance Franzen emphasized in a letter to Don DeLillo from 12 June 1995 (Franzen). Only by doing away with these complexities could Powers go ahead and compare Motor City to a provincial town that developed from a Roman settlement and can stake a legitimate claim to being the oldest city in the Netherlands.

Surely, Powers must have been struck by the difference once he had moved to the Dutch province after the publication of *Three Farmers*. But instead of abandoning his type-based approach, he used a similar method for his next novel, *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, in which his interest in type would take on a distinctly midwestern shape. Just as he had used Sander’s photograph to gain imaginative access to the Dutch setting of that first book, so too did Powers use visual material to conjure up an image of the Midwest from his new home in Limburg. The first U.S. edition of *Prisoner’s Dilemma*, which is designed to recall the first edition of *Three Farmers*, also has a photograph of three unidentified figures on its cover—figures who turn out to be a young Powers and both of his parents (Dewey 33).[123] Unlike the author’s first novel, however, the plot of his sophomore work does not revolve around this cover photo, which is presumably why it was left out of subsequent paperback editions. The visual material that does take on a crucial role this time is actually not a picture but a motion picture, namely a 1939 promotional film titled *The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair*. In the

[122] The analogy might also be at the heart of Powers’s decision to relocate his fictionalized encounter with Sander’s *Young Farmers* from Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts to the Detroit Institute of Arts, thus further strengthening the connection between Limburg and the Midwest, Maastricht and Detroit.

[123] Putting such a family picture on the cover of a book that did not include an official author photograph and that was published at a time when Powers had not yet made a single media appearance is, again, not unlike Pynchon’s playful manipulation of his reputation for being media shy. Most recently, for instance, a *New York Times* piece by Logan Hill spread the rumor that Pynchon makes an appearance in Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2015 film adaptation of his novel *Inherent Vice* (2009). According to one of the film’s stars, Josh Brolin, the novelist “‘came on as the kind of mercurial iconoclast he is’” (qtd. in Logan AR1). His cameo has yet to be confirmed, though.

following analysis of *Prisoner's Dilemma*, I examine how Powers turned to this film as a main source of inspiration for the midwestern domestic drama of his own novel, which he has repeatedly called his "most American book" (qtd. in Burn xxiv). I argue that the film's construction of an all-American nuclear family conveniently allowed Powers to bring his Sander-like fondness for type to bear on the Midwest and to imagine it, for the first time in his career, as an Everyman setting.

It is only fitting, then, that we begin by taking a closer look at *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*. This promotional film was commissioned by Westinghouse to offer American moviegoers virtual access to the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, New York, and to give them the opportunity to marvel at all of the high-tech gadgets and household appliances on display at the fair's "World of Tomorrow" and "Playground of Science" (Johnson 1). "Strategically," as Victoria Johnson rightly observes, "Westinghouse used *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair* to encourage audiences across the United States to apprehend the Pavilion's wonders through the eyes of midwesterners and their presumed 'common sense' Heartland values" (2). Moviegoers would, for instance, have gotten their first glimpse of the dishwasher over the shoulders of mother and grandma Middleton, who attend a "wash-off" between woman and machine. They would have first seen the technology for broadcast television through the eyes of young Bud Middleton, who visits the Pavilion's TV studio with his father. And all the while they would have most likely been hoping for Babs Middleton to break up with her anti-capitalist New York art teacher, Nicholas Makaroff, and get together with Jim Treadway, "good people" from back home with a healthy belief in the "World of Tomorrow."[124] Audiences, in other words, were expected to identify with this midwestern, down-to-earth Middleton family from Riverdale, Central Indiana—the very region that the Lynds had turned into the

[124] Reader, she marries Jim. Or at least that is what the film's ending leads us to expect. But if the motivation behind Babs's decision is anything like Patty Berglund's reasons for choosing midwestern nice guy Walter Berglund over New York aesthete Richard Katz in Franzen's novel *Freedom*, then there might just be another "Mistakes Were Made" autobiography waiting to be uncovered.

Everyman setting *par excellence* with their choice of Muncie for their 1929 Middletown study, to which the Middleton name is an unmistakable reference.

In his apparent efforts to populate *Prisoner's Dilemma* with Everyman characters who are just as relatable as Westinghouse's were meant to be, Powers casts the book's Hobson family in the same mold as the Middletons. Though the youngest member of the Middleton family gets the most screen time in the motion picture, Powers's novel revolves around the oldest member of the Hobson family, Eddie Sr., whose mysterious fainting spells and unwillingness to seek treatment for them have forced the family to relocate from their east-coast home and move farther and farther midwestward or, to use the novel's enigmatic phrase, "deeper in the interior" (46). At the start of the novel, Eddie's oldest son Artie witnesses one of his father's blackouts, and this makes it clear that the Hobsons' present hometown of DeKalb, Illinois, has not provided them with the "healing climate" they were looking for (Ibid.). What follows is a sit-down with the whole family, after which Eddie Sr. finally agrees to check himself into a hospital in Chicago, but on the condition that all four of his children—Artie, Lily, Rachel, and Eddie Jr.—join him and their mother Ailene for one more family Thanksgiving in their parental home.

This family plot should, of course, immediately call to mind Franzen's *The Corrections*, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, features an old midwestern couple named Enid and Alfred Lambert and centers on Enid's wish to have all three of their children spend one last Christmas together in their parental home before Alfred agrees to seek treatment for his Parkinson's disease. But while Alfred's debilitating condition has left him barely able to answer his mail, we soon discover that Eddie Sr.'s frail health has not stopped him from steadily working away at a recording project he calls "Hobstown." These audiotapes give us access to Eddie Sr.'s "interior." They grant us entry to the elaborate fantasy that he has dreamed up to cope with the trauma of having lost his brother in a military accident and having witnessed the first detonation of a nuclear weapon at the United States Army's Alamogordo site in 1945. Surprisingly, however, this imaginative access does not make Eddie Sr. a more three-dimensional

character. By comparison, it is Franzen's impenetrable Alfred who appears more lifelike and relatable, especially in those final moments of great vulnerability at the end of the novel when, for instance, he struggles to unbuckle the belt that straps him to his hospital bed—a struggle that Franzen captures neatly when he writes: "He was like a person of two dimensions seeking freedom in a third" (Franzen 642).[125]

The reason for Eddie Sr.'s comparative flatness has everything to do with the Westinghouse film, whose link with the Hobson family drama is made explicit in "Hobstown: 1939," the reader's first encounter with the "Hobstown" tapes. This early chapter introduces us to another of the many marvels on display at the fair's Westinghouse Pavilion: a time capsule for the year 6939 or, to use Powers's phrase, a "*torpedo locked on a target five thousand years from now*" (31). As for the contents of this capsule, the ever-obliging Jim Treadway explains to the Middletons that it is "a complete record of our civilization," ranging from a women's hat to microfilms containing a "record of ten million words and a thousand pictures" (11:59-12:01, 12:28-12:30). While the adults are visibly impressed by this, Bud looks at the capsule with a healthy degree of skepticism: "I bet a knickel I know something that isn't in it: Mickey Mouse" (12:45-12:47). But Jim manages to convince him, too, when he answers, "You'd lose Bud. Mickey Mouse, Dick Tracey, Barney Google—they're all there" (12:47-12:53). In Powers's novelistic retelling of this scene, on the other hand, Bud is not so easily convinced; he sees that "*fitting all America into the tube would take a tube the size of all America*" (30). With this allusion to the Borgesian metaphor of the map and the territory, which we discussed in relation to Wallace's work in chapter 1, Powers hints at why this scene takes up such a prominent place in his novel: the motivation behind the time capsule is reminiscent of the social realist idea behind Sander's collection of "Ur-types," *Man of the Twentieth Century*. More importantly, it is similar to

[125] In his review of *The Corrections* for the 15 October 2001 issue of *The New Republic*, James Wood pays special attention to this description when he builds up to his closing remarks on Franzen's work, which he contrasts with the "social novel" and describes as a work that "makes a case for the vivacity of another kind of book, the novel of character" (40).

the idea behind Westinghouse's construction of the "ur-typical" Middleton family and, by extension, Powers's invention of the all-American Hobsons.

The novel emphasizes this reliance on a stereotypical construct to sum up an entire culture when the narrator of the first Hobstown chapter, who is of course Eddie Sr., observes that the "*mythical Middleton family is manufactured to serve as model Americans at this model America*" (31). The focus in this and other early Hobstown chapters is on Bud, the youngest member of the model-American family and the voice of a generation that would inherit the fair's "World of Tomorrow." As Eddie Sr. imagines "[*w*]*hat world* […] *the Middletons return to after their film is over*," he first pictures Bud writing a letter to a younger Eddie, whom Bud has apparently met "*last spring at the Fair*" (33, 35). The significance of this connection between Bud and the narrator becomes clear in the course of the story, when the Hobstown recordings are revealed to be something akin to what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction," that is, a narrative in which "the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the 'world' and literature" (124). The Hobstown metafiction presents us with an account of how, following the attacks on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Walt Disney was asked by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson to create a work of propaganda that could rival Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and raise the morale on the American home front. Such a work, Disney believes, "*must be about the median fellow, the American's American, the butcher, baker, fruit-and-vegetable vendor*" (171). The lead role should go to a "*local voice* [*that*] *is larger than life*," which is why Disney goes looking for Bud Middleton, that "*quintessential American boy*" whose performance in the Westinghouse film has shown Disney that he can "*convince the audience that his story is their story"* (90, 209, 213). When Bud is nowhere to be found, though, it is his World's Fair acquaintance, the young Eddie, who takes Bud's place next to Mickey Mouse as the "ur-typical" lead in Disney's Great American Movie, *You Are the War*.

It turns out, then, that the "Hobstown" metafiction is less an intimate portrait of a flesh-and-blood character than an account of how Eddie Sr. is eventually typecast as a

generic Everyman. Instead of presenting us with a relatable character, Powers manufactures a model American through whom he is able to explore the subject of character relatability. This distinction is an important one to make because it is exactly what accounts for the difference between a novel of character and a novel of ideas *about* character—one whose author's interest in his protagonists never goes "beyond their usefulness as symbolic elements in grand theoretical assemblages," as Daniel Mendelsohn rightly observed in his piece on Powers for *The New York Times* of 26 January 2003 (12). Mendelsohn raised these objections in a review of Powers's 2002 novel, *The Time of Our Singing*, but his criticism can just as easily be applied to the novelist's treatment of Eddie Sr., not to mention the other members of the Hobson family whose construction as archetypal figures is not made as obvious by means of allusions to Westinghouse's all-American Middletons. A cursory look at the criticism and scholarship that *Prisoner's Dilemma* has so far attracted confirms that it is not the characters' individuality and local manners but their role as symbolic elements in the "big picture" that is commonly regarded as the book's main feature. One of its first admirers, for instance, was systems theorist Tom LeClair, whose book review appeared in the 25 April 1988 issue of *The New Republic* under the title "The Systems Novel." LeClair views the book's cast of characters as a system, "the Hobson loop," and observes that the family members "turn into one another, turn into other Hobson pairs, and form by the novel's end a dense Venn diagram of Hobson—and American—family life" (41-42).[126] Beth McFarland-Wilson takes a similar view on the family unit in her more recent journal article, "The Hobson Family System in Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*." In her analysis of the novel, she moves away from "a traditional review of its literary elements" and proposes that "[t]hrough Family Systems Theory, we will better understand the Hobson family as a kind of sympathetic and mimetic character" (115, 101). Even essays that do not set out to examine the Hobson family

[126] LeClair's review of Powers's novel appeared just after the publication of his monograph, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987), a work in which LeClair coins the term "systems novel" to describe a kind of fiction that would offer a maximalist alternative to what in his book review he calls "the carved-down school of fiction, 1980s minimalism" (40). Interestingly, Powers uses LeClair's book as a point of departure for his own discussion on the possibility of a hybrid novel in his contribution to *Intersections*. This piece will be discussed in more detail in the following section on *Gain*.

through the lens of systems theory—essays such as Arthur M. Saltzman's chapter on Powers in *The Novel in the Balance*—almost inevitably end up treating the book as "an extended transcript of family echo-location" (Saltzman 104).

It is not hard to see why the Hobsons have hardly been appreciated as individuals, especially when we draw another quick comparison with *The Corrections*, whose Lambert family has been examined in much more traditional, literary and psychoanalytical terms.[127] The key difference is, in fact, already apparent from the life stories of the heads of both families. Alfred's is an all too recognizable tale of personal suffering, that is, a story of a retired railroad worker with a depression, family problems, and Parkinson's disease. Eddie Sr.'s, on the other hand, is a singular account of suffering on the grandest possible scale; it is not so much about the realities of suburban domestic life as it is about the trauma of having witnessed nothing less than the birth of a nuclear superpower, having seen the explosion that transformed America into "Death, the destroyer of worlds," in J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous gloss of the Hindu scripture (*The Decision* 25:12-25:15). It is this "predicament of the individual imprisoned by the sum of history" that Ursula Hegi praised in her review of *Prisoner's Dilemma*, and practically every one of Powers's later novels has drawn responses of this kind (BR15). But when "[h]is picture," as Atwood gushes, "is that big," Powers risks subordinating his individual characters to those monumental events in which they are caught up, as clearly happens in Eddie Sr.'s case (58). No amount of midwestern "common sense" and "heartland values" will in itself be enough to bring such a tall tale as Eddie Sr.'s down to earth, down to a level where it would resonate with readers in the same way as Franzen's portrait of Alfred Lambert would. All that Powers's emphasis on Eddie Sr.'s all-American qualities ends up doing is turn him into a simulacrum of midwestern "good people."

[127] See, for instance, Catherine Toal's essay, "Corrections: Contemporary American Melancholy," which examines the "effect on contemporary American literature of a popular discourse on depression" alongside a trio of books, namely Rick Moody's *The Black Veil*, Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Franzen's *The Corrections* (305). Another example is a revised version of Wood's aforementioned review of Franzen's novel, which appears in his 2004 collection, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, under the title "Jonathan Franzen and the 'Social Novel.'"

With regard to the other members of the Hobson family, whose stories play out on a far more local scale, Powers's efforts at character development appear no less perfunctory. Just as the "Hobstown" chapters draw attention to Eddie Sr.'s artificiality, so do the novel's main chapters call attention to the one-dimensionality of the other Hobsons. A good example is a chapter that focuses on Eddie Jr., who has just been to the cinema to see *Fantasia* with his date Sarah. While Eddie Jr. is walking Sarah home, she asks him what his parents are like, and he admits to her that they are somewhat unusual by means of a pop-cultural reference: "They aren't the Cleavers" (181). To this he adds, "[t]hat's Ward and June, for those of you just back from the rococo," which leaves no doubt that his comment refers to *Leave It to Beaver*, an iconic sitcom that is set in the mid-twentieth century's Golden Age of Capitalism and features another "Middletonian," all-American family: the Cleavers (Ibid.).[128] But when Sarah goes on to ask Eddie Jr. to describe his family to her in more detail, he has second thoughts about his relatives' not matching the typical sitcom profile:

> "The close-to-the-chest older brother. The testy, ex-radical big sis. Sis number two, everybody's favorite flake. The patient, long-suffering mom. All lost in orbit around the master of ceremonies. You tell me. Now that I think about it, we might make a halfway decent sitcom after all" (182).

Eddie Jr.'s realisation that these brief, one-sentence character sketches actually suffice to sum up the collection of familiar types that is the Hobson family leads him to conclude that his relatives might, therefore, more closely resemble the typical cast of a sitcom than he initially thought. This, then, invites the reader to define the Hobsons in relation to the pop-cultural idea of yet another manufactured, model-American family. In other words, the Hobsons are a simulation of not only the Middletons but the Cleavers, too.

Most of the Hobsons' interactions do, indeed, come across as highly choreographed set pieces straight out of an American "period sitcom" such as the

[128] The TV series takes place in the fictional suburban town of Mayfield; and although the actual state is never mentioned, there are several clues that suggest that Mayfield is either located in Wisconsin or Ohio, making this another domestic drama set against the backdrop of an imagined heartland.

popular *That '70s Show*, which aired from 1998 to 2006 and entertained viewers with a pastiche of life in the 1970s in the fictional suburban town of Point Place, Wisconsin. In fact, the very conversation in which Eddie Jr. draws attention to the sitcom qualities of his family is itself already a good example of such a set piece, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

> "It's not fair. You can't be attractive and know everything, too. Make up your mind and specialize, like everyone else.' Sarah declared that her specialty tonight was Donna Reed. So they took it again, from the top, with feeling. 'Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight. Buffalo gals won't you come out tonight. And…dance…by…the light…of the moo-ooon."
>
> "God you're beautiful."
>
> "Let's not get blasphemous, now."
>
> "What? I didn't say nothing. I said, *Gob*, not *God*. 'Gob, you're beautiful.' I've got a great idea. How about you and I …?" He took her elbow and pointed to her mouth, then to his, waving his index finger back and forth between the two, inquiringly. She nodded almost imperceptibly, and they kissed a tentative exploration. (188).

It seems reasonable to assume that such dialogue is, at least in part, unnatural by design. Joseph Dewey takes this view in his monograph's chapter on *Prisoner's Dilemma*, where he writes of the Hobson children that they "find difficult the simplest gesture of honest talk—their conversations are snappy, pun-riddled, and erudite but often maddeningly artificial" (38).

And yet, the problem with this interpretation is that Powers's other novels are by no means exempt from such maddeningly artificial conversations, which raises the question of whether Powers unironically embraces such typicality or gently pokes fun at it. A brief look at his 2000 novel *Plowing the Dark*—a book that can hardly be thought of as a pastiche of a sitcom—shows a range of dialogues that are just as contrived as Eddie Jr.'s above conversation with Sarah. The first chapter, for instance, presents the reader with a phone conversation in which Stevie Spiegel reconnects with his secret crush Adie Klarpol, with whom he has lost touch after their college years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. What follows is a brief excerpt from that opening phone call:

> *Jesus! Stevie*. Her voice skidded away from her, a gypsum imitation of pleasure's bronze. *Stevie. What on earth have you been doing with yourself?*
>
> *Doing…? Adie, my love. You still make life sound like a summer camp craft project.*
>
> *It isn't?*
>
> *No, you decorative little dauber. It is not. Life is a double-blind, controlled placebo experiment. Has middle age taught you nothing?*
>
> *Hah. I knew that at twenty. You were the one in denial*. (6)

A generous reader might, perhaps, accept Stevie's use of "my love" as ironic and interpret a single phrase like "decorative little dauber" as a playfully artificial one. But this tone is maintained throughout the entire conversation, which strongly suggests that this is simply the way Powers's characters speak. This, in turn, casts serious doubt on how deliberately artificial the Hobsons' interactions are in *Prisoner's Dilemma*. Is their behavior an ironic commentary on the media-manufactured image of the average American household—one that brings to mind Wallace's admission in "E Unibus Pluram" that "[a]ctually I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV" (22)? Or does the novel's cast of flat characters illustrate precisely what Wallace identified as the "problem with so many of us fiction writers under 40 using television as a substitute" for real fieldwork (Ibid. 24)?

The example from *Plowing the Dark* points toward the latter, but *Prisoner's Dilemma* does contain several set pieces that are unmistakable parodies of sitcom camp, which means that the novel as a whole is delicately poised between parody and pastiche. One such parodic scene plays out near the beginning of the novel, just after Eddie Sr. has had his latest blackout in the absence of his wife Ailene and his daughter Rachel. When both women come home, Eddie Jr. greets them with a callous remark about what has just happened: "'You two ducked out just in time to miss the show'" (27). This clearly upsets Ailene, leaving Eddie Jr. with a guilty conscience that Rachel then decides to tease him about with the following, sitcom-like antics:

> Rachel took a pitch pipe out of her pocket, blew a C, and sang, to the tune of "Goodnight, Ladies,"
>
> *Don't cry, Edski,*
> *Don't cry Nedski,*

Don't cry Wedski,
We'll let you take the blame. (28-29)

This spontaneous bursting into song is one of the novel's more theatrical, or rather, televisual moments, one for which the reader can practically already hear the mechanical laugh-track of a TV sitcom. Another example incidentally also involves Rachel, though this time it is not a set piece but a short paragraph detailing her backstory. Rachel, we are told, dropped out of college after only two semesters at the local land-grant university. For a year afterward, she apparently "wore a homemade button that read: THIS MIND INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK" (50). The theatricality of this gesture is on par with that of the above song. But what is more, the statement can be applied to the entire Hobson family, who mostly serve as blank screens onto which the reader is encouraged to project the culture's ideas of the nuclear family, ideas that have largely been shaped by iconic families such as the Middletons and the Cleavers.

With only a minor adjustment, the phrase on Rachel's button provides a remarkably accurate description of the novel's setting, too: THIS SPACE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK. Such a connection between the novel's flat characters and the midwestern flatlands is no coincidence, as Patricia Oman rightly observes in her contribution to the essay collection *Critical Insights: Midwestern Literature*. Oman concentrates her attention on chapter 10, which portrays Rachel and Artie's car ride on the East-West Tollway from DeKalb to Chicago as an "eventless tour from nowhere to nowhere through nowhere" during which the two siblings "could have disappeared into flatness"—as if they have not already done so (Powers 154, 155). The specific connection that Oman identifies is a thematic one between the Hobsons' hollow interior and the empty landscape of the American "interior," which is hinted at in one of the chapter's most striking sentences: "Why was it so impossible, these days, to experience anything, to look out the window and *feel*?' (162). Oman argues that "[t]his description of the Midwestern landscape as devoid of feeling is a direct contrast to the traditional agrarian trope, which contains rich emotional undercurrents" (54). Of course,

we need only recall chapter 1's discussion of Wallace's heavily annotated copies of Martone's "The Flatness" to see just how flatly Powers's account of the region contradicts the established narrative of the heartland. After all, Martone's essay represents the Midwest as "a place of sense," "a membrane," a place "[w]here we begin to feel" (33, 32, 33).

What Oman's essay does not adequately address, however, is the role of the blank slate that the Midwest has always played as well. Martone, for instance, mentions this role in his piece when he likens the region to "the stretched canvas and paper" (33). And judging from Powers's aforementioned interview with *Salon* in 1998, he himself was well aware of this particular view on the Midwest, which is reportedly "subverted and played off against in a couple of [his] books" ("The Salon Interview"). In fact, it is in *Prisoner's Dilemma* that this idea first emerged in Powers's work; it comes up in one of the later "Hobstown" chapters that recount Disney's search for the ideal location to shoot his magnum opus, *You Are the War*. Before Disney eventually settles on the young Eddie for the lead role, he has already found the perfect all-American location for his film set, which he comes to refer to as "World World." It is perhaps no surprise that the town of his choice is DeKalb, Illinois. The reasons for selecting a place "*deep in the interior*"—in the "*weighted center of the nation's population*"—are explained in a teaser trailer that his film crew manages to put together while the cartoonist himself is in New York, still trying to track down Bud Middleton (174). The following is what Eddie Sr. imagines the teaser to be like:

> *A voice-over, perfect parody of a forties documentary narrator, quavers about how a band of home-front soldiers, at the insistence of their country, have lucked upon the ideal geography for establishing a model nation, for starting over from scratch, for beginning again. "From out of this absolute absence of features," the voice resonates, "this flat, empty tabula rasa, this blank slate of nothingness, can come anything at all, anything that a majority of folks agrees to put here*." (209)

Here the popular idea of the Midwest as an "empty tabula rasa" clears the way for Disney's treatment of it as one giant green screen onto which he and his team of

animators or, in keeping with Disney's own terminology, "imagineers" are able to project their own national narrative, their own magic kingdom.

But of all the shapes that they can possibly draw on this midwestern blank page, the animators ultimately choose to turn this "*miniature model of a sleepy town into a living, breathing replica, as convincing as the original*" (211). Their stated intention is to turn the model-American town into a simulacrum of itself and a synecdoche of the nation, much like the Lynds turned Muncie into Middletown:

> *The technique he* [i.e. Disney] *means to pinch is that view of Middle Americana going about its ordinary, small-town dance of courtship and romance that he has glimpsed two years before and still cannot shake*. (216)

This grand design behind the "World World" set is, of course, also an allusion to the original Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California, whose construction we looked at in the introduction to this dissertation. Readers will remember that Disney delivered a dedication speech for the park's official opening on 17 July 1955 and that he personally chose to give this speech at the uneventful Main Street, U.S.A., which was dearer to him than any of the park's more spectacular sites, such as the "World of Tomorrow"-inspired Tomorrowland. Just as the "World World" set in *Prisoner's Dilemma*'s "Hobstown" chapters is supposed to be an imaginative refuge for those Americans imprisoned by history, so does Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A. airbrush reality and provide its visitors, not to mention its creator, with an imaginary retreat into the good-life fantasy of dwelling in an all-American midwestern town. It presents visitors with a simulacrum of Marceline, Missouri, the prairie town in which Disney reportedly spent the happiest years of his childhood.

Finally, the idea of a retreat into an idealized midwestern comfort zone is one of the novel's central conceits. It ties together the book's layered narratives, whose artificiality is repeatedly emphasized by reminding the reader that most of these stories are dictated into voice recorders. First of all, the "Hobstown" metafiction offers several glimpses of Disney's creative process, showing us how Disney composes his "Silly

Symphonies" and outlines his plans for *You Are the War* by speaking into the black bullhorn of a recording device that is *"the secret land where he creates the alternate worlds that give the public safe haven*" (87). We should be mindful, of course, that these scenes are themselves constructed by Eddie Sr., who speaks them into a voice recorder as part of his "Hobstown" project, which earns him the family nickname of "the Great Dictator" (54). Eddie Sr.'s story is, in turn, communicated to the reader by Powers, who draws our attention to exactly this storytelling mechanic in the novel's penultimate chapter. In that chapter, Powers breaks the fourth wall and confides in the reader that he coped with the loss of his own father by constructing this storyworld: "Call it Powers World" (344).[129] In this series of embedded narratives that construct a Main Street whose main character constructs a Main Street whose main character constructs a Main Street, Powers finds a convenient way of turning his own typologically-oriented approach to writing into the subject of his novel. But the end result is a novel that is all ideas and no character, which is a far cry from a hybrid novel that gives equal importance to both. The following discussion of his 1998 novel, *Gain*, will show how Powers attempts to redress this imbalance by taking a slightly different approach that relies not on narrative recursion but on juxtaposition. In *Gain*, he constructs the same Main Street stereotype of small-town America, only to then justify its construction with constant reference to corporate America, or Wall Street, as emblematized by the multinational Clare Corporation.[130]

[129] This penultimate chapter is all the more striking now that we know that Powers has himself become a Great, or rather, not-so-Great Dictator. According to his *New York Times* piece on "How to Speak a Book," he has not "touched a keyboard" since he composed *The Echo Maker* on a tablet PC using speech-recognition software (Powers 31). James Wood's review of *Generosity*, however, strongly urged Powers to switch back to the keyboard, or at least install additional "bullshit-recognition software" (81).

[130] Following the title of William Z. Ripley's 1927 book, *Main Street and Wall Street*, this pairing has come to be known as "Main Street versus Wall Street." In the "Personal Note" that prefaces the main text, Ripley acknowledges Sinclair Lewis's 1920 classic as a source of inspiration: "I have confessed the theft of a part of my title to Mr. Sinclair Lewis, the distinguished author of *Main Street*. He has been pleased to send me his 'Godspeed' in the enterprise" (vii).

Powers, Ltd.

Let me begin my discussion of *Gain* with a simple exercise of filling in the blanks, one that takes its inspiration from a scene that occurs roughly halfway through *Three Farmers*. When one of that novel's main characters, a man by the name of Peter Mays, is queuing up for a one-woman show by Kimberly Greene, he passes the time by imagining the words that have been omitted from the review blurbs on the ads outside the theater. Peter wonders, for instance, whether an apparently glowing recommendation like "'Compelling … Arresting … I was stunned …'" may have originally appeared in print as follows (188):

> "By compelling me to go to this so-called performance, my editor caused me to miss the simpler pleasure of staying home and getting stewed. Arresting Ms. Greene would be a public service. I was stunned that such a racket could escape the Better Business Bureau." (Ibid.)

Clearly, this game of Peter's doubles as a critique of an all-too-common practice in the entertainment industry to reduce lengthy, mixed reviews to catchy and often misleading soundbites. But that criticism is somewhat weakened by the fact that Peter's comments are pure speculation and he never bothers to check his fabrications against any of the original reviews to establish their accuracy.

For our own example, let us therefore fill in the blanks of a blurb using actual material from an original review of *Gain*, namely John Updike's review for *The New Yorker*. This piece is excerpted on the back cover of the 2001 Vintage paperback edition of *Gain* as follows: "Intricately, intelligently and accurately constructed … formidable." A brief look at the original review, which appeared in the 27 July 1998 issue of *The New Yorker* under the title "Soap and Death in America," reveals that this apparently high praise was anything but that. It turns out that the use of ellipsis indicates the omission of a total of 151 words that, unsurprisingly, are a lot more critical of Powers's work.[131] The following block citation presents Updike's comments in full,

[131] But we could just as easily have chosen another blurb that appears on the book's back cover. Just below Updike's comment, for example, there is an excerpt from Bruce Bawer's aforementioned review of

and the handful of words that appeared on the book's back cover have been italicized for ease of identification:

> This *intricately, intelligently, and accurately constructed* fictional mechanism yet lacks the spark that would make it go on its own. The author, off above the clouds with his omniscience, is unignorably present in every high-tech touch, every shift of narrative gears, every typographical oddity. The rapid fluctuation between Laura's medical weepie and the saga of American industry, with antic commercial breaks in between, makes it hard to get close to any character. We never quite dwell among these people; we just collect a few pages of evidence and hurry on. The prose seems not so much written as administered, in short, doselike paragraphs and compressed sentences with an occasional tang of the precious:
>
> > Its appeal cut across social strata, from Astor to ash tender.
> > Lather now lent luster to the name Clare.
>
> Not that Powers's achievement, in describing the rise of the corporations that pollute every corner of our world with souped-up molecules and mind-numbing slogans, isn't *formidable*: formidable is just what it is. (Updike 77; italics added)

So not only did Powers's own publisher implicate him in a practice of false advertising that he himself had mocked in his 1985 debut, but they did so with the publication of a book that is all about unethical business practice and "mind-numbing slogans," to use an apt phrase from the deleted portion of Updike's review. It is hard to imagine a nicer irony.

But my reason for bringing up this review is not (only) to draw attention to this irony. Rather, it is to point out that what is omitted from Updike's blurb is an early diagnosis of the "Powers Problem." Given that, in another review of his, Updike had written that *Galatea 2.2* "drew tears, I confess, from this [reader]," such criticism cannot be easily dismissed as that of someone who is hostile to Powers's writing ("Novel Thoughts" 113). Powers, to his credit, does address it in his interview with the *Paris Review*. There he remarks that

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Gain in the 21 June 1988 issue of the *New York Times*. The review blurb reads a lot like Updike's: "Erudite, Penetrating and splendidly written … dazzling." Here the use of ellipsis is even more outrageous, since it is used to mark the omission of a staggering total of 1,004 words, which is to say, almost three fourths of the entire review.

> John Updike criticized the book, rightly or wrongly, in *The New Yorker* by saying that every time the individual asserts itself, the scope of collective industry dwarfs it and reduces the individual to insignificance. My response is: That's not a bug, that's a feature. That's not a failing of the narrative, that's what the narrative is about. ("The Art" 117)

Several years later, the novelist would make a similar case in his contribution to *Intersections*, titled "Making the Rounds." In this piece, he takes issue with Wood's complaint about Zadie Smith and her "hysterical realis[t]" peers, who purportedly "do not think that language and the representation of consciousness are the novelist's quarries anymore" (Wood, "Human" 41, 43). "Information," Wood argues, "has become the new character" (43).[132] To this, Powers responds, "Is that a bug or feature? For my money, focalized information *is* character, voiced ideas are as passionate as humans get" ("Making" 307). In other words, his reply to Updike and Wood is a defense of his own tendency to reduce the individual to insignificance and elevate ideas to the status of character. Scholars of Powers's work have presented a similar defense. Charles Harris, for example, writes about the flatness of *Gain*'s characters that "we should consider the possibility that this is a strategy rather than a flaw" ("The Stereo" 100). But might it not be both? Should we not consider the possibility that it is a strategy to cover up the narrative's flaws?

The following analysis of *Gain* takes this question as its point of departure and examines more closely what so many critics and reviewers, not to mention Powers himself, have identified as the novelist's trademark "narrative 'braiding' technique" (Burn and Dempsey xii). This technique, for which Harris borrows the phrase "stereo view" from Powers's own *Three Farmers*, essentially weaves together two seemingly unconnected narrative strands and, in doing so, supposedly "resolves [them] into three-dimensional parallax" (Harris, "The Stereo" 99, 98).[133] Such narrative braiding is immediately recognizable in *Gain*, which alternates between one strand that presents an encyclopedic account of "Wall Street" by recounting the history of Clare Soap and

[132] These comments originally appeared in Wood's review of Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), for the 24 July 2000 issue of *The New Republic*. The piece, titled "Human, All Too Human," was subsequently republished as "Hysterical Realism" in Wood's aforementioned essay collection *The Irresponsible Self*.
[133] Harris borrows the phrase from page 341 of Powers's debut novel.

Chemical, and another strand that explores the company's impact on "Main Street" as represented by the "good people" of Lacewood, Illinois, specifically Laura Bodey, whose ovarian cancer may or may not have been caused by the contaminants from Clare's local factory. It appears, then, that the book aspires to the "kind of bastard hybrid" that Powers describes in his essay for *Intersections* as a maximalist novel of ideas that wraps inside itself a minimalist novel of character ("Making" 308). And yet, when Sven Birkerts asks him about his narrative approach in a 1998 interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Powers admits that he has trouble bringing his narratives "closer to eye level" and that he "gravitate[s] naturally" toward the "aerial view" or "grand scheme" (60). He says that he "would characterize [him]self as a top-down writer who's learning to become a bottom-up writer," and he clarifies that "top," in this case, refers to a story's concept while "bottom" refers to its cast of characters (Ibid.). In light of the author's above response to Updike and Wood, however, we should seriously question whether he has, in fact, been learning to become a "bottom-up" writer. All he seems to have done is simply (re)define character as "voiced ideas" or "focalized information," which has conveniently allowed him to pass off one half of his novels of ideas as a novel of character. With regard to *Gain*, this means that one side of the "stereo view" is actually nothing more than stereotype.

This is where the Midwest and Powers's notion of it as an Everyman setting come in again. Much like *Prisoner's Dilemma* established the artificial all-American features of the Hobsons early on, *Gain* wastes no time whatsoever in communicating to the reader that its midwestern setting is a manufactured model America. What Updike called the author's "high-tech touch" is already present in its opening pages, which recount the local legend of how the citizens of Lacewood went out of their way to convince the Clare Corporation to build its latest factory in the town. The following description of these efforts immediately plants the idea of the mythical small town in the reader's mind:

> Lacewood decided to doll itself up, to look like what it thought Clare wanted. Weeks before the visit, the town began papering over its crumbling warehouses

> with false fronts. Every boy over ten turned builder. The mayor even had two blocks of plaster edifices erected to fatten out anemic Main Street. (4)

Based on this folk tale, the reader's first impression of the town is most likely that it is no less "imagineered" than Disneyland's Main Street, U.S.A. That impression is reinforced by the fact that, for the duration of the Clare company tour, Lacewood rented an "old Consolidation locomotive," a replica of which serves Main Street, U.S.A. for similar reasons of nostalgia (5). And at the risk of piling on the clichés of a pastoral idyll, Lacewood even dammed up its "sleepy little stretch of the Sawgak" in advance of the Clare company tour, which meant that "for four glorious days in the heat of late summer, the town council built itself a junior torrent"—one that they filled with northern pike fish, which specially appointed fishers "who passed as either entrepreneurs or sportsmen" landed with uncanny regularity (Ibid.). Such trickery is obviously meant to impress the Clare delegation, but it also appears to be an effort to make Lacewood look like what Powers presumably thinks the reader wants from a midwestern small town; the town seems "imagineered" to put the reader into a midwestern state of mind, to conjure up visions of the Great Lakes region, that is, of a Midwest not unlike, say, Nick Adams's Michigan in part two of Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River."

Just as the Clare delegation immediately sees through this "whole charade," so of course does the reader, who is told right from the start that Lacewood's self-presentation was a big "ruse," a "snare" involving "false fronts" and "fake façades" (4-5). Surprisingly, the Clare Corporation nevertheless agrees to build its new plant in Lacewood. While the agreement is partly based on large tax concessions, it seems that the decisive factor is Douglas Clare Sr.'s great appreciation of the effort that the townspeople put into Lacewood's self-advertisement as a mythical, midwestern small town: "He admired the industry, the pathos in the stratagem. He could work with these people. They would work for him" (5). I suggest that Clare Sr.'s reason is of crucial importance here because it is instrumental in Powers's pre-emptive game of second-guessing his reader's response; it allows him to acknowledge the possibility that the book's main setting may, indeed, remain nothing more than a collection of midwestern

stereotypes while nonetheless following in Clare Sr.'s footsteps and using this false-fronted Main Street as the story's backdrop. It is an early indication of Powers's attempt to have it both ways, to work with a completely flat Everyman setting while not accepting responsibility for it whenever its superficiality attracts criticism. After all, it was the townspeople who molded their local community into this archetype of midwestern Americana, and they did so, moreover, out of sheer necessity: "Without Clare, the town would have dozed forever. It would have stayed a backwoods wasteland until the age of retrotourism" (Ibid.). We might say, then, that Douglas Clare Sr. is not the only one who could work with these people. They work for Powers, too.

Precisely how the people of Lacewood work for him becomes apparent near the end of the novel, in a section that covers the history of Lacewood and the Clare Corporation at the time of the Great Depression. To prevent the unemployed and precariously employed townspeople from uniting against the company, the Clare Corporation keeps them entertained with a prime-time radio show every Thursday. Titled *The Henry Happel Hour*, the show stars Henry Happel and his "hopeless family" who

> lived in none other than Dunville, Illinois, a thinly disguised Lacewood, recognizable even to those who had never heard of the original. Through the miracle of wireless broadcast, Lacewooders could see themselves in their own mind's eye, raised from blandness and redeemed by high myth. (310)

Here Powers invents a radio program reminiscent of Garrison Keillor's "The News from Lake Wobegon," the regular storytelling segment of Keillor's popular variety show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, which was the basis for his bestselling 1985 novel, *Lake Wobegon Days*. Keillor's show mythologizes an imagined "hometown, out on the edge of the prairie," and this is precisely what *The Henry Happel Hour* does for Lacewood (Keillor 0:05-0:07). The show, as it were, completes the residents' own efforts to airbrush Lacewood and turn it into a mythical small town, "the Town That Time Forgot"

(*Gain* 62).[134] Moreover, by mentioning that the show is recorded in front of a "sophisticated New York studio audience" who treat it as a "brilliant burlesque," Powers draws attention to its reception by a third party (310). In doing so, he seems to try to anticipate the response of a cultured readership to his own portrait of Lacewood. Just as "Greater Dunville was a complete menagerie of types[,] the last bastion of a vanishing communal America," so is Lacewood nothing more than a wholesome community of "good-people" stereotypes, as illustrated by the book's very first page, which tells the reader that "May made it seem as if no one in this town had ever sinned" (310, 3). His inclusion of the radio show, then, enables Powers to use self-protective irony to deflect criticism for his own one-dimensional heartlanders; it allows him to respond to comments from *New Yorker* literati such as Updike, who wrote that the storyworld "feels a bit sitcomish," by saying that such superficial burlesque is what the novel is about (77).

Not all New York reviewers found the novel's portrait of Lacewood "sitcomish," though. In her piece for the *New York Times*, which did not receive a mention on *Gain*'s back cover even though it is much more positive than the *Times*' other article by Bruce Bawer, Michiko Kakutani praises the novel's depiction of Laura Bodey as "the most emotionally affecting work Mr. Powers has done to date" ("Company" E6). Particularly interesting is that she likens the book's imagined heartland to "the portrait Don DeLillo created in *White Noise* of another small midwestern town trying to come to terms with the fallout of an industrial accident" (Ibid.). Kakutani was far from the only one to make this connection with *White Noise*, a connection that Powers may have actively encouraged by naming Laura Bodey's ex-husband and father of her two children Don. In fact, Ursula K. Heise's entire journal article, "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel," revolves around a comparison between the two books. At first glance, what such comparisons reveal about Powers's characters is that, once again, they are mostly talked about and understood in relation

[134] In interviews, reviews, and press materials, Keillor's Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, is often referred to as "the little town that time forgot and decades cannot improve" ("My Little Town").

to other, all-American families. To briefly return to the example of *The Corrections*, Franzen's Lamberts entered the collective post-9/11 imagination as simply the Lamberts, but Powers's families only ever mirror the culture's collective idea of other families, such as the Middletons, the Cleavers, and, in the case of *Gain*, the Gladneys of *White Noise*.[135, 136]

A good way to explore the much deeper implications of this comparison to DeLillo's modern classic is by taking a look at Powers's own commentary on *White Noise*, which was published as the introduction to Penguin's 25th-anniversary deluxe edition of the novel. Titled "The Whiteness of the Noise," Powers's foreword provides a range of insights into the book and does an excellent job of placing it in literary-historical context, as demonstrated by the below excerpt:

> *White Noise*, DeLillo's eighth novel, appeared at a whirlpool moment in the permanent turbulence between those two broad streams of American literature—call them telescopic and microscopic, the whaling ship and the carved scrimshaw. The book straddles the fantastic, maximalist experiments of the '60s and '70s and the stringent, intimate miniatures of the '80s and '90s, exploring the terrain between the two. (xiii-xiv)

A more striking variation on this paragraph exists but did not make it into the published piece. DeLillo himself requested its alteration via the publisher's executive editor, Paul Slovak, as evidenced by a faxed letter about "that paragraph that originally mentioned Pynchon and Carver," dated 11 May 2009 (Slovak). Powers's original version of the last part of the above excerpt is as follows:

> The book straddles the fantastic, maximalist experiments of the '60s and '70s and the stringent, intimate miniatures of the '80s and '90s. In his eighth novel,

[135] The fact that divorce is such a big part of the Gladneys' and the Bodeys' family life might, at first, seem to disqualify them as examples of the all-American family. Yet a brief look at *Middletown Families: Fifty Years of Change and Continuity*, a 1982 work that was part of the third Middletown study, teaches us that in 1975 Muncie's divorce rate was 51 per 100 marriages, making it practically the same as the national average of 49 per 100 marriages (Caplow et al. 16). By the time *White Noise* appeared, in other words, divorce had already become a part of all-American family life.

[136] In a more general context, Joseph Tabbi remarks on Powers's constant use intertextual references as follows: "Allusion has proven necessary to Powers's particular mode of creativity. He needs this kind of active reflection on the creations of others" (224). Tabbi does not ask why this might be so, but it should be clear from my above discussion that it is because the novelist's own creations cannot stand on their own.

> DeLillo (born within two years of both Pynchon and Carver) pulled off a shotgun miscegenation of the two. (Powers)

Even more so than the published version, this original draft shows how Powers describes DeLillo's book as practically a blueprint for the hybrid novel that he has repeatedly said he intends to write—a novel that combines the best of Carver and Pynchon, minimalism and maximalism, or, as Powers said of *White Noise*, "incommensurable modes of tenderness and burlesque" (xv). How, then, did DeLillo manage to turn this "shotgun miscegenation" into a critical and popular success, while Powers is commonly understood to have repeatedly failed to deliver on the promise of striking a balance between head and heart?

This question can best be answered by briefly going back to Kakutani's review of *Gain*. When she compares *Gain* to *White Noise*, Kakutani describes the setting of DeLillo's novel as "another small midwestern town" ("Company" E6). Heise, too, writes that *White Noise* is set in "the Midwestern college town of Blacksmith" (748). In fact, many of the original reviews that appeared upon the book's publication in 1985 also located Blacksmith in the Midwest, or, as the ambiguous title of Jay McInerney's review announces, the "Midwestern Wasteland" (McInerney 36). Yet there is not a single mention of the region in the entire book, and the actual location of Blacksmith is never revealed; a rural site like the famously photogenic barn merely confirms that the Gladneys live a short drive away from some unidentified bucolic scenery. So why would Kakutani, Heise, and a host of other critics and reviewers jump to the conclusion that DeLillo's story takes place in the Midwest? I suggest that it has to do with what appears to be the culture's automatic assumption: if the novel revolves around an all-American family, and if that family's hometown is rural and unremarkable enough to be thought of as an "Anytown, U.S.A.," then the story must take place in that well-known Everyman region, the Midwest.[137] In other words, the roundness and relatability of the

[137] Among those who have referred to Blacksmith as an "Anytown, U.S.A." are Powers, who uses the concept in his introduction to the deluxe edition of *White Noise*, and the *Partisan Review*'s Pico Iyer, who was one of the few reviewers attentive enough not to automatically assume that those "bright, plastic artifacts of Anytown, U.S.A." are midwestern (Powers xi; Iyer 292).

Gladneys, together with the synecdochal qualities of their small-town lives, have left countless readers with the impression that the book's setting is midwestern, even though there is not a single mention of the place.

Now, what Powers appears to be aiming for in *Gain* is to turn this cultural assumption about the heartland on its head: if the reader is constantly reminded that the characters are midwestern and that they live their normal lives in an average small town, then surely the Bodeys are bound to come across as relatable, if perhaps not exactly round, characters. Such a strategy relies heavily, and rather cynically, on the heartland myth of "all-American identification, redeeming goodness, face-to-face community, sanctity, and emplaced ideals" for which Powers lays the groundwork with the story of Lacewood's self-advertisement, which he then tops off with his later account of *The Henry Happel Hour* (Johnson 5). Given this reliance on a mythical Midwest that acts as a storehouse of American norms and values, Ralph Clare rightly observes in a subsection of his article on *Gain*—a subsection that is aptly titled "Anytown, U.S.A.™"—that Lacewood "is rendered as uneventful and as 'normal' as we might expect to find it," much more normal, interestingly, than what he calls the "Simulacra, U.S.A." of DeLillo's Blacksmith (Clare 29). But a crucial point that Clare neglects to mention is that, for all its zany Baudrillardian set pieces, *White Noise* still has flesh-and-blood characters at its center. Powers himself appreciates this in his foreword, where he marvels at DeLillo's "surprising care for these 'fragile creatures'" (x). He describes the effect of DeLillo's care for his characters in the by now familiar language of irony and earnestness:

> And I marvel too, on this late rereading, at a naked earnestness hiding inside a style that I years ago mistook for pure postmodern irony. Or rather, the marvel lies in that sound of human speech hungering for a time before irony and earnestness split into two strangers that deny their shared genes. (Ibid.)

Another, far less likely explanation for the common consensus on the midwestern location of the novel's setting is that the name Blacksmith might subtly bring to mind Martin Arrowsmith, the small-town midwesterner of Sinclair Lewis's eponymous 1925 novel.

There is still a heart at the heart of *White Noise*, regardless of whether or not it is set in the heartland. On the other hand, *Gain*'s carefully staged "soap opera," set in a self-consciously cliché-ridden simulation of a small town, makes calculated use of a cast of "ur-typical" midwesterners who are themselves merely simulations of such endearing, fleshed-out characters as the Gladneys.

Here, of course, is where Powers and those scholars who champion his work will counter that the novel's reduction of characters and setting to simulacra and simulation is not a bug but a feature. To compare *Gain*'s protagonists to conventional characters is, according to Paul Maliszewski, to "miss the point, an obvious one, that Powers isn't writing novels in a traditional mode" (169). Supposedly, the novelist's depiction of people as flattened, dehumanized stereotypes is a literary experiment designed to replicate and make painfully obvious our corporate culture's dehumanizing effects on the individual who lives in a "world [that] is a registered copyright" (*Gain* 304). Leaving aside the somewhat confused logic behind Maliszewski's essay, which tries to have it both ways when it argues three pages later that *Gain* does "presen[t] what a traditional story privileges," it is worth pursuing this observation further in the final pages of this section on *Gain* (172). In particular, it is instructive to consider the novel's theme of dehumanization alongside its pairing of the Clare Corporation and Laura Bodey, whose name clearly echoes the word "body," which, in turn, is the "corpus" that lies buried within the term "corporation." In several interviews, Powers speaks of this pairing in exactly those terms, and he describes the novel as "basically a dialogue between two people: a 42-year-old woman with cancer and a multinational corporation" ("The Salon Interview").

The theme of dehumanization is established early on in the novel, before Laura is even diagnosed with ovarian cancer. While musing on the virtual environment of her son's favorite online multiplayer video game, Laura observes that, "[a]t day's end, […] we'll all be disembodied" (30). She then realizes that she might already be, going by the billboards that her employer, the Next Millennium real estate agency, has posted everywhere around Lacewood: "Pictures of all the agents, half photo, half cartoon. Hers

is a black-and-white passport photo superenlarged and stuck upon a generic fairy godmother torso complete with wings and magic wand" (Ibid.). This observation of Laura's appears to be yet another of Powers's pre-emptive strikes to forestall criticism of her cartoonish, stereotypical life as a middle-aged realtor and soccer mom who spends her free time gardening and watching soap operas on TV. But, what is more, it also hints at the complete disembodiment she would come to experience during cancer treatment. After she has undergone multiple sessions of chemotherapy, Laura comments that she "no longer recognizes the scraps of person left to her" (227). As a result of the disease and the chemotherapy drugs, whose raw materials are supplied by Clare Soap and Chemicals, which is also a major benefactor of her local hospital, "[h]er body scares her now. Alien infestation. A pink, bare, cave newt, bald down to her plastic tubes. Clammy and numb and going deaf" (Ibid.). So Laura's disembodiment is intimately connected to the Clare Corporation, whose Lacewood factory, in a classic case of the *pharmakon*, produces both the toxins that are the likely cause of Laura's illness as well as the raw materials for her potential cure. The Clare Corporation has ultimately reduced Laura to an empty shell of a person, to a character who, conveniently enough for Powers, lacks a human dimension.

This leads Maliszewski to suggest that "people in *Gain* resemble small corporations" (179). But I would argue that this is true only insofar as they are "intricately, intelligently, and accurately constructed fictional mechanism[s]," to repeat Updike's aforementioned phrase (77). Maliszewki's second observation, namely that "companies in turn become like people," is imprecise for similar reasons (179). First of all, the original five Clares behind the Clare Corporation have, by the end of the novel, been flattened into two-dimensionality in much the same way as the people of Lacewood have been turned into caricatures. In the final pages, we learn that the company's current CEO has just "readie[d] himself for his latest television performance" by "consuming thumbnail biographies of the first five Mr. Clares and all that they assembled" (352, 353). But what Maliszewski presumably had in mind when he suggested that companies become like people is a crucial piece of corporate legislation

that “declared Clare Soap and Chemical Company one composite body: a single, whole, and statutorily enabled person” (158). This understanding of a corporation as an “artificial being,” however, does not mean that companies become like people; rather, it means that a company such as the Clare Corporation is a fictional construct that, in the eyes of the law, is treated as a person (Ibid.). Information, in other words, is legally (re)defined as character. This means that Clare is by no means the opposite of Laura or any of the novel’s other characters-as-voiced-ideas. On the contrary, company and characters are equally artificial.

To link these observations back to Powers’s treatment of the Midwest, it is helpful to briefly turn to David Foster Wallace, who appears to have been particularly interested in Powers’s lengthy exposition of the rise of the corporation, judging by the annotations in his personal copy of *Gain*, which he seems to have studied almost as if it were an illustrated textbook on the history of business in America.[138] In fact, his choice to set *The Pale King* in Peoria, Illinois—a town that is mentioned at the start of *Gain* as Lacewood’s main competitor—raises the possibility that Wallace’s unfinished novel on the “small-h heroes” of the Internal Revenue System may have been at least in part a reply to Powers’s story of the all-powerful Bad Company. But what makes *The Pale King* especially worth mentioning here is that, in this unfinished novel, Wallace clearly recognized the creative potential and the implications of his corporate subject matter, namely the limited liability corporation, whose definition in *Gain* as an “ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility” he both underlined and circled (*Gain* 159). In the published version of his “Author’s Foreword,” Wallace explicitly likens his Narrator Persona, the capital-a Author of the text, to “a pro forma statutory construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a corporation” (*TPK* 66). I would like to conclude this section by suggesting

[138] Wallace summarized several pages of the book’s expositional sections with key phrases such as “1828 – Protection Tariffs,” “Corporation – in 1800s, unpopular,” “1870s: ‘Fiduciary Age – Monetary Age,’” “Age of Credit – Grant Admin,” and “Wheat Futures Scam” (19, 155, 166, 183, 208). And, what is more, in a handwritten draft of the “Minilecture on Govt. + Selfishness” that would become chapter 19 of *The Pale King*, Wallace wrote in the left margin next to a dialogue on the concept of the corporation: “*Gain* p. 159” (“Floating” 13).

that, implicitly, the Author of *Gain* operates in the same way, which is to say, as a limited liability corporation. Call it Powers, Ltd.

As we saw in chapter 1, Wallace makes explicit use of the Author's corporate status in *The Pale King* to make claims about the authenticity of his memoir, for which he directs the reader to the boilerplate on the book's copyright page. More importantly, though, he includes several literary disclaimers that explicitly enable him to avoid taking responsibility for the faux-memoir's more experimental features. In the most relevant of these disclaimers he pins the blame on his younger self: "the notebook entries on which parts of this memoir are based were themselves literarily jazzed up and fractured; it's just the way I saw myself at the time" (Ibid. 73-74). For Wallace, this is a way to distance himself from a portrait of the Midwest and its locals that may be almost too colorful, or "jazzed up," for the culture to recognize it as midwestern. Even though Powers never makes explicit use of any such disclaimers, I suggest that all his emphasis on Lacewood's artificiality, its media-manufactured image, and the dehumanizing effects of Clare's local factory serves a similar purpose. In Powers's case, it is a means to shirk the responsibility of character development; it is a way to respond to reviewers whose opinion, like Updike's, is not that the book's depiction of the Midwest is too colorful, but rather, that it is not colorful enough. Such mounting criticism of Powers's fiction seems to have preoccupied the novelist in the years after the publication of *Gain*. The following discussion of *The Echo Maker* will examine how he appears to have dealt with it.

Another Country

In an interview with the *Chicago Reader*, titled "The Genius in the Cornfield," Stephan Lyons suggests to Powers that in *The Echo Maker* he "seem[s] to have found a narrative for the Midwest, a place that is often dismissed as a bland fly-over region"

("The Genius"). This prompts the novelist to elaborate on the region in a way that he had not done since his 1998 interview with *Salon*. His reply to Lyons is as follows:

> I don't think there's a single midwestern narrative. I've tried different ways in several books to tap into some of those long rhythms that the [M]idwest invites us to hear. But it's a subtle place that opens up only gradually as you keep looking at it, and keep listening.
>
> But I think there's something else about the [M]idwest. It's the portion of the country that supports the coasts and makes the coasts possible, so it's absolutely essential to how the American mind works in its role as a kind of primary producer for all the rest of this complex ecosystem. So that's always intrigued me: America stripped bare. America without props and without distractions or disguises and protections. (Ibid.)

There is a subtle change of perspective here. The above view of the Midwest as "America stripped bare" differs from Powers's earlier description of it as a "blank slate" in that it attributes to the region a newfound sense of authenticity and fragility, which, as we will see, *The Echo Maker* attempts to capture in its portrait of Kearney, Nebraska.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these efforts have so far mostly been discussed as part of the book's exploration of systems: the endangered ecosystem of the region's Platte River and the damaged nervous system of Mark Schluter, a 27-year-old local slaughterhouse mechanic who suffers severe brain trauma after a near-fatal car crash. Heather Houser and Rachel Greenwald Smith, for example, have both teased out the connections between the novel's environmentalist subplot, which revolves around the shrinking habitat of the sandhill crane—known to Native Americans as the "echo maker"—and the novel's biomedical narrative that centers on Mark's rare case of Capgras syndrome, a misidentification delusion that causes him to view everyone and everything dear to him as identical replacements. But neither scholar devotes much time to a third subplot that is introduced when Mark's sister Karin, in desperation at her brother's dismissal of her as "Kopy Karin," writes to famous New York-based neurologist Gerald Weber for help. Houser simply treats Weber as a middleman who "disseminates *The Echo Maker*'s view of neural interconnectedness," and Smith mostly

describes him as a composite character made up of several "writers of popular nonfiction books on neuroscience" (Houser 101; Smith 158n30). But this third strand tells the intriguing story of how a renowned author of "neurological novelistic books" ends up going the extra mile for his case study of Mark in response to growing criticism of his work, which Karin neatly sums up when she says to him that he is "[n]ot interested in people at all. All that interests you is theories" (*EM* 359, 331). While we should, of course, be careful not to treat Weber as Kopy Powers, it is nevertheless instructive to read his story as a dramatization of the "Powers Problem" and to determine the Midwest's place within it. This concluding section on *The Echo Maker* does just that.

But before we take a closer look at that 2006 novel, it is helpful to briefly turn our attention to *Galatea 2.2*., since it shows that the author is no stranger to turning criticism of his own work into the subject matter of his books. Best defined as "autofiction," which is to say, as a work that is "every bit as much a fiction as it is autobiography," *Galatea 2.2* portrays the mid-life crisis of Richard Powers, a troubled-writer type whose backstory is not unlike that of the actual novelist ("The Art" 130). Work on his fourth book, *Operation Wandering Soul*, has left Richard plagued by self-doubt about his abilities as a writer, and he returns to the heartland to take up a fellowship at his "old college haunt of U." in the hope that this will revitalize him (*Galatea* 3). At U., he ends up collaborating on an artificial intelligence project with cognitive neurologist Philip Lentz, who constantly harasses Richard over his chosen profession, which, needless to say, only deepens Richard's self-doubt. He finally reaches a low point when reviews of his fourth novel begin to appear and Lentz makes sure to bring the worst of them to his attention. Lentz, for instance, reads out the opening of Meg Wolitzer's review for the *New York Times*: "In every reader's mental library, there are books that are remembered with admiration and books that are remembered with love" (Wolitzer BR19; qtd. in Powers 208).[139] "*Operation Wandering*

[139] Lentz also makes an allusion to another review of *Operation Wandering Soul*: "'Look who's here! If it isn't my favorite manufacturer of literary astonishments. Which is not to say a good novelist,' he added, graciously patronizing, 'although you are that, too'" (206-7). This is an almost exact reproduction of the

Soul," Wolitzer argues, "is firmly planted in the first category" (BR19). Lentz does not read past these opening remarks, but Wolitzer continues along the same lines when she writes that, "[i]n *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner describes a certain kind of writer who seems to care 'more about his gift than about his characters.' At times, Mr. Powers fits this description" (BR19).[140] It is this criticism, of course, that would go on to become a familiar refrain in reviews of Powers's writing.

A fictionalized variation on this critique leaves Gerald Weber "panicked by the arena of public judgment" in *The Echo Maker* (*EM* 320). Near the end of his first lightning visit to Kearney, where Weber has collected three days worth of medical data on Mark, reviews for his latest book, *The Country of Surprise*, have started to come in, and a number of high-profile pieces are not all that kind to his work. The first piece that sends Weber into a downward spiral is one that appeared in *Kirkus Reviews*, whose main objection his publisher sums up for him over the phone: "Too much philosophy and not enough car chases" (171). Once Weber has returned to his New York home after his Nebraskan field trip, more negative reviews begin to appear. The most devastating of them is a piece for *Harper's*, in which the reviewer complains that Weber "returns here with his familiar and slightly cartoonish tales, hiding behind an entirely predictable if irrefutable plea for tolerance of diverse mental conditions" (221). Even Karin, who has read through Weber's latest book in the wake of his brief visit, admittedly finds it "filled with recycled pronouncements about the human brain and empty of the human soul" (205). These all-too-recognizable reviews initially bring out Weber's defensive side, and he tells himself that his success has simply made him a big target. "In the field of public reviewing," he reassures himself, "one scored zero for appreciating an already appreciated figure. With a target as large as Gerald Weber,

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opening sentence of John Skow's review for *TIME* magazine: "Novelist Richard Powers is a prodigiously talented manufacturer of literary astonishments, which is not exactly the same as being a good writer, though he is that too" (Skow 64).

[140] This appears to be a slight misquotation of Gardner's statement that "[t]he writer who cares more about words than about story (characters, action, setting, atmosphere) is unlikely to create a vivid and continuous dream" (Gardner 6). Powers himself has challenged this definition of a good novelist on several occasions, most notably in his piece for the *American Book Review*, "Children of the Revolution," where he argues that "[t]he sixties had their prominent aesthetic police, men (invariably) who warned artists never to wake the sleepwalking reader, but to keep her forever tranced out in what John Gardner would eventually call, with unqualified moral approval, 'the fictive dream'" (8).

one earned points only for a kill" (222). Arguably, such defensive statements double as Powers's usual pre-emptive measures, though this time they deal with criticism much more explicitly than in *Gain*, if not as obviously as in *Galatea 2.2*.

Yet writing about an author-type who is struggling to cope with criticism that is often reminiscent of reviewers' complaints about Powers's own novels in no way addresses those complaints.[141] This should be clear from one of the more prominent reviews of *The Echo Maker*, namely William Deresiewicz's article for the 9 October 2006 issue of *The Nation*. Titled "Science Fiction," this particular piece can be read as somewhat of a prelude to "Brain Drain," Wood's 2009 review of *Generosity*. It has, as a matter of fact, been treated this way by Charles Harris, who argues in his contribution to *Intersections* that Deresiewicz is "under the obvious sway of that 'woefully influential' British critic James Wood" ("The Story" 242). Although Harris's comment creates the impression that Deresiewicz's piece is somehow unfair, the reviewer actually notes that he is "honor bound" to make a mention of the uncomfortable irony that Weber's breakdown is "precipitated by a bad review" (Deresiewicz 28). That said, he rightly observes that this should by no means prevent him from casting a critical eye over Powers's novel. Indeed, he does exactly that from the very first paragraph on. He offers yet another variation on that by now familiar refrain when he announces that *The Echo Maker* "won't tell you much about what its laboriously accumulated information and elaborately constructed concepts have to do with what it means to be alive at a particular time and place, or what it feels like" (25).

This brings us to our main question: does *The Echo Maker* do anything new in an effort to address the "Powers Problem"? The short answer is yes, and Powers's newfound perspective on the Midwest as "America without props" has a lot to do with it. To see how this is so, we need to go back to the story of Weber's breakdown. It turns out that, after his initial defensiveness, "Famous Gerald" begins to take the criticism of

[141] Despite all these undeniable similarities, it should be noted that Powers takes care not to turn Weber's problem into a carbon copy of the "Powers Problem." Late in the novel, for example, Weber remarks that his fiercest critics "wanted science, not stories," which is quite clearly the opposite of the comments that Powers regularly faces from critics who want stories, not science (357).

his cerebral writing to heart (*EM* 269). Back home in New York, he expresses his self-doubt to his wife Sylvie when he tells her, "'I'm wondering if they might actually be right'" (227). But just when his self-doubt reaches its peak because of a *New Yorker* parody of Weber's writing, titled "From the Files of Dr. Frontalobe," the famous author receives an email from Karin informing him that Mark's delusions have gotten much worse. Weber takes this as an opportunity to redeem himself, and he returns to Kearney a mere four months after his first visit, during which he had apparently "failed to honor what he claimed lay at the heart of all good medicine. He didn't listen" (183). He intends to do things differently now: he will "re-create Mark Schluter, no composites, no pseudonyms, no glossed-over detail, no hiding behind the clinical" (274). This time, instead of meeting Mark again for a couple of quick sessions at the Dedham Glen Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, he arranges to meet him in his home, where he "learn[s] more about Mark in five minutes in his living room than in all their previous encounters" (300). And instead of subjecting him to various tests, he now agrees to accompany Mark to his secret fishing spot, "someplace slow enough to think and talk" (307). In short, Weber makes an effort to treat Mark as a complex individual after he dismissed him on his first trip as "a typical American man in his twenties, from any of the big, empty states" (114).

This effort, in turn, marks a noticeable change in Powers's writing. It bears a striking resemblance to the "turn toward the Kmart People" that Wallace seemed to be struggling with in his later fiction and non-fiction about the Midwest. In chapter 1, we saw how Wallace worked hard to complete this turn in *The Pale King* by trying, for instance, to represent a young Toni Ware's troubled childhood in a midwestern trailer park and to recount it in a lyrical, unironic prose style that, judging by his draft materials, he feared would "seem like all language, some McCarthy exercise" ("Electric" 11). If we substitute the family farm for the trailer park, the early life of Mark and Karin Schluter, two "shit-kicker[s] raised by zealots," is not all that different from Toni Ware's (23). Brought up by a mother who was "more Christian than Christ" and a father who "thought the nine-digit zip code was a Democratic Party plot to control the

movements of ordinary citizens," Karin has made repeated attempts to escape her life in Kearney (371, 138). Mark, on the other hand, appears to have been content with his unremarkable "mail-order home" and a life of doing maintenance work at the local slaughterhouse, tinkering with his '84 cherry-red Dodge Ram, and going to see local bands at the Silver Bullet (196). This simple, rural background evidently informs Mark's behavior toward, for instance, the staff at Dedham Glen: "But no, the university chick tells him, with a mouth like two little bait worms doing it. Useful little mouth, probably, in a pinch. But a pain in the ass at the moment, with its trick questions" (81). Such convincing re-creations of Mark's thoughts and behavior earn Powers the approval of even Deresiewicz, who finds it "a vividly interesting sound" (28). It is a sound that can be heard in none of Powers's other novels, even though they do include occasional nods to the Kmart-realist side of the Midwest. In *Galatea 2.2*, for example, one of Richard's creative-writing students completes the assignment, "'Convince a total stranger that she would not want to grow up in your hometown,'" by writing about a Chicago childhood of "waking up to the stink of slaughtered animals from the stockyard mixed with the heavy scent of chocolate from the neighborhood factory" (49).[142] But nowhere else does Powers actually give the reader imaginative access to the lived experience of such Kmart People as Mark, whose life is as far removed from Weber's world of lectures, keynotes, and book tours as it is from Powers's own suburban, middle-class background.

Weber's and, by implication, Powers's attempts at "empathy with Mark" are all about the difficulties of covering this distance between two vastly different worlds (*EM* 303). Powers makes this very clear when he recounts how Weber, born and bred in suburban Ohio, is shocked to discover near the end of his first visit to Kearney that he "could no longer read them, his people, the residents of the Great Central Flyover" (167-168). The novelist then contrasts this realization with Weber's more positive experience during his second field trip. On his way to Mark's house for another visit,

[142] Interestingly, Wallace underlined this answer in his copy of *Galatea 2.2*, and Powers recycles the exercise in *Generosity*, where his Chicago protagonist instructs his creative-writing students to "*[c]onvince someone that they wouldn't want to grow up in your hometown*" (23).

Weber looks out over the region's sparsely populated land and pictures himself living there, amid the Nebraskan cornfields: "It seemed to him, as he drove, one of the last places left in the country where you would have to face down the contents of your own soul, stripped of all packaging" (316). How different such a rooted life would be from his cosmopolitan life in New York, which comes with constant, fleeting visits to what Marc Augé calls the "non-places" of airports and hotel rooms "that pretended [they] had never been inhabited by anyone, […] that promised to disappear, traceless, the instant Weber checked out" (Augé 109; *EM* 108). And yet, this growing appreciation of Mark and the midwestern life that he embodies reaches a contrived and unsatisfactory conclusion when we learn, in the novel's last pages, that Weber would have written *The Country of Surprise* entirely differently now: "Weber would destroy every copy of every word that bears his name for a chance to tell [that] story again, now that he knows what he's talking about" (448). Such a "happy" ending to this subplot, in which Weber sees the error of his ways, is too convenient and unambiguous. By making it all about Weber's personal- and career development, Powers ultimately risks assigning a purely functional role to Mark, a character who might, for once, be more than just a media-manufactured extra in the bigger picture of Powers's novel of ideas.

This tension between Mark the individual and Mark the medical case study is present from the very start of Weber's narrative. The irony is that, while Weber's efforts to really listen to Mark draw attention to his three-dimensionality, the large collection of medical facts that Weber's subplot brings with it also obscures that detailed novelistic portrait of Mark. What Harris has called, with wholehearted approval, the book's mode of "neurological realism" too neatly reduces Mark's thoughts and behavior to a medical condition that Powers chooses to spell out for us by having Mark diagnosed with Capgras syndrome very early on ("The Story" 243). Although Houser has argued that Powers's novel "envisions a disturbing form of estrangement from the most familiar," it would seem that any disturbing effects the book may have had on the reader disappear as soon as Mark's unusual behavior is safely classified as a medical condition (100). In fact, over the course of the novel, any change to Mark's mental state is given a medical

label almost as soon as it occurs. When Mark confesses to Karin that he suspects her boyfriend is following him around, this suspicion is dispelled a mere five pages later when it is diagnosed as Fregoli syndrome. And when Mark tells Karin he believes he "passed away on the operating table, and none of the doctors noticed," these ideas are diagnosed one page later as part of a delusion known as Cotard's syndrome (396).

Leaving readers in doubt about these unusual mental developments could have been a creative way of challenging their presumptions about the storyworld and of calling the reliability of the narrative into question. A good example of such use of neurological realism to great, disturbing effect is Rivka Galchen's more recent novel, *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), even if that book is certainly not without its own lack of subtleties.[143] While Galchen's novel appears to be dealing with misidentification delusions that closely resemble Mark's, it leaves much more creative space to be explored by the reader, who is only directly alerted to the possibility of "misidentification syndromes" near the end of the novel—a novel that never explicitly mentions the words Capgras syndrome (Galchen 207). Its first-person narrative simply begins, "Last December a woman entered my apartment who looked exactly like my wife," and continues from there (Galchen 3). This has led Wood to draw a direct comparison to *The Echo Maker* in his review of Galchen's book for *The New Yorker*. According to Wood, the essential difference between the two is that "*Atmospheric Disturbances* is a novel of consciousness, not a novel *about* consciousness," by which he means *The Echo Maker* (Wood, "She's Not" 80). Of course, this difference is similar to the one between a novel of character and a novel *about* character that we discussed in relation to *Prisoner's Dilemma*. It is one between showing and telling, and Powers's clear preference for the latter means that, in the case of *The Echo Maker*, he maintains a safe distance, at all times, between the reader and Mark's case of Capgras.

[143] For one thing, the book's reference to "the 49 Quantum" or simply "the 49" is an obvious nod to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, one that is made even more obvious by the fact that a large-font number 49 appears on the front cover of the first edition (Galchen 12, 13). In addition, the book's protagonist, Leo Liebenstein, goes looking for his Argentine wife, Rema, in Buenos Aires, which is a not-so-subtle allusion to Jorge Luis Borges. Unsurprisingly, reviewers have called the novel's "inventive narrative strategies" Pynchonesque and Borgesian (Schillinger 10).

And yet, in spite of safely medicalizing Mark's behavior, the novel seems to want to grasp the opportunity to make Mark's delusions resonate with the reader on a much deeper, thematic level. In particular, Capgras syndrome is made to appear as a metaphor for the ways in which the country has become virtually unrecognisable in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Colson Whitehead picks up on this in his review for the *New York Times*, where he describes *The Echo Maker* as "a wise and elegant post-9/11 novel" that manages to "avoi[d] some of the now familiar features of the genre" (G22). Powers himself has talked about the novel in exactly these terms in a 2007 interview with Alec Michod for *The Believer*, where he makes the following comments:

> Estrangement seems to have become the baseline condition for life in terrorized America. After November 2000, after September 2001, after the Patriot Act and the detainee bill, after Gitmo and Abu Ghraib, our stories—public and private—keep scrambling to keep America whole, continuous and coherent, to *place* it. The basic outline of life here still looks familiar. But for a lot of people, the place no longer feels recognizable. ("Richard Powers")

Here the novelist's emphasis on place, on Americans' estrangement from it, is key. It follows on from an earlier piece he wrote for the *New York Times*, which appeared roughly two weeks after 9/11. Titled "The Simile," the article recounts how, on the day of the attacks, Powers met his students for their regular writing class at UIUC, even though the "America they woke to on Tuesday morning was, like the skyline of New York, changed forever. The always-thereness of here was gone" (21).

While this idea of how 9/11 "changed everything" has the potential for cliché, *The Echo Maker*'s metaphorical use of a rare mental condition largely avoids such post-traumatic commonplaces—even though its unsubtle, repeated mention of Capgras as "contagious," as something "the whole race suffered from," prevents the novel from realizing its full, disturbing potential (38, 278, 430). To see exactly how Mark's delusion takes on this broader, metaphorical dimension, it is necessary to look more closely at the extent to which he misidentifies everyone and, more tellingly, everything dear to him. Mark's Capgras syndrome initially manifests itself as an inability to recognize his sister Karin, whom he dismisses as "Karbon Karin" or even "Special

Sister Agent," and his border collie, Blackie, which he simply renames "Blackie Two" (279, 202, 199). But it is only once Mark is discharged from Dedham Glen that the full scale of his delusions becomes apparent. When Karin brings him back to his mail-order home, which Mark affectionately calls "the Homestar," he no longer recognizes the place as his (11). As he walks around the house, he expresses his complete amazement: "'They did an incredible job. They got almost everything right. Jesus! How much did this cost? It's like some billion-dollar film of my life" (195). Rather than a film, the whole scene actually seems as if it were taken straight out of a song, namely "Once in a Lifetime" by Talking Heads: "And you may tell yourself / This is not my beautiful house!" (01:04-01:10).[144]

But what at first appears to be a comical set piece quickly becomes part of a modern-day, midwestern spin on Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" when Mark's inability to feel at home in the Homestar grows into a failure to recognize his entire hometown of Farview, which he believes has been replaced by "a colossal fake, a life-sized, hollow replica" (197). We learn from the second email that Karin sends to Weber that, months after he has recovered from his coma, Mark is "assembling a list of documented details proving that his entire town of Farview had been replaced between the night of his accident and the day he came out of his coma, for the express purpose of misleading him" (273). Near the end of the novel, Weber discusses these delusions over dinner with Barbara Gillespie, the woman who secretly caused Mark's accident and now works as a nurse's aide at Dedham Glen to ease her conscience. Barbara says to Weber that "'Mark is right, you know. The whole place, a substitute. I mean: Is this country anyplace you recognize?'" (432-433). What makes Barbara come to this conclusion is the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which is announced by a "television suspended above their corner booth" (432). It is through this and other references to Homeland Security and America's War on Terror, news of which is delivered by Mark's

[144] In fact, the novel makes a direct reference to the song when Barbara Gillespie, a nurse's aide at Dedham Glen, takes Weber to Mark's favorite bar, the Silver Bullet, and shouts into his ear: "*You may ask yourself: How did I get here?*" (322). The song is also oddly appropriate to Galchen's novel, whose main character, Leo, sets the plot in motion by telling himself: "This is not my beautiful wife!" (Talking Heads 01:11-01:13).

friends as well as muted televisions in diners and waiting rooms, that Mark's geographical estrangement is made into a metaphor for the post-9/11 "age of mass hypnotism" (269). At one point in his recovery, even Mark himself begins to frame the story of his car accident as part of the national post-9/11 narrative. "Suppose this guy I picked up was a terrorist. Months after. Trying to strike at something really … American" (284).

This last comment in particular leads us back to the Midwest and its place in the popular imagination as that all-American region, the nation's home, the emblem of "the invulnerable yet somehow infinitely threatened American way of life" (243). As we saw in the previous chapter, it was this image of the heartland as "The Land That Time Forgot" that played such a central role in the canonization of *The Corrections* as a Great American Novel about a pre-9/11 Great Before (294). But *The Echo Maker*, as Whitehead rightly notes in his book review, does not present such a straightforward "elegy for How We Used to Live" (G22). Instead, the novel's account of Mark's Capgras syndrome challenges this very idea of the Midwest as a place to which the culture can come home in times of trouble. As part of this challenge, the book repeatedly alludes to and subverts the one story of a midwestern homecoming that is etched into the collective imagination: *The Wizard of Oz*.[145] More so than any direct, symbolic correspondence between the cast of *Oz* and Powers's characters—a correspondence that Margaret Atwood tries to map out in her article for the *New York Review of Books*—it is the fairytale's account of Dorothy Gale's journey home that provides the author with his thematic framework. Home's central place within the novel is emphasized by numerous variations on Dorothy's famous line, "there's no place like home." When Karin, for instance, talks about her hometown with her boyfriend, he replies: "'No place like it, huh?'" (55). Weber's wife's return from work is described as: "'Yo, Man—I'm home!' she chanted from the foyer. 'No place like it'" (103). And Mark's discharge from Dedham Glen is announced as: "They took Mark home: no other place

[145] The film adaptation of the fairytale even gets a direct mention in the novel. When Karin meets up with her former lover, Robert Karsh, he at one point in their conversation "hum[s] the tornado music from *The Wizard of Oz*" (295).

to take him" (191). All of the novel's characters, it seems, are somehow on their way back home.

However, as Karin puts it halfway through the novel, "[t]here [i]s no *back* to get them to" (237). This is precisely the emotional truth that Mark's Capgras syndrome exposes and, in doing so, it gives the lie to the cultural myth that the heartland is where the nation's home is. Powers brings up one of the main reasons for this disappearance in his abovementioned interview with *The Believer*. There he comments that "Kearney and the Platte, like every place else on earth, have been virtualized—completely transformed by broadband and its networked bits. The book explores that derangement, too: the total defamiliarization of place in the digital age" ("Richard Powers"). So, as much as Weber may end up idealizing the region as an authentically American place "stripped of all packaging," the Midwest's reality is one of commercial strips and hotel chains. Like any other place, the Nebraskan prairie has been taken over by the "usual gamut of franchises—motel, gas, convenience store, and fast food—[which] reassur[e] the accidental pilgrim that he [i]s somewhere just like anywhere" (166). Main Street has practically been "euthanized since the Wal-Mart landed" and "[h]istoric, vanished America, reincarnated as comforting franchises" (291, 319). A final, striking example of the symbolic afterlife of the small-town Midwest is the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument, a living-history museum where Mark's friend Bonnie works as a pioneer woman, dressed as if she came straight out of Willa Cather's 1918 classic, *My Ántonia*.[146] It is the museum's attempt at Kopy Cather, with a strong emphasis on a shared agrarian past rather than on the distinctly foreign character of those frontier times, that sums up the region's popular postwar image and people's nostalgic longing for the sense of collective identity that it represents.

All of this leads us back to that familiar, midwestern "World World" of simulacra and simulations that Powers has been charting since his debut novel. The difference is

[146] Barbara lends a copy of Cather's novel to Mark, telling him it is a story about "'a young Nebraska country boy who has the hots for an older woman'" (240). In the novel's closing pages, Mark passes his copy of the novel on to Weber, adding that it is a book about "'real Nebraskaland. I kind of bought into it, finally'" (449).

that, in *The Echo Maker*, the novelist comes closer than before to making the reader experience, through the eyes of Mark Schluter, what it feels like to live in such a world. Of course, it remains to be seen if Powers's future novels will pursue this promising new direction. But if his most recent novel *Orfeo* is anything to go by, it seems that he has yet to solve the "Powers Problem." A quick look at reviews of *Orfeo* reveals that this remains the critical consensus on Powers's work. Lev Grossman's review for *TIME* magazine, for instance, concludes that *Orfeo* contains some very profound essays on music, but it "shows only a passing interest in that clumsier, more mortal, more human medium, the novel" (Grossman 56). It is interesting, finally, to bring up one more piece in which Powers responds to the criticism he has received over the course of his career. In his interview with *The Paris Review*, he has the following to say about it:

> The funny thing is that they would never launch that criticism about believability of character against a novel that is clearly written on the terms of noncharacter-driven, nonevent-driven, postmodern metafiction. No one would think to criticize avant-garde fiction for not having fully dimensional characters. I think I've been criticized because I've wanted to have it both ways. And it's very possible they may be right. In some fundamental way, I may not be able to have it both ways. I may not be able to create the kind of parallax that I'm most interested in creating. ("The Art" 126)

Here the author suggests that he has attracted growing criticism for what he fears is his inability to have it both ways, to combine the novel of ideas with the novel of character. It is the closest he comes to acknowledging the limits of his narrative powers—limits that have emerged so clearly from his novelistic accounts of the Midwest.

Afterword

Bookends and New Directions

Two midwestern novels bookend my doctoral research.

The first one appeared in the countercultural ’60s, but was nobody’s protest novel. It presents a portrait of life in a small university town in Missouri with “the kind of seriousness usually reserved th[o]se days for black humor, boredom, collapse and murder,” as Irving Howe put it in 1966, in one of only a handful of reviews (19). At odds with the subversive zeitgeist, the book quietly went out of print and died a death as anonymous as that of its protagonist, whose afterlife is summed up in its prologue:

> An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner’s colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity within which they can associate themselves or their careers. (Williams 1)

How wrong this account turned out to be when in 2013 the name “Stoner” was put on display in shop windows around the United Kingdom after John Williams’s eponymous novel had become a word-of-mouth sensation and been named Book of the Year by Waterstones in 2012, the year in which the first ideas for this dissertation were put on paper. Dubbed “The Greatest American Novel You’ve Never Heard Of” by *The New Yorker*’s Tim Kreider, *Stoner* finally rose to fame half a century into its afterlife (Kreider). Its rise, as Kreider’s phrase already hints at, follows on from the popularity of that *TIME*-honored “Great American Novelist” Jonathan Franzen, who, with the post-9/11 success of *The Corrections* in particular, has been at the center of a revaluation of the midwestern novel of local manners and its ascent to the status of Great American Novel. Accordingly, the Great American Novel has been “yoke[d],” as Lawrence Buell

puts it, “to ‘retro-realist’ fiction” in the first decades of the new millennium (462). This, I suggest, is what paved the way for the rediscovery of *Stoner*.

The second book has yet to make its Great American Ascent. Serialized in *The New Yorker* in the early ’90s, where it filled a niche after Garrison Keillor had quit the magazine when he “heard that Ms. [Tina] Brown was the new editor,” *The End of Vandalism* by Tom Drury received a good amount of critical attention upon its publication in 1994 (Keillor). Its vivid portrayal of the local residents of Grouse County, a fictional prairie town located in what appears to be Iowa, even earned Drury a place on *Granta*’s 1996 list of “The Twenty Best American Novelists under Forty.” The writer’s name appeared alongside Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, two fellow midwesterners whose literary careers would take off as Drury faded into obscurity. But there have been efforts to recover his work, most recently with the 2015 UK reprint of Drury’s first novel, which appeared just as the main research for this thesis was nearing completion. Endorsed by Franzen, whose blurb called Drury “a big-time American talent,” the book nevertheless failed to reach a large readership in the way that *Stoner* had done only a few years earlier, leading *The Independent*’s James Kidd to ask, in a headline that is clearly inspired by Kreider’s, “Why Does Tom Drury Remain the Greatest Writer You’ve Never Heard Of?” (Kidd). This is all the more baffling, Kidd explains, given that

> *The End of Vandalism* suggested that Drury was ready to take his place in an extraordinary generation of American novelists that would include Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, who published their own masterpieces in roughly the same period. (Ibid.)

Though it would have been more accurate to name Eugenides instead of Eggers, the general comment still holds: each of these millennial fictions “made international literary superstars of their creators, [but] *The End of Vandalism*, stubbornly, did not” (Ibid.).

I mention this pair of novels in these closing pages because they indicate two main directions for further research that my analysis of the New Sincerity and the Midwest opens up. In the space of this dissertation, I have examined the writing of

David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers through the wide-angle lens of literary history in response to the far more narrowly focused accounts offered by literary scholars who, in their search for the New Thing, have imposed a linear narrative on postwar American culture. *Stoner*'s rediscovery exposes precisely the limitations of such linear thinking, which tends to simply dismiss early postwar literature as ironic and celebrate a "Heartbreaking Group of Staggering Geniuses" for having single-handedly swung the cultural pendulum in the direction of sincerity at the turn of the millennium.[147] What Williams's novel makes abundantly clear is that the New Sincerity did not come out of nowhere; rather, the authors discussed in this thesis have clearly inherited several strands of writing about, or representations of, what John Jeremiah Sullivan has jokingly called "the most nowhere part of America" ("The Final" 127). *Stoner* represents one such strand, and its recovery shows that in a literary decade known primarily for the publication of books such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), less eclectic and darkly comic stories could still be found. One way to expand on my doctoral research, then, would be to discover more such direct precursors of the New Sincerity and bring their work to the fore.

There is one writer in particular whose work has emerged over the course of this doctoral project as an ideal candidate for such a revisionist account, and that is William Gass, whose debut novel *Omensetter's Luck* appeared in the year following the publication of *Stoner*. At the time, it was able to avoid *Stoner*'s fate because it managed to infuse its story of the prairie town of Gilean, Ohio, with the kind of humor and self-reflexive qualities found in the zany metafictions that have come to be treated as representative of the decade. In the early stages of his career, this meant that Gass would often be mentioned in the same breath as Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Pynchon, and even sometimes mistaken for "that self-same and similarly sounding person" William Gaddis, as he explains in his introduction to Gaddis's *The*

[147] This allusion to Eggers's 2000 memoir was, in fact, the title of a seven-part series aired on *KCRW's* "Bookworm" radio show from 22 June to 3 August 2000. Among the authors interviewed for this series were Wallace, Eggers, and George Saunders ("KCRW Press").

Recognitions (vi). But fast-forward to the ’90s and we see that his magnum opus *The Tunnel* (1995), on which he worked for 26 years, is by far the most overlooked of what James Wood has called the “big, ambitious novel[s]” that were published midway through the decade (“Human” 41). In fact, the book is conspicuously absent from Wood’s list, which includes Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), and Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997). The most plausible reason for this absence is that the scope and overall tone of its first-person account of the life of a single protagonist, William Frederick Kohler, are a far cry from the eclectic megaplots and huge casts of characters that Wood identifies as key components of the “hysterical realism” that he associates with his own list of novels (Ibid.). It is precisely because of these dissimilarities that it is instructive to examine Gass’s work in the context of the New Sincerity and to study its family resemblances to the writing that has been discussed in this thesis—resemblances such as its extensive use of heartland symbolism to both create a sepia-tinted picture of square, small-town life and to complicate this sentimental depiction by connecting it with what the novel repeatedly refers to as “the fascism of the heart” (*Tunnel* 33, 53, 366). Such a different look at Gass’s work in relation to the New Sincerity would open up new possibilities for a comprehensive overview of his career and *The Tunnel*’s place within it.

As for Drury’s *The End of Vandalism*, its difficulties in gaining the recognition that the work of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers has earned draws attention to other issues of canon formation within the debate on the New Sincerity. For one thing, the novels of each of the three writers discussed in these pages are on the maximalist end of the literary spectrum and, as Mark Greif has convincingly shown, the process of canonization still heavily favors the doorstop novel. So much so, that an author of more slender volumes, like DeLillo, “must push himself to produce one of the much longer, ceaseless-circulation-of-stories novels” to secure his place in the canon (Greif 28n34). The fact that Drury has not written a single book on that scale certainly has not boosted his chances of being canonized alongside his maximalist contemporaries. But things might change when *The End of Vandalism* is no longer considered as a single work but

as one episode in the entire "Grouse County Trilogy" of which it is a part—a trilogy that includes Drury's 2000 novel *Hunts in Dreams* and his more recent work *Pacific*, which appeared in 2013. Taken together, these three books approach the size and scope of a typical work by either one of the three core authors of the New Sincerity on whom I have centered my discussion. A logical next step in broadening out my doctoral research with work by other late twentieth-century American writers would therefore be to bring Drury's entire trilogy into my discussion of the New Sincerity. The potential for making such connections is already apparent from one of Drury's interviews with Michael Silverblatt for *KCRW*'s "Bookworm." When Silverblatt asked him about the trilogy and its cast of midwestern characters, Drury made the following comment:

> There's just a single line in *The End of Vandalism* that a number of people astutely picked up on, I thought, where it just said, "The family farm seemed to be over, and no compelling idea had come along to replace it." You know, and that's the existence that they live in. Sort of the existence that I went through. (09:30-09:48)[148]

These words, of course, resonate strongly with my definition of the New Sincerity and its emergence as a result of postmodernism's having "bought the farm."

It is this death of conventional small-town existence and its continuation as part of a symbolic afterlife that is also behind the nostalgia effect of another midwestern series, namely Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead Trilogy." The effect is particularly noticeable in the trilogy's first installment, the epistolary novel *Gilead* (2004). Set in the midwestern small town of Gilead, Iowa, the novel is made up of the autobiographical account of the town's pastor, the Reverend John Ames. Burdened with the knowledge that he is dying of a heart condition and that his seven-year-old son might have few lasting memories of him, the Reverend sets out to write a series of letters to his son, presenting him with a very moving account of his small-town life that is actually not unlike some of Kohler's reminiscences in *The Tunnel*. Given that Robinson is closely associated with the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she is the F. Wendell Miller

[148] This is a slight misquotation of the following sentence, which appears in *The End of Vandalism*: "Family agriculture seemed to be over and had not been replaced by any other compelling idea" (131).

Professor of English and Creative Writing, thinking of why her work may or may not fall within the scope of the New Sincerity would be a good way to raise additional questions about the place and significance of the Iowa Writers' Workshop within the body of regionalist writing that the New Sincerity draws on. After all, as Mark McGurl observes in *The Program Era*, "regionalism's celebration of the particularities of place was fundamental to the aesthetic sensibilities imparted at Iowa" (148-9). Further research could aim to establish how the Workshop's aesthetic sensibilities may have found their way into New Sincerity writing, knowing that W. P. Kinsella, for instance, earned his MFA in Iowa and went on to write *Shoeless Joe*, the novel that, as we saw in the introduction, was the basis for that key New Sincerity genre film, *Field of Dreams*.

Another way to include more contemporaries of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers in my discussion of the New Sincerity would be to extend my analysis to Jeffrey Eugenides, an author who has, in fact, already been identified as a New Sincerity writer by Adam Kelly in his essay for the "Post45" website, "Dialectic of Sincerity." In light of his 2011 novel *The Marriage Plot*, which takes as one of its explicit subjects the clash between experimentalism and the conventions of realism, the kind of critic-turned-trendspotter that I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation might be tempted to position Eugenides's work as a successor to postmodernism. But here, again, it is important to maintain a critical distance from the "end of postmodernism" discourse so as not to lose sight of the author's place within the larger field of American letters. One way to do this would be to begin with Eugenides's 1993 debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, whose story of lost innocence is characterized by that same mournful and elegiac tone that is part of *Gilead*, even though in this case it is adapted to a suburban midwestern environment. Narrated by a group of anonymous boys from a suburban neighborhood in Grosse Point, Michigan, the novel is a collective reconstruction of the story of the Lisbons, a Catholic family whose five daughters all end up killing themselves, leaving a lasting impression on the neighborhood boys. In other words, the creative impulse behind the novel seems to be a recovery of a picture-perfect, Norman

Rockwell suburbia—an image that was tarnished by the tragedy that befell the Lisbon family.

Finally, I hope that this dissertation has offered a fresh and more nuanced perspective on the writing of Wallace, Franzen, and Powers that has made it possible to pursue such new directions in the study of the New Sincerity's place within American literature at the turn of the millennium. The central aim of the thesis has been to open up the debate on the New Sincerity, to move it out of the "end of postmodernism" discourse, and to bring to the fore a creative impulse behind the New Sincerity that had not yet been properly articulated or conceptualized. This impulse, which typically leads to a nostalgic reworking or recovery of a cartoonishly straight, small-town America populated with "good people," has allowed for a redefinition of the New Sincerity's scope—one that properly takes into account the ways in which the writing of its core members reaches back across the twentieth century and draws on a range of popular representations of an imagined heartland, be that Sinclair Lewis's "Gopher Prairie" or Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon."

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